

Archived Information

Adult Basic Education: Strategies for Supporting Learning

Judith A. Alamprese

**Abt Associates, Inc.
Bethesda, Maryland**

Introduction

There has been a developing interest in the United States among federal, state, and local officials in meeting the education needs of adults with low levels of literacy proficiency. This interest is prompted by factors such as increased enrollments in beginning literacy classes, the desire on the part of adult basic education (ABE) program staff to serve these learners more effectively, and the call at the national level for data on the success of ABE programs in helping adults enhance their literacy skills. Recent discussions among the State Directors of Adult Education, ABE program instructional staff, and ABE researchers also have pointed to the need for research on strategies for instructing this subpopulation of adult learners (Alamprese 1998; Research Triangle Institute 1998).

While there is a growing concern about the educational needs of adults with low levels of literacy proficiency, few systematic studies have been undertaken concerning the quality of the educational services provided to ABE learners and the effects of these services on student learning. This lack of research on the quality of services has been due, in part, to limited fiscal support for studies on ABE programs as well as the design of studies that have been funded. For example, the national studies of adult education programs (Young et al. 1994; St. Pierre et al. 1995) have collected limited data on program implementation, such as the strategies used in managing local adult education services and the methods used in delivering instruction. Rather, these studies have documented outcomes achieved by program participants without an in-depth understanding of the services that have facilitated adults' attainment of outcomes. Other federally supported studies have consisted primarily of descriptive reviews of ABE programs, particularly those funded under discretionary programs such as workplace literacy and adult basic education for the homeless (Kutner et al. 1991; Henard et al. 1992), and guidelines for effective ABE practice developed through consensual processes involving ABE practitioners and researchers (Mayer 1984). What is lacking is empirical research that examines the relationship between adults' participation in ABE programs and their development of literacy skills. Two current studies are under way, however, they are intended to provide data concerning the effects of ABE programs on adults' learning. In a multiyear study supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Planning and Evaluation Service and Office of Vocational and Adult Education, researchers from Abt Associates are examining instructional and organizational strategies for serving adults with low levels of literacy proficiency who are participating in ABE programs. In a project that is being undertaken as part of the work of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, researchers at Portland State University are conducting a longitudinal study of adult learners. These two efforts hold promise for providing valuable data that can inform the work of ABE policymakers and practitioners.

As a initial step in understanding the current state of adult basic education for learners with low levels of literacy proficiency, this paper describes the operation of the system that serves ABE learners, some emerging organizational and instructional practices in ABE programs, and key research issues that need to be addressed.

The Adult Basic Education System

Adult basic education in the United States often is described as a mosaic of services rather than a cohesive system intended to support adults' learning in and out of the classroom. Three types of educational services are provided under the federally supported adult education program: adult basic education for learners with skills below the eighth-grade level; adult secondary education for adults earning a high school diploma or the General Educational Development (GED) certificate, and English-as-a-second-language services for nonnative born adults desiring to develop English language skills. These services may be delivered in a variety of contexts and often include workplace literacy and family literacy. According to statistics compiled by the U.S. Department of Education (1998) for local programs funded under the Adult Education Act's State-Administered Grants Program, during FY 1996 over 4 million adults participated in the three types of services. Of the participants in adult basic education, approximately 55 percent (853,160) were enrolled in beginning ABE.

During FY 1996, there were approximately 4,000 grant recipients providing adult education services, with over half of these recipients (59 percent) being local educational agencies, while 15 percent were postsecondary institutions (primarily community colleges), and 14 percent were community-based organizations. Another 4 percent of programs were offered by correctional institutions and 8 percent were delivered by a variety of providers, including libraries, literacy councils, private industry councils, and sheltered workshops.

Funding for adult education and literacy comes primarily from federal and state government sources. According to the most recent comprehensive study of federal funding for adult education (Alamprese & Sivilli 1992), there were 84 programs in FY 1989, within 11 federal agencies, which authorized or supported some type of adult education activities. Of these, 27 programs had adult education as a priority in the authorizing legislation. While there are a number of programs authorizing adult education activities, the major discretionary federal funding for adult education and literacy currently comes from two federal sources—the State-Administered Basic Grants Program under the Adult Education Act (which has been reauthorized as part of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) and the Even Start Family Literacy Program, of which approximately 15 percent of the funding is spent on adult education and literacy. In addition to these two sources of funds, approximately 4 percent of students receiving Pell Grants are enrolled in developmental education courses as part of a certificate or degree program. Estimates for FY 1998 are that about \$345 million from the State Grants Program and \$18.6 million from Even Start will be spent on direct ABE and literacy services, and that the \$345 million will leverage about \$958 million in state and local funding.

Services provided under the Adult Education Act are targeted to adults age 16 and older who are not enrolled, or who are not required to be enrolled in secondary school; lack sufficient mastery of basic skills to function in society; lack a high school diploma; or lack basic English skills. The

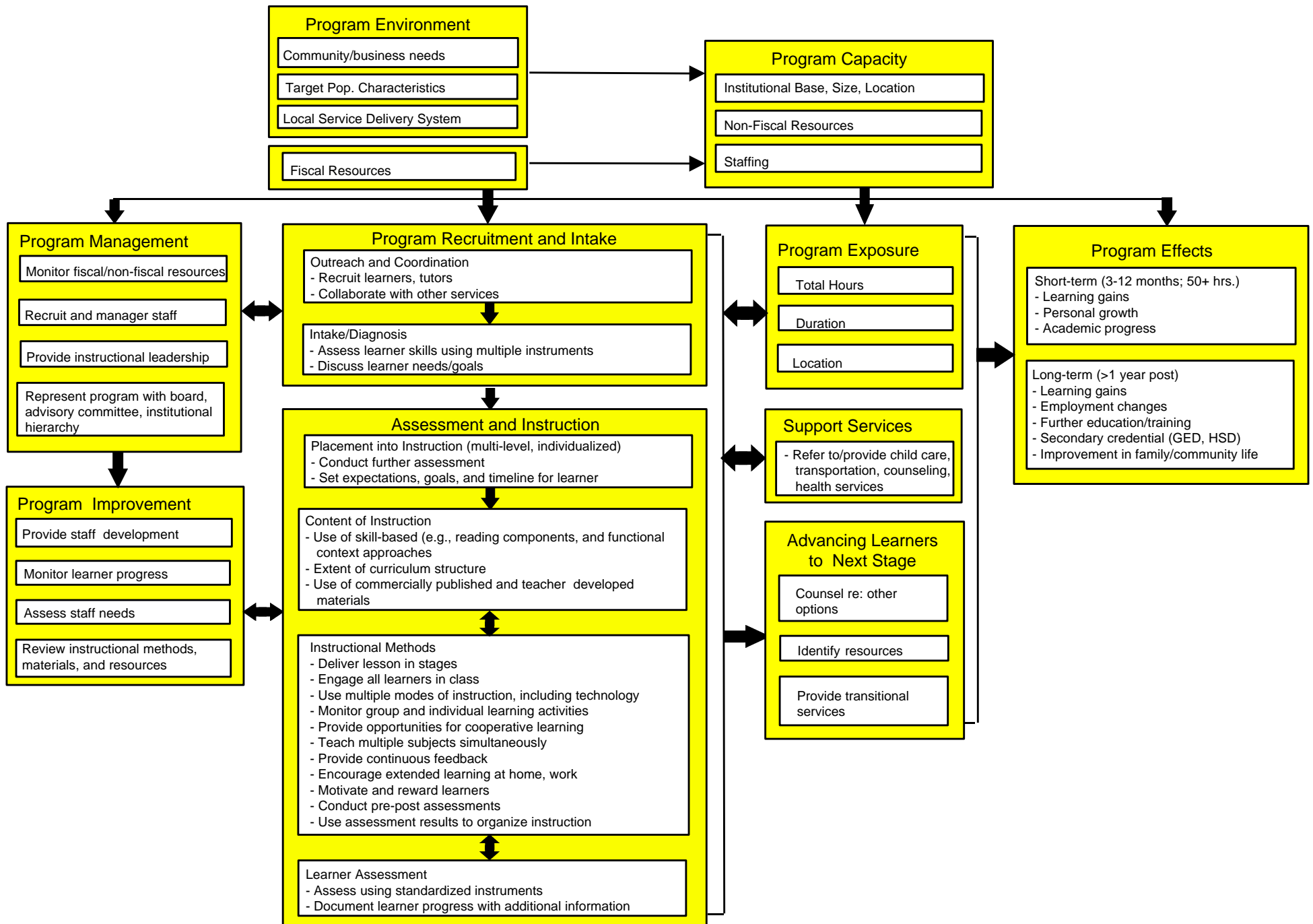
Even Start program serves children and adults from low-income families and is designed to improve their educational opportunities by providing early childhood education, adult education, and parenting education. According to the 1990 census, there are approximately 44 million adults who meet the target population characteristics of age 16 years and older who have not attained a high school diploma or equivalent, and are not currently enrolled in school. In terms of adults with low levels of literacy proficiency, various approaches have been used to determine the population of adults who may be categorized as such, including placement in the first level of an instructional program and attainment of a score on tests of general literacy skills. Reder (1998) has addressed the definition of this population in a related paper for this conference.

Adult Education Service Delivery Components

An important aspect of the adult education service delivery system is the structure and operations of the programs providing instruction. While the research on program implementation in adult basic education is sparse, there does appear to be agreement at a general level about the types of activities that a comprehensive adult education program should offer. In Abt Associates, Inc.'s current study of ABE programs for learners with low levels of literacy proficiency, a preliminary framework for portraying the relationship among the functions that are carried out in an ABE program was developed based on data collected from 20 ABE programs and related studies. This framework, which is presented in [figure 1](#), is a heuristic model for understanding the variety of activities that a program undertakes and the types of program effects that should result from these activities (Alamprese, Voight, & Stickney, forthcoming).

Abt's framework of an ABE program indicates that there are key functions that appear to be important in supporting the delivery of services to learners. The environment in which a program operates, such as the characteristics of learners accessing the adult education system and the structure of the service delivery system, are factors that affect a program's capacity to offer quality services to learners. For example, programs with limited resources that serve a learner population with varied skill levels will need to be particularly flexible and creative in developing services that can meet the individual needs of learners while using a group instructional model. The leadership and resourcefulness of a program's manager or administrator also is critical. Particularly in complex organizations, such as community colleges and large school districts, an ABE program's administrator must manage both the content of the program while maintaining responsibility for the fiscal and operational functioning of a program. As shown in [figure 1](#), the integration of assessment and instruction is an important aspect of the delivery of service. Rather than viewing assessment as an isolated process designed to provide data primarily for accountability purposes, adult basic education staffs increasingly are using information from multiple assessments to guide their development of an instructional plan for learners and to monitor learners' skill development. It is expected that as further research is conducted, aspects of the program framework will be revised or new functions added.

Figure 1: Framework of ABE Program Operations



Emerging Practices

As a systematic study of ABE program implementation and outcomes, Abt's research presents an opportunity to examine in depth the types of activities that ABE programs are carrying out and the effects of these activities on learners' progress as one lens for understanding how adults learn. The results of the first phase of Abt's study, in which nine ABE programs were selected for study based on learner outcome data or the presence of trained instructional staff, indicate that there are aspects of program structure and operations, including instruction, which administrators and staff in these programs believe are critical to providing quality services to adult learners (Alamprese, Labaree, & Voight 1998).

Program Management and Leadership Development

The importance of program management has been an emerging theme in statewide program improvement initiatives in ABE since the early 1980s. While effective instruction is a critical element in learner success, the system that supports this instruction also plays a pivotal role. The function of program management has been viewed in a number of ways. One perspective is that the administrator is responsible for the overall operation of the program and does not play a role in instructional leadership. In this case, leadership activities may be carried out by a key staff member, such as the program coordinator, or may be absent. Another view is that the administrator may facilitate programmatic change by working with these staff. In either case, it appears that successful programs have an element of leadership that may be present in different forms.

The responsibilities of an administrator in an adult education program may vary substantially by the size of the program. In programs serving large numbers of learners or in programs located in complex institutions, such as community colleges, an administrator may have responsibility for a number of services that include basic skills education and often must report through multiple levels of administration in an institution. In smaller programs, an administrator may have responsibility for a more limited range of services and may report to a board of directors or to a senior administrator in a school district. In either case, the administrator is responsible for the fiscal and programmatic soundness of the program and for obtaining and managing the resources that are critical in supporting a program.

The administrators in the case study sites examined in Abt's study used a variety of strategies to support the staff and provide the needed services for learners. At one community college site, the administrator appointed instructional leaders to be responsible for the content of the programs and to meet with the teaching staff to discuss the methods and materials used in the variety of basic education services being delivered. This structure enabled the instructional leaders to work together in forming a cohesive instructional program, with the teaching staff implementing the program and the administrator determining the types of support they needed to carry out their responsibilities.

The convening of staff in regular meetings is another approach for fostering communication and discussion about learners and the services provided to them. A number of programs in Abt's study had staff meetings during which instructors had the opportunity to discuss issues

concerning learner recruitment and retention as well as teaching content. While a primary objective of these meetings was to convey administrative information, they also were the occasion for substantive discussions about the program.

Staff Development

The programs in Abt's study used a variety of strategies to assist staff in developing new skills and reinforcing these skills through ongoing activities. While staff participated in state and locally sponsored training events, these events were viewed as a first step in skill enhancement. Programs increasingly are viewing staff development as a continuous improvement process that involves a variety of activities that support staff in their professional enhancement. A number of the programs in Abt's study have instructors who have been trained in the use of a specific instructional approach for teaching adults with low levels of literacy proficiency, and these instructors were able to participate in formal training and then work together as a team after the training event. As the concepts of action research and practitioner inquiry have become part of adult education staff development, there have been increasing efforts to structure opportunities for instructors to engage in self-reflection and data collection activities that enable them to view their practice through different perspectives and make change based on these alternatives.

Instructional Strategies

A key focus of Abt's study is the instruction that is delivered to learners with low levels of literacy proficiency. In developing a framework for examining the quality of instruction, Abt's researchers have considered the overall approach that instructors use in organizing a lesson and the content of what is being taught in a lesson. While these aspects of instruction are commonly studied in elementary and secondary education, little attention has been given to these topics in adult basic education. For example, Abt's study has found that instructors are conceptualizing a lesson as a series of stages in which they introduce the objective of the lesson, review the background on the topic or skill that has been previously addressed, present new information about a topic, provide opportunities for learners to practice the skills that they are learning, and then offer feedback to learners about their practice. Viewed this way, a lesson is a coherent series of activities that reinforces prior knowledge and introduces new information that learners can use in building their skills.

In terms of instructional activities, instructors are using a variety of ways to promote learning. Almost all instructors in the programs examined used multiple modes of instruction, including didactic, group response, and individual response. One instructional practice for promoting learner engagement is cooperative learning, which can be used effectively to encourage teamwork and a shared sense of responsibility among learners. Another strategy that is important is the provision of corrective feedback to learners so that they understand when their responses have not been accurate and why. Instructors used different ways of providing feedback to learners, including giving the feedback themselves or soliciting comments from other learners to clarify a response.

Emerging practices regarding the content of reading instruction for learners with low levels of literacy proficiency include the adaptation of phonics approaches used in elementary education for application with adult learners (the Lindamood-Bell Learning Process, the Wilson Reading System, and the Slingerland Approach), as well as the use of blended approaches where phonics is incorporated in context-based instruction. For example, for beginning level learners, ABE instructors are using primarily phonics to teach initial reading skills. They then move to the next level of reading classes blending phonics instruction with the teaching of other reading skills, such as the development of vocabulary and comprehension, usually in a context relevant to the learner. In the area of mathematics instruction, new approaches include the teaching of math as problem solving, communication, and as connections to the real world. At the heart of these approaches is an attempt to provide instruction that is structured and linked to the daily lives of students so that they see the applicability of what they are learning across different contexts.

Learner Assessment

The issue of learner assessment in adult education is highly debated and at the center of national and state program accountability initiatives. While a common theme among ABE practitioners is that existing tests of general literacy skills do not adequately measure the content of ABE programs, there is a growing recognition that assessment is necessary and can provide valuable information for guiding the instruction of learners. One initial finding from Abt's study of learners with low levels of literacy proficiency is that programs are using multiple forms of assessments at different points in the program. Upon enrollment, learners are assessed using diagnostic reading instruments that provide information for determining a learner's strengths and areas for study, as well as the instructional approach that will be taken. Learners' progress then is monitored using instruments designed for pre-post administration. In these programs, staffs are learning how to interpret the results from these assessments and to use them appropriately—a practice that often is absent in ABE programs. The use of specific reading tests has been found to be particularly helpful with learners with low levels of literacy proficiency, since tests of general literacy skills often do not reveal the skills that learners need to develop.

Supports to Learning

Instruction for learners with low levels of literacy proficiency usually is provided in small classes of less than 10 students or through an individualized approach. ABE programs are recognizing that these learners make progress when the instruction is tailored to their needs, and are utilizing approaches to address the varied learning styles of students. In class-based programs, one strategy is to have tutors assist in the classes to enable learners to benefit from the group instructional process while receiving individualized attention. Tutors also are used to extend learning, where students meet with learners outside of class to receive additional instruction.

The process of supporting learning also can be viewed from an administrative perspective. ABE program directors are limiting the enrollment of classes for learners with low levels of literacy proficiency in an attempt to provide quality instruction that is customized to these learners' needs. For example, as teachers incorporate the use of phonics in reading instruction, they have found that learners need individualized attention but benefit from group instruction. A third aspect of promoting learning is the length of the class. ABE administrators and

instructors view length and intensity of instruction as critical variables for learner success, and some programs have been able to offer classes for 2 or more hours several days a week. While this may be desirable from an educational perspective, this practice is not always feasible since adult learners often do not have the time to participate in programs for this duration.

Areas for Research

The results from the first phase of Abt's study concerning program implementation and the findings from the descriptive studies of ABE programs that have been undertaken indicate that there are several areas of research that warrant further examination. One concerns the general question of the relationship between ABE program operations and learner progress, and the types of services that are most effective with the various subpopulations of learners participating in programs. For example, more information is needed about the extent to which adults' varied learning problems can be addressed with different instructional approaches.

Another issue concerns the organization of instruction. While the variables of length, duration, and content of instruction are thought to be important to learning outcomes, more systematic examination of these factors is needed. Both program operators and founders have an interest in determining the conditions under which adults can best be served in basic education programs. A related topic is the role of learning outside of the classroom, and the methods and materials that can be used by adult students with ease to extend and reinforce their in-class learning. Finally, a better understanding is needed concerning methods for continuous staff development, the conditions under which instructors can incorporate new practices, and the relation of teaching strategy to learner outcomes.

References

- Alamprese, J. (August 1998). *Linking research and evaluation to policy and practice in adult education: Final report*. Bethesda, MD: Abt Associates, Inc.
- Alamprese, J., Voight, J., & Stickney, E. (forthcoming). *Results from the pilot test of organizational and instructional practices for first-level learners in adult basic education*. Bethesda, MD: Abt Associates, Inc.
- Alamprese, J., Labaree, S., & Voight, J. (1998). *Case studies of organizational and instructional strategies for first-level learners in adult basic education*. Bethesda, MD: Abt Associates, Inc.
- Alamprese, J. & Sivilli, J. (1992). *Study of federal funding sources and services for adult education: Final report*. Washington, DC: COSMOS Corporation.
- Henard, D., Lloyd, P., & Mikulecky, L. (1992). *A guidebook for developing workplace literacy programs*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University.
- Kutner, M., Sherman, R., Webb, L., & Fisher, C. (1991). *A review of the national workplace literacy program*. Washington, DC: Pelavin Associates.
- Mayer, S. (1984). *Guidelines for effective adult literacy programs*. Minneapolis, MN: B. Dalton Bookseller.
- Research Triangle Institute. (June 1998). *A national agenda for research and development in adult education and literacy*. Research Triangle Park, NC: author.
- St. Pierre et al. (1995). *National evaluation of the Even Start family literacy program: Final report*. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, Inc.
- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education. (1998). *Data fact sheet: Adult education*. Washington, DC: author.
- Young, M.B., Morgan, M., Fitzgerald, N., & Fleischman, H. (1994). *National evaluation of adult education programs: Draft final report*. Arlington, VA: Development Associates, Inc.