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A History and Contemporary Analysis of the Standard Adult High School Diploma Program in Minnesota

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A History and Contemporary Analysis of the Standard Adult High
School Diploma Program in Minnesota

A Dissertation Presented to
the Graduate Faculty of
Minnesota State University Moorhead

By

Ray Michael Ades

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education in
Educational Leadership

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Moorhead, Minnesota

A HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS OF THE STANDARD ADULT HIGH
SCHOOL DIPLOMA PROGRAM IN MINNESOTA.

By

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DEDICATION

I am the proverbial turtle on a fencepost. Even a casual observer understands I didn't get here by my own efforts. The list of those who buoy me is too large for the limitations of a dedication page. Nevertheless....

Being the last of a generation who remembers the dunce cap, I owe an unpayable debt to my parents. Simple, working people who believed in education. Who, despite all evidence offered by educational professionals reassured me with the words; "No, you're not a dummy!" My mother forbidding the use of that sobriquet in her home. Truth be told, much of my last half-century was an effort to prove her right.

My wife Kathryn and her (our) children, and their families truly own whatever accomplishment is attributed to me. It is their provision that fuels my effort. Far beyond simple support they create my meaning.

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NOMENCLATURE

ABE	Adult Basic Education
CASAS	Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System
CCRS	College and Career Readiness Standards
DEED	Department of Employment and Economic Development
GED	General Education Diploma
HiSET	High School Equivalency Test
HSED	High School Equivalency Diploma
MDE	Minnesota Department of Education
MnSCU	Minnesota State College and University system.
NEDP	National External Diploma Program
TASC	Test Assessing Secondary Completion
WIA	Workforce Investment Act
WIOA	Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act

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ABSTRACT

This research project, which focused on a competency-based, secondary credential option for adult learners, known as the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma, investigated the development of this credentialing option from its inception prior to 2014 legislation through present implementation. Three research questions, which centered on the circumstances that instigated, the process that developed the implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma, which is referred to as the quintain in this study, and the perceived impact upon Adult Basic Education programs guided this multiple case study. Group interviews and document analysis were employed to answer the aforementioned questions. Documentary evidence suggested that scores of education professionals and stakeholders contributed to the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma's evolution. Despite this evolutionary complexity, several assertions associated with this quintain lend themselves to best practices within the discipline of adult education regarding andragogical factors, education policy development and program flexibility.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Necessity is the mother of invention, so the proverb goes. Innovative educational practice arises from the needs of learners and the willingness of educators to search for creative solutions. This research considers one such attempt by Minnesota educators to better equip adult learners for success.

By means of introduction, this chapter will define and summarize the problem faced by Minnesota's adult educators and their students, which prompted innovative program solutions. After describing the resultant Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma, this chapter will outline a research plan designed to explain best practices in adult education. Built on a case study model, this research explored three research questions within an andragogical framework.

Recognizing the Problem

In 2013, Minnesota was still recovering from the great recession. As economic activity gradually increased, both the public and private sectors sought to fill job vacancies. Newly streamlined employers sought to expand their workforce with an emphasis on innovation, flexibility, and efficiency. Employers were looking for employees who possessed both technical skills and the ability to think critically. Ho-Kim (2011) elaborated, "A survey in 2011 by the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development reveals that a "high-performance workforce" is the number one factor for firm success, according to 67 percent of Minnesota manufacturers" (p. 2).

Looming behind gradually improving economic indicators a disturbing fact was becoming apparent. Ho-Kim (2011) continued, "Close to half of respondents (47 percent) had positions that were unfilled due to lack of qualified applicants, including 13 percent with 10 percent or more of jobs

unfilled” (p. 5). Despite generalized economic expansion, a shortage of qualified job applicants was inhibiting economic growth.

Simultaneously, a portion of the state’s population was unable to regain losses incurred during the 2008 – 2009 recession. Rohrer (2011) pointed out an important fact, “As the recession progressed and even after it ended, the number of workers experiencing longer durations of unemployment began to increase” (p. 3). Biegler and Madden (2013) clarified the problem, “Minnesota’s overall economy is improving, but a closer look tells a disturbing story: many Minnesotans still lack quality jobs that would allow them to support themselves and their families” (p. 1). Similar trends on the national level created ever-widening disparities in both wages and labor market participation. Neumark (2016) described the emerging problem;

The depth of the Great Recession, the slow recovery of job creation, the downward trend in labor force participation, high long-term unemployment, stagnant or declining wages for low-to-medium skill jobs owing to adverse labor demand shifts, and a greater rebound in low-wage than mid- or higher-wage jobs raised concerns that the normal business cycle dynamics of recovery from the recession will be insufficient to offset the diminished labor market prospects of many workers. (p. 1)

Prompted by these economic concerns, national policy makers looked for innovative solutions. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016) one response was to revise the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) (p. 1).

National Response

The Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA) reauthorized and revised WIA. Under WIOA, adult basic education and literacy programs were linked to dislocated worker employment and rehabilitative service providers, creating a holistic approach. WIOA not only

required the integration of service providers but also demanded rigorous standards focused on college and career readiness. The U. S. Department of Education website (2019) described, “*WIOA* is landmark legislation that is designed to strengthen and improve our nation’s public workforce system and help get Americans, including youth and those with significant barriers to employment, into high-quality jobs and careers and help employers hire and retain skilled workers” (p. 1).

Prompted by changes in federal legislation, needs of their clientele and anticipated changes in the longstanding General Education Diploma (GED) test, adult basic education programs in several states explored programmatic possibilities. Several states adopted rules allowing use of the HiSET (High School Equivalency Test) and TASC (Test Assessing Secondary Completion) as a replacement or alternative to the GED test. Other states demonstrated renewed interest in applying competency-based education models to adult secondary education. Shaffer (2015) explained, “...at least eleven states (California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin) have a competency-based diploma system in place, using either a state-developed set of competencies or endorsing the competency-based National External Diploma Program” (p. 5). Influenced by these economic, social and political currents, adult education practitioners in Minnesota explored programmatic alternatives.

Minnesota’s Response

In 2014, adult education practitioners and policy makers sought ways to bridge the gap between the requirements of Minnesota employers and the skills of Minnesota workers. One part of the greater efforts of the 2014 Minnesota Legislature was to enact foundational changes in how Adult Basic Education (ABE) services are provided to adult learners. Minnesota’s Education Code (2014) was amended to initiate a standard high school diploma for adults (Standard high school diploma for adults, 2014).

This new approach to adult secondary credentialing was based on a competency demonstration model. According to the legislation, the Minnesota Commissioner of Education was to ensure that this secondary degree demonstrated competencies necessary for post-secondary and employment success. This legislation introduced significant changes into how adult learners in Minnesota would qualify for a secondary degree.

Limitations associated with high-stakes testing generally and the revised 2014 GED test specifically prompted interest in a competency-based approach. Competency-based learning models have a long history in professional and technical training as well as growing popularity in alternative high school and post-secondary education. Apart from limited utilization of the National External Diploma Program (NEDP) and Wisconsin's High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) adult basic education has been dominated by the GED exam. Davidson recounted, "The GED test has played an important role in the history of the U.S. educational landscape and has practically been the sole means for high school dropouts to earn their high school equivalency for more than 70 years" (p. 30). The Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma was intended to facilitate the preparation of those lowest skilled Minnesota workers who sought to improve their career and post-secondary education options.

Minnesota's Standard Adult High School Diploma

As envisioned in the 2014 legislation, the Standard Adult High School Diploma is a competency-based secondary diploma. Eligible students must be adults enrolled in a Minnesota Adult Basic Education program. Standards and domains reflect both Minnesota K-12 graduation standards and employability readiness. Program processes and competency demonstration were designed to provide both flexibility and portability.

Domains

Five subject domains define the curriculum areas of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. English/language arts consists of competencies in reading, writing, speaking and listening. The mathematics domain covers number sense, algebra, geometry and measurement, as well as data, statistics, and probability. The nature of science and engineering, life science, physical science and earth and space define the parameters of the science domain. Social studies consists of U.S. government and citizenship, economics, geography and history. One final domain, career development and employability, consists of skills necessary to transition into post-secondary training and career opportunities.

Standards

The Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma employed four separate standards. According to the State Adult Diploma Working Group (2020), Minnesota K-12 academic standards and the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) were embedded in the domains of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies (p. 18). Two additional documents were utilized as standards to evaluate employability skills. According to the State Adult Diploma Working Group (2020), the student's competency to develop a future pathway, self-manage, and navigate systems are informed by the Academic, Career and Employability Skills (ACES) framework (p. 18). The Northstar Digital Literacy Assessment is the standard for evaluating digital literacy competency (State Adult Diploma Working Group, 2020, p. 18).

Program Process

A four-step paradigm guided the process of program delivery. These are intake, instruction, evaluation, and graduation counseling. The intake process ensures that the student meets the eligibility requirements which include minimum standards for English reading ability. Additionally,

initial counseling consists of an assessment of the student's prior experience and creation of a learning plan focused on their career objectives.

Steps two and three consist of learning and evaluation. By nature, these steps are overlapping and designed to facilitate feedback and reiteration. In this process the student, in collaboration with instructors, has flexibility to demonstrate competency in a variety of ways. Ultimately, competency completion is determined by the Minnesota Department of Education staff. Their evaluation feedback consists of three possible responses, definite pass, potential pass and not yet ready. A judgement of potential pass or not yet ready allows the student to submit further evidence or complete additional instruction in that competency area.

Graduation counseling consists of ensuring that the students have completed their education plan which demonstrates the necessary competencies and the creation of a transition plan. Transition planning helps students identify their next steps toward their ultimate career objectives. Additionally, this plan helps the counselor identify support services important to the student's success.

The eventual end state of this process is the creation of a portfolio which demonstrates the student's competency in the five Standard Adult High School Diploma domains. As students advance, they collect artifacts with the assistance of their instructors. These individual artifacts are uploaded into a common database which will eventually be submitted to the Minnesota Department of Education for evaluation. This common database provides portability even as the student is progressing. This process is predicated on ongoing advising to ensure the student is progressing toward their defined goals.

Competency Demonstration

Adult learners bring a depth and variety of experience into the classroom. The Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma was designed to leverage and authenticate that experience.

Students may combine artifacts from a variety of sources into a single portfolio which demonstrates secondary level competency. Competency evidence is grouped into four broad categories. Prior experience-based competency may consist of previously completed K-12 or postsecondary courses. Test-verified learning could include a passing score on a recognized, standardized test such as the GED or a post-secondary entrance exam. Completion of ABE courses may also serve as evidence of competency completion. Additionally, students may demonstrate competency through applied learning projects.

Research

This research endeavored to investigate the results of legislative efforts to establishing a competency-based secondary credentialing option for Minnesota adults. The effects of this change have a potential to impact not only adult learners, but also ABE programs across the state. Additionally, second order effects potentially influence post-secondary institutions and Minnesota employers.

Problem Statement

Broadly speaking, a significant amount of scholarly research is available in the area of adult basic education. Unfortunately, research regarding secondary credentialing is heavily contextualized by the dominance of high stakes testing. Due to its limited use in the past generation, the competency-based education model has been the subject of very little research in an ABE setting. What material is available is largely sourced from state and private service providers.

Similarly, a search of databases demonstrated that the competency-based model of education has a well-established academic research foundation. The research mainly reflects its application to professional programs, post-secondary and more recently, alternative high school programs. Newly established, very limited scholarly research has been published regarding the Minnesota Standard

Adult High School Diploma. There is however a readily available cache of documents related to the task forces appointed by the Commissioner of Education and the Adult Diploma pilot program which preceded full implementation.

Research Questions

As early as 2011 the Minnesota Commissioner of Education sought input as to alternatives to the secondary credentialing options available to adults. In 2011, based on legislative recommendations, the commissioner appointed a task force to make recommendations regarding a competency-based diploma (Minnesota Adult Secondary Credential Task Force, 2012, p. 3). Following their guidance, a second task force of ABE professionals and stakeholder representatives was commissioned in 2013 to construct specific recommendations as to implementation. This task force consisted of teachers, administrators and representatives from the business community, the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), Minnesota State College and University system (formerly MnSCU), and the Department of Education (MDE) (Standard Adult High School Diploma Task Force, 2014, p. 5). Subsequent to legislative action in 2014, a pilot program began in 2015, prior to full implementation.

Utilizing multiple, nested case study design this qualitative research focused on the development of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma from its inception through implementation by ABE programs. Data were drawn from multiple sources including group interviews and archived documentation. Three research questions guided the investigation.

- 1) Why was there a need for the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma?
- 2) How was the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma developed?
- 3) How did the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma impact ABE programs?

To answer these questions research methodology was anchored on group interviews conducted at several Adult Basic Education sites which implemented the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. These group interviews consisted of administrators, teachers and staff who took part in the program. Groups consisted of four to six participants. Attention was given to recording the lived experience of the participants. Of particular concern were their perceived need and their understanding of the programmatic impact on adult education.

The second prong of research was an analysis of the written record created by both the Commissioner of Education and the task forces appointed to make recommendations. From its roots prior to 2011, through task force work and pilot program documentation, there is a significant record publicly available. The perspective of key stakeholders and the evolution of programmatic ideas were detailed through document analysis.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is explanatory. The Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma is an innovative policy response to challenging educational, social and economic questions. Ontologically, various stakeholders brought a diversity of thought to the process. Rather than sum the parts, this research examined the interconnectedness of priorities, motivations and the communal evolution of ideas toward solutions. The work of the task forces and the pilot program exemplified trial and error as well as constructive correction as it progressed.

Conceptual Framework

This research utilized an andragogical framework to conceptualize effective adult education programming. As formulated in the 1980's by Malcolm Knowles, andragogy is distinct from the conventional curriculum driven approach of pedagogy. Knowles, Holton and Swanson (2005) formulated:

The difference is not that one deals with content and the other does not; the difference is that the content model is concerned with transmitting information and skills, whereas the process model is concerned with providing procedures and resources for helping learners acquire information and skills. (p. 115)

Andragogy asserts assumptions about adult learners. These assumptions differentiate andragogy from pedagogy and constitute the elements of effective adult education.

The first of Knowles' assumptions is that adult learners have to need to know. By this he is stating that adults have to have a reason to learn. Simply presenting information to them is not sufficient to stimulate learning; they need to know why. Adults need to be actively engaged in planning their learning.

Active engagement in planning translates into adult learners taking ownership of their learning. Another of Knowles' assumptions deals with the adult learner's self-concept. As opposed to children, adults are accustomed to being responsible decision makers. With some exceptions, adults need to self-direct their education.

Experience separates adult learners. This is not simply the fact that adults have accumulated more experience, but also that this accumulated experience has shaped their identities. Experience can be a great asset but, depending on the nature of the experience, it can also lead to biased attitudes and entrenched false beliefs. To be effective, teaching aimed at adults must be experiential based and affirm previous knowledge.

Along with an experiential basis, adult learning must be timely, relevant and applicable to the current context. Knowles' assumptions about adult learners contend that they must express a readiness to learn. Readiness may vary based on two elements. The first is direction, or how much assistance is needed. The second is support, or how much encouragement is required.

Adult learning is contextualized. It is life-centered, focusing on problems not subjects. Knowles defined this assumption as the adult's orientation to learning. The adult learning cycle is based on previous knowledge. From this knowledge base an observation leads to a generalization which can then be tested in new settings. Adult learning is for the purpose of accomplishing a task.

Motivation is the final assumption about adult learners. According to Knowles (2005) an adult will generally be motivated intrinsically; extrinsic motivators are much less powerful. Internal values and freedom of choice are central to what motivates adults.

This research sought to explain a statewide adult education initiative. Toward that goal, data were collected from a variety of documents and local ABE service providers. Each of these providers existed in a specific setting, served a distinct clientele and employed tailored approaches toward meeting their local mission. The data undoubtedly reflected the unique setting from which it arose. Andragogy provided the coalescing lens from which to view differentiated data. Knowles (1978) best described:

The field of adult education has long sought a glue to bind its diverse institutions, clienteles, and activities into some sense of unity; perhaps andragogy will give it at least a unifying theory. And, extended in its application to the concept of life long education, perhaps andragogy will provide a unifying theme for all of education. (p. 20)

Key Terms and Operational Definitions

WIOA - The Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act was enacted in 2014 as the primary federal legislation of workforce development.

WIA - Workforce Investment Act of 1998 was revised and replaced in 2014 by WIOA.

Carnegie unit – also known as seat time, technically refers to 120 hours of class/contact time between student and teacher.

Andragogy – differentiated from pedagogy, this is the theory and practice of adult education.

HSED - High School Equivalency Diploma is a secondary option available in Wisconsin.

NEDP - National External Diploma Program is an applied performance high school equivalency assessment administered by CASAS.

HiSET - High School Equivalency Test is a high school equivalency test administered by Educational Testing Service.

TASC - Test Assessing Secondary Completion is a high school equivalency assessment created by McGraw-Hill Education and administered by Data Recognition Corp.

CASAS – Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System is a nonprofit organization providing curricular and assessment tools.

Standard Adult Diploma – also referred to as the Minnesota Standard Adult Diploma and the Standard High School Adult Diploma. One of three secondary degree options available to Minnesota adults.

Competency-based – A system of instruction and evaluation based on the students demonstrated mastery of the content.

Secondary credential – A certification that the student has demonstrated completion of the Minnesota K-12 graduation standard content.

Adult learners – In Minnesota, learners above 21 years of age or otherwise not eligible for K-12 education. Federal data frequently defines the age of adult learners as over 24.

DEED - acronym for the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development

ABE - Adult Basic Education refers to both the services and providers of education to adult learners.

Postsecondary education – refers to educational programming which requires a secondary degree as a prerequisite.

MnSCU – acronym formerly used by the Minnesota State College and University system.

MDE – acronym for the Minnesota Department of Education

Adult Literacy – here refers to exhibited reading and writing skills, also refers to educational programs offered to improve same.

K-12 Diploma Completion – One of three secondary degree option available to Minnesota adults.

GED – The General Education Diploma is sometimes referred to as the General Education Development test. This trademarked battery of 4 tests is aligned to the College and Career Readiness Standards and used to demonstrate secondary competency.

CCRS - College and Career Readiness Standards define the academic content of ABE, including English Language Arts and Math.

High-stakes testing – reliance on a single summative evaluation, generally a written examination, as the sole measure of performance.

Scope, Limitations, and Assumptions

Countless teachers, staff, adult learners, administrators and policy makers were involved in the development of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. This case study is bounded by scope and sample. This research limits itself to the written documentation retained by the Minnesota Department of Education. Additionally, this secondary credential is offered to adult students at some 100 sites across Minnesota. This research is limited to investigating its implementation at four of these ABE sites, and collecting interview data from 18 staff, teachers, and administrators.

Certain assumptions guided the conduct of this research. During the implementation of this program individual sites developed diverse processes and made distinct curricular choices. This individualization does not indicate better or worse, rather, different roads to the same end. Another

assumption is that individual sites and the Department of Education applied the same standards of rigor and completeness expected in other secondary degree completion programs.

Significance

The importance of this research is articulated in two areas. The first impact of this study is nested in its analysis of the complexity by which the ideas of educational practitioners are implemented into public policy. Mindful of its stated limitations, this research will inform education professionals and stakeholders who seek public policy change in the future. A second significance is its demonstration of the impact of educational policy changes on Minnesota's adult basic education programs. Adult learners at the lowest skill level are envisioned by this policy. This research informs policy discussion concerning Adult Basic Education programs ability to serve marginalized populations.

The Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma is an innovative approach to adult education. Utilizing a competency-based education model, it seeks to broaden access to economic and educational opportunities for those lowest skilled Minnesotans. This collective case study investigated three research questions. These questions sought an explanation of the need for, the development of and the perceived outcomes for ABE providers. Assumptions regarding adult learners hedged the collection and defined the relevance of data. A review of literature bearing on this topic placed this research within its academic context.

CHAPTER 2. LITURATURE REVIEW

Utilizing a competency-based approach toward the secondary credentialing of adult learners is an emergent topic in adult basic education. There isn't a significant foundation of scholarly research related specifically to the topic. That said, there is germane published material broadly examining adult literacy, adult education, secondary credentialing and competency-based education. Based on the developing nature of the topic a significant portion of the relevant material was assembled from government reports, census data and information available from service providers. Whenever possible scholarly inquiry was chosen and cited.

This review begins by capsulizing adult literacy in Minnesota and defining the role of adult basic education. Methods of secondary credentialing and associated shortcomings lead into consideration of competency-based models which are emerging as possible solutions. This section concludes with an examination of applicable research methods.

Adult Literacy in Minnesota

By 2013, a clear mismatch existed between the demands of Minnesota jobs and the supply of trained workers. The necessity of effective adult education programs for a healthy, expanding Minnesota economy was apparent. Rohrer (2011) stated the obvious, "The more educated a worker, the less likely he or she is to be unemployed. Long term, that pattern is exactly the same, indicating that education insulates both against layoff and long-term unemployment" (p. 6).

Data available to Minnesota lawmakers in 2013 indicated a four-year High School graduation rate of 78.42%, by 2017 that rate had risen to 82.68% (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019). This corresponds with the national trend and four year national graduation rate of near 84%. McFarland, et al. (2018) explained, "In other words, more than four out of five students graduated with a regular high school diploma within 4 years of starting 9th grade" (p. 128).

Imbedded in these statistics is wide variability based on race, national origin, nativity and immigration status. Overall trending toward graduation rate improvement, though positive, does not impact the existing population of adult Minnesotans who struggle with basic skills. Further, this population is growing as newly arrived immigrants and refugees find residency in Minnesota.

American Community Survey (2017) data indicated that 26% of foreign-born residents of Minnesota do not possess a secondary diploma. Among those who are not naturalized citizens 32.3% have not attained a secondary degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Based on data from the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning, Reder (2012) explained,

School improvement efforts alone will not meet future workforce development needs. LSAL findings indicate that the development of literacy and essential skills during adult life has substantial economic benefits to individual adults and society. Programs that elevate and sustain the rate of literacy skill growth over time are needed to raise future levels of employment and earnings. (p. 4)

Despite increased K-12 graduation rates, future workforce demands require adult basic education programs that address the needs of specific populations.

Adult Basic Education (ABE)

The Adult Basic Education Impact Report (2019) defined the current situation, “Nearly one in five Minnesotans over age 25 do [*sic*] not have a high school diploma, and many who do still lack the basic skills necessary for employment” (p. 1). ABE programs have an established role in both literacy development and workforce preparation. According to the 2017 Adult Basic Education Overview, “The mission of Adult Basic Education in Minnesota is to provide adults with educational opportunities to acquire and improve their literacy skills necessary to become self-sufficient and to participate effectively as productive workers, family members, and citizens” (p. 1). Over 13% of all

secondary degrees conferred in Minnesota in 2013 were issued by ABE programs. During that same reporting year some 26,000 newly arrived Minnesotans learned rudimentary English skills in an ABE classroom (Minnesota Department of Education, 2014).

According to the 2019 Adult Basic Education Impact Report, “The overarching goal of Minnesota ABE is to connect low skill adults with opportunities for employment and career advancement” (p. 2). Annually, over 60,000 Minnesotans participate in a variety of educational services provided through 44 ABE consortia. Adult education is offered at locations in over 500 communities across Minnesota. English as a second language, digital literacy, civics, parenting and basic literacy skills are some of the programs commonly offered. Central to the mission of Minnesota ABE are courses designed to assist students attain a secondary degree.

Secondary Credentialing

Prior to 2014, there were two options available in Minnesota for adult learners to acquire a secondary degree, K-12 Diploma Completion and the General Education Development (GED) test. For decades these were the choices available to adult learners in Minnesota. These are distinct pathways but both having severe limitations.

K-12 Diploma Completion

K-12 Diploma Completion is also known as credit completion and the credit recovery option. Essentially, this option allows adult students to complete those portions of the High School graduation requirements that they had not previously completed. Satisfactory accomplishment of both state and local academic standards applies to this option. Additionally, the adult learner must meet Minnesota’s 21.5 course credits requirement. These courses must include four credits of language arts, three each of mathematics and science, 3.5 of social studies, one of art and seven elective credits.

Since course completion involves requisite hours of classroom instruction, the time commitment is prohibitive for both adult learners and ABE providers.

The limitations of this option make it untenable for all but a few adults. The Department of Education's website explained, "Due to the intensive time commitment for adult students and expensive resource commitment for schools, many Minnesota ABE programs do not offer this model" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019). Many ABE providers simply do not have the resources to offer K-12 Diploma Completion programs as an option to their students.

GED, HiSET and TASC

The history of the trademarked GED test is long. It was initially implemented as a mechanism for returning WWII veterans to validate secondary attainment and thus qualify for GI Bill post-secondary benefits. Davidson (2017) noted that shortly thereafter it found an application in the civilian sector as a means by which adults could receive a diploma despite having dropped-out earlier (p. 31). The standardized test went through numerous revisions over a seventy-year period. Over time it became the nationally accepted standard by which adults attained a secondary credential.

The 2014 revision of the GED test marked a turning point. A growing concern that attainment of a high school diploma no longer guaranteed a living wage job informed the development of the newest version. McLendon (2017) observed, "Thus, a greater emphasis on preparing students for transitions to postsecondary education and training indicated a need for a more rigorous high school equivalency standard that was better aligned with expectations for those contexts (p. 42). Alignment to the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) was not the only change in the 2014 GED test.

Once offered only as a pencil and paper exam, after 2014, the GED test was only available via computer. Predictably this was a point of concern; perhaps adult learners would not perform as well based on familiarity with technology? Patterson, et al. (2011) contributed,

A concern at the start of the pilot project was whether candidates might differ demographically in their perception of ease of use or their preference for computer versus paper testing. They did not; neither gender, age, nor ethnic background predicted results. (p. 73)

Post-implementation, Brinkley-Etzkorn and Ishitani (2016) offered a more nuanced appraisal, “While findings indicated that the teachers and administrators in this particular context underestimated student technology skills and access to computers, there are still technology-related services from which students could clearly benefit” (p. 39).

One further accessibility issue was raised concerning the 2014 revision of the GED exam. Many in the immigrant community are English language learners. For a significant number in this population the GED is an essential pathway toward career advancement and post-secondary training opportunities. Anderson (2015) warned,

French and Spanish, however, are the only language variations available, leaving speakers of other minority languages with no choice but to take the exam in English. Surprisingly, GED Testing Service offers no accommodations for those who are obliged to take the test in a second language. (p. 58)

Zinth (2015) reported, “Until January 2014, the General Educational Development (GED) was the only option for youth and adults lacking a high school diploma, but needing a high school credential to pursue employment opportunities or postsecondary education” (p. 1). Based on College and Career Readiness Standards, the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) produced by

Educational Testing Service and the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) produced by Data Recognition Corporation were offered as alternatives. Beginning in 2014 numerous states approved the use of HiSET, TASC or combinations of all three equivalency tests in order to offset perceived shortcomings of the 2014 GED revisions. Zinth (2015) continued, “States cite common multiple factors in decisions to offer the HiSET and TASC test, including assessment costs, testing center infrastructure and staff capacity, and test-taker ability to complete a computer-based test.

Quite apart from any specific criticism of the 2014 revision of the GED test or its alternatives is the fact that all are test-based assessments designed to confer secondary credentialing. The implementation of the 2014 revision instigated a discussion amongst adult educators in Minnesota as to the equity of relying so heavily on high-stakes testing. Professional dissatisfaction and collegial discussion led to legislative action and a third method of secondary credentialing for Minnesota adults.

Competency-Based Models

The competency-based model of teaching and learning is not new. Professional and technical training has a long history of focusing on demonstrated mastery as opposed to class attendance. Offering flexibility of programing and the opportunity to receive credit for prior learning, college students are increasingly attracted to competency-based degree programs. (Kelchen, 2015, p. 8) At the secondary level, administrators are utilizing elements of competency-based education to meet the needs of alternative high school students. Sullivan (2015) described;

This paradigm of teaching and learning is gaining momentum in the public education system and is referred to as a competency-based (CB) model that builds on individualized learning tailored to the uniqueness of each student. Learning is driven by set standards and is

demonstrated through authentic application of knowledge and skills. Assessments range from short, concise activities to long-term multifaceted projects. (p. 6)

Within adult basic education, apart from Minnesota's Standard Adult High School Diploma, a few models of competency-based programming exist.

Eight states plus the District of Columbia participate in the National External Diploma Program (NEDP) administered by Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS). Adults and out-of-school youth utilize online, self-paced assessment tools to demonstrate competency in ten content areas. Best practices combine computer based assessment with work experience to meet the competency requirements. Completion of the program results in a secondary diploma issued by a local school board or the respective State Department of Education (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems, 2019).

Similarly, adult education programs nationwide have independently utilized the Equipped for the Future (EFF) standards to facilitate competency-based education. Developed through the input of practitioners and experts in the 1990's these standards sought to define 21st century adult competencies. Stein described, "The 16 Equipped for the Future Standards define the core knowledge and skills adults need to effectively carry out their roles as parents, citizens, and workers" (p. 17).

Ohio's Adult Diploma Program utilizes a competency-based diploma approach to target in-demand jobs. Zinth (2017) explained that Ohio's program "allows an eligible student to complete the requirements for obtaining a high school diploma that are specified in rules adopted by the superintendent while also completing requirements for an approved industry credential or certificate" (p. 4). This option, available to adults over 22, eliminated both credit and graduation test requirements and resulted in a state issued diploma (Ohio Department of Education, 2019).

Connecticut's Adult High School Credit Diploma (AHSCD) is based on the accumulation of academic credits but recognizes experiential learning. The state's website (2019) explained, "Credits for work or military experience, independent study projects and online courses are additional ways to obtain credit" (p. 1). This hybrid approach to adult secondary education intercalates elements of competency-based into a traditional Carnegie unit model.

Wisconsin allows adults to complete a secondary credential in a variety of ways. The 5.09 High School Equivalency Diploma is titled based on its location in the Wisconsin administrative code. This longstanding diploma program offers students and local providers wide latitude in demonstrating the prescribed competencies. Ideally these programs are career oriented. Panzer, Johnson and Lewis (2015) warned, "Simply offering the program in order to deliver an isolated high school credential without integrating career-pathway guidance would be a disservice to students" (p. 46).

Washington's 21+ program credits accumulated life and work experience toward completion of a secondary diploma. Kerr (2015) elaborated, "The advisor evaluates any transcripts as well as life and work experience and administers assessments to find any educational or work-readiness gaps" (p. 52). Based on identified need, students create an individualized plan to gain and demonstrate competency through a variety of activities.

Though not purely competency-based, several states including Texas, Alabama, Louisiana, amongst others are experimenting with experiential learning. Many of their programs employ elements of competency-based education as a method of credit recovery or proficiency demonstration for adult learners (Dounay, 2008, pp. 2-3). Other states authorize completion of post-secondary credits as a means of retroactively attaining a secondary diploma (Zinth, Response to information request, 2017, p. 5).

Presenting Themes

Two important themes arise from the literature. Of growing importance is the necessity of adult basic education to address issues of economic opportunity. Mortrude (2018) persuaded, “I believe quality adult education has economic value for an individual and a family. I believe quality adult education is an anti-poverty and an anti-*intergenerational* poverty strategy” (p. 114). Secondly, issues related to equality of opportunity were an undercurrent in the literature. Dounay (2008) pointed out, “While some states’ proficiency-based credit options were adopted long ago to accommodate gifted students, more recent state policies make clear that such options must be made available to at-risk or returning dropout students” (p. 2).

Methodology

Studying the need for, process by, and perceived impact of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma is essentially an investigation of best practices. Considerations of best practices in education are inherently human and social, most effectively explored qualitatively. Qualitatively, several design options were available.

The research questions under consideration did not lend themselves easily to ethnography, phenomenology or grounded theory. Narrative design was considered but rejected because of the narrowness of inquire. Creswell (2018) cautioned, “Narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals” (p. 71).

Case study design corresponded well with the research questions that grew from a desire to explain how and why. Thomas (2016) explained,

Here we are talking about understanding how and why something might have happened or why it might be the case. The assumption in a case study is that, with a great deal of intricate

study of one case, looking at your subject from many and varied angles, you can get closer to the ‘why’ and the ‘how’. (p. 4)

This research investigated an educational program that was implemented at a number of locations involving various teachers. In order to capture a complete understanding a multiple case study design was adopted. Stake (2006) explained the benefit, “An important reason for doing the multicase study is to examine how the program or phenomenon performs in different environments” (pp. Kindle Locations 837-838). In this research, implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma was defined as the quintain, and individual program sites were the associated cases. In a sense these cases were nested within a consideration of the larger whole. Stake (2006) continued, “We seek to understand better how this whole (in this book, I am going to call the whole— the entity having cases or examples— a “quintain”) operates in different situations” (pp. Kindle Locations 39-40).

Effective case study depends on an in-depth understanding of each case. Creswell (2008) reminded, “In order to accomplish this, the researcher collects and integrates many forms of qualitative data, ranging from interviews, to observations, to documents, to audiovisual materials” (p. 98). This research utilized documentary and interview data, but additionally the researcher observed participant interactions during the group interviews. Focus group data collection was considered but rejected in favor of group interview methodology. Thomas (2016) explained, “In group interviews the emphasis is on the researcher taking a lead role, asking questions and being in control of the discussion – rather in the way that an interviewer is leading the discussion in a structured or semi-structured interview” (p. 192). Group interview, rather than focus groups, better captured the milieu of an ABE setting. A more robust explanation of this research methodology is found in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research utilized document analysis and multiple case study methodology to develop assertions leading to best practices in adult education. Research questions probed the need for and development of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma as well as its impact on Adult Basic Education programs. Data were gleaned from group interviews conducted at four ABE sites and archival documentation. The collection and analysis of data were informed by an andragogical model of adult learning.

Design

At its foundation, this research is case study contextualized by prior document analysis. Creswell (2018) explained the design of case study;

Case study research is defined as a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case themes. (pp. 96-97)

The cases examined in this research are bounded by their participation in the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma.

More specifically, this research utilized a multiple, nested case study design where individual cases were nested within a larger whole. Thomas (2016) explained;

With multiple studies, the emphasis is on comparing clearly different examples, and the contrasts found between and among the cases then throw the spotlight on an important theoretical feature. By contrast, with nested studies the breakdown is within the principal unit of analysis, such as classrooms within a school. (p. 177)

The purpose of this research is explanatory. Explicitly, this research attempted to explain the perceived need of a third secondary option for adult learners, the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. Additionally, this research attempted to explain the process by which it was developed and the perceived impact it had on adult education programs. Exploring the archival record related to the development of this secondary credential option added both background and context to inform the analysis.

The goal of this research did not lend itself to either ethnographic or grounded theory research methodology. Case study methodology was chosen over narrative or phenomenology because this research attempted to explain both process and perception. Yin (2018) explained,

In contrast, “how” and “why” questions are more explanatory and likely to lead to the use of a case study, history, or experiment as the preferred research method. This is because such questions deal with the tracing of operational processes over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence. (p. 36)

Research Questions

Three open-ended research questions guided this investigation.

- 1) Why was there a need for the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma?
- 2) How was the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma developed?
- 3) How did the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma impact ABE programs?

Data were drawn from a variety of sources, including teachers, staff, program administrators and the archival record. In each case, these three questions defined what data were sought and collected.

Context

Stake (2006) advised, “Qualitative understanding of cases requires experiencing the activity of the case as it occurs in its contexts and in its particular situation” (p. Kindle Location 502). Group

interviews provided the vehicle by which data were gathered about individual cases. The interactive dynamics of the site are important to the context, group interview captures those important interactions. Thomas (2016) distinguished group from individual interviews, “If you are interviewing a group, it should be because the group psychology itself has some impact on the situation that is of interest to you” (p. 191). The setting in which interviews took place were adult education program sites in Minnesota. Exploring the need for, development and perceived impact on adult education programs, data were collected within that milieu. Every effort was made to preserve a natural setting. Creswell (2018) instructed, “Instead, qualitative researchers gather up-close information by talking directly to people and seeing them behave within their context” (p. 43).

Ethics

Participants of this study can be visualized at two levels. First, four Adult Basic Education programs were selected from more than 100 sites implementing the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. Administrators at these sites were contacted and all agreed to host group interviews with four to six participants. Secondly, site administrators invited staff and teachers involved with their adult diploma programs to be part of the digitally recorded group interview.

Consent to gather and utilize data was clearly explained prior to participation, both verbally and in writing (see Appendix A for consent form). Programs and interviewees could withdraw consent or discontinue participation at any time, for any reason, without penalty. No vulnerable or protected populations took part in this study.

The identity of programs and interviewees was not shared with anyone beyond the principal researchers. All individual information was recorded under a pseudonym, actual names were not used. Data, including audio files, were stored in the researcher’s password protected computer storage.

Researcher Role

The focus of this research is the implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma as a third credential option for adult learners. Document analysis and group interviews generated data from which analysis was constructed and conclusions were drawn. The researcher is an adult educator who participated in the implementation of this credential. Proximity to the topic requires transparency regarding the research questions under consideration.

The researcher approached this project with the belief that there was a demonstrated need to make a third secondary credentialing option available to Minnesota adults due to shortcomings of the K-12 diploma completion and inequities created by high-stakes testing. Further, competency-based education is well suited for an adult education setting since it lends itself better to basic andragogical learning tenets than does traditional educational credentialing components.

The Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma had a transformative effect on the researcher's classroom and the program in which he taught. Students frustrated by high-stakes testing found success with the expanded options to demonstrate competency. Test taking stamina was no longer the determinant factor in achieving a secondary degree. As a result of the researcher's observed successes in his own classroom, the researcher approached this project with a positive impression of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma.

Given that the researcher is an adult education practitioner, there is a familiarity with and even a pre-existing professional relationship with some of the research participants. This relationship aided the group interview process. Comfort and familiarity with the practices of adult education informed how group interviews were conducted. Familiarity with the documentary evidence and the authors facilitated understanding this data.

This said, the researcher recognized that one teacher's experience does not validate success. Encouraged by the outcomes personally experienced, this research aimed to explain how other's experiences confirm or contradict his own. In the process conclusions were developed that lend toward best practices in the field of adult education. Although the researcher brought a positive experience to this inquiry, an assessment of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma warranted greater professional scrutiny to obtain a more thorough vetting of its merits. An assessment as to whether Minnesota's adult learners' needs were met through effective educational programming was a chief concern of this project.

Participants

Cases were selected based on their relationship to the phenomenon being studied; that is, implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. When multiple case study methodology is employed, the examined phenomenon is referred to as the quintain. Stake (2006) described, "The quintain is something that we want to understand more thoroughly, and we choose to study it through its cases, by means of a multicase study" (pp. Kindle Locations 41-42). Purposive sampling was utilized to apprehend various settings in which adult basic education takes place. Stake (2006) instructed,

At the outset of such a multicase study, the phenomenon is identified. The cases are opportunities to study it. Even in the larger multicase studies, the sample size is often much too small to warrant random selection. For qualitative fieldwork, we will usually draw a purposive sample of cases, a sample tailored to our study; this will build in variety and create opportunities for intensive study. (p. Kindle location 844)

Cases were selected in order to capture various perspectives of the quintain. The scope of this research was limited to documentary evidence and four cases. Following Creswell (2018),

“researchers typically choose no more than four or five cases” (p. 102). The researcher’s familiarity in combination with MDE guidance facilitated case selection. One case represented corrections education while another was located in a rural community. A third case was illustrative of a mid-sized outstate city, while the fourth was located in a large urban school district.

The limited number of teachers, staff and administrators at each of these sites did not lend itself to randomization. At one site, all adult diploma employees participated in the interview. Interviewees were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate. Nested within the larger whole, these four cases and archival documentation offered unique and diverse perspectives from which to envision implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma.

Data Collection

Stake (2006) cautioned, “Always, there is a ton of information to gather that is not directly related to the research questions. But the most important data will be those driven by research questions” (pp. Kindle Locations 540-541). Data for this study was gleaned from a variety of sources including archival documents, researcher observation (see Appendix B for observational protocol pages one and two) and group interviews (see Appendix C for interview protocol). Each document and case investigated reflected its own unique setting. In order to bridge this setting diversity and keep the quintain embraceable, data collection was limited to that which pertained directly to effective adult education.

For the purpose of this study, an andragogical conceptual framework defined the elements of effective adult education. Several distinguishing characteristics of adult learners arose from the literature review contained in chapter two. Together, these assumptions about adult learners form the andragogical model of education. Adults have a desire to be self-directed in their learning, possess a wealth of previous knowledge and are motivated by intrinsic values rather than external factors.

(Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 294) Additionally, adult learning readiness is a function of how relevant the new learning is to their life situation and learning best occurs when it is problem/solution oriented. (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 294) Addressing these assumptions about adult learners forms the nexus of efficacious adult learning.

Succinctly put, data were collected from four seminal documents retrieved from MDE's archive and group interviews at four separate adult education sites. Document analysis preceded group interviews. The historical perspective captured by document analysis explained the terrain from which this state-wide program developed and its intended goals. Defining the landscape through document analysis, group interviews offered distinct views of its implementation at a local level. These interviews took place at selected ABE sites involving adult education teachers, administrators and staff involved with their adult diploma programs. Digitally recorded, these group interviews were transcribed for analysis. Observational data included contextual information about the ABE site, its clientele and programs. In each case, data collection was girded by an andragogical understanding of effective adult education.

Analysis

Creswell (2018) described the essential elements of qualitative data analysis as;

Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis; then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes; and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion. (p. 183)

Data gathered from four digital recordings of group interviews were transcribed into written texts.

Examination of the written archival record identified four pivotal documents. These were analyzed

through coding processes and condensed into descriptive themes. (see Appendix D for deductive/inductive analysis schema).

The andragogical assumptions regarding adult learners which guided data collection translated into a priori codes in the analysis process. Deductive coding utilized predetermined codes gleaned from the literature review. This type of coding is a top-down approach, where the researcher brings a set of significant perceptions to the data. These being self-directedness, previous experience, life relevant, problem/solution oriented and intrinsic motivation. Under the theme of andragogical characteristics, these deductive codes were sought in the data.

Creswell (2018) warned, “If a prefigured coding scheme is used in analysis, we typically encourage the researchers to be open to additional codes emerging during the analysis” (p. 193). Inductive coding is a bottom-up approach. This type of coding allows the data to suggest its own significant perceptions without the researcher’s predetermination. Following this guidance, a set of inductive codes emerged utilizing an interpretive, constant comparative approach. This process involved repetitively going through the data in order to identify similarities and differences. Multiple readings of the collected data produced preliminary codes evolving into final constructs categorizing the data. These emerged themes described the meaning participants had assigned to their experience. Thomas (2016) summarized, “The basic principle governing the process of constant comparison is that you emerge with themes that capture or summarise the essence (or essences) of your data” (p. 205). Both deductive and inductive coding were utilized within this analysis.

Within each case, identified themes were analyzed to determine their relationship to each other. Interconnected relationships within the data defined the complexity of the case and served as the basis of the case description. Though its aim is explanatory, this research utilized case description as an essential element of analysis. Yin (2018) exemplified use of this technique, “In this sense, the

descriptive approach was used to identify an overall pattern of complexity that the authors then used to “explain” why implementation had failed” (p. 309).

The purpose of this multiple case study is to explain the quintain. Stake (2006) clarified, “Similarly, the multicase research director starts with a quintain, arranges to study cases in terms of their own situational issues, interprets patterns within each case, and then analyzes cross-case findings to make assertions about the binding” (pp. Kindle Locations 639-640). Cross-case analysis combined the significant case findings into a visualization of the quintain. This visualization lent itself to interpretation stated in the form of case assertions and conclusions stated as proposed best practices.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) define the elements of trustworthiness in qualitative research as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (p. 300). Several research techniques have been incorporated to establish the trustworthiness of this qualitative research project. The first of these techniques was member-checking.

The researcher partnered with participants who offered their personal insights in group interview settings. In order to present their constructed meaning as clearly as possible, member-checking was utilized to ensure credibility. A participant from each of the group interviews was given the opportunity to read the case findings and clarify meanings prior to publication.

The concept of transferability in qualitative research differs from that of quantitative research.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained,

Thus the naturalist cannot specify the external validity of an inquiry; he or she can provide only the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility. (p. 316)

Introductory vignettes precede each case finding along with brief descriptive vitas of the interview participants. These descriptive elements offer readers the opportunity for transferability.

Creswell (2018) reminded, “The naturalistic researcher looks for confirmability rather than objectivity in establishing the value of the data. Both dependability and confirmability are established through an auditing of the research process” (p. 265). The dependability of this qualitative research is established through oversight and audit by its research advisor and committee.

Confirmability is also established through triangulation techniques. Triangulation refers to viewing something from multiple angles to ensure accuracy. Stake (2006) defined its purpose, “to assure that we have the picture as clear and suitably meaningful as we can get it, relatively free of our own biases, and not likely to mislead the reader greatly” (pp. Kindle Locations 1754-1756). In this research, findings and assertions are based on multiple data sources. Further, the data itself is of various types, including interview and documentary analysis.

Finally, positionality enters into the trustworthiness of this research. The researcher clearly positioned himself as a participant in not only the research, but also the topic being studied. As an adult educator the researcher clearly has a stake in the success of this educational program. The goal of the researcher is clearly stated, to propose best practices in the field of adult education.

Limitations

As earlier stated, cases for this multiple case study were selected in order to capture various perspectives of the quintain. One case represented corrections education, another was a rural community, a third represented an outstate city and the fourth was located in a large urban school district. These four offered unique and diverse perspectives but they certainly did not capture the entirety of adult basic education in Minnesota.

Additionally, the researcher's familiarity with the subject and participants of this research lends an insider's perspective. This double-edged sword was admittedly leveraged to add contour and depth to case description. Nonetheless, it inescapably flavored the process. Fully acknowledged, the reader should be aware of these limitations.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

The Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma was a response to the economic, demographic and educational challenges faced by Minnesota's adult educators and their students. The goal of this research is to utilize both the written documentation and the gathered insights of teachers, staff and administrators to answer three research questions:

- 1) Why was there a need for the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma?
- 2) How was the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma developed?
- 3) How did the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma impact ABE programs?

Description of Sample and Methodology

Sampling can be envisioned on two levels. First, the selection of cases followed a purposive sampling technique. Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016) explained, "The purposive sampling technique, also called judgment sampling, is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses. It is a nonrandom technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of participants" (p. 2). Four Adult Basic Education (ABE) sites, which offered the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma as a secondary option, were selected. These sites were selected to represent the diversity and complexity of settings common to adult basic education. Stake (2006) offered this guidance,

An important reason for doing the multicase study is to examine how the program or phenomenon performs in different environments. This often means that cases in both typical and atypical settings should be selected. When cases are selected carefully, the design of a study can incorporate a diversity of contexts. (p. Kindle location 826)

Sites representing corrections, a rural community, an out-state city and the greater metropolitan area were included in this research. By design the cases explored were very different

from each other. In order to describe the quintain, the implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma, it was viewed from these distinct perspectives.

Secondly, convenience sampling was employed within each of these cases to select interview participants. Etikan, et al. (2016) explained;

Convenience sampling (also known as Haphazard Sampling or Accidental Sampling) is a type of nonprobability or nonrandom sampling where members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate are included for the purpose of the study. (p. 2)

Group interviews were conducted at these four ABE sites with four to five participants in each interview (see table 1). A total of 18 teachers, staff and administrators participated, four men and 14 women. All participants had between 12 and over 40 years of experience.

Table 1 *Interview Participants by Site*

Group Interview Participants			
Site	N	Male	Female
One	5	2	3
Two	4	1	3
Three	4	0	4
Four	5	1	4
Total	18	4	14

An andragogical framework was used to guide the semi-structured interviews. Thomas (2016) described, “In a semi-structured interview you provide the structure with a list of issues (rather than specific questions) to be covered and you have the freedom to follow up points as necessary” (p. 190). Andragogical elements related to self-directedness, life experience, life relevancy, problem-solution orientation and student motivation were introduced for group discussion. For instance, the group was asked to comment on the adult diploma’s impact on student self-directedness. These common characteristics of adult learners served as prefigured codes and contextualized data gathered through group interviews.

Transcripts from recorded group interviews were coded according to predetermined andragogical markers but unique codes arose from each location. Quotes were assembled by code on a spreadsheet and arranged thematically. Both commonalities and differences in the perspective of these sites are discussed in the findings and cross-case analysis.

Presentation of Findings and Cross-Case Analysis

First, utilizing document analysis, this section will investigate key documents in the written record specifically focused on discovering the evolution of Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma from concept to educational policy. Secondly, this section will record the distinct experience of four different adult basic education programs which employ the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma as an option for their clientele. Finally, these findings will be assembled into a comprehensive visualization of the quintain, the implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma.

Written Record

A search of the Minnesota Department of Education’s website yields scores of documents related to or referencing the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. It is immediately

apparent that these documents cross-pollinate and build from each other, an indication of collaboration and conceptual progression. Two foundational task force reports summarize the efforts of various working groups prior to legislative action creating the adult diploma. In addition, several documents chronicle its progression through the pilot program into full implementation.

Minnesota's Literacy Action Network is a statewide professional organization which supports adult basic education through proactive organization, professional development and advocacy. In 2011, at the request of the Minnesota Department of Education, it formed the Adult Secondary Credential Task Force to provide recommendations regarding adult secondary credentialing. Active professional discussion and local experimentation with alternatives to the General Education Diploma (GED) predate the work of this committee. In its final report the task force acknowledged and affirmed the organic efforts of local education programs. The Adult Secondary Credential Task Force (2012) reported, "Minnesota has a rich tradition of local innovation in adult secondary credentialing to complement the traditional GED test option. Over the years many school districts have developed adult high school diploma programs that meet the needs of adult students" (p. 18).

Building on input and examples from educators in Minnesota and elsewhere the task force recommended implementation of a statewide, competency-based adult diploma. Career readiness requires more than an accumulation of academic knowledge. Recognizing the narrow constraints of high-stakes testing, the final report envisioned a secondary diploma that encompassed multiple approaches to learning assessment. The Adult Secondary Credential Task Force (2012) proposed "This new framework preserves access to the GED but embraces a more comprehensive approach better aligned with adult learning context and need, as well as broader competency assessment choices that address both achievement and workplace preparedness gaps" (p. 20). The Adult Secondary Credential Task Force (2012) later concluded that assessment of "core adult skills and

attributes in the three elemental areas (academic, career, and personal readiness) is the primary defining characteristic of the new adult credential option” (p. 23). Prompted by this report, the 2013 Minnesota legislature enacted chapter 116, article 2 section 19, directing the commissioner of education to establish a second task force to make specific recommendations regarding a competency-based adult diploma.

The new task force consisted of five education professionals as well as representatives from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), higher education and the business community. Working in sub-groups, the Standard Adult High School Diploma Task Force produced a wealth of supportive documentation related to their investigation. In its final report to the commissioner of education the Adult High School Diploma Advisory Task Force (2014) summarized their work;

The Task Force reviewed existing adult diploma programs and models for delivery from other states. Task force members researched policies, standards and materials and interviewed state adult diploma specialists from Connecticut, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin. In addition, they talked with a variety of experts and reviewed state and national standards relevant to adult learners. (p. 5)

Several conceptual developments and additional influences are apparent in the 13 recommendations delineated in this task force’s final report.

The Adult Secondary Credential Task Force identified three broad areas of readiness; academics, career and personal. The Standard Adult High School Diploma Task Force clarified by recommending five domains for assessment; language arts, mathematics, science, social studies as well as career development and employment skills. The influence of both Minnesota’s K-12

standards and the newly released College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Learners (CCRS) was apparent. The Standard Adult High School Diploma Task Force (2014) recommended,

Competencies covered in the adult diploma program model should be rigorous and consistent throughout the state while aligning to Minnesota academic high school standards pertinent to adult learners and their needs. (p. 8)

Recognizing adult learners' need to respond to changes in their employment and housing, both task force's recommended portability and transferability. Building from findings of the earlier credential task force, the Standard Adult High School Diploma Task Force (2014) recommended students have, "the opportunity to continue their studies and not have to start over or repeatedly demonstrate progress on the same standard requirements if they move or transfer to another approved standard adult high school diploma program within Minnesota" (p. 8). Hinted at by the work of the previous task force, robust individualized advising was recommended as an essential part of each student's program.

Methods of competency demonstration were defined quite broadly. The Standard Adult High School Diploma Task Force (2014) simply stated, "The commissioner should allow standard adult high school diploma program students to demonstrate completion of the requirements in a variety of ways" (p. 8). Perhaps recognizing the need to develop the criteria and processes of this new credential, the diploma task force recommended the establishment of two continuing groups, an Advisory Committee and an Adult Basic Education Working Group.

Following legislative action authorizing the adult diploma, in February of 2015 a pilot program was launched. The pilot enlisted adult education programs from across the state in an effort to enliven the vision of the legislature and the recommendations of the two task forces through the

guidance of the advisory committee and the working group. This guidance is captured in a living document entitled “State Adult Diploma Resources and Guidance.”

The State Adult Diploma Resources and Guidance (2015) explained,

The working group formed in January 2014. It has met monthly to develop and discuss detailed issues in implementing the state adult diploma... The working group would spend time working as a large group and in sub-groups to help define how local consortia could meet the competencies in language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and employability and career development areas. (p. 12)

Containing the work of some 35 contributors, this document fully developed standards for each of the five domains. In addition to those standards envisioned by the previous task forces the working group adopted the Academic, Career and Employability Skills (ACES) in the Transitions Integration Framework (TIF), and the Northstar Digital Literacy Standards as standards in the area of employability and career development. Developing skills related to setting goals, defining career pathways, functioning in organizations and utilizing technology are clearly intended by these additions.

Guidance related to program processes reflect a continued emphasis on student advising, portability and the creation of online portfolios. The State Adult Diploma Resources and Guidance (2015) described, “The purpose of the online portfolio is to give students an electronic resource file of key documents they may need to prove their competency and help them succeed in postsecondary education, careers, and other next steps” (p. 93). It is these assembled portfolios that are ultimately submitted to MDE for evaluation.

Following the initial phase of the pilot program the “Statewide Standard Adult High School Pilot Evaluation Report” summarized the project’s outcome. Hasskamp (2015) explained, “Standard

Adult Diploma programming took place at 26 sites throughout Minnesota, serving more than 300 students in the initial piloting period. 100 of those enrollees made significant educational gains” (p. 1). During the first five months of the pilot program 14 adults earned their secondary credential. Documenting the utility of a competency-based model, students were able to capitalize on previous experience and assemble artifacts from a variety of sources. Hasskamp (2015) summarized, “The new graduates averaged about 4 months to earn their state standard adult high school diploma, using their prior experience, G.E.D. scores, ABE instruction and other methods to demonstrate their competencies in the content domains” (p. 1).

A 2017 report to the legislature indicated that since its implementation statewide the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma has become a flexible tool. Alternative Learning Programs (ALP) and State-Approved Alternative Programs (SAAP) are designed to meeting the educational needs of disenfranchised high school students who are unsuccessful in traditional school settings. In many cases, adult basic education sites offer overlapping serves. The Legislative Report on Learning Year Programs (2017) explained,

There are a number of Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs that are co-located with ALPs. This partnership creates efficiencies by leveraging resources and facilitating credit completion for ABE participants who are working on completing the credits to earn high school diplomas and provides for a smooth transition to participation in the Standard Adult Diploma for students who have aged out of SAAP programs. (p. 13)

The most recent documentation available concerning the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma comes in the form of an overview posted in January of 2020. In that document Hasskamp (2020) updates, “Currently, 27 of Minnesota’s ABE consortia are approved and trained to offer the Standard Adult High School Diploma at more than 100 sites across the state” (p. 3).

The written documentation indicates that the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma resulted from the collaborative labor of dozens, if not hundreds, of stakeholders. Building on the work of others, each taskforce, committee and working group refined the eventual product through revision and negotiation. Over time, their efforts coalesced into statewide public education policy implemented at the local level.

Investigation of the MDE's archive of documents related to the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma revealed four seminal documents which summarized and influenced the others.

These four being:

- 1) The Adult Secondary Credential Task Force Report (2012)
- 2) Adult High School Diploma Advisory Task Force Report (2014)
- 3) The State Adult Diploma Resources and Guidance (2015)
- 4) Statewide Standard Adult High School Pilot Evaluation Report (2015)

Documentary analysis of these indicated that all of the prefigured andragogical coding elements were present from the inception of this work. From the beginning this credential option was designed for adult learners.

In addition, several other themes emerged from the analysis. The formation of working groups to support programmatic implementation demonstrated a commitment to collaboration. Over time, the elements of rigorous standards, competency-based approach and the importance of student advising took shape. These group together thematically as the essential program components. The theme of outcomes was in view from the beginning. Post-secondary student success of course but outcomes related to portability and transferability equally influenced the final product (see Appendix E for written record analysis).

Site One

At precisely 0900 the movement control officer announced “education switch out” over the radio. On the living units, magnetic locks snap open and offenders filed out of their cells. Individually, and in small groups, they ambled along the sidewalks toward the education building. This was a well-practiced and highly structured exercise but that morning it was for a unique purpose.

Arriving at their destination students did not proceed to their usual first period rooms. Instead, they gathered in a large classroom where they sorted themselves by height. Draping their regulation royal blue coats over the schoolroom tables they were issued royal blue caps and gowns complete with a gold tassel and instructions to line up in the hallway. At 0930 *Pomp and Circumstance* was played on a portable electric keyboard signaling the near 100 graduands to proceed into the gymnasium.

The assembled group was larger than would normally be allowed, additional security was conspicuous. Seated on plastic chairs waiting to receive their diplomas these students participated in an unconventional rite of passage. The printed program outlined all the normal elements of a graduation ceremony but the auditorium lacked the exuberance of proud friends and family. Student speakers and visiting dignitaries offered both congratulations and encouragement. For many, completing a secondary degree was the culmination of months, if not years, of study. In this brief respite these men had the opportunity to reflect on their accomplishments and look positively toward their futures. Upon the conclusion of the morning’s formality offenders were once again “switched out” to their units. Where they joined other offenders awaiting the noon meal and afternoon count. Graduation day at a correctional facility is a peculiar mix of academic process and security protocol, not unlike corrections education itself.

Site one is the largest educational program in the Minnesota Department of Corrections system. Serving more than 350 incarcerated students a day, site one offers classes leading to secondary, post-secondary and career and technical degrees. 18 adult basic education professional and para-professional staff work with a diverse group of secondary students ranging in age from late teens to seventies. The Minnesota Department of Corrections was one of the participating programs in the Minnesota Standard Adult Diploma pilot program.

Commenting on the experience of participating in the pilot project, site one's director explained,

“When the opportunity to be a pilot arose, I jumped at it. That implementation was, as we called it, like building the airplane while it was flying. This facility went through all of the growing pains of actually designing and creating.”

Implementing the adult diploma led to a significant restructuring of how this site approached secondary education.

Corrections students have the opportunity to attain credits toward their high school diploma, take GED tests or complete the competencies of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. These are not separate classes or tracks but rather distinct destinations of the same process. One curriculum guides classroom activity, but the individual needs, skills and preferences of each student define their outcome. Beginning during the pilot program this site has graduated more than 460 students with an ADP, more than any other program in the state.

A group of four teachers and the site administrator offered their insight as to how implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult Diploma had impacted their program. Director N has over 35 years of educational experience in teaching, consulting and administration, the last 5 in adult corrections. Teacher R recently retired after 23 years of corrections and post-secondary

teaching. He now works as an intermittent instructor. Teacher J has been with the Department of Corrections for 11 years, previously he taught 22 years as a special education teacher. Teacher S taught Spanish at the high school level then joined the Department of Corrections as a para-professional. Moving into a teaching role, she has taught in an adult men's correctional facility for the past 18 years. Finally, Teacher A has a twelve-year background in middle and high school instruction. She has been a corrections teacher for the past four years.

Community reintegration emerged as a unique theme from their discussion. This theme is evident in the program structure and how students progress through their curriculum (see Appendix F for site one analysis). Several teachers commented on the difference between the 20 competency areas of the adult diploma and the four high stakes tests of the GED. Teacher R noted, "With the GED, you are taking these high stakes tests that are comprehensive of the whole subject area, it's hard to see that you're actually making progress toward the goal." He contrasted this with the fact that employment more closely resembles the competency-based approach of the Adult Diploma. Teacher R continued, "I think that is relevant to how they're going to make it on the outside. In whatever job they're going to do. That's how you do it, you make progressive progress." Teacher A echoed agreement, "With the adult diploma they're reaching a lot more goals, smaller goals, but seeing success helps them realize that it is achievable."

Prior to involvement with the adult diploma pilot program, site one structured their curriculum around the four subject area tests of the GED. Since implementing a competency model, students take a more active role in determining their educational outcomes. Through advising, students identify individualized educational and employment goals. Teacher S expanded, "I would say that they have definitely become more self-directed. Part of it is because it is built into the requirements. There are self-management skills that we're teaching. So, they learn how to be their own best advocate." An

essential part of successful community re-entry is encouraging offenders to make positive behavioral change. Director N commented that programmatic changes have given offenders the opportunity for positive growth, “They see it, they feel it, they own it, they believe. That is where the difference is. It's not staff that control it.” Implementation of the Adult Diploma prompted this site to fundamentally reorganize their approach to adult education. Teacher J observed, “I could see from the start of our program, the growing pains. We had to devise the program. Switching gears from doing it one way to another way. To let them be self-directed, to let them have that responsibility.”

A second aspect arising from this group of corrections teachers was preparation for employment. Recognizing the connection between employability and recidivism it is not surprising that corrections teachers place a priority on preparing their students with employment skills. Teacher A expanded, “They are here in a prison but we're establishing goals for what's going to happen from here on out. Where do you want to go from here? You don't have that with a GED program.” She later explained, “That's a huge difference between the adult diploma program versus the GED, there's not that employability component. Throwing in that employability component definitely makes it a lot more relevant to their current life situation.”

More than simple planning, diploma competencies reflect the current needs of the workplace. Teacher R observed, “I think the Northstar digital literacy is huge, particularly for the older guys. They're coming out of here with at least some basic computer skills that aren't a part of the GED.” Later Teacher R added, “It's their communication skills. That is not as much a part of the GED.” Communication, both verbally and especially in writing was seen by these interviewees as a major difference between the requirements of the GED and the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. Director N noted, “Our writing component was not strong prior to this.” Teacher R agreed

that their program had made positive changes, “I think this is much more relevant to the type of writing they might do on the outside.”

Implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma at site one prompted a re-structuring of their program. Interview participants at this site find the competency standards more applicable to their adult learners and understand their students to be more motivated and self-directed in their education. As Teacher J summarized, “These skills they are being taught, which are not in the GED, are lifelong skills. They are practical skills that they can use lifelong.”

Site Two

Site two is housed in the education center of a rural school district in Southeastern Minnesota. Built in 2016, the building itself occupied the geographic, and in many ways programmatic, space between the local high school and the regional community college. Entering the building from the south parking lot, the windowed foyer gave the impression of a community space. More like a coffee shop than a classroom. Several young children played on the floor enjoying the midwinter sunshine. Their mothers sat on elevated tables discussing something they were looking at on an open laptop. In a few minutes several people walk through the space, several languages were being spoken.

The education center offers a number of programs designed to enhance the quality of life for both students and the changing community. With a stated vision of student empowerment, the staff have embraced a holistic approach to community education. Their programming offers recreational, English language, citizenship, and employability classes along with adult basic education options.

The program director displayed an encompassing understanding of the community she served because she is a product of that community. Raised locally, she attended and later taught special education at the high school that adjoins her current building. “I have been working in community

education since I was 16 years old, in after school programs,” she explained. Her staff displayed not only a commitment to the success of their students but also to the vitality of their community.

Located in a town of near 24,000 population, this education center endeavored to meet the needs of an evolving community and its immigrant population. The director estimated that 85% of their students are attracted by the available English language classes. The remaining percentage is seeking to finish a secondary degree. She further estimated that 75% of the enrolled students come from the local Somali community, 15% to 20% from the Hispanic or Latino populace.

Employability skills was an often-repeated phrase. The program director explained, “Many students come here to improve their employment, to get better jobs.” In addition to English language, the center offers computer literacy training. Particularly popular were their “Bridge” programs. In conjunction with the local community college these classes prepare prospective students for the rigor of post-secondary courses.

In addition to Director C, three ABE teachers shared their insights about implementing the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma during a group interview. Teacher J has been teaching for 40 years with experience in middle school, high school and special education. Following 15 years at the local alternative learning center, he is now in his second year of full-time, adult basic education teaching. Teacher K taught secondary English for ten years, predominantly in alternative settings. She has taught adult basic education for four years and is currently pursuing a master's degree in English as a Secondary Language. Teacher V served in a support role working with adult diploma and other students. Adopting a holistic approach was a unique theme apparent from their discussion (see Appendix G for site two analysis). This approach is most clearly evident in the importance placed on teacher involvement and the individualized programmatic coordination with which students are supported.

The Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma has been an option at site two for more than three years. Over the course of time their use of this option has evolved. Initially the adult diploma program was implemented as an independent study curriculum through the use of a commercial online learning platform. Teachers managed but students worked independently toward completion of their high school requirements. Director C is now beginning her third year as the director of site two, she reported her initial evaluation of the adult diploma program on her arrival;

“Our students were not being successful. They were not passing their classes, they were failing, they weren't learning anything, they weren't making gains. When I came in, I saw that we needed actual human teachers.”

Based on this internal program audit, site two reassessed where the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma might fit into their program.

The Minnesota Department of Education Office of Career and College Success' report to the legislature (2017) pointed out the ground truth;

This new third option will allow adults to earn a competency-based diploma. The Standard Adult Diploma Program is designed for the diverse adults in Minnesota who need a secondary credential. Many of these adults possess the same risk factors as students in alternative programs (p. 7).

Not only do these populations share the same risk factors, many times they are the same people.

At the local level it is not uncommon for adult basic education to coordinate efforts with alternative learning centers. A certain percentage of high school students do not complete their secondary credential before they age-out of alternative learning programs. For these students, a smooth transition to adult basic education greatly increases their opportunity to graduate. The addition of Teacher J to the ABE staff provided that opportunity for coordination.

Director C recounted,

“I had a perfect opportunity to start this independent study branch of our ALC and also align it to our adult diploma program. In case we have a student who is not eligible for our independent study diploma completion program it would still meet the adult diploma requirements as well.”

Teacher J summarized the outcome of this effort, “So, we are meeting the needs as described by the State of Minnesota to be in the adult diploma program. We are meeting the actual graduation requirements of the public school system.” Albeit a narrow niche, the ADP provides valuable programmatic continuity for students transitioning into adult basic education.

Site Three

Site three is located in an outstate Minnesota community of over 42,000 population. It serves six school districts in south central Minnesota with 38 staff, 20 are licensed teachers. Beginning in 1976 with a budget of \$6000.00, it has grown to meet the needs of its community. During the 2019-20 school year this site served between 850 and 900 students with a budget of roughly 1.3 million.

The majority of the adult learners at site three are involved with ESL classes. Immigrant Somali, Hispanic, and Sudanese students seek to improve their language skills through one of the five levels of ESL curriculum. Program referrals come through close ties with the local schools, social service providers and refugee resettlement agencies in the area. Site three offers both day and evening options for those seeking to complete their secondary degree. They also provide college preparatory programming to students who want to further their education beyond the secondary level.

Over the past five years this site has seen a gradual decrease in student contact hours even as participation numbers have remained relatively constant. The site director explained, “When we talk to our students, we are experiencing students having to go to work. They leave early to go to work, in and out for temporary jobs that they take.” As is always true, adult learners prioritize work and their

family's needs. Educational opportunities are subjugated to adult responsibilities. Site three's director continued, "We are always looking for new innovative programming, flexible scheduling, ways that we can meet their needs so they can continue their education while they're working."

Site three has a long history of innovative programming in adult basic education. As early as 1994 this site sought, and was granted state approval, to offer adults the opportunity to complete a local school district high school diploma. Structured as an alternative, independent study program, adults had the opportunity to complete credits toward their diploma. Strictly credit based, students met the high school graduation requirements of their associated school district.

In 2005, site three transitioned from a strictly credit completion approach to a competency-based set of standards. Utilizing the nationally recognized Equipped for the Future standards, site three staff developed curriculum more closely aligned to the needs of adult learners. Based on their track record of success with credit completion, the school board enthusiastically endorsed the proposal. Fully ten years prior to the implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma, site three had implemented a competency-based diploma program which was recognized by their local district and the Minnesota Department of Education. Involvement with the Adult Diploma project was a natural extension of this site's ongoing program development. The site director explained, "We didn't have to be sold on doing a competency-based diploma, we already knew that that was motivating to students before we went into it." The site director and three of her staff offered their insight on site three's transition to the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma following their involvement with the pilot program.

Director K has worked at site three, in various capacities, since 1994. As a teacher, program and site director she has experience developing and operating a competency-based adult secondary program. She chaired the 2013 Standard Adult High School Diploma Advisory Task Force appointed

by the MDE commissioner. Teacher R has been at the site since 2007, primarily teaching upper level math classes. She has a background in post-secondary developmental education and was involved with the development of math competencies through the adult diploma working group. Teacher L has a background in secondary English and wide experience as an ESL teacher. She has been at site three for 20 years. In her current role she supervises the ESL programming but is also responsible for scheduling, staff development and curricular oversight. Teacher A supervises secondary completion programs for site three, including the ADP. She has training and previous experience in physical and adaptive physical education. Participating in the pilot program, Teacher A has been an instrumental member of the adult diploma working group since its inception.

Post-secondary readiness was a significant theme apparent from the insights offered by this group. College preparation and curricular rigor were both impacted by implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma (see Appendix H for site three analysis). Director K explained,

“We already had a program in place but I think what it has actually done, when I think about the whole picture is, it has brought the rigor, the standards have brought the rigor up, of how far we take them in the high school completion part. So, they are closer to college ready and we have less need of college prep.”

Teacher A echoed her agreement that students are more prepared for post-secondary work, “They are very ready, they are almost ready to soar by themselves up at the college.” Director K conceded, “I don't know that it has increased the number of people that we are graduating, I would say we have less people graduating. That is fine. We have people more prepared, better prepared.” As evidence of the program's success with college readiness, Teacher A points out that of their 14 ADP graduates, “every single one of these went on to post-secondary.”

Prior to 2014, site three employed a curriculum based on Equipped for the Future standards. Director K clarified a problem that became apparent over time,

“We noticed by the end of that program that students were finishing their diploma and not passing Accuplacer. It's like the standards were aging. They needed to be changed and we could see it happening. Students would graduate in the program and then stay here another year for college readiness.”

Published in 2013, the College and Career Readiness Standards are reflected in the increased rigor of the 2014 GED test. These same standards informed the development of the adult diploma. Teacher R was an active participant in the working group that developed the adult diploma's math competencies. When asked about rigor and competency development Teacher R explained,

“I think they kind of blended together at the same time CCRS came out. It became one of the ingredients for building the competencies. And the shift was more on how you think about things rather than memorizing. We are developing lifelong strategies to solve problems.”

Another aspect that became apparent as these participants discussed their program is the importance of multiple forms of assessment. Increased rigor does not translate into more testing, quite the opposite is true with competency demonstration assessment. Teacher R explained, “You could do a math test, get 100% of all multiple choice and that wouldn't count because they're looking for; do you have the skills, do you understand, can you problem-solve?”

Students can choose to demonstrate their competency on a given requirement in a number of different ways. Competency demonstration may involve documenting previous job/life experience, transcripts, classes or projects. Ideally their competency demonstrations are aligned with the career pathway they identified in the earliest stages of their advising. Director K stated, “They plan what

they want to do in the adult diploma. As part of the diploma they have to state their pathway. When they leave here, they're ready to launch into it or maybe already in it.”

Teacher R explained the importance of allowing students latitude in how they chose to demonstrate competency.

“The choice part is huge. I think having an option was huge. Show that you can! It is very motivating to know that it is okay if you don't fit inside the box because there are other ways to show that you have the skills and the knowledge.”

Director K agreed, “That is motivating to know that they can just prove what they know and we're going to honor that.” Sanctioning students to be self-directive is at the heart of effective adult education. Teacher R concluded, “It is also empowering to know that you have knowledge you just have to find a way to express it.”

Site Four

Minnesota Governor Tim Walz proclaimed the week of July 22 through July 28 as Liberian Independence Week. In his proclamation Governor Walz affirmed, “The State of Minnesota recognizes the rich and strong Liberian community that is making our state a thriving, vibrant, and diverse community” (p. 1). Originally populated by former slaves from North American and the Caribbean, the United States and the Republic of Liberia have a long and complex relationship. America’s struggle with social justice and racial equity interweave our shared histories. Civil wars and unrest beginning in the last decade of the 20th century prompted a wave of Liberian immigration to the United States. Many of these refugees are now living in Minnesota on an annually renewed, temporarily protected status. According to Governor Walz’ proclamation, some 36,000 Liberians call Minnesota their home. (State of Minnesota, 2019) Though well established, this community faces many challenges. With an unemployment rate of 10%, fully 51% of this population is living at or near

the poverty line. (Minnesota state demographic center department of administration, 2018). The majority of Liberians living in Minnesota are within site four's service area.

Immigrant and first-generation Liberians are one of the groups served by site four, but certainly not the only underserved population. The area school district encompassed by site four is large and diverse. According to the program director, "The eastern side of our school district is considered to be tier-one suburbs of Minneapolis. The racial, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity on the eastern side of our school district runs the gamut." Later she extended, "There is no disputing we have a community with a large socioeconomic range. Some that are terribly underserved in our community, we also have some very wealthy pockets."

Site four serves approximately 1,100 adult students annually, with six levels of English language classes and five levels of adult basic education classes. Program participants represent 50 different countries and 60 different languages. Based on the needs of this population, site four is largely focused on language acquisition and developmental literacy. The program director explained, "Better than half of my entire community reads and writes beneath the sixth-grade reading level. Native speaker or not. Even if they're native speakers in English they are still reading and writing below the 6th grade reading level. So, there is a big education gap. I'm not getting someone to a high school diploma in a quick moment."

Despite these obstacles, last year site four graduated 52 students with their GED or Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma.

Site four consists of three locations with 33 staff, 22 of which are licensed teachers. Five members of site four's faculty offered their insights concerning implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma in a group interview. Director E has been in her position for four years. Prior to her administrative role she had experience working as a librarian in various

capacities. Teacher N is an English language instructor who also advises the adult diploma students. She has 20 years of experience which includes both elementary and post-secondary. Teacher T has 35 years of teaching experience. He is a full-time special education teacher at the elementary level but also teaches part-time in the adult education program. Teacher P has been an adult or alternative high school teacher for 32 years. She has been at this site for 18 years and primarily teaches adult diploma, GED and college preparation classes. Teacher M teaches adult diploma students and has been at this site since 2008.

During this group interview teachers shared their impressions of the impact that the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma has had on their program. One theme was unique, though perhaps not surprising, to site four. Issues related to empowerment were referenced by these interview participants (see Appendix I for site four analysis). The first of these issues arising from their discussion was equity.

Director E explained her definition of equity as it relates to the students she served;

“If you think about equity as reducing barriers, the goal doesn't change, the goal is a high school credential. How do you reduce as many barriers as you can to create an equitable situation? So that as many students as possible are able to reach that goal. That is really what I think about when I think about equity.”

Several of the instructors expressed their frustration with high stakes testing as the only assessment available for their adult learners. Their population, some having little experience with the process of education, are not well served. Teacher T observed,

“Wearing my special education hat, I see a lot of my students who cannot pass the GED because of the time constraints, because of the pressure, the anxiety, all of that stuff. But now there is another avenue. We talk about equity all the time, that is equity.”

Competency demonstration is not simply about testing. The option to demonstrate competency in a variety of different ways was seen as the key aspect to reducing barriers. Teacher P agreed, “It gives them another option to show ability. That is part of what equity is, it's not equality. They will all be getting the same thing but how they get it, that is up to them.”

A second set of themes that was evident in their discussion related to self-advocacy. Part of the requirements of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma are demonstrating competency in self-management and navigating systems. These are particularly important skills within this community. Teacher N explained that her role as an advisor involved teaching students lessons in self-advocacy for completing their diploma. Teacher N explained, “It is a lot of hand-holding in the beginning but it ends up that they are very independent and they can manage themselves very well.” Teacher T added, “And very much advocating for what they need.”

Significant to this group of adult learners is developing the ability to be involved with their children's education. Director E related a story about an adult learner who was so excited by a lesson about indigenous Americans that she wanted to confront her children's teacher for not teaching that same material. Teacher P explained, “Some of them are also going to the teachers saying, why aren't you teaching this? Advocating for their child's learning, that is very powerful.”

Empowerment is expressed in the students' desire to take charge of their own learning. Director E summarized,

“One of the things I hear consistently from the entire team is that one of their biggest jobs is to help students feel confident and feel empowered that they have control over their own education. This is a complete shift; we are telling students that you are in control of your education. We are here to help you reach that goal.”

Given the opportunity to manage their own learning, students have begun forming spontaneous cohorts. Teacher P observed, “And the other thing that happens, and it's quite interesting, there will be one student that starts and a cohort develops. Others say, can I do this? What is this you are doing?” Teacher M confirmed her observation, “They get into these little cohorts, that motivates them to keep going. Together they motivate each other.”

Visualizing the Quintain

The phenomenon, or quintain, being examined in this multi-case study is the implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma as a secondary option for adult learners. The purpose of this methodology is to visualize the quintain from various perspectives, building general understanding from these case’s experience. Stake (2006) explained, “The main activity of cross-case analysis is reading the case reports and applying their findings of situated experience to the research questions of the Quintain” (p. Kindle Location 1245). Three research questions guided the investigation of this quintain.

The Need

The first research question asked of this quintain related to its genesis, its reason for being. For decades the preponderance of adult learners earned their secondary degree by completing a series of nationally recognized tests. The GED, in its various editions, offered a clearly defined, universally accepted pathway to secondary degree completion. With the GED option available, why was there a need for the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma? Following the 2008-2009 recession, three broad social changes coalesced revealing the necessity for a more inclusive approach to adult secondary completion (see figure1).

During the sluggish recovery following the recession of 2008-2009, several trends became apparent which continue to impact the economic landscape of Minnesota. Increased demands for

skilled labor coexisted with persistent un/under-employment of marginalized workers. As summarized by the Minnesota Adult Basic Education impact report (2019),

Technology and globalization are re-making Minnesota's economy. Workers and employers increasingly rely on higher-level skills to compete and succeed. At the same time, Minnesota faces a looming shortage of skilled workers as the baby boomer generation retires. The growth of our economy will depend largely on our ability to build the skills of all Minnesotans — including low-skill adults and immigrants. (p. 1)

The Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma was a proposed solution to this growing economic need.

A second impetus prompting the creation of a new method of secondary completion was demographic shifts taking place in Minnesota. The emerging Minnesota workforce was increasingly diverse. The Minnesota Adult Basic Education impact report (2019) described, "In 2014, approximately 385,000 Minnesota residents were foreign born. In addition, there are about 173,000 Minnesota born children with at least one immigrant parent" (p. 9). Primarily persons of color and English language learners, this population joined a group of traditionally marginalized job seekers. Biegler and Madden (2013) explained that recovery following the 2008-2009 recession was not universal, "Too many Minnesotans, especially women and people of color, are not finding quality jobs that would allow them to support their families" (p. 4).

A third stimulus, perhaps emerging from those previously stated, were intensified standards and outcome expectations of adult education programs. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 incorporated adult basic education programs into an evolving national response to economic challenges. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Final Rules (2016) asserted, "The system will deliver integrated, job-driven services to job seekers, including youth and those

with barriers to employment, as well as to workers and employers” (p. 1). At about the same time, new adult education standards defined the rigor necessary for post-secondary success. The College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education (2013) explained, “The importance of college and career readiness for adult students cannot be overstated. Increasingly, students entering the workforce are discovering that they need critical knowledge and skills that are used on a regular basis” (p. 2).

The intersection of these economic, demographic and educational trends fueled a growing awareness amongst Minnesota’s adult educators that systemic change was necessary. The available assessment tools, and the curricular system build around them, were insufficient to prepare marginalized workers for post-secondary success. Recognizing the limitations of comprehensive, high stakes testing, educators proposed the adoption of a competency-based assessment model.

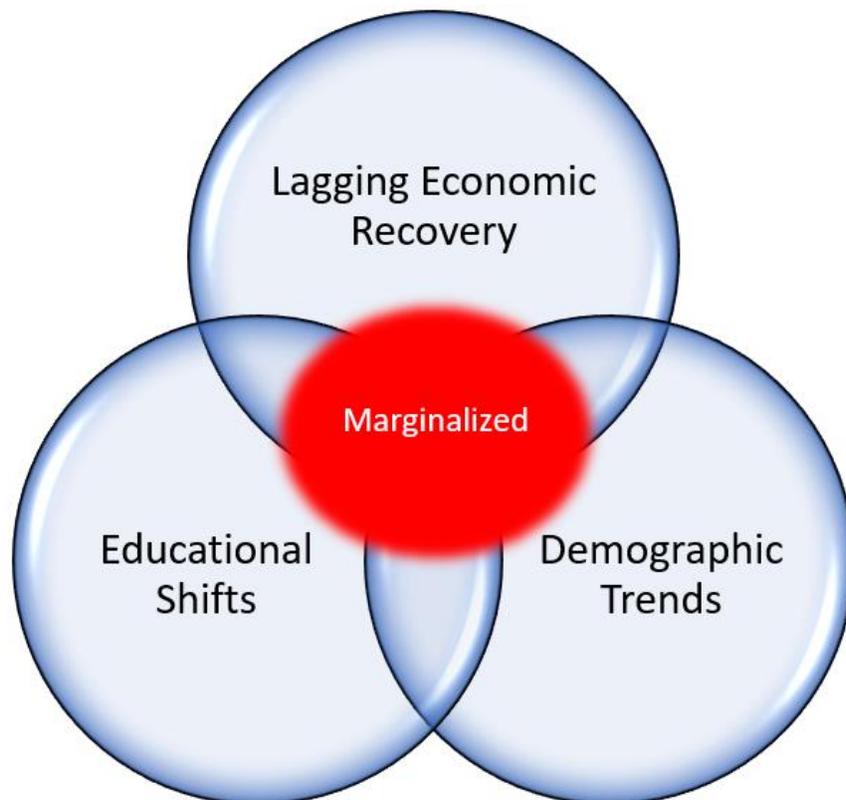


Figure 1 *Visualizing the need for the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma*

The Process

The second research question posed to the quintain is one of process and progression. How was the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma developed (see figure 2)? Prior to 2011 local adult basic education programs were experimenting with alternatives to the GED. Commenting on the efforts of Wisconsin and Minnesota adult educators, the Minnesota Adult Secondary Credential Task Force (2012) observed,

In addition, both states offer multiple adult diploma options as alternatives to the GED, although in Minnesota these options lack statewide consistency since they are authorized locally by school districts, with many districts not choosing to offer alternative adult diploma options. (p. 8)

Aware of these ongoing efforts, the Minnesota Department of Education requested that the Literacy Action Network explore alternatives to the GED through a supplemental services grant.

A group of adult education teachers and administrators working in conjunction with MDE staff were appointed to the Minnesota Adult Secondary Credential Task Force in 2011. Their purpose was to propose alternatives to the GED. Through a comprehensive review of existing programs and considering the input of focus groups, the task force proposed a competency-based alternative. The Minnesota Adult Secondary Credential Task Force (2012) summarized in the final report,

After reviewing the various adult secondary credential models currently in use in Minnesota or other states, as well as the alternatives under consideration elsewhere, the Task Force offers a comprehensive design for a new framework with multiple options for adults to secure a high school equivalency credential. This new framework preserves access to the GED but embraces a more comprehensive approach better aligned with adult learning context and need,

as well as broader competency assessment choices that address both achievement and workplace preparedness gaps. (p. 3)

Legislative action in 2013 extended this effort by appointing a task force charged with developing specific criteria for implementing an adult diploma.

The Standard Adult High School Diploma Task Force consisted of adult education professionals and representatives from various stakeholder groups. The business community, higher education and involved state agencies reviewed existing competency-based models and offered input from their unique perspective. The resultant report outlined 13 recommendations which further clarified the outworking of this diploma at the local level. In its final report the Recommendations to Create a Standard Adult High School Diploma (2014) argued, “Local standard adult high school diploma programs would include individual advising and align to a set of common competencies that incorporate individual student goals and needs with state and national standards as defined by the Workforce Investment Act” (p. 3). Acting on these recommendations the legislature codified the Minnesota Standard Adult Diploma into statute.

Officially enumerated in the Minnesota education code in 2014, the hard work of program development fell to ABE consortia across the state. Prior to its full launch, an adult diploma pilot program was initiated in February of 2015. The purpose of the pilot program was not simply instructional. Practitioners collaborated with their contemporaries and students to discover best practices in program delivery. These 26 sites from 13 participating consortia were assisted by the creation of two ongoing advisory groups. The consultation team consisted of interested stakeholders who provided guidance on policy and accountability. The ABE working group consisted of adult education practitioners who developed specific standards and honed the process of meeting competency requirements. The Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma is currently available

at over 100 ABE sites across Minnesota. Since its inception more than 650 Minnesotans have earned an adult diploma through this competency-based secondary option.

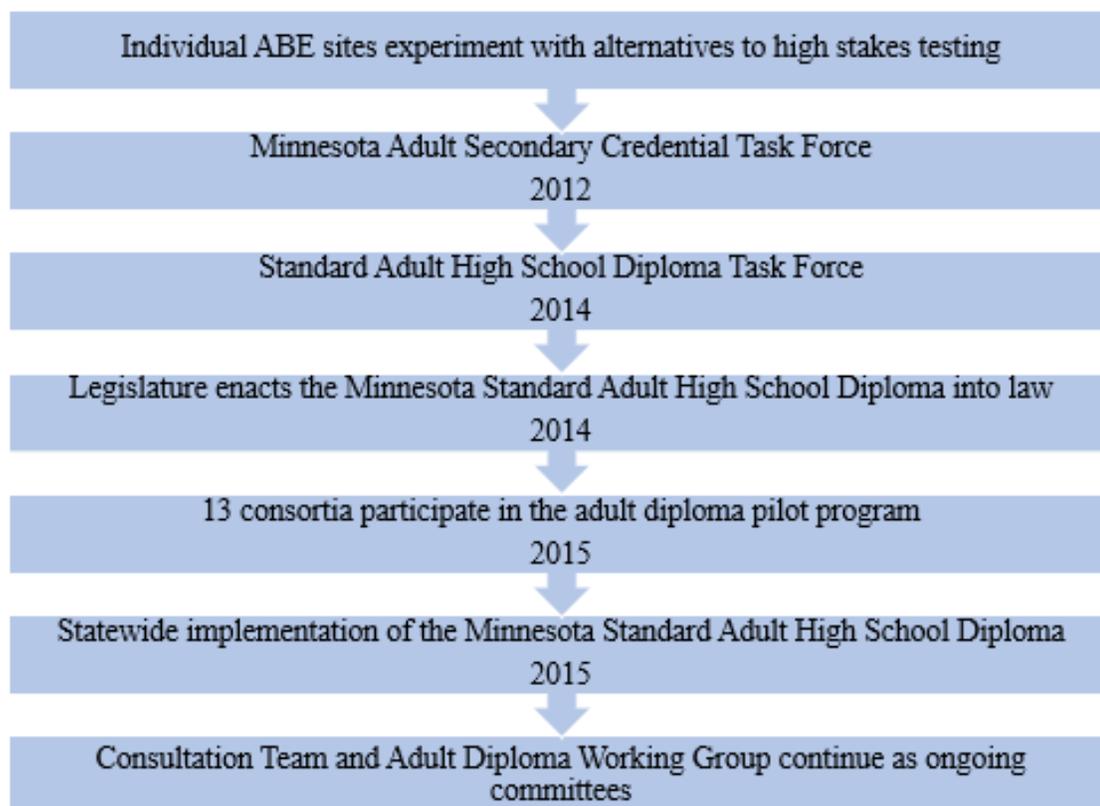


Figure 2 *Visualizing the developmental process of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma*

The Impact

The third research question asked of the quintain is one of consequence. What was the impact on adult basic education programs of implementing this new secondary credentialing option (see figure 3)? The collected insight of 18 teachers, administrators and staff, at four diverse sites, indicate that each ABE program implemented the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma to meet the specific needs of their setting. Each site saw this option as a solution, or potential solution, to the needs of their specific setting.

Site one utilized the domains and competencies of the adult diploma as a structure to reorganize their curriculum. A greater emphasis on communication, particularly written communication, and other employability skills grew naturally from ADP competency requirements. Site two understood the adult diploma as a natural progression of the curriculum utilized by Alternative Learning Program (ALP) students. Coordinating these distinct programs allowed site two to seamlessly transition students who aged out of the ALP into the ABE program. Site three had a competency-based program in place prior to their adoption of the ADP but was dissatisfied with the outcomes they were experiencing. Students were completing their program but lacked the skills for post-secondary success. Site three perceived that the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma's focus on academic and employability standards would facilitate greater levels of post-secondary success. Site four understood the adult diploma's competency-based assessment options as mechanisms to facilitate equitable access to educational success. Additionally, ADP competency requirements provided the curricular framework to teach essential skills in self-advocacy.

Despite each of these sites implementing the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma in a unique way, they shared several commonalities. Three andragogical themes were seen as being impactful at each of these sites. The adult diploma had a positive impact on student's self-directedness, on student's perceived relevancy of their work and on student motivation.

Adult learners have a deep need to be self-directed in their learning. Part of the maturation process is to move from a place of dependency to higher levels of personal autonomy. Effective adult education both leverages and facilitates that behavioral process. Knowles et al., (2005) reminded, "I have seen low-achieving students become high-achieving students when they discovered the excitement of self-directed learning under the influence of a creative teacher" (p. 263).

Site three Teacher L shared this observation, “They are absolutely self-directed. It's kind of like a flipped classroom model because they're coming to class and interacting with materials but they asked me for help if they need it.” The competency requirements of the ADP more than allow for self-directed learning, they necessitate it. Site one Teacher S explained, “I would say that they have definitely become more self-directed. Part of it is because it is built into the requirements.”

Specifically seen in the competency requirements of the employability domain, students are expected to develop a personalized career pathway. Each student's chosen career path defines how they will complete necessary competencies along the way. Site two Director C exemplified,

“One thing that comes right to my mind, self-directed being, our students who are going to start the CNA program. We are going to count that as elective credit and that can be counted toward the adult diploma. That is self-directed, they're choosing to go the CNA route, it was self-directed.”

Another area in which personal autonomy is developed is the adult diploma's advising component. Not all students are skilled in self-directed behaviors entering the program. Intentional, personalized, purposeful interaction with an advisor distinguishes the adult diploma program from other secondary options. Site three Director K commented on the importance of student advising;

“People can go out and get their GED with zero advising, with a diploma there's no way you're not going to get advising. But I think that is important because the advising piece helps them set up their pathway. They're not going to have a pathway setup necessarily with a GED. In that sense there is more value in the diploma than in the GED because you're going to get that advising and set up a pathway.”

Self-directed adult education means that the role of the instructor shifts from authoritative expert to partnering mentor. Teachers no longer define successful outcomes; they enable students to achieve

their personal goals. Site four Director E succinctly captured this shift in the teacher's role, "And the teachers are really there to break down those walls and those barriers."

Inexorable linked to an adult learner's need for self-direction is their need to find life relevancy in their education. Adults are not preparing for life; they are living their lives. Knowles et al., (2005) explained the difference, "Adults want to apply what they have learned as quickly as possible. Learning activities need to be clearly relevant to the needs of the adult" (p. 294).

Adult learners have little tolerance for school work that is not applicable to their intended outcomes. On the other hand, adult learners are engaged by material, even challenging material, that they comprehend to have an impact on their life success. Comprehensive, high stakes testing is often understood by adult learners as irrelevant. Site one Teacher A clarified, "With the GED you need to know a little bit about all of this stuff. Whereas the adult diploma has more in-depth, specific competencies. They have to explain what they're doing not simply find the answer to a problem."

Direct linkage from career goals to diploma requirements is a key element to creating relevancy for adult learners. Within their programs, students are encouraged to accomplish industry recognized credentials as demonstrations of competency. Site two Teacher V offered, "Like the credentials piece, I think because now that we can add more credentials like that, I think it's really helpful." Students utilize their secondary education as a step toward post-secondary training. Site three Director K Summarized, "It is not an endpoint it is a start. As you are wrapping up one thing, your foot is in the door of the next before you leave here."

Site four teachers discussed how their adult learner's need for life relevant education has an impact on their classrooms. Teacher P started, "they want to know how this make sense in the world. I'm going back to that relevancy thing, why do I have to know this?" Later Director W expanded,

“But I think that whole idea of relevance is that you try to create a space. Depending on what a student's background is they may not have those connections. When you are working with adult learners, they bring a wealth of experience and opinion or things that they've heard. Our job is to create a space for them to put some context to that, to create a space for them to talk about it in a meaningful way.”

Verbalizing the obvious impact on classrooms, Teacher T concluded, “You have to let it get pretty messy.”

Andragogy recognizes that adult motivations differ from that of children. Adult learners tend to find motivation from what they intrinsically value. External factors and authority expectations are less influential as people mature. Knowles et al., (2005) delineated, “Adults are motivated to learn because of internal factors, such as self-esteem, recognition, better quality of life, greater self-confidence, the opportunity to self-actualize, and so forth” (pp. 294-295).

Site four Director W expressed, “I will say though, on a bigger scale, once we get students into the program, I think the adult diploma has some built-in motivators.” Attaining a Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma is not based on passing a set standardized test. Rather, it is based on accumulating a portfolio of artifacts that demonstrate defined competencies. Allowing students to choose the mechanisms by which they are evaluated is an obvious motivational benefit.

Speaking from several years of competency-based experience, site three Director K explained, “We saw that right away they were way more motivated to do projects around things that they liked. Be more motivated to write and read and learn.” Site two Director C added her concurrence, “It is so individualized. Like we, if you are working, will assign work via elective credit. They get to choose what they're going to do.” Site one Teacher A exemplified how this motivational difference translated into her classroom;

“I see the difference currently between GED students and ADP students. Typically, GED students just want to sit down and study the book, go take the test to be done. They don't contribute as much in class. They don't participate as much when we are doing a lesson.”

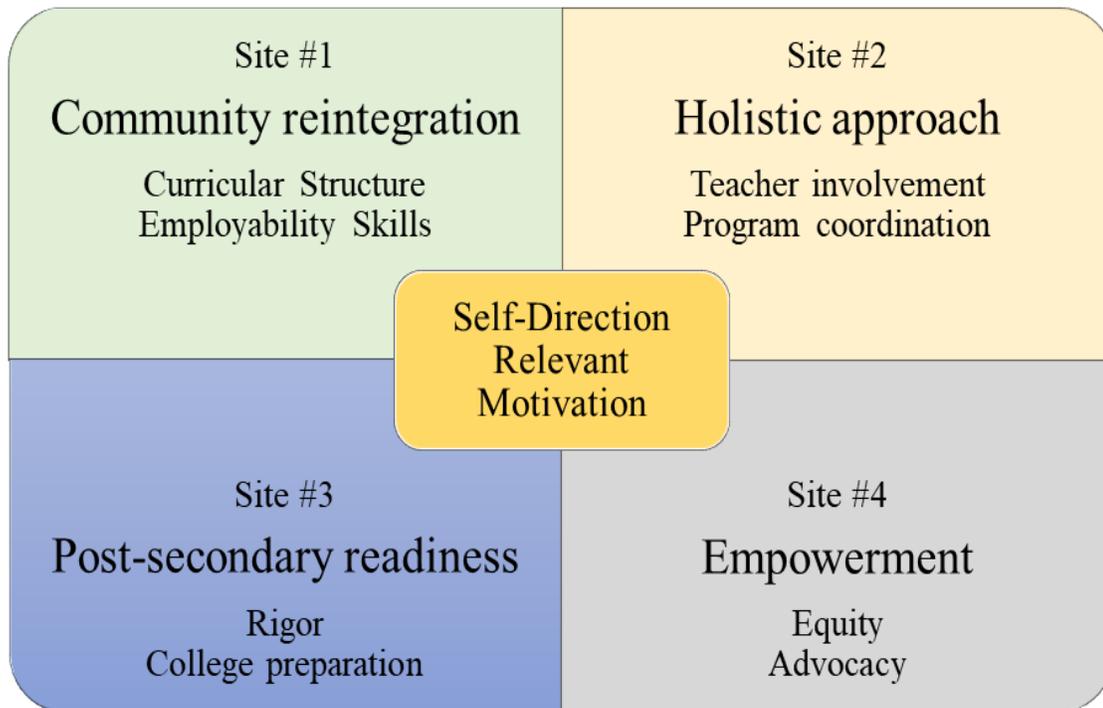


Figure 3 *Visualizing the programmatic impact of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma*

Summary

No single event marked the necessity of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. Complex economic, demographic and educational shifts, both nationally and locally, shaped a growing realization that systemic change was crucial. Correspondingly, no single person or group authored this public policy response. Documentary evidence suggested that scores of education professionals and stakeholders contributed to its evolutionary creation. It should not be surprising that its impact on individual adult basic education programs was as unique as the clientele they served. Despite this complexity several assertions about this quintain lend themselves toward best practices within the discipline of adult education.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

This chapter will discuss the investigation of the implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. It will begin with a brief synopsis of the need for, purpose of, methods by and results from this investigation. Several assertions can be made from this documentary analysis and multi-case study. Conclusions are recorded in the form of suggested best practices in the field of adult education. Limitation of this research and recommendations for future research complete this section.

Summary

In 2014, the Minnesota Legislature enacted the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma into law. This competency-based secondary degree was a radical departure from the existing options available to adult learners in Minnesota. Not tied to Carnegie units or high stakes testing, a broad menu of assessment options became available.

A growing interest in competency-based education has fueled research on the topic broadly but this is generally focused on post-secondary education. Despite its innovativeness and importance, this change in Minnesota education policy has received little attention from researchers. Apart from one Minnesota study which examined the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma's impact on recidivism, no serious work has been done. (Emslander, 2018) The need for a foundation of scholarship was obvious. This investigation contributed to that effort.

This research utilized a multi-case study methodology supported by document analysis. Documents were retrieved from the MDE's website while case study data were collected through group interviews at ABE sites. An effort was made to select sites which portrayed the diversity of settings in which adult education is offered. Data were collected and analyzed in order to answer

three research questions of the quintain (phenomenon), which was the implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma.

The first research question was; why was there a need for the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma? Complex national and local economic, demographic and educational trends coalesced to produce both unemployment and a worker shortage. Marginalized Minnesotans lacked necessary skills to participate in the recovering economy.

The second research question was; how was the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma developed? Documentary evidence revealed that this educational policy response was the collective effort of scores of stakeholders. Very much a bottom-up process, the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma has been the result of continuous and ongoing revision through collaboration.

The third research question was; what was the impact of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma? Utilizing an andragogical lens, local Adult Basic Education (ABE) practitioners were asked to assess the impact of this new degree option on their programs. Their feedback indicated that each program implemented the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma to meet specific needs of their local program. Despite this variety, these interviewees perceived the adult diploma had a positive impact on the andragogical elements of self-directedness, life-relevancy and student motivation.

Assertions

Describing assertions Creswell (2018) wrote, “This is the last step in the analysis, where the researcher makes sense of the data and provides an interpretation of the data couched in terms of personal views or in terms of theories or constructs in the literature” (p. 321). Based on case and cross-case analysis several assertions about this quintain can be offered. These can be grouped into

three overlapping streams of thought; andragogical considerations, developmental process and programmatic flexibility.

Andragogical Considerations

An andragogical model of education assumes that adults are motivated to learn based on what they intrinsically value. To be effective, adult learning must be self-directed and solution oriented. Adults bring a great deal of experience into their learning and expect that new learning has a direct relevancy to their lives (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 294). The first assertion that can be made regarding implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma is that it fits well into an andragogical paradigm of adult education.

All of the cases examined in this research perceived that implementation of the ADP had a positive impact on student self-directedness, life-relevancy and motivation. Although they differ as to extent and reason. As would be expected, teachers perceived that relevancy and motivation were directly impacted by their ability to tie competency requirements to the students career or post-secondary aspirations. The ability to assess student competency on artifacts that the student recognized as essential for their future success was a clear advantage over high stakes testing and credit completion options.

The adult diploma's impact on student self-directedness was a mixed bag, influenced greatly by the learner's previous experience. Despite the desire to be self-directed, several interviewees pointed out that some of their students lacked the skill. The adult diploma's competencies require students to formulate a future pathway, demonstrate self-management and show their ability to navigate systems. These requirements necessitated that ABE program's teach essential skills in personal autonomy.

There was no consensus amongst cases as to a positive impact of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma on the andragogical factors of previous experience and problem/solution orientation. Utilizing a competency-based framework, the ADP is able to capitalize on previous work if it can be documented. This was particularly helpful if students had previously passed standardized tests or completed secondary classes. In practice, many students enter ABE programs with no applicable previous experience or previous performance that does not meet competency standards. These cases agreed that implementing the adult diploma had little impact on the problem/solution oriented teaching in their classroom. That said, most agreed that the implementation of the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education did influence their programs in that direction.

Developmental Process

Almost universally during group interviews at these ABE sites, interviewees expressed frustration with the developmental process of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. That said, I hasten to add that as universally they expressed satisfaction with the outcome, or at least perceived that improvements were being made. This was particularly the case amongst those who participated in the pilot program. In several variants the phrase, building the bicycle while we rode, was echoed at more than one site. Analogous is the fact that I do not enjoy going to the dentist. However, I greatly appreciate the outcomes of going to the dentist.

What underpins this educational policy is the fact that practitioners were dissatisfied with the tools they had to meet the needs of their students. This unmet need spurred reform efforts at the local level. These local efforts coalesced into task force and committee work at the state level. Even after the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma was codified into law in 2014, the developmental process continued.

The pilot program engaged practitioners at the local level to flesh out how best to implement a statewide competency-based diploma program. These efforts were facilitated and guided by two working groups, each with their specific roles. Through the consultation team, stakeholders offered input as to policy and accountability. While a working group of ABE practitioners developed specific standards and necessary processes.

What can be asserted about the development of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma is that it was an evolutionary process. Further, the process was driven by practitioner's collaboration with the input of involved stakeholders. Finally, continued evolution is built into the structure through the agency of ongoing working groups.

Programmatic Flexibility

What you see, so the adage goes, depends greatly on where you choose to stand. This research observed the quintain from varied perspectives, each offered a unique view. Perhaps it should not be surprising that each of these cases implemented the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma in a way that addressed their specific perceived needs. The foundational imputes of the adult diploma was that ABE programs were constrained by limitations to credit completion and high stakes testing models. A final assertion that can be made in regard to implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma is that it facilitated programmatic flexibility.

At two of the sites the domains and competencies required of the adult diploma served as the basis of their curricular structure. Several have produced checklists to facilitate students managing their own path through the curriculum. At other sites these requirements have been melded with existing curriculum to provide students with the ability to choose from various possible outcomes. The employability standards and advising component gave several sites the ability to incorporate less academic but quite essential personal growth skills into their curriculum. Adult diploma portfolios

allow students to compile artifacts from previous learning, individual study, group work, experiential projects...At every site, this ability to individuate assessment was perceived as being more realistic to an adult education setting.

Conclusions

Stake (2006) counsels,

It would be a mistake if a multicase researcher fails to disclose whatever generalizations appear evident from the data, in a tentative way. In the obligation to be useful to society and to the individual reader (whether this is a policy maker, another researcher, or a practitioner), the researcher should talk briefly or at length about individual cases. He or she should enrich the reader's experiential knowing with as much of the action and context of the cases as possible. Because the reader knows the situations to which the assertions might apply, the responsibility of making generalizations should be more the reader's than the writer's. (p. Kindle location 2002)

I agree. To that end, five considerations for best practices in the field of adult basic education are humbly offered.

1) Best outcomes in educational policy come through the efforts of practitioners, informed by allied stakeholders.

Adult education programs understand the frustration of balancing the needs of their students with available tools and resources. Teachers involved with the adult diploma pilot program certainly understand the frustration of developing tools and resources to meet those needs. That said, the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma is a tool developed by educators for educators and the clientele they serve. Its adaptability evidences the collaborative efforts of scores of practitioners who considered it their professional responsibility to act on behalf of their students. Perhaps it is a

testament to MDE leadership who guided this developmental process while resisting the temptation to predetermine its outcome.

2) Adult education is most effective when it is built around those characteristics that distinguish adult learners.

Perhaps the most significant facet of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma is its recognition that adult learners are focused on their future. Defining clear future pathways and individualizing education to facilitate those goals is both effective and efficient. Adults are motivated by internal values with a desire to direct their own progress toward goals that are relevant to their life situation. Leveraging these attributes is a key element to successful outcomes.

3) A holistic approach to adult basic education facilitates student success.

The importance of the employability and advising components of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma cannot be overstated. For many adult learners, academic success does not translate into career or post-secondary success because academics do not encompass the entirety of the person. Built into the requirements of the adult diploma are both employability skills and ongoing advising. Employability encourages personal growth in the areas of self-management and systems navigation. Ongoing advising begins with clarifying goals and ends with transitioning beyond graduation. In practice, these components translate into a holistic approach to adult basic education.

4) Flexibility of assessment is foundational to adult secondary education.

Flexibility in assessment and adherence to standards are not mutually exclusive. To the contrary, success on a multiple choice test or completing hours of passive instruction are far less reliable measures of standards mastery. Perhaps the most useful tool that the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma offers ABE programs is the ability to individuate assessment while

adhering to clearly established, rigorous standards. For example, utilizing work-focused and industry recognized credentials to satisfy competency requirements recognizes the student's need for relevant education while ensuring critical material is mastered.

5) Offering a competency-based secondary option is a practical tool for adult basic education programs.

The Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma is a useful tool for ABE programs but it is certainly not the only tool they need. The adult diploma will not replace either credit recovery or high stakes testing. Despite their shortcomings, both these secondary options will continue to be preferred by many adult learners. That said, this research viewed implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma from a variety of vantage points. Both large and small, metropolitan and rural, community based and corrections successfully implemented this secondary option to the benefit of their students.

Limitations and Recommendations

This research was a qualitative, multiple, nested case study supported by document analysis. Its purpose was an explanatory investigation of the implementation of the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. This research was bound by several of the following factors.

The first limitation was the number of participating ABE sites. The Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma is offered as a secondary option by 27 consortia, at over 100 sites across Minnesota. This research considered four of those sites. Considering the variability in data gathered from four sites, it is likely that the other 96 have implemented the ADP in their own unique way.

Secondly, data gathered concerning the written record was limited to that electronically achieved by the Minnesota Department of Education. Data gathered concerning the perspectives of

teachers, administrators and staff were limited to interview groups held at the participating sites. Each site was visited once with group interviews lasting between 60 and 75 minutes.

Finally, this research was solely focused on the perspective of adult basic education professionals. Certainly, other stakeholders have a perspective about the implementation of this educational public policy. Most notably employers, post-secondary educators, elected officials and agents of the Department of Employment and Economic Security and the Minnesota Department of Education were not considered as part of this investigation. More significantly, one voice is conspicuously absent, adult learners. The scope of this research was limited to the practitioner's perspective.

These limitations suggest recommendations. This research contributes to the foundation of scholarship related to the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. Enacted in 2014 as a third option for adult secondary students in Minnesota, this significant change to Minnesota adult basic education has received little attention from researchers.

The impact of this option on adult learners is deserving of attention. Specifically, its impact on their career and post-secondary success. Is this competency-based approach preparing adult learners with the tools they need to succeed in a 21st century economy?

This research was purely qualitative. Perceptions of participants regarding programmatic impact was in view. I will leave quantitative analyses to other researchers with this recommendation. Can the economic impact to our state in general and the impact on marginalized Minnesotan's in specific, be measured?

A second recommendation relates to the impact of competency-based secondary options in other states. Minnesota is not the only state experimenting with competency-based secondary options.

Prior to adopting the ADP model, Minnesota explored programs from Connecticut, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin. Comparative research related to the outcome of other programs could suggest best practices useful to all.

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Appendix A
Consent Form



Institutional Review Board

Please read this consent agreement carefully before agreeing to participate in this study.

Title of Study: A History and Contemporary Analysis of the Adult High School Diploma Program in Minnesota.

Purpose of the study: Investigate the development of the MN Standard Adult High School Diploma program from historical records and the commentary of practitioners.

What you will do in this study: Share your personal recollections and individual perceptions.

Time required: 60-75 minutes for focus groups or interviews.

Risks: Participation does not present any threat of harm or discomfort.

Benefits: Participants contribute to the understanding of best practices of teaching and learning.

Confidentiality: Participant’s identity will not be shared with anyone beyond the principal researchers. All individual information will be recorded under a pseudonym, your name will not be used. Data, including audio files, will be stored in a password protected computer storage. All video/audio files will be destroyed at the end of the study.

Participation and withdrawal: Participation in this study is optional. You may withdraw consent or discontinue participation at any time, for any reason, without penalty.

Contact: Dr. Boyd Bradbury, School of Teaching and Learning, Minnesota State University – Moorhead, (218) 477-2471, bradbury@mnstate.edu or Ray Ades, (507) 475-4393, adesra@mnstate.edu

Whom to contact about your rights in this research: Dr. Boyd Bradbury, School of Teaching and Learning, Minnesota State University –Moorhead, (218) 477-2471, bradbury@mnstate.edu or else you may contact; Dr. Lisa I. Karch, Chair of MSUM Institutional Research Board, at irb@mnstate.edu, or 218-477-2699

Agreement:

The purpose and nature of this research have been sufficiently explained and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time and my withdrawal will not affect any future relationship with the researchers.

In signing this agreement, I also affirm that I am at least 18 years of age or older.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____

Appendix B
Observation Protocol

Observational Protocol			
Time		Date	
Location		Observer	
Duration			
Program Description			
Diagram of Space			
Page 1			

Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
Self-directedness	
Previous experience	
Life relevant	
Problem/solution	
Intrinsic motivation	
Page 2	

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

My intention is to assemble groups of practitioners at ABE sites which implemented the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma. Group Interview questions center on the ADP's impact on andragogical elements of adult education. These questions are designed to frame a semi-structured interview. The data I intend to collect are the personal perceptions and lived experience of these subjects.

Framing Remarks: The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) website explained the Standard Adult High School Diploma in this way...The 2014 Minnesota Legislature approved a third secondary credential option for adults: a state standard adult high school diploma. This new state adult high school diploma is competency-based and is completed through participation in an approved Minnesota Adult Basic Education program. Completion of the program is recognized by the state with a diploma awarded by the Minnesota Department of Education. (Hasskamp, 2017)

The research questions that guide my research are:

- 1) Why was there a need for the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma?
- 2) How was the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma developed?
- 3) How did the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma impact ABE programs?

In terms of your adult learners'...

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1) Self-directedness | 4) Problem/solution orientation |
| 2) Previous experience | 5) Intrinsic motivation |
| 3) Life relevancy | |

What impact did the Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma have on your program?

Appendix D

Deductive/Inductive Analysis Schema

Theme	Deductive Coding	Text evidence
Andragogical characteristics	Self-directedness	
	Previous experience	
	Life relevant	
	Problem/solution oriented	
	Intrinsic motivation	
Theme	Inductive Coding	Text evidence
Emergent theme	Emergent code	
	Emergent code	

Appendix E

Written Record Analysis

Document analysis of (1) The Adult Secondary Credential Task Force (2012), (2) Adult High School Diploma Advisory Task Force (2014), (3) The State Adult Diploma Resources and Guidance (2015), and (4) Statewide Standard Adult High School Pilot Evaluation Report (2015).		
Theme	Deductive Coding	Text evidence sample
Andragogical characteristics	Self-directedness	...supports a more customized approach that is uniquely tailored to each adult’s educational, career, and life goals. (1)
		...allow standard adult high school diploma program students to demonstrate completion of the requirements in a variety of ways. (2)
		Teaching self-management will prepare learners to succeed in environments where there is little guidance, structure and monitoring. (3)
	Previous experience	...assess individual skills and experience to identify competencies that have already been completed. (2)
		As part of the personal learning plan, this role will need to help evaluate transcripts and other experiences that may serve as evidence of completion of various competency domains. (3)
		...using their prior experience, G.E.D. scores, ABE instruction and other methods to demonstrate their competencies in the content domains. (4)
	Life relevant	...and personal ability to manage life and family issues in balance with job requirements and community engagement. (1)
		...local programs should be required to work with the student to develop an individualized learning plan based on the student's identified goals and skills. (2)
		Developing a future pathway builds the aptitude to more fully understand one's own skills, interests and talents and how these are transferable to a successful career or success in one's family or larger community. (3)
	Problem/solution oriented	Test-based credentialing approaches do not reliably assess these non-academic skills that adult students frequently possess in good measure. (1)
		...adults must be asked to demonstrate the ability to navigate community resources pertinent to individual and family sustainability. (1)
		Successful learners and are those who are able to adapt to their environment and problem solve when issues arise. (3)
	Intrinsic motivation	Given the occupational motivation of these adults, it makes sense to offer assessment of work readiness skills... (1)
		...offer individuals a meaningful opportunity for initial and subsequent employment with advancement potential. (1)
		We see renewed energy and interest in our adult students because they have an attainable option in view. (4)

Theme	Inductive Coding	Text evidence sample
Collaboration	Working group	This working group should be comprised of state and local Adult Basic Education practitioners in various roles, including administrators and instructors. (2)
		The working group would spend time working as a large group and in sub-groups to help define how local consortia could meet the competencies in language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and employability and career development areas. (3)
		Adult Diploma Working Group Meetings: Provides ongoing training and technical assistance for pilot program staff in all roles, including administrators, instructors, and advisors. (4)
	Consultation Team	The commissioner should establish an advisory committee of state and local ABE practitioners and leaders to provide guidance... (2)
		The consultation team is comprised of 10-20 representatives from stakeholder entities. (3)
		The Consultation Team meets quarterly to discuss the diploma and provide feedback on their needs with the new adult diploma. (4)
Program components	Standards	...program model should be rigorous and consistent throughout the state while aligning to Minnesota academic high school standards pertinent to adult learners and their needs. (2)
		The diploma adopts Minnesota’s K-12 standards, the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education (CCRS), Academic, Career and Employability Skills (ACES) in the Transitions Integration Framework (TIF), and Northstar Digital Literacy Standards. (3)
		Local education programs worked very diligently to develop new programming, revamp current programming to align to the standards and create meaningful opportunities for adult students to demonstrate their competencies.(4)
	Competency - based	A third option is needed for adults to earn a secondary credential: a competency-based diploma. (2)
		Minnesota’s new standard state adult high school diploma is a mixed competency-based diploma... (3)
		Creating competency-based, standards-aligned adult educational programming is very beneficial... (4)
	Advising	Local standard adult diploma programs should be required to provide ongoing advising and monitoring... (2)
		Advising will be provided to students to help them identify goals and create and revise their personal learning plan during intake, upon graduation, and throughout their participation in the adult diploma pilot. (3)
		...especially with 1-1 student-staff time, individualized learning plan development, advising, and portfolio management. (4)

Outcomes	Portability/ transferability	Given the relative mobility found within the Minnesota adult population, it makes sense to develop a set of alternatives (in addition to the existing adult diploma options) that are portable across the state. (1)
		The standard adult high school diploma program should be structured with uniform records and transcripts to allow portability and transferability for students. (2)
		The State Adult Diploma Programs should be structured with uniform records and transcripts to allow portability and transferability for students. (3)
	Post-secondary success	...intended to eliminate achievement gaps and prepare adult students for the anticipated rigors of college study as well as the expectations of the modern high-skill workplace. (1)
		...ensure graduates have the skills needed to be successful in postsecondary education and careers. (2)
		...tailored to adult learning needs and has sufficient rigor to ensure graduates have the skills needed to be successful in postsecondary education and careers. (3)

Appendix F

Site One Analysis

Site One		
Theme	Deductive Coding	Text evidence sample
Andragogical characteristics	Self-directedness	I would say that they have definitely become more self-directed. Part of it is because it is built into the requirements. (S)
		They see it, they feel, it they own it, they believe. That is where the difference is. It's not staff that control it. (N)
		Switching gears from doing it one way to another way. To let them be self-directed, to let them have that responsibility. (J)
	Life relevant	I think that is relevant to how they're going to make it on the outside. (R)
		Their question was where am I going to use this. Now they see that they can use this. (J)
		My guys are getting practical experience about what it's like to sit through an interview. (A)
	Intrinsic motivation	Seeing the program now is a very positive experience. The students value it, they are buying into it. (J)
		I also think that the ADP gives hope to a lot of people. (R)
		I see the difference currently between GED students and ADP students. Typically, GED students just want to sit down and study the book, go take the test to be done. They don't
Theme	Inductive Coding	Text evidence sample
Community reintegration	Program structure	Going from the GED program like we had before, it was just going from one test to the next and it wasn't meaningful. (J)
		With the adult diploma they're reaching a lot more goals, smaller goals, but seeing success helps them realize that it is achievable. (A)
		It's not some nebulous, oh when you get this score. It's like these are the things you can do, skills and tasks, to progress. (S)
	Employability	I think that is relevant to how they're going to make it on the outside. In whatever job they're going to do. (R)
		That's a huge difference between the adult diploma program versus the GED, there's not that employability component. (A)
		Giving them a chance to get jobs that they didn't have before. (R)

Appendix G

Site Two Analysis

Site Two		
Theme	Deductive Coding	Text evidence sample
Andragogical characteristics	Self-directedness	That is self-directed, they're choosing to go to CNA route. (C)
		They have to live their life as an adult yet be here and be a student. (J)
		So, I think that helps because: I'm doing this at my own pace or how I want to do this. (V)
	Life relevant	Just recently at this last meeting we went to they approved more certificates and trainings that the students need to qualify for adult diploma. (V)
		Those are critical thinking skills, those are problem solving skills. (K)
		Adult diploma has the work piece (V)
	Intrinsic motivation	Because I think they're so urgent to do it, to complete it. (V)
		It is so individualized. (C)
		Those who can't pass a GED know that they can take a course online or with a teacher and they know that if they can learn it with a little more time that is OK. (V)
Theme	Inductive Coding	Text evidence sample
Holistic approach	Program coordination	I had a perfect opportunity to start this independent study branch of our ALC and also align it to our adult diploma program. (C)
		We have the curriculum offered there that lines up with that. As well as meeting the requirements to be eligible for the adult diploma. (J)
		There are some students now who come right from the high school to the adult diploma. (C)
	Teacher involvement	In the beginning it was all on the computer and students were failing and they weren't learning anything. (C)
		I was working with these students quite a bit in small groups. (K)
		I use those different techniques because they have to learn to be a little flexible with their education and how it's being taught and what is expected of them. (J)

Appendix H

Site Three Analysis

Site Three		
Theme	Deductive Coding	Text evidence sample
Andragogical characteristics	Self-directedness	They are absolutely self-directed. It's kind of like a flipped classroom model... (L)
		Through our student council we found out students said please tell us about these opportunities even if we're not ready for them. (K)
		I'm not giving them assignments at all. It is like a big field of choices that they can do. (A)
	Life relevant	They plan what they want to do in the Diploma. As part of the diploma they have to state their pathway. (K)
		We are developing lifelong strategies to solve problems. (R)
		And that advising piece can be really helpful if someone really wants to go to college (R)
	Intrinsic motivation	If you want to get going now and you're sitting at level four, you can get going because that's one piece of the diploma. They get really motivated by that. (L)
		That is very motivating to know it is okay if I don't fit inside the box because there are other ways to show that I have the skills and this knowledge. (R)
		That is motivating to know that they can just prove what they know and we're going to honor that. (K)
Theme	Inductive Coding	Text evidence sample
Post-secondary readiness	Rigor	...when I think about the whole picture is, it has brought the rigor. (K)
		That is not enough evidence because you have to show problem solving skills. (R)
		Well when I'm looking at this group of 14 people, every single one of these went on to post-secondary. (A)
	College preparation	The people coming up out of our program that graduate seem to be better prepared. (K)
		They are very ready, they are almost ready to soar by themselves up at the college. (A)
		It is a two-for-one deal they already know that that is a college entrance requirement they are finishing a degree at the same time. (R)

Appendix I

Site Four Analysis

Site four		
Theme	Deductive Coding	Text evidence sample
Andragogical characteristics	Self-directedness	They are basically telling us what to do to help them get done. (P)
		...it ends up that they are very independent and they can manage themselves very well. (N)
		...students feel confident and feel empowered that they have control over their own education. (E)
	Life relevant	You get students to an endpoint that is much more relevant to them. (P)
		Relevancy for our students is to be able to effectively help their children become better scholars. (E)
		We are doing this to get the skill competency done, you're getting more skill that you can take back to work. (P)
	Intrinsic motivation	They get into these little cohorts, that motivates them to keep going. (M)
		And then there are those people who are motivated super intrinsically or by personal reasons. (M)
		I will say though on a bigger scale once we get students into the program I think the adult diploma has some built-in motivators. (E)
Theme	Inductive Coding	Text evidence sample
Empowerment	Equity	We talk about equity all the time, that is equity . (T)
		That is really what I think about when I think about equity. (E)
		That is part of what equity is, it's not equality. (P)
	Advocacy	And very much advocating for what they need. (T)
		And you have the tools you need to advocate for what you need to succeed. (P)
		Advocating for their child's learning, that is very powerful. (P)