



National Coalition For Literacy

Concept for Research in Adult ESOL, Basic Education, Family, Workplace Literacy and Secondary Education from the National Coalition for Literacy

January 18, 2006

The results of the recently released National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) strongly reaffirm that millions of adults need adult education. This includes those who are native-born with basic and below-basic literacy skills and a growing population of immigrants who must learn English to function successfully in American society. The U.S. Department of Education, which conducted the NAAL, concluded that research is needed on the most effective (i.e., scientifically-based) methods of teaching and delivering services to adults. This concept paper addresses the need for a strong federal role in building that knowledge base for adult education—in both structural and funding terms.

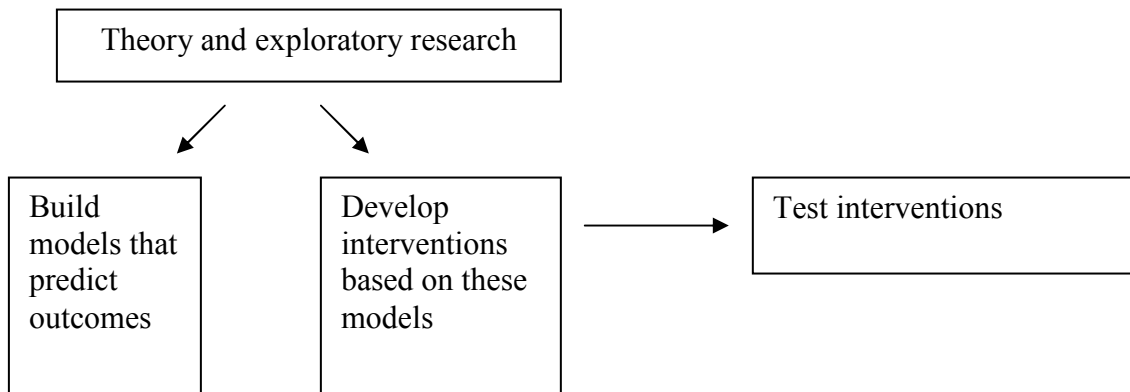
This paper is not intended to support the funding of any specific organization or individual, but to outline a policy that the field as a whole, represented by the National Coalition for Literacy, can support with one voice. The Institute of Education Sciences¹ (IES) has not yet issued a request for proposals for an R&D center for adult learning and literacy in spite of the NAAL findings that indicate extensive need for adult education research and services. (The current center, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, or NCSALL, is in its final year of funding.) Furthermore, the conference agreement on Labor/HHS/Education appropriations stated that IES should fund R&D centers at higher levels to encourage research of sufficient size and scope to be effective. (Conference Report 109-337, accompanying H.R. 3010, making appropriations for the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Education and Related Agencies for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2006; public law 109-149, signed into law December 30, 2005.)

Most resources, both for research and service delivery, are focused on K-12 students and schools. However, our country also needs to improve adult literacy services for high school dropouts, immigrants, and adults with low literacy and math skills so that they can more effectively carry out their roles as workers, parents, and citizens. The adult literacy field serves this diverse population outside schools with a distinct group of practitioners in a variety of settings, such as community-based organizations, community colleges, school districts, and workplaces. Although the knowledge base for adult education is growing, neither the state of adult literacy research nor the approach needed to develop evidence-based practice and policy in this field is comparable to that of the K-12 system.

¹ The U.S. Department of Education funding arm for educational research.

Research

Applied scientific research has two equally important aspects: the development of theory that can predict outcomes and through which causality can be inferred; and the development, from theory, of practical interventions that can be tested. It can be depicted as:



NCSALL, the currently federally funded R&D center, and other institutions have been trying to develop sufficient theory and models for rigorous research that could be successful with this population and these programs, as well as to engage a community of scholars who have experience with rigorous research. The field now has a small community of scholars, sufficient theory to begin testing interventions, and models for rigorous research with this population.

Research funding in our field should:

- Support the growth of a community of scholars in this field, by identifying those who have sufficient training and experience; this community of scholars should be brought together once a year (perhaps in conjunction with a research conference) to share insights about research methodology, priority research questions, and gaps in the research agenda. Further, the community should be encouraged to form collaborations to take on the research projects of the center. At present, this community of researchers is small enough that it can rather easily be brought together for such discussions, but our field is also in dire need of growing this community to meet the demand for research.
- Pursue the development and pilot testing of promising interventions on a small (but adequate) scale. These small-scale experiments would provide the information needed to design comprehensive interventions that could be tested in full-scale field trials. Several interventions could be tested immediately.
- As sufficient research builds, seek funding for full-scale trials of comprehensive approaches to specific populations (adults who have a specific reading profile or underserved groups, for example). Researchers could describe these interventions and design the field trials, but such a large and complicated research effort would require additional funds.

Development of Evidence-based Practice and Policy

Practitioners and policy makers in this field need and want access to a comprehensive source of evidence-based advice for making decisions about all aspects of program design and implementation. Since the What Works Clearinghouse is limited to advice based on the criteria set through No Child Left Behind for scientifically based research², it has little yet to offer this field, because much of the existing research in adult education does not yet fully meet these criteria. Researchers could provide comprehensive advice that is based on the best available empirical research and professional wisdom. NCSALL has been reviewing the research and professional wisdom literature for this field³. This has led to a draft of a comprehensive set of evidence-based principles that describe:

- A basic instructional and organizational framework for a good adult literacy program.
- Effective recruitment, intake, orientation, and waitlist management processes.
- Effective instruction for subgroups of students defined by their instructional goals and needs.
- Effective support services that allow students to persist long enough to reach their goals.
- Effective processes that help program dropouts reengage in learning and successful students to transition to postsecondary education or its equivalent in vocational education.

As new research becomes available, this source of evidence-based advice would change. Once this comprehensive source of evidence-based advice is ready, researchers would collaborate with:

- State professional development staff to link the advice to practice,
- NIFL, OVAE, and the association of state adult education directors to link the advice to policy, and
- Postsecondary institutions to link the advice to graduate programs for administrators and teachers.

²Scientifically based research has been defined as research that is *rigorous, systematic, objective, empirical, peer reviewed and relies on multiple measurements and observations, preferably through experimental or quasi-experimental methods.*—No Child Left Behind, USDOE. See also: *scientifically based research: employs systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation or experiment; involves data analyses that are adequate to support the general findings; relies on measurements or observational methods that provide reliable data; makes claims of causal relationships only in random-assignment experiments or other designs (to the extent such designs substantially eliminate plausible competing explanations for the obtained results); ensures that studies and methods are presented in sufficient detail and clarity to allow for replication or, at a minimum, to offer the opportunity to build systematically on the findings of the research; obtains acceptance by a peer-reviewed journal or approval by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review; and uses research designs and methods appropriate to the research question posed* from http://www.whatworks.ed.gov/faq/what_research.html

³ See Comings & Soricone, in draft form: http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/ebaep_model_monograph.pdf

Funding

Funding from IES for research and development efforts in the adult learning and literacy field should be a minimum of \$5 million per year⁴ (or \$25 million for a five-year period, to be increased in succeeding five-year periods). An additional \$5 million, making the total for federally-supported research funding of \$10 million, should come from other governmental sources, such as the National Institute for Literacy; Office of Vocational and Adult Education in the Department of Education; Department of Labor; Health and Human Development, and so forth.

Structure

The best option for a structure to support research in adult literacy is a fairly competed, comprehensive R&D center for adult literacy to which all funders (e.g., IES, NIFL, OVAE, NICHD, Labor, HHS) can contribute, that would both conduct research and develop evidence-based practice and policy for this field. However, since the bulk of research funding for a field that serves a large and diverse population would probably come from the U.S. DOE Institute of Education Sciences, the R&D center should be larger and have a more comprehensive agenda than the recently-competed R&D centers since it seeks to link with other researchers in the field collaboratively. It should also provide for a clearinghouse for all adult literacy-related research projects in the field (e.g., doctoral dissertations, local research conducted at universities) and for adequate dissemination to the wide range of practitioners and programs in the field.

Alternatively, three or four smaller research centers might be funded, each focused on conducting research and developing evidence-based practice and policy related to instruction for a separate population of adult learners (ESOL, ABE, and ASE, including transitions). Perhaps a fourth center might focus on over-arching issues such as program design, professional development, and persistence. Each of these smaller centers would receive approximately \$1-2 million per year from IES with the mandate that the centers develop some type of coordinating process for sharing and disseminating information to communicate with the field as a whole.

⁴ This represents only a small increase (from \$3.2 million a year) over the current R&D center funding, and represents probably about 1% of IES total educational research funding.