

Educational Participation of Low SES Adults

Robert B. Lewis, Pennsylvania State University

This is a North Carolina study of participation patterns of low socioeconomic status (SES) adults in educational programs. The findings are based on interviews from nearly 7,000 adults living in 31 low socioeconomic counties in North Carolina. The researchers found a high level of interest in education and job training among low SES adults. But there was far less actual participation than interest in participation. About one-third of the adults interviewed were neither interested in participation nor had a record of past participation.

Our society is placing more and more emphasis on the education of people from low socioeconomic status (SES) families. Manpower training programs, adult basic education programs, and even education within the home are some of the types of education receiving additional resources to accomplish this job.

This article is about a North Carolina study on participation patterns of low SES adults in education. It provides some interesting findings and important implications for professionals working with low SES adults.

The findings should be useful to educators in making appropriate changes in their present programs to attract more low SES adults and offer more effective educational and job training programs.

Basically, the individuals in the study were asked whether they had participated in adult education and job training in the past, were presently participating, or were interested in participating in the future. We defined participation as engaging in educational activities after formal schooling to acquire new knowledge, information, or skills. Based on their responses, the individuals were then grouped as: non-, low-, medium-, and high-participating orientation.

Then, the following personal and situational variables were related to their participation orientation: age, sex, educational level, race, marital status, family income, place reared, place of residence, employment status, and willingness to move to another geographical location to get a good job.

The findings are based on interviews of 6,710 adults living in 31 low SES communities of North Carolina. Of those studied, 46 percent were Negro, 53 percent white, and 1 percent American Indians. Two-thirds of the respondents had less than a high school education, while 76 percent had less than a \$5,000 family income.

Nearly one-fifth (18%) indicated a record of past and present participation in education and job training, while another 59 percent indicated a positive interest in future participation. About one-third of the respondents indicated they'd never participated and weren't interested in doing so in the future.

Variables Studied

Here are the findings and implications of the 10 personal and situational variables studied.

Age

Young adults were found to have the greatest level of interest, and as age increased the level of interest decreased. In the study, four-fifths of those 18 to 39 years of age were oriented toward participation, while only one-fourth of those over 60 years were interested in participation.

The relatively high participation orientation of the young adults could be attributable to such factors as high levels of aspiration and goal setting, greater self-confidence, a greater association of education and

job training with success in life, a feeling of responsibility, and less conflict with other activities as has been suggested in the literature. Because of this high interest, more emphasis should be given to designing programs for this age group.

Sex

The findings indicated that 70 percent of the women, compared to 60 percent of the men, were oriented toward participation. The men had participated slightly more than the women, but a greater percentage of the women were interested in future participation in education and job training. The greater record of participation by men may be because they have more opportunity to participate through their work, while women are limited by family responsibilities. It's possible that women in the low socioeconomic communities indicating an interest in participation also recognized the greater number of job opportunities available to them with more education and job training.

Educational Level

Level of education influenced the participation orientation and actual participation of adults in education and job training. Nearly three-fourths of those who had attended high school had a positive participation orientation, while about half of the respondents with zero to four years of education had a favorable orientation toward par-

ticipation in education and job training.

Different strategies, such as teaching on a one-to-one basis in the home or community, must be developed to motivate the less educated adult.

Race

About 7 out of 10 Negroes and Indians indicated an interest in education and job training, compared to only half of the whites. In contrast, 22 percent of the whites, compared to only 14 percent of the Negroes and 10 percent of the Indians, had actually participated. The findings of high interest in participation and low actual participation among the Negroes and Indians suggest that these two racial groups have had greater limitations in adult education and job training opportunities.

As more of these opportunities become available, these two racial groups will likely participate in even greater numbers. Thus, agencies will need to develop programs with this specific clientele in mind, and in doing so, take into account their special cultural attributes. At the same time, adult educators must recognize and accept the challenge of involving nonparticipation-oriented, white, low SES adults.

Marital Status

Among the marital status groups, the single and separated people were most willing to participate in adult education and job

training. The study found that over three-fourths of the single and separated individuals had a positive participation orientation. In contrast, less than two-thirds of the married respondents were oriented toward participation. This finding is partially explained by the youth of the single respondents, the large number of Negroes in this group, and respondents with some high school education. Considering these findings, a planned social phase of the education program involving both sexes might be a motivator for encouraging participation.

Family Income

As the level of family income increased, level of participation orientation toward adult education and job training decreased slightly among those living in low SES communities. For example, 63 percent of those with a family income of less than \$3,000 indicated an interest in future education and job training, compared to 54 percent with incomes of over \$5,000.

Educators and community leaders should take steps to remove as many social and economic barriers as possible . . . for example, reducing or eliminating educational fees.

Place Reared

The greatest level of participation orientation was found among those reared in town or city settings. About three-fourths of those reared in the town or city were favorably

oriented toward participation, compared to only three-fifths of those reared on the farm or in the country.

The concept of continuous education and job training throughout life could be more effectively developed as a positive attitude among low SES youth in schools, youth organizations, and mass media. This changing of attitudes and interests is particularly needed in the rural low SES areas, since this group of adults had the lowest orientation toward participation.

Place of Residence

City residents had the greatest level of participation orientation. About 70 percent of the city residents, compared to 60 percent of the rural and suburban fringe residents, had a favorable participation orientation. More specifically, the urban Negro was the most interested in participating in the future, while the rural white seemed to be the least likely to participate. However, the highest level of actual participation was found among the city and suburban white residents.

Lower participation orientation among the rural residents may be due to any one of a combination of factors such as valuing education less, little realization of the need for more education and job training to improve their situation, or little awareness of adult educational and job training opportunities in the rural community. Educational agencies need to realize that these kinds of limitations exist among the rural

low SES adults and correct the shortage of educational and job training opportunities in the rural community.

Employment Status

Participation orientation toward education and job training was greatest among the unemployed. Of the unemployed respondents, 84 percent had a favorable participation orientation, compared to 62 percent of those employed with a favorable orientation. Thus, unemployment may be a potential motivator for participation. This also suggests that employment agencies, as well as employers, should be involved in planning programs for this clientele.

Geographical Mobility

The adults "willing to move to get a good job" were better prospects for education and job training than those "unwilling to move." About half of the respondents in this study were willing to move to get a good job. Eighty-seven percent of those "willing to move without question" to get a good job, compared to 48 percent of those "not willing to move for a good job," had a positive participation orientation.

Those expressing a willingness to move were apparently expressing a desire to achieve a higher standard of living. They also perceived adult education and job training as a way of accomplishing this goal. This suggests that educational programs

might be more attractive if some type of assured employment with a specified income or job promotion were directly associated with the individual's learning effort. The educator programming for the low SES adults may want to develop work-related educational programs that are acceptable to welfare, employment agencies, and employers.

Implications for Extension

The high level of interest in education and job training among low SES adults is an important implication for agencies conducting programs like this. The fact that far more adults are interested in adult education and job training than have participated offers a challenge to these agencies.

Research is needed that will shed light on the whys for this lack of participation: Are the educational and job training programs compatible with felt needs of low SES clientele? Are the facilities in a location or so designed that they'll be used by adults living in low SES communities? Are the methods and approaches to instruction and treatment of adults so similar to the traditional methods used in the public schools that these adults lack motivation to participate?

Further research is also needed to determine why there was little interest in adult education and job training among the college-educated adults living in low SES communities. From a sociological standpoint, further research is needed to explain

why the respondent who now resides in a low socioeconomic community and who was reared in both urban and rural communities had the greatest participation orientation of all respondents.

With one-third of these adults neither interested in future participation nor having a record of past participation, long-range efforts to emphasize the value of and need for continuous adult education and job retraining throughout life should be expanded in the public schools and adult education programs. Since less participation orientation was found among adults reared in a rural area, a concentrated effort should be made to communicate to the rural citizens the need and opportunities for continuing education and job training in today's rapidly changing society.

More research is needed to determine what underlying factors caused some adults to lack interest in adult education and job training. Determination of the underlying values, attitudes, needs, goals, and levels of aspiration of low SES adults could lead to long-range approaches for motivating this clientele to participate.

The fact that more women than men in low SES communities are interested in adult education and job training suggests that both employers and educational job training agencies need to emphasize jobs and training opportunities for this group. Supervised child care programs provided by educational agencies and employers would enhance active par-

ticipation among this clientele.

For the over three-fourths of the single and separated adults interested in adult education and job training programs, a planned social phase involving both sexes should possibly be added to the present programs. Considering the high level of interest shown by respondents with less than \$3,000 annual family income, steps should be taken by educators to remove as many social and economic barriers to participation as possible for this low-income clientele.

The high interest of Negroes and Indians in education and job training programs indicates that agencies should direct their programs more to this clientele and, in doing so, should take into account special cultural attributes of these racial groups. Adult educators must at the same time recognize the challenge of involving a high percentage of nonparticipation-oriented, white adults.

The fact that more than four-fifths of the unemployed respondents expressed an interest in education and job training programs suggests that more systemic linkage should be strengthened among educational agencies, employment agencies, and employers in reaching and helping these people. Through cooperation and coordination, efforts to reach this group would be more productive.

The large percentage of respondents expressing a willingness to move and emphasizing income as a desirable feature of a job were try-

ing to achieve a higher standard of living. They perceived adult education and job training as a way of accomplishing this goal. This suggests that adult education and job training programs would be more attractive to low SES clientele if some type of assured employment with a specified income were directly associated with the individual's learning effort. This concept is similar to manpower training programs, but is different from the present-day, adult basic education programs that place immediate emphasis on literacy training rather than teaching marketable skills.

More specifically, in the future the adult educator will likely have to take an active leadership role in developing "work-study" education and job training learning experiences for the unskilled, undereducated, low SES adult—programs that are acceptable to welfare agencies, employment agencies, and employers.

Added emphasis should be given to innovative methods and techniques specifically designed for the low SES adult. Such programs might include adult basic education, programmed-instruction materials that are centered around the interests and needs of these adults. These materials could include such areas as: (1) job-related activities, (2) development of adult education programs in consultation with employers and lower-class individuals rather than offering traditional "canned" or standardized approaches, and (3) educational pro-

grams that can be carried out by volunteers and professionals on an individualized basis and in small group settings in the home or at least outside traditional educational facilities.

Other possible programs and methods would be incentive types of "work-study" programs designed for this adult clientele within business and industry that assure:

1. Greater incomes as higher educational levels are reached.
2. Development and expansion of present cooperative government-industry adult education and job training programs that financially assist adults residing in low SES communities while they achieve higher educational attainments.
3. Expanded development of the various media directed specifically at reaching and helping the adults living in low SES communities.
4. Establishment of counseling programs aimed at helping adults living in low SES communities with various types of problems, including education and job training opportunities.
5. Development of more individualized types of learning programs to reach this adult clientele.

With less than one-fifth of the adults in this study actually participating in adult education and job training, a major challenge facing extension and adult educators in the future is the development of programs that are relevant to the needs of adults living in low SES communities.