

WHATEVER WORKS: TEACHING ADULTS WITH LEARNING  
DIFFICULTIES IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAMS

A DISSERTATION

submitted by

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## Abstract

Research indicates that significant numbers of adult learners who attend adult basic education (ABE) programs have learning difficulties and/or learning disabilities. However, most ABE teachers have not been trained to teach students with these complex learning needs. This qualitative study, conducted through an interpretivist/constructivist lens, used in-depth individual interviews to garner the voices and experiences of ten ABE teachers as they described how they identify and manage the learning needs of their students. Results showed that ABE teachers described their practice in terms of how they identified their students' learning difficulties; their perceptions of their identity and role as an ABE teacher; the practical teaching methods they used; and ABE system issues that affected their teaching practice. Recommendations to promote effective teaching and learning in ABE programs included improving training and professional development for ABE teachers and providing additional resources to support students with learning difficulties in ABE programs.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

### **Preface**

They called me a “learning strategist.” They weren’t quite sure what to do with me; an occupational therapist showing up to volunteer in an Adult Basic Education (ABE) program was not something they had seen before. But there aren’t any barriers to getting into adult education programs, even for anomalous staff, so my offer to do cognitive assessments with the struggling students of my local ABE program as part of my graduate work in adult education was graciously accepted. I was about to live the intersection of my two fields—occupational therapy and adult education—and none of us knew exactly what that would look like.

I, at least, had some sense of what I thought would happen. Working in an outpatient community mental health clinic, I had done occupational therapy (OT) assessments with clients who had not been successful participating in or completing coursework in an adult education setting. The occupational therapy assessment consisted of tools that evaluated the students’ information processing method and learning style, memory, attention, visual/auditory processing, motor skills, and sensorimotor processing abilities; as well as an interview that illuminated the students’ occupational roles, adaptive behaviors, and overall functional abilities and challenges. My interpretation and summary of the assessment information was meant to clarify how the students learned best and to suggest adaptations or accommodations that would support their academic success. These suggestions included strategies the students could learn, practice, and initiate to accommodate for their learning challenges, as well as ways they could reconstruct or

manage their sensory environment to better match their identified sensory preference and support effective performance. I also wrote recommendations specifically for the teachers, describing how they could most accurately match their teaching approach and instructional activities to each student's learning style. Although I offered recommendations that I thought would help the student, I realized my suggestions were not developed in the context in which the problems occurred. I had only theories about the possible relationship between learning disabilities, the environment and demands of the ABE program and why "traditional" education so often proved insurmountable for students who later attended ABE programs. This reminded me of the "Person-Environment-Occupation," (PEO) model (Law, Cooper, Strong, Stewart, Rigby, & Letts, 1996) of occupational therapy practice, and I wondered if perhaps ABE and OT practice were more closely aligned than I'd realized. Guided by the PEO model, occupational therapists evaluate all aspects of the person, the environment in which he/she is functioning, and the task he/she is trying to accomplish, to determine the level of "fit" among these three core elements. They then collaborate with the person to make adjustments in any or all of those three areas to support his/her ability to engage in desired life roles and tasks. By working with students inside the ABE program, I hoped to determine more precisely how the interventions of an occupational therapist could help to match an ABE student's skills and strengths to the demands of the student role and the ABE program.

While I was warmly received in the local ABE program, and the students who engaged in OT assessments with me reported that they felt the information I provided was helpful to their academic efforts, the staff were not so sure. In fact, after reading my

summaries that outlined learning and teaching strategies for both the student and the teacher, an administrator said, “These are good, but I’m not sure how they help us.” Since I thought the assessment information and recommendations had clear application to the students’ work in the ABE program, the administrator’s comment provoked a disorienting dilemma for me. Having finally worked with students within the ABE program, I saw firsthand the particularities of the ABE student population that ABE teachers were already trying to manage—for example, low retention of material presented, difficulty sustaining attention in the classroom, and wide variations in students’ learning pace. Since these teachers had no specialized training, I wondered how they were expected to address such complex learning needs as those presented by their ABE students. I thought it would help them to have access to resources like occupational therapy that could not only clarify what the students’ learning strengths and challenges were but also offer some specific, individualized teaching strategies.

My subsequent forays into the ABE field produced even more questions about ABE students, teachers, and programs, and positioned me to seek answers to them. For instance, I learned more about the needs of the students and about managing an adult education classroom during a brief assignment as a teacher in a Welfare-to-Work job skills program. Working with the “Building Partnerships” group sponsored by the state of Maine Office of Adult Education helped me to both appreciate the prevalence of learning disabilities/difficulties in Maine’s ABE student population and wonder what was being done about it. Becoming a trainer for the National Institute for Literacy’s *Learning to Achieve* program finally piqued my curiosity, as I spent many hours with ABE teachers first as a co-participant in the initial training about adult learning disabilities, and then as

a facilitator of these trainings in ABE programs. Although I was the only participant who was not an ABE teacher, the other trainees were receptive to my presence even as I made it clear I was an “outsider.” While I had lived little of their teaching experience, I did understand from my work with adults who had cognitive challenges some of what they were managing and figuring out in their classrooms. Later, in presenting the trainings across the southern half of the state of Maine, I interacted with many more ABE teachers and heard their stories and concerns about working with ABE students with learning difficulties. I realized then that to answer my questions about teaching and learning in ABE programs, I first had to gain an understanding of current ABE teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties from those who do it every day and know it best—the ABE teachers themselves.

## **Introduction**

This study explored the teaching practices of adult basic education teachers as they work with adult learners who have learning difficulties. It was intended to highlight the experiences of ABE teachers as they manage the complex learning needs of this population of adult learners—usually without specialized training—and to gather their perceptions of their training and resource needs. In-depth, individual interviews were conducted to bring forward the teachers’ voices and experiences in this research. Participants in the research were ten ABE teachers purposefully selected because of their participation in a national training about adult learning disabilities.

This chapter provides an overview of the context and background of this study, including the researcher’s perspectives and assumptions; the problem statement and statement of purpose, research questions, and the research approach used. The rationale

and significance of this research study will be outlined, and key terminology will be defined.

### **Context and Background**

Adult learners attend adult basic education programs to finish coursework for their high-school diploma or to prepare for the General Educational Development (GED) test; in either case, these are learners who did not complete the traditional route to getting a high-school credential. Research on ABE learners (Hutto, 1995; Minnesota Department of Education, 2009; Noyes, 2008) has identified numerous reasons that they leave high school and why they later decide to enter ABE programs; the presence of learning difficulties and/or learning disabilities is often a significant factor, regardless of whether the learner has been officially diagnosed (White & Polson, 1999). However, teachers in ABE programs typically are not trained to address the needs of adult learners with these complex learning challenges, nor do they have access to the additional educational support services that are available to support learners in the K-12 system. Services such as special education and occupational therapy provide specialized assessment and intervention to support learners with cognitive, motor, sensory, and environmental issues that interfere with their learning and subsequent course completion. No such service currently exists in adult basic education programs to support adult learners with learning difficulties, and ABE teachers frequently express frustration at this lack of resources (Polson & White, 2000).

Since a large percentage of learners in ABE programs are thought to have learning difficulties or learning disabilities (Mellard & Patterson, 2008; White & Polson, 1999), teachers in ABE programs already are working with a population of learners who bring

unique learning challenges—cognitive, academic, and emotional issues—to the classroom. Many ABE teachers intuitively adapt their teaching practice to accommodate the learning needs of their students, but lack both evidence and confidence that what they are doing results in successful outcomes for their students.

### **Research Problem**

The ABE field has only recently recognized the high prevalence of learning disability/difficulty in the student population attending ABE programs. At the same time, many teachers in these programs have not been trained as teachers or they have K-12 teaching credentials and in most cases lack training in teaching adult students with complex learning needs. This discrepancy between the needs of the students and the skill sets of the teachers in ABE programs presents challenges to effective teaching and learning that ultimately affect student achievement and outcomes.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore the current teaching practice of ten ABE teachers with students who have learning difficulties, in order to better understand the alignment of the students' needs and the teachers' skills. On a daily basis ABE teachers confront this discrepancy in the classroom, and privileging their voices and experiences adds rich data to the discourse about effective teaching and learning for adults with learning difficulties in ABE programs. As presented from the viewpoint of the teacher-stakeholders, an appreciation of the relationship between student needs and teacher skills can inform the ABE field about the professional development and resource needs of its

workforce and improve outcomes for ABE students with learning difficulties. Therefore, a central question guided this research:

- How do adult basic education teachers describe their teaching practice with adult learners who have learning difficulties?

In addition, two sub-questions supported the central question:

1. What are the training and professional development needs of adult basic education teachers who teach adult learners with learning difficulties?
2. What teaching practices or additional resources do adult basic education teachers think would support teaching and learning in adult basic education programs?

### **Research Approach**

To study these research questions, an interpretivist/constructivist approach was selected because it sanctions the social construction of reality and subjective meaning-making of participants and because it implies a collaborative relationship between the researcher and the research participants (Angen, 2000; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Using this approach positioned the researcher to appreciate and present the teacher-participants' lived experience of teaching adults with learning difficulties—from how they define learning problems to how reflection on their practice informs their teaching.

The data collected from in-depth, individual interviews with 10 ABE teachers produced the findings from this study. All the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Informed by the study's conceptual framework, categorizing strategies were used to code the interview data and reveal common themes. Additional strategies used included member checking of the transcripts, inter-rater reliability of the coding process, and peer/committee review throughout the study.

### **Researcher Assumptions**

It is critical when using an interpretivist approach to identify the factors influencing the researcher's interpretation of data. Based on lengthy experience as an occupational therapist, brief experience in the ABE field, review of the literature on the topic, and findings from the pilot study that preceded this research, the researcher in this study made the following assumptions:

- ABE teachers want to understand their students' learning difficulties, and they recognize their own strengths and limitations in working with adults with learning difficulties;
- ABE teachers adopt an intuitive approach to assessing and working with their students' learning challenges;
- ABE teachers know what resources they lack and can identify resources they need to effectively teach their students in ABE programs;
- As an educational support service that is already available to students in the K-12 system, occupational therapy services should be offered to support ABE learners in their student role.

### **Rationale & Significance**

The rationale for this study is to bring the voices of ABE teachers into the discourse about teaching adult learners with learning difficulties while responding to the call from the ABE field for more research on ABE teachers as a way to "capture professional wisdom" (Bingman & Smith, 2007, p. 79) and to support better student outcomes (Dirkx & Spurgin, 1992; Smith & Hofer, 2003). In the interest of increasing the stability of the ABE teacher workforce and raising the stature of the field, research that focuses on



identifying the characteristics of current ABE teachers as well as on the connection between teacher preparation and subsequent teaching quality is also recommended (Smith, 2006). Research conducted in collaboration with ABE teachers that addresses the current state of “classroom life” (Dirkx & Spurgin, 1992, p.40) in ABE programs and “...the relationship between well-trained and well-supported teachers and adult student achievement, persistence, and other outcomes” (Smith & Hofer, 2003, p. xiii) may produce results that better inform the decisions of ABE leaders, funders, and policy-makers, ultimately leading to improved teaching practice and student success in ABE programs.

### **Definitions of terminology**

Key terms used in this study are defined as follows:

1. Adult Basic Education (ABE): Adult Basic Education programs provide instruction in basic academic skills for adults 16 and over functioning at literacy levels below the secondary level.
2. Learning disability: A neurologically based disorder related to an individual’s predisposition for one or more weaknesses associated with key learning processes that include reading (word recognition and spelling, comprehension, fluency, and automaticity), math (computation and problem solving), and written expression disabilities (handwriting, spelling, and/or composition) (Fletcher et al., 2007).
3. Learning difficulty: “A learning difficulty arises when a specific task or circumstance in the learning environment inhibits an individual’s ability to learn.” (NIFL, 2009, p.21). In contrast to learning disabilities, which are intrinsic to the individual, learning difficulties are provoked by conditions and factors external to

the individual, such as the learning environment or task. Most existing literature uses the term *learning disability*; however since the number of students with neurologically based learning disabilities is thought to be relatively low, in this study the term *learning difficulty* is used to represent the larger number of ABE students with and without diagnosed learning disabilities who want to learn but struggle in the process.

4. Native English speakers: Individuals for whom English is their first and primary spoken language.
5. Educational support services: Services that are available in the K-12 system to support the academic success of students, which can include special education, occupational therapy, physical and speech therapies, and social work.

## CHAPTER TWO: Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to garner the voices of adult basic education (ABE) teachers regarding their teaching practice with adults who have learning difficulties and to contribute these teacher perspectives to the discourse on this topic. A critical review of literature was initiated prior to the study and continued throughout all phases of the research. To explore the central question guiding this study—*How do adult basic education teachers describe their teaching practice with adults who have learning difficulties?*—it is necessary to consider the characteristics of both ABE teachers and the adult learners who attend adult basic education programs, whose learning needs ABE teachers must address. Therefore, this review will first ground the populations of ABE teachers and learners in the context of ABE programs by outlining both the historical background and the current status of the field of adult basic education and its programs, teachers, and learners. Research on adult learning disabilities pertinent to ABE learners will also be included to extend understanding of the learning and teaching needs in ABE programs; adult learning theory will be explored as it addresses adult learners in ABE programs; and finally, a conceptual framework for this study will be presented.

### **Adult Basic Education: Past and Present**

A field in which practice preceded theory, adult learning has its philosophical roots in the Progressive Era of the 1920s. Pragmatists John Dewey and Eduard Lindeman worked across the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and sociology to develop the earliest foundations of the adult learning principles employed in the design of adult education programs today. While often seen as an advantage that broadens the view of a field, the

interdisciplinary beginning of adult learning likely contributed to the field's persistent failure to develop a distinct identity (Merriam, 2001), which has led to repercussions throughout its history. During the twentieth century, while the field searched for theory to define itself, however, adult education practice was already underway. Cass and Crabtree (1956), for instance, cited "adult elementary education" in the United States as "one of the oldest types of adult education in our nation" (p. 4). These authors dated the beginning of teaching English, reading, and writing to both foreign-born and native-born adults back to colonial days in seaport cities, where these skills were crucial to commerce and "the conduct of good business" (p. 4). Throughout the ensuing decades, the intent of these programs to teach foundational academic skills remained stable, and they operated under various names and program formats. Then in 1964 adult basic education programs became emblematic of President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty," as he signed legislation to establish them as federally funded programs. His expressed goal in doing so was to combat poverty by improving the literacy skills of adults 18 years and older to ultimately increase their chances of becoming employed. Individual states matched the federal funding they received and created adult basic education programs nationwide to serve this mission. Subsequent changes included amendments and revisions to the Adult Education Act in 1970 that reduced the age of adulthood used for admission to ABE programs from 18 to 16 years old, and that situated the preparation for and the administration of the General Educational Development (GED) exam within adult basic education programs (Tyler, 2005). The struggle of the public K-12 system to adequately meet the needs of all its students, particularly those with learning difficulties, in combination with societal assumptions about the rights of adults to state-funded

education (Shanahan, Meehan, & Mogge, 1994) were additional factors that shaped the mission, student population, and funding of ABE programs heading into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Funding—how much is available and where it comes from—and legislation are constant variables affecting the ABE field and they are often intertwined. During the early 1990s, federal funding for adult basic education was significantly increased, which resulted in a period of rapid development for the field and its programs. For instance, large research centers such as the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) were funded specifically to investigate the reflexive relationship between research and practice with adult learners (Marceau, 2003). Passage of the National Literacy Act (NLA) in 1991 also included a directive to states to allot consistent, specific amounts of their ABE funding to support research and professional development endeavors (Belzer, Drennon, & Smith, 2001). Unfortunately, more recent legislation has eliminated this funding, and NCSALL was also defunded in 2007, leading St. Clair and Belzer (2010) to declare this a “fallow period” (p. 193) for ABE research.

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 is considered to be “the most recent significant federal legislation to have had a direct impact on ABE” (St. Clair & Belzer, 2010, p. 193). This funding partnership between ABE and national workforce development initiatives also mandated a requirement to track both student academic outcomes and job attainment and retention through the new National Reporting System (NRS) created for this purpose (Belzer, 2007). For the first time in its history, ABE had to show “demonstrable outcomes” (Belzer, 2007, p. 2) to maintain its federal funding, and this performance-based system of accounting for student outcomes—and by extension, teacher performance—was a significant departure from the way most ABE

programs had ever practiced before. While this standardization of procedures was welcomed by some in the field for bringing clarity to ABE practice, in many programs tension persists around simultaneously meeting accountability requirements and “the day-to-day needs, interests, and challenges of the learners” (St. Clair & Belzer, 2010, p. 193) in ABE programs. These are often perceived by ABE teachers and administrators to be disparate and possibly conflicting goals; thus, leaders in the ABE field must not only recognize and address the problem of whose needs are met and what agenda exists in the operation and funding of ABE programs but also understand how day-to-day practice in ABE programs is influenced by these external forces (Amstutz, 1999; Isserlis, 2008).

The history of the ABE field reflects an enduring commitment to adult literacy skill acquisition, especially as this relates to ABE students’ subsequent employment and support of the U.S. economy. With alternating degrees of focus on literacy and job skills over time, program design and development typically followed the funding sources rather than the other way around. The ABE field historically has been poorly positioned to respond differently to this top-down government agenda in part because of identity issues that allowed broad diversity in its programs, which led to a splintered infrastructure and weakened the field’s capacity to advocate. The ongoing challenge for the ABE field will be to figure out how to respond as if funding parameters and student needs are not competing interests and to create solutions and program structures that artfully integrate these demands.

### **Programs**

Adult basic education programs can be categorized by their mission, philosophy, and funding source into three types: traditional, compulsory, and responsive (St. Clair &

Belzer, 2010). *Traditional* programs are usually publically funded and are often affiliated with public schools or community colleges. These programs offer academic skills instruction in modes most similar to those used in K-12 settings, so adults can earn a high-school diploma or prepare for the GED test. *Compulsory* programs also provide instruction in academic content but with equal or greater focus on development of life skills and job readiness. The goal is to increase employment potential for their learners, a group that includes recipients of welfare assistance as well as court-adjudicated individuals who are mandated to attend these programs. Community members with an interest in learning for self-improvement attend ABE programs designed to be “*responsive*” (p. 191) to their personal goals. Some responsive programs also carry an empowerment or social justice agenda. Of these three types, the traditional and compulsory programs are most likely to focus on moving their students toward employment outcomes, although St. Clair and Belzer (2010) note that any program receiving federal funds is in the position of placing “more emphasis on learning for human capital development rather than for human potential development” (p. 193). This reflects the earliest funding goals for ABE—to increase the employability of U.S. citizens—but does not always reflect the attendance goals of individual ABE learners, which sometimes include developing or improving literacy and math skills to support their parenting and household management abilities.

As programs adjust and respond to meet the national performance standards that determine their level of federal funding under the Workforce Investment Act, new tensions emerge in ABE practice at the program level. For instance, many students with learning difficulties do not follow a linear trajectory through traditional ABE programs,

sometimes needing to repeat the same level of one course for numerous sessions in order to master the content. This affects how their outcome is reported to the NRS, which then reflects poorly on the ABE program they attend and ultimately can jeopardize the program's federal funding (J. Fantine, personal communication, 1/29/10). Also, administrators, teachers, and students in ABE programs may all have different expectations of the goals and outcomes of ABE program participation. There is no standard design for ABE programs, which means that students who enroll in an ABE program solely to improve their literacy skills so that they can read to their children, for instance, may find themselves attending a program that is heavily focused on transition to college or job skill development. Alternately, a student enrolling to quickly gain job skills may move through academic courses more slowly than anticipated because of learning difficulties or interruptions in attendance, for example, and be delayed in the job search. Reconciling these competing demands on teaching and learning in ABE programs is an urgent problem for the programs that can only be truly solved by changes at the ABE system level. Those changes must eliminate the penalties incurred by programs that work with the very students who need them most—those with learning difficulties—and whose learning needs and pace do not align with the accountability requirements.

### **Teachers**

Teaching in ABE programs has been described as an “accidental career” (Smith & Hofer, 2003, p. 23) that most teachers do not plan to have. They usually come to ABE from other teaching experiences, such as K-12 or special education, or because they have credentials or expertise in a content area, such as math or English (Shanahan, Meehan & Mogge, 1994). However, K-12 credentials are not a match for adult education settings, as



these teachers rarely have been taught how to teach adults (Chisman, 2011; Sabatini, Daniels, Ginsberg, Limuel, Russell & Stites, 2000; Smith, 2006). In addition, most teaching positions in ABE programs are part-time with a very low salary and no benefits offered. Teachers are typically not paid for the time they spend preparing for classes or for engaging in professional development opportunities. These factors contribute to high turnover and instability in staffing patterns in ABE programs (Marceau, 2003; Smith & Hofer, 2003; Smith, 2006).

Numerous variables affect the ABE teacher workforce, including the sociocultural and professional characteristics of the teachers themselves. Gender and power issues, for instance, are key elements in the ABE workforce, as both historically and currently the majority of ABE teachers are women (Amstutz, 2001; Park, 1977). Low salaries and lack of professionalization are common in female-dominated fields like ABE. Amstutz (2001) and Park (1977) noted the propensity, not only for ABE teachers and volunteers to be women working part-time but also for ABE program administrators and policy makers to be primarily male, full-time employees. The associated disparity in salary, benefit, and seniority structures that keeps women from advancing in the field perpetuates the marginalization of ABE teachers and learners.

Bingman and Smith (2007) noted that although “teacher quality” (p. 77) has been strongly correlated with student achievement in the K-12 literature, research to determine what constitutes teacher quality in ABE settings is sparse. However, at least two earlier studies attempted to find correlations between teacher skills and student learning in ABE. For instance Dinnan, Moore, Wisenbaker, Ulmer and Spinks (1996) found that four

teacher characteristics predicted reading improvement in their ABE students: number of years' experience teaching adults in the same location; length of post-degree teaching experience; teachers' perceptions of their impact on their students' reading gains; and number of years since the teacher had completed a college-level reading instruction course (p. 2). In another study, Shanahan et al. (1994) conducted interviews with ABE teachers and found that all ten participants believed that standardizing the entry-level criteria for ABE teachers by having specific training or degree requirements would benefit not only the teachers but also the ABE students. To this end, Bingman and Smith (2007) suggested the development of a "full teacher preparation package" (p. 72) for ABE teachers, similar to that which currently exists for K-12 teachers, as a means to ensure a quality teaching workforce and promote best practice in ABE.

Determining teacher quality is further complicated by the particularities of practice in the ABE field, such as teacher certification and credentialing processes, which vary widely across states and programs and are rarely used. How credentialing of ABE teachers should be accomplished and what effect doing so would have on student outcomes, is unknown at this point but is currently being explored (Chisman, 2011). The active debate in the ABE field about how to ensure a state-of-the-art teaching workforce for ABE programs (Chisman, 2011; Smith & Gomez, 2011) was the subject of a 2010 roundtable of adult education experts, and in their recommendations they specifically addressed the effect of teacher quality on students with learning difficulties:

The gap between the knowledge and skills teachers have and need is one factor that severely limits the ability of the adult education system to offer the kind and quality of service low-skilled adults and the nation's economy need. Too little attention has been given to this gap. (Chisman, 2011, p. iii)

The burden remains on the leadership in the ABE field to demand and support more research that explores the intricate relationship between ABE teachers' training and skills and their students' needs and outcomes to determine what constitutes "teacher quality" in ABE.

As a field that "often presents more challenges than opportunities" (Marceau, 2003, p. 73), ABE's lack of access to and support for quality, ongoing professional development has a significant impact on teachers' ability to stay current in the field and gain expertise as teachers of adults, especially those with complex learning needs. The diversity of the ABE teacher population—in types and amounts of pre-service training, credentials, years of experience, and access to professional development—is thought to both enrich the field and complicate efforts to provide professional development that effectively meets the needs of all teachers (St. Clair & Belzer, 2010). Adult basic education teachers consistently report that what they most need from professional development opportunities are take-away strategies and tools that will be immediately applicable in their classrooms (Marceau, 2003; Smith & Hofer, 2003). Indeed, in their study using focus groups with ABE teachers, Bingman, Smith, and Stewart (1998) found that teachers are "looking for answers and for stepping stones to improve practice" (p.ii). The focus group participants identified the "recruitment, retention, and motivation" (p.6.) of their ABE students as their primary concern. They also questioned their competence in working with students who have learning disabilities; in fact, other research has shown that finding suitable professional development is especially problematic for ABE teachers who are in the position of teaching significant numbers of adults with learning disabilities (Smith & Gillespie, 2007). To this end, the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) produced two

recent trainings, *Bridges to Practice* (2003) and *Learning to Achieve* (2009), which were designed for ABE teachers to learn about current research on adults with learning disabilities in ABE programs and to offer effective teaching strategies for them to use with this population.

In arguing for greater access to professional development resources for ABE teachers, Marceau (2003) draws an astute comparison between how both adult learners and adult educators in ABE programs are “underserved in their respective educational systems” (p. 73) and suggests that including adult education practitioners as stakeholders in the creation of a robust professional development system will ultimately benefit student achievement. Because common barriers to engaging in professional development opportunities include limited and/or unpaid time to attend, and lack of program funding to pay for their attendance (Marceau, 2003), ABE teachers often pursue self-directed means of developing their knowledge and skills. For instance, Brady and Lampert’s (2007) text, *The New Teacher of Adults*, written as a “primer on teaching adult learners” (p. v) in ABE programs, offers instruction to new ABE teachers on practical teaching tools such as planning a new class and writing a syllabus, as well as how to facilitate group discussions and how to assess student learning. Communities of practice (Wenger, 2001) have also emerged, both organically and by design, as a way to fill the professional development gap in the ABE field (Taylor, 2008). An interesting outcome of the focus groups conducted as part of a research project with ABE teachers (Hill, Lawrence & Pritsos, 1995) was that in addition to answering the questions designed for the focus group, the teacher-participants also viewed their participation as a form of staff development. They reported that they found it helpful to both share their own teaching

experiences and hear about those of other teachers and that they learned more about teaching strategies and classroom practice from participating in the groups. This prompted the researchers to continue offering focus groups as staff development workshops for ABE teachers in the New York City area after the research study was completed. Also in 1995, using the newly available Internet, the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) created online discussion lists with the goal of disseminating information to the ABE field more efficiently. Over time, these discussion lists have evolved into ‘virtual’ communities of practice for adult educators as more subscribers use these platforms to share professional information and “build the knowledge base of the field” (Taylor, 2008, p. 183). Whether generated from the ABE field or found in a self-directed search, professional development opportunities for ABE teachers are a critical component in promoting teacher effectiveness, student achievement, and professional leadership in the ABE field (Marceau, 2003; NIFL, 2010).

ABE teachers are not well supported by their field to do the complex work of teaching adults with learning difficulties. Their work is further marginalized by the convergence of the low social status of women, teachers, and adult literacy learners. Some of the steps necessary to improve the state of ABE practice, i.e. continued work to professionalize the field, will require the active engagement and input of the teachers themselves to advocate and effect significant change.

### **Learners**

Who attends adult basic education programs, and why? In order to design effective teaching environments and enact effective teaching practices, it is necessary for ABE

teachers to recognize and appreciate the characteristics of the students who participate in their programs.

By definition, learners who attend ABE programs do so because they did not complete a traditional high-school education and seek to either complete credits for a high-school diploma or earn a GED credential. ABE learners' needs were outlined in Noyes' (2008) case study of four adult ABE learners who described why they decided to attend ABE programs and what supported their remaining in the program. Her study concluded that students in ABE programs attend when the timing is right for them; that they used support from family and friends to persist; that finding a learning community with a teacher who is a co-learner is critical; and that participation in the program contributes to their personal growth (p. iii). O'Donnell's (2006) research cited specific reasons that adult learners participate in basic skills/GED preparation classes. His very large national survey found that the majority of adult learners attended to improve how they felt about themselves. Other motivating factors included: to be eligible to attend college or vocational school; to make it easier to do tasks on a day-to-day basis; to get a new job with a different employer; to help secure a raise or promotion; to help their children with schoolwork; and to meet a requirement for public assistance. Certainly the diversity of the needs of the ABE population is reflected in the range of their reasons for attending ABE programs.

The age of students is also a significant variable in the population of ABE learners. The "traditional" (St. Clair & Belzer, 2010, p. 190) ABE learner is typically understood to be an older adult whose earlier education was interrupted for any number of reasons, who later decides to complete the high-school credential or earn a GED. While this group

still represents the majority, the age demographic in the ABE learner population is slowly changing. Currently, the youngest (16-20 years old) ABE students have likely failed or dropped out of traditional high-school programs and attend programs to finish their high-school diploma or take the GED, which is often perceived to be a “quicker and easier” (St. Clair & Belzer, 2010, p. 190) credential to earn. Their presence in ABE classrooms challenges some traditional “adult” education concepts (i.e., what levels of motivation and self-directed learning can be expected from adolescent students) and also raises questions about the appropriate use of adult education funding (Rachal & Bingham, 2004). The wide range of ages, learning needs, academic history and life experience in ABE learners presents a unique challenge for teachers in planning lessons and managing classrooms in ABE programs. Burgeoning evidence (Mellard & Patterson, 2008; NIFL, 2009; Smith & Gillespie, 2007; White & Polson, 1999) now suggests that a prominent teaching challenge presented by ABE learners is having a learning disability or learning difficulty.

### **Adult Learning Disabilities**

A recent and significant development in the field of adult basic education is the recognition of the prevalence of adults with learning difficulties who attend ABE programs. Nearly 20 years ago, Ryan and Price (1993) noted the need for research on how policy makers and teachers could best address the “multiple issues” (p. 32) presented by an increasing number of students with learning disabilities attending ABE programs, and the issue has continued to gain attention since then. Typically underestimated, the percentage of adult students with learning disabilities in ABE programs has ranged in the literature from 29% by student self-report (Mellard and Patterson, 2008) to 80% as

postulated by the National Adult Literacy and Learning Disability Center (Mellard & Patterson, 2007; White & Polson, 1999). Determining an actual number has proved very difficult for many reasons, including lack of consensus on the definition of the term *learning disability*, especially as it pertains to adults (NIFL, 2009; Ryan & Price, 1993), and how ABE programs determine if a student has a learning disability. White and Polson's (1999) study found that in many ABE programs, staff observation and students' self-reports were the techniques used most often to determine whether a student had a learning disability, but these methods have limitations. Because of provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, staff in ABE programs are not allowed to ask students directly about disability status; thus, many use their observations of student appearance and classroom performance to identify learning disabilities in their students. Students will sometimes disclose that they have learning issues, but relying on student self-report is especially difficult because students may be unaware that they have a diagnosable learning disability; conversely they may be aware and choose not to disclose, or they may think they have a learning disability when in fact they do not (Mellard and Patterson, 2008).

Given that adult learners who return to ABE programs to earn a GED or finish a high-school diploma have not completed a traditional high-school program, it is reasonable to assume that the persistence of cognitive or learning barriers that prevented them from finishing would require the attention and intervention of the ABE teacher. However, assessing the abilities and difficulties of adult learners in the ABE setting—whether to do so at all, and if yes, how and by whom—has been a hotly debated topic in the field of adult basic education. A thorough assessment for learning disabilities described by



Roffman (2000) involves a three-part diagnostic process of “fact-finding; testing and precise diagnosis; and the provision of recommendations” (p. 37). This type of assessment must be administered by a qualified psychologist, is time-consuming and costly, and is often beyond the financial reach of most ABE learners. Mellard (1998) distinguished a screening process from this more extended evaluation or testing that would be used to formally diagnose learning disabilities in adults. He cautiously approached the idea of literacy educators screening their students, suggesting that screening is only the first step in intervening with adults who have learning disabilities and that screening tools must be subjected to more research before results from them can be used to plan instruction or accommodations for adult learners with disabilities. Polson and White (2000) actually described the assessment process used in most adult basic education programs as a barrier to providing appropriate supports to ABE students, since their research showed that the process consisted of “relatively impotent tools such as observation, physical appearance, and a center-created assessment/intake form” (p. 7). Addressing assessment from a different perspective, Gerber (1998) connected the effects of learning disabilities to the “psychological processes” (p. 4) that underlie them—cognition, perception, language, attention, motor abilities, and social skills—and advocated assessment of these learning characteristics. This places the effect of learning disabilities well beyond academic impact, and includes the adult learner’s functional skills at work, home, or in the community. Thus, Gerber argued for an ecological approach to assessment of these “invisible disabilities” (p.2)—i.e., an approach that is strengths-based and addresses the adult’s ability to function in a variety of environments. Roffman’s (2000) work also supports an approach that attends to the broad impact of

learning disabilities on typical adult roles—spouse/partner, parent, and worker—as well as the potential negative effects on quality of life. Introducing the voices of the consumer, Ross-Gordon, Plotts, Joesel, & Wells (2003) conducted surveys and interviews with adult educators and both college and adult basic education students with learning disabilities to garner their perceptions of the assessment process. The recommendations from this group included provision of increased staff development for adult educators about learning disabilities and when/how to refer students for evaluation; coordinated referral systems and financial support for assessment; and training for assessment providers in giving useful feedback about the findings to the student and the instructor.

In addition to using informal assessments and screening for intake purposes, ABE programs that receive federal funding through the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) are required to administer standardized assessments for the purpose of reporting their learners' achievements to the National Reporting System (NRS), but whether assessment scores developed for this specific purpose can also serve to inform curriculum and instruction is currently being reviewed and questioned (Mellard & Anderson, 2007). For instance, the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) was designed to measure reading and writing skills as these apply to everyday living tasks; the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) was designed to assess competence and progress in literacy skills of native English speakers. The two tests differ in focus and in how their results are reported to NRS; neither was explicitly designed to assist ABE teachers with planning individualized instruction, although the TABE is more directly linked to academics (Mellard & Anderson, 2007). The practical outcome of this

complicated debate is that ABE teachers are typically left in the classroom without useful means to understand and plan accurately for their students' complex learning needs.

Assessment of the adult learner's abilities and challenges ideally would lead to individualized recommendations for strategies or techniques that both the teacher and the learner could use to improve the learner's performance (Roffman, 2000) in the ABE program. Accommodations that support an adult learner to compensate for learning difficulties are routinely recommended after a formal diagnostic evaluation for learning disability, but there is no guarantee that students will receive these accommodations in an ABE program. For example, Polson (2000) surveyed 555 adult basic education programs regarding the barriers they experienced in attempting to provide learning accommodations to their students with learning disabilities. The top four barriers cited by the programs were: limited budget, limited staff, lack of staff training, and ineffective assessment tools. Further research was recommended to develop definitive diagnostic tools and methods of identifying appropriate accommodations for adult learners in ABE programs.

Following the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the issue of accommodating students' learning difficulties gained more attention, and in the ABE field this resulted in the production of numerous manuals and guides to help ABE programs accommodate their students' learning needs (Chapman, Dalheim, Mauke, Risley & Smith, 1997; Horton & Hall, 1998; Hutto, 1995). Of particular interest to this researcher was a research report from Mellard, Hall, and Leibovitz (1997) that used occupational therapy principles as a framework for developing effective methods to accommodate ABE students with learning disabilities. In this report, accommodations in the ABE setting were defined as

follows: “...an educational accommodation is any change that creates an equitable opportunity for task completion or environmental access within the learning environment” (p.7). Using the “Ecology of Human Performance” (p. 13) model to inform their definition, these authors emphasized that changing the manner or tools with which a task is done, or the context in which it is performed, is a strategy that can be used to create equal access to education for learners—not as a way to ensure their academic success. Ensuring access to opportunities remains the sole goal of providing accommodations.

The ABE field continues to progress in its approach to teaching adults with learning disabilities. In an attempt to address the lack of assessment tools and teaching strategies available to ABE teachers for use with their students who have learning difficulties, the National Institute for Literacy produced *Learning to Achieve* (2009) for dissemination in ABE programs across the United States. The training curriculum is based on a meta-analysis of the most current research on adult learning disabilities and begins with promoting a consensus definition for the term *learning disability*—previously lacking in the ABE field—as a first step toward a unified understanding and approach to learning disabilities in the ABE classroom. It also suggested use of the term “learning *difficulties*” (NIFL, 2009, p. 21) to denote the much larger population of students in ABE programs who struggle to learn, but who do not have a diagnosable, neurologically based learning disability. Instructing ABE teachers in teaching methods shown to be effective for adults with learning disabilities promotes broader application of quality instruction for all ABE learners and therefore is expected to benefit those who have less-disabling learning problems.

### Adult Learning Theory and ABE

Several tenets of adult learning theory are particularly applicable to teaching and learning in ABE programs; those addressing adult cognitive development, self-directed learning, and andragogy. Certainly research and literature that address adult cognitive development provide an understanding of the learning strengths and challenges faced by adult learners in ABE programs, especially those with learning difficulties, and inform the subsequent teaching practices that will be most effective with that population. In addition, Merriam (2001) describes *self-directed learning* and *andragogy* as the “pillars of adult learning theory” (p. 3) that emerged from efforts in the field to build theory that would support professionalization of adult education practice. Self-direction of one’s learning, or the ability to self-motivate and find and use resources to increase knowledge, is thought to be the hallmark of an adult learner. But what happens if an adult does not have adequate skills for self-directed learning? Should external direction for learning be provided? And if so, how and by whom? These questions are at the heart of applying the concept of self-directed learning to learners in ABE programs. Finally, andragogy is perhaps the most debated adult learning theory; however, its essential premise that fundamental differences exist between children and adults as learners has newfound relevance in current study of best teaching practice for ABE learners with learning difficulties.

This next part of the review will look at teaching and learning in ABE programs through the lens of these three adult learning theories.

## Adult Cognitive Development

Distinguishing between adults and children as learners, as andragogy does, first demands attention to whether and how adults learn. Ideas about this have shifted over time and have had a significant impact on the field of adult education. For instance, in 1956, while confidently stating that adults can learn, Cass and Crabtree also presented research findings suggesting that adults over the age of 20 begin to experience memory loss and reduced processing speed that can “hinder learning” (p.23). Fifteen years later though, Knowles (1970) unequivocally stated, “The central proposition on which the entire adult education movement is based is that adults can learn” (p. 49). Yet it was not until the dramatic advances in brain-scanning technology of the 1990s that allowed nuanced understanding of real-time human brain function that Tennant and Pogson (1995) could present definitive research findings updating the field on adult cognitive development. Their conclusion: cognitive growth does, in fact, continue into adulthood. This view rejected earlier notions of adulthood as a period of either intellectual stability or decline and proposed that adult cognitive growth capitalizes on accumulated life experiences to support further learning and expertise-building. These new ideas that adult brains do not stagnate and that learning is possible after adolescence supported the viability of teaching adults and also changed the question from ‘Can adults learn?’ to ‘How do adults learn and what should adult educators do with that information?’ Capitalizing on the recent advances in neuroscience, the current literature addresses this question through updated understanding of adult cognitive development. The neuroplasticity of the adult brain, or its ability to “change and reorganize in response to environmental stimulation” (Hill, 2001), is now known to persist throughout the life span

and support the cognitive functions necessary for learning, i.e., attention, memory, and flexibility in thinking. Zull (2006) suggests that this new knowledge about the biological basis of learning should challenge adult educators to revisit their roles and teaching practices and says of the brain, "...our understanding of learning must be consistent with the biological properties of the learning organ" (p. 8). For many adult educators, such attention to cognition and neuroscience has not been included in their preparation for teaching and represents a significant departure from their view of adult education as a strictly humanistic endeavor. Integrating both concepts, Cozolino and Sprokay (2006) described a connection between the adult educator's intuitive use of "language, empathy, emotion, and behavioral experiments" and "promoting neural plasticity and network integration" (p.13) on the part of the adult learner. Since these authors view the brain as a "social organ" (p. 15) and see the context of social interaction as both making demands on and improving the neural plasticity in the adult brain, they posited that adult educators can best support adult learners by promoting a trusting relationship. Cozolino and Sprokay (2006) also suggested that because developing and sharing narrative taps into a variety of different brain regions/structures, the intentional use of narrative in teaching provides the learner with an increased level of neural network integration that then supports new learning and meaning-making.

However, do these ideas about adult cognitive development also inform our understanding of adults with learning difficulties? Learning disabilities that began in childhood are now also thought to "persist throughout the life span" (National Institute for Literacy, 2009, p.7), an idea that supports both the careful consideration of the characteristics of the adult learners who attend adult basic education programs and the

ways that adult educators can respond with best practice. Isserlis (2008) noted that many ABE learners return to educational settings seeking to gain or increase skills that will assist them with employment, but they also often return hesitantly and with anxiety left over from “failing” (p. 21) school in the past. Caine and Caine (2006) pointed out that fear and anxiety experienced by a learner can “sabotage” (p. 57) the executive function skills—i.e., planning, anticipating, sequencing, and self-monitoring—necessary for learning and significantly interfere with learning. They suggested that an optimal state of mind for learning can be facilitated by the adult educator, starting with helping the learner to recognize and name the fear. Maintaining a safe learning environment, engaging the learner in assignments driven by student interests, and scaffolding the complexity of tasks are all steps educators can take to reduce fear and allow learners to access the executive function skills necessary for effective learning in adult basic education programs.

While it appears that some adult learning theorists have been able to extrapolate practical teaching strategies from the latest neuroscientific research on cognition, other writers caution against jumping too quickly “from brain scan to lesson plan” (Howard-Jones, 2011, p. 1), since there is often not a direct link between what is discovered about brain structure and function, and how that information translates into best educational practice in the classroom (Bruer, 1997; Howard-Jones, 2011). In fact, Bruer (1997) suggested that the missing intermediate link can be found in the field and practice of cognitive psychology and defined a more complete route as one “that links brain structures with cognitive functions and cognitive functions with instructional goals and outcomes” (p. 10). In other words, at this juncture teachers stand to gain more from



understanding and exploiting the cognitive processes that underlie the academic tasks they give their students than they do from knowing which brain structure or region is responsible for it. Teachers also have a role in advancing the research efforts to link neuroscience and education by lending their thinking to “developing tractable and useful questions, to executing the research and communicating its findings” (Howard-Jones, 2011, p. 113).

### **Self-Directed Learning**

Throughout the evolution of the field of adult learning, many theorists have addressed the fundamental principle of self-direction in adult learning and created models that attempted to explain or operationalize the phenomenon. Although Malcolm Knowles wrote a book in 1975 entitled *Self-Directed Learning*, according to Merriam (2001), Allen Tough was the first adult learning theorist to describe comprehensively the concept of self-directed learning. Tough and Knowles each proposed the initial, linear models that described the process of how learners engage in self-directed learning; these processes start when the learner diagnoses his/her learning needs and continue as the learner moves through identifying resources and evaluating outcomes. In *Self-Direction for Lifelong Learning* (1991) Candy expanded on this original concept by describing self-direction as a characteristic that is present in learners on a continuum, and by questioning whether self-direction is the process or the product of learning. This view left open two possibilities: that not all learners innately possess the skills to direct their own learning; and that they can be taught to do so—important considerations for teaching adults with learning difficulties. Candy (1991) situated the skills for self-directed learning in four domains: personal autonomy; willingness/ability to manage one’s learning; pursuit of learning independent of formal institutional support; and learner-control of instruction.

Preceding the newer “instructional” models, he encouraged adult educators to work at facilitating self-direction in those areas with their students. And, noting the inherent irony in using autonomy as a method to teach autonomous learning, Candy instead promoted the use of direct instruction, encouragement and support by adult educators to help students develop efficient self-management skills, familiarity with subject matter, and a sense of learning competence. Although he was not specifically addressing the needs of students with learning difficulties, Candy’s work in this area was foundational and had direct application to this population.

Also advocating the idea that adult educators could be instrumental in the development of self-directed learning skills in their students, Grow (1991) posited self-direction as important only to the extent that students and teachers were well matched with the levels of direction needed and provided for effective learning to occur. Terry’s (2006) qualitative study of two community-based adult literacy programs in Canada bears out this very phenomenon and connects it directly to adult basic education settings. Seventy stakeholders in the programs, including adult literacy students and instructors, were interviewed about their interpretations of self-directed learning. Results showed that instructors discussed the need to balance the amount of self-direction they expected of students with the “other-direction” (p. 36) they provided, based on the students’ comfort level. The adult students saw themselves on a continuum of self-direction in terms of self-selecting subject areas and assignment topics, learning pace, and attendance schedules, and among the recommendations was that adult educators should consider these fruitful areas to begin with when supporting students to develop self-direction.

Challenges to the original concept of self-directed learning are particularly vital to the development of teaching practice in adult basic education programs, since assumptions that all adult learners are self-directed can be faulty and lead to the use of ineffective teaching methods, especially for those learners whose ability to direct their own learning is affected by learning difficulties. Additional concerns involve the practical risks of misinterpretation or individual reinterpretation of the self-directed learning concept; these risks can include badly designed adult education programs, with too much focus on the “self” due to adult educators “equating self-directed learning with independent or individualized learning” (Cranton, 1994, p. 15), as well as failing to attend to “the interdependent and socially determined nature of much of adult learning” (Candy, 1991, p. 42). Likewise, Amstutz (1999) asserted that the “individual learner” (p. 23) focus of self-directed learning lacked attention to social context in learning. She argued that promoting the original concept of self-direction for adult learners diminishes the fact that some learners find collaborative learning endeavors to be highly effective. In fact, Merriam (2001) described later constructions of self-directed learning models that added the context in which learning takes place to produce a more “interactive” model and then moved further to “instructional” models that explicitly identified the role of instructors and what they can do to facilitate self-direction in their students. In adult basic education programs, for instance, teachers must be able to assess each learner’s comfort level and skill with the demands of self-direction and be prepared to support and scaffold the learner’s engagement in the learning task while he/she learns the skills for self-directed learning. Clearly for ABE students, the relationship with their teacher plays a key role in

their development of self-directed learning skills, and Allen Tough spoke to this directly in describing his experience of talking with adult learners about their learning:

So people told their story in terms of other people and how they helped. That's what tipped me off that self-directed learning is not a lonely thing. It's not an isolated thing but a very social thing. It involves a lot of interaction with others even though it sounds like it's an isolated and individual act. (Allen Tough Reflects on Self-Directed Learning, 2003, p. 2)

### **Andragogy**

*Andragogy*, defined as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1970, p. 38) was presented to the field by Malcolm Knowles in the 1960s. Driven by a humanistic focus, Knowles wrote his seminal text, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* in 1970 as a comprehensive guide to facilitate the planning and evaluation of adult education programs, as well as to explore his burgeoning theory of andragogy. In stating his case for the separation of adult learning from the concept of pedagogy, Knowles cited rapid “twentieth-century cultural revolutions” (p. 38) that increased the speed with which a person navigating adulthood needed to integrate new knowledge, thereby creating the motivation to engage in lifelong learning. He further extended the distinctions between the learning of children and adults by suggesting that compared to a child's classroom environment in which content is “transmitted” (p. 45), adults had far greater needs as learners to participate in experiential learning techniques, in order to develop skills of inquiry to apply to a range of increasingly complex life situations.

Originally, Knowles described four “Assumptions of Andragogy” which centered on the differences between adults and children as learners. These differences included:

1. Self-concept of the learner: how dependent is the learner on the teacher for direction
2. Prior experience of the learner: how much life experience does the learner have and is this a resource for her learning
3. Readiness to learn: how accessible is the learner to the content presented
4. Orientation to learning: subject-oriented or problem-oriented  
(1970, p. 39)

Knowles' updated version of *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* in 1980 bore a new subtitle, "From Pedagogy to Andragogy," which reflected the changes in his thinking about the range of skills and abilities in adult learners, as well as the impact on learning of the specific characteristics of the learning situation, rather than focusing solely on those of the adult learner—essentially, he added context to the mix. Twenty-five years later, in producing the sixth edition of Knowles' *The Adult Learner*, Knowles' successors Holton and Swanson (2005) added two additional "core adult learning principles" (p. 62) to the original four andragogical assumptions: the learner's need to know—i.e., what application does the learning have in the learner's life—and motivation to learn, i.e., what are the learner's internal and external motivators. They also emphasized two necessary ideas underlying andragogical principles: the definition of the term *adult* and also the increasing need for self-directed learning skills as one matures through the life span. Knowles, Holton and Swanson (2005) defined *adult* (p. 64) through four realms: biologically, legally, socially, and psychologically. For these theorists the psychological category was most important, as development in this area is considered to determine how self-directed a learner can be.

Adult learners in ABE programs are represented in the theory of andragogy in several ways. Knowles et al. (2005) presented a practical application of the theory of andragogy by using a case example from an adult basic education program to outline how an “andragogical learner analysis” (p. 157) could be used as part of a needs assessment for program development purposes. This analysis used a matrix that evaluated “the extent to which the andragogical assumptions fit the learners at that point in time” (p. 158) by rating the alignment of the learner population characteristics with the six andragogical principles, and thereby determining the most effective teaching approach. The results of this case analysis revealed that while the learners in this traditional ABE program generally fit most of the andragogical assumptions, they tended not to fit andragogical assumptions about the self-directedness of adult learners because they had histories of being unsuccessful in past learning settings and they “lack confidence” (p. 158) as learners of reading and math. However, they tended to also be very motivated students in their effort to improve their lives and were seen as pragmatic learners for whom it was critical to make real-life connections to their new learning. Based on this analysis, the instructors in this case study chose to use experiential learning techniques rather than more traditional GED classroom methods.

Current research is also beginning to address the real-life application of andragogical principles to the learning and teaching that goes on in ABE programs. For instance, Mellard and Patterson (2008) connected the practice of “individualized group instruction” (p. 134) that is prevalent in ABE programs to the adult learning theories of andragogy and self-directed learning, but then questioned if ABE students with learning disabilities could use this method to learn effectively. They concluded that most ABE students with

specific learning disabilities will benefit instead from a “diagnostic or clinical teaching approach” (p.143) that begins with a comprehensive assessment of their academic skills and results in explicit instruction designed to address their affected cognitive processes. This approach both situates the learning “problem” within the ABE student and changes the skill set required of ABE teachers. It also suggests that ABE programs would need additional and different resources were they to serve their students in this way.

An unexpected finding from the pilot study (Spear, 2010) that preceded this dissertation research presented a new angle from which to view the pedagogy versus andragogy debate in adult learning theory. While the adult learning theory of andragogy as posited by Knowles (1970) suggests that there are fundamental differences to teaching adults and children based on their relative life experiences and cognitive development, the three highly experienced ABE teacher-participants in the pilot study emphasized that knowing how to teach at the elementary level was beneficial to their teaching practice with the ABE learner population. All three participants clearly indicated that using elementary teaching strategies for ABE learners reading at or below sixth-grade level affected the most progress in reading levels for their students. However, findings from Mellard’s recent research on this topic (NIFL, 2010) revealed that the models of reading acquisition that are known to be effective for children did not prove effective for adults reading at similar grade levels to children, and further, indicated several problems with using the grade level learning trajectory for adults:

1. The assessments and placement tests ABE teachers have available to them tend to use grade level measurement of skills that in the case of adults with learning

difficulties does not inform instructional planning in the way that more specific diagnostic assessment would.

2. Adult learners are looking for practical gains in their reading skills, but ABE programs are tied to “administrative” ways of demonstrating gains, such as placement tests that are not sensitive to practically oriented improvements.
3. Possibly due to differences in executive function skills, adults do not shift from word-level analysis to integrated language in the way that children do, and therefore do not have sufficient language knowledge to support effective reading comprehension and development of further reading skills. These adults do not achieve fluidity and efficiency in reading, and so grade level matters little in attempting to understand and plan for their instruction.

This discrepancy between the actual practice of a very small number of experienced teachers, and Mellard’s findings is but one representation of whether and how adult learning theory such as andragogy should inform day-to-day practice in the field. Despite the existence of adult learning theory meant to guide practice, are ABE teachers more likely to rely on their own educational experiences, pre-service training (often as elementary teachers), and on-the-job experience to make decisions about how best to teach individuals and plan curricula? Can principles of both pedagogy and andragogy be brought to bear on teaching adult learners with learning difficulties? Answers to these questions will advance the theoretical debate begun by Malcolm Knowles forty years ago.



### Summary

Many elements converge on teaching practice in ABE programs and ultimately determine whether students with learning difficulties will have successful learning experiences. Exploring the question of how teachers work with adults with learning difficulties in ABE programs involves understanding the interaction of these elements: the ABE field and programs in which the teaching activity occurs; characteristics of the teachers and students who engage in the teaching/learning transaction; and how adult learning theory informs this issue. This literature review treats each of these factors within the context of teaching adults with learning difficulties.

Operating under the governmental regulation of its activity, the ABE field tends to complicate rather than support teaching practice in its programs. The field has not responded in ways that suggest it recognizes the complexity of teaching basic skills to adults with learning difficulties; on the contrary, it continues to task the programs with assessment and outcome expectations that reflect lack of awareness and adjustment to ABE student needs at the larger system level. At the same time, research continues to investigate learning disabilities in the adult population. Closer collaboration between these researchers and the leaders and policy makers in the ABE field is called for, so that ABE teaching practice can be informed with these data and student needs can be advocated at the state and federal levels.

Adult education has had a traditionally humanistic focus, and this philosophical bent is reflected in most of adult learning theory. However, to effectively include adults with learning difficulties in the field's theories and its programs, attention must also be paid to cognition and neuroscience—fields that are most specifically addressing the science of

teaching as it relates to adult learning disability. Both adult learning theory and day-to-day ABE practice must integrate the art and the science of teaching to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The Conceptual Framework (Appendix A) that provided structure and direction for this study resulted from the integration of this review of the literature and the researcher's experience and knowledge of the ABE field. Throughout the study, the conceptual framework served to maintain alignment between the research questions and the coding schemes, organization of findings, and analysis and interpretation of the data, thereby preserving the focus of the research.

As seen in Appendix A, categories were devised that responded to each research question, and descriptors were listed to expand the content in those categories. The first research question intended to explore how teachers practiced with adults with learning difficulties, so the primary category, "How/If to Identify Learning Difficulties," highlights the defining detail of this study. Additional categories of "Identity/Role as a Teacher" and "Student Outcomes" and "Methods of Teaching" addressed more ways teachers described their practice, by focusing on the salient characteristics of the key people involved in the teacher-student relationship and the concrete tools they used. The second research question sought to identify teachers' perceptions of their training and professional development needs, so the logical category was "Professional Development." The last research question prompted teachers to consider what teaching practices or missing resources could fill the gaps in ABE programs and support their teaching. Two categories were appropriate here: "Methods of Teaching" and "Additional

Resources.” As the study progressed, some descriptors were added, removed or collapsed, so the conceptual framework was continuously refined.

## CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

The purpose of this interpretivist study was to garner the perspectives of ABE teachers regarding their practice with adult students who have learning difficulties, including the teachers' perceptions of their training and resource needs. To study this phenomenon, the following research questions were posed: (1) How do adult basic education teachers describe their teaching practice with adult learners who have learning difficulties? (2) What are the training and professional development needs of adult basic education teachers who teach adults with learning difficulties? (3) What teaching practices or additional resources do these teachers think would support teaching and learning in adult basic education programs?

This chapter provides a detailed description of the research methodology used in this study, including: the rationale for the research approach, the research participants, research design and methods of data collection, analysis and synthesis, ethical considerations, and the trustworthiness and limitations of the study.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Rationale for Research Approach**

A qualitative research approach was chosen for this study of ABE teachers' perceptions of their practice. As defined by Creswell (1998), qualitative research is best suited to inquiries like this one that seek to "explore a human or social problem" (p. 25) by studying that problem in its natural setting and then presenting a detailed view of its complex, holistic nature. The goal of such qualitative research is to "interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 4). To that

end, this qualitative study of the perceptions of ABE teachers was conducted through the lens of the interpretivist/constructivist research paradigm, which privileges the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) and the subjective meaning-making of research participants. In the hermeneutic philosophy that forms the foundation of the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, *understanding* is assumed to be “positional” (Palmer, 1969, p. 224); this means that how we know what we know is always bound to the parameters of time, prior history, situation, and culture. And precisely because such interpretations of understanding are so context-bound, they can be negotiated and re-interpreted over time (Angen, 2000; Cohen and Crabtree, 2006).

Mertens (2005) also identified the social construction of reality as the fundamental tenet of the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm and noted that individuals described the same concept in different ways that reflected their unique life experience. For example, this study’s central concept was *learning difficulty*, and although all the participants shared the commonality of teaching adults with learning difficulties, it was expected that each participant would describe *learning difficulty* differently depending on how she/he had made meaning of it in her/his practice. For this reason the researcher started each interview by querying the participant about how she/he defined *learning disability* and by sharing her own definition, so that our respective interpretations would be clear as we further discussed the issue. This also set the tone for the role of the researcher in this study, since in addition to being the facilitator and steward of new interpretations, the researcher in interpretivist/constructivist studies is also an intentional participant in developing them. The researcher’s own background and experience are meant to explicitly inform her interpretations of the data collected, and the burden is on the

researcher to recognize and acknowledge the impact of this on all phases of the research (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). To access and give voice to the perspectives of ABE teachers in this research, the researcher adopted the role of the interpretivist/constructivist researcher best described by Guba and Lincoln (2008): “a ‘passionate participant’ as facilitator of multivoice reconstruction” (p. 261).

The interpretivist/constructivist paradigm also influences the researcher-participant relationship and the methods used in qualitative studies. For example, Miles and Huberman (1994) maintained that because both the researcher and her “informants” (p. 8) in interpretivist research are situated in a certain cultural time and place, their interpretation and construction of the topic of study will result in a research interview that is “a ‘co-elaborated’ act on the part of both parties, not a gathering of information by one party” (p. 8). This guideline allowed the researcher in this study to bring her knowledge and experience of the ABE field into the interview to create an “ongoing correspondence” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 23) between her own perspectives and those of the participants. Together, the researcher and participants engaged in a meaning-making process to develop a shared sense of the reality of their teaching practice. Developing new, co-created knowledge about a topic is the desired outcome of this data gathering process, and interpretivist/constructivist researchers capitalize on the capacity of humans to use “intersubjective social knowledge” (Guba & Lincoln, 2008, p. 269) to do this.

### **Participants**

Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research to intentionally select a population to study the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). For this study, a homogeneous sample

of 10 ABE teachers was chosen, and the defining characteristics for the group of participants included that they: taught native speakers of English in an ABE program; attended a National Institute for Literacy's (NIFL) *Learning to Achieve* training co-facilitated by the researcher in 2010; and that they identified on the *Learning to Achieve* training attendance sheet as an ABE teacher or instructor. Of the 36 potential participants, 10 ABE teachers responded affirmatively to the solicitation and were included in the study.

The participants in this study are teachers in Maine ABE programs, all of which are located in the southern half of the state. Nine of the ten participants teach the academic courses taken by adult learners who are native speakers of English in order to complete their high-school diploma or prepare to take the GED exam; one participant is a former ABE teacher who recently began teaching remedial English classes in a program that supports ABE students to transition to community college.

Although a very high percentage of students in urban ABE programs are English Language Learners (ELL) from other countries, ABE teachers who exclusively teach ELL were excluded from this sample because of the complexity of determining the presence of learning disabilities in the ELL population, as well as how best to teach those learners. Current issues in this burgeoning field include not having an effective way to determine if the ELL was literate in his/her native language prior to attempting to learn English, and lack of culturally competent tools to assess learning needs and inform instruction (National Institute for Literacy, 2009). With no experience or expertise in this specialized field, this researcher purposely limited the sample of teachers in this study to those who teach native speakers of English.

Adult basic education teachers enter the field from a wide variety of educational and disciplinary backgrounds, and many were not trained as teachers. To support and improve their teaching practice, ABE teachers typically attend seminars or workshops offered as professional development opportunities. In 2009 the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) produced *Learning to Achieve*, a training program designed to meet several goals, including: to provide a consensus definition of the term *learning disability* as this applies to adults; to update ABE teachers on current research about adult learning disabilities; and to offer strategies for ABE teachers to use with struggling students in their classrooms. *Learning to Achieve* was disseminated across the U.S. in an effort to provide consistency in the way the ABE field addresses adult learning disabilities, both conceptually and practically. Since attendance was not mandated, participation in the *Learning to Achieve* training was seen by this researcher as a measure of ABE teachers' interest in the topic of adult learning disabilities, recognition of their students' classroom struggles, and investment in improving their teaching practice with this population of adult learners.

Table 1 outlines the demographic data for the participants in this study; pseudonyms are used to protect their identity.



Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Years in ABE	Adult Education certification in Maine	Full or Part time ABE teacher	Subject taught	Special Education background
Carol	56	female	white	3	yes	part	English	no
Kate	28	female	white	1.5	no	part	English	no
Jim	47	male	white	5	no	full	Math	no
Deb	48	female	white	15	yes	part	Math	yes
Pam	59	female	white	10	no	full	English	no
Angela	42	female	white	2	no	full	English/ Math	no
Jane	43	female	white	3	yes	full	English	no
Ashley	25	female	white	3.5	yes	full	Math	no
Theresa	59	female	white	12	yes	full	English	yes
Anne	62	female	white	10	no	full	English	no

In this sample, all participants were white, and the age range was 28 to 62, with a median age of 47.5. Of the ten participants, only one was male. Four participants had ten or more years of experience teaching in ABE programs, while four had 3 years experience or less. Half the sample held adult education certification in Maine, and seven participants worked full-time in their ABE programs. The majority taught English, with only 3 participants teaching math full-time. Two participants had been educated as K-12 special education teachers.

### Information Needed to Conduct the Study

Theoretical, perceptual, and demographic information was required to answer the three research questions posed in this study. To provide a theoretical base for this research, ongoing review of relevant literature was conducted throughout the study. The perceptions of ABE teachers regarding their practice with adults with learning difficulties were collected during ten individual interviews. Demographic information regarding

ABE trends in the state of Maine was researched in-depth, and specific demographic data about study participants was obtained from the Demographic Data Sheet (see Appendix B) that participants completed prior to the individual interview, as well as from participant self-report during the interview.

In order to support the analysis and interpretation of the data collected in this study, the following contextual information that situates ABE programs, teachers, and learners in the state of Maine was considered.

The sociocultural factors that define the population of the state of Maine also affect the student population, teacher workforce, and enrollment patterns in Maine's ABE programs. Bordered only by New Hampshire, Maine is the northeastern-most state in the United States, and of its total population of 1.3 million people, 96% are white (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The most recent U.S. Census data confirm that Maine is also an aging state, with 15% of the population over the age of 65—this is 3% higher than the national average. Statewide, over 12% of people live below poverty level, with the highest concentration in the northern half of the state. Nearly 15% of Maine residents do not have a high-school diploma, and over one-third of this group have less than a ninth-grade education (Office of Vocational and Adult Education annual report, 2009).

The current unemployment rate in Maine is 7.6% (Center for Workforce Research and Information, March 2011), which is lower than the national average yet still higher than Maine has experienced in 30 years. High unemployment rates typically result in increased participation in ABE programs as more students enroll to earn a high-school credential or acquire new job skills to improve their employment potential (J. Fantine, personal communication, 1/29/10).

## **Programs**

According to the 2009 Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) annual report, there are 107 local adult education programs in the statewide Maine Adult Education system. Of those, 47 programs receive funding through the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) and are required to report their activity and outcomes through the National Reporting System (NRS) because of this federal support. Maine adult education program offerings include high-school completion, literacy and family literacy, college transitions, business and skills training, and personal enrichment. Funding for the programs comes from a variety of sources, including federal, state, local municipality, and grant monies, as well as income from course fees (Maine Adult Education Association, 2010).

## **Teachers**

In order to teach credit-bearing courses in adult education diploma and GED programs in Maine, an ABE teacher must be a certified teacher and have a state-issued “Adult Education Teacher” endorsement on her or his teacher certificate. To be eligible for this endorsement, teachers must meet basic eligibility requirements, which include: an earned bachelor’s degree from an accredited institution; completion of a minimum of 24 semester hours in areas relevant to the content area being taught; and passing the Basic Skills Test in reading, writing, and mathematics, in accordance with the Maine Department of Education’s Regulation 13 (Maine Department of Education, 2011).

Working conditions for ABE teachers in Maine appear to reflect overall trends in the ABE field. In program year 2009-2010, for instance, 92% (534) of the 580 ABE teachers in Maine worked part-time. This indicates that the teacher-participants in this study are

not typical of the Maine ABE teacher workforce, as only 30% of the sample (3 teachers) worked part-time. This could be the result of full-time teachers having more time and resources to attend professional development offerings—since participants in this study had to have attended *Learning to Achieve* training to be included in this study—or an indication that full-time ABE teachers are invested in their teaching career differently than part-time teachers are and value research that serves their profession.

Another important variable affecting the Maine ABE workforce is the inconsistent availability of timely and relevant professional development opportunities. After a state budget cut in 2008, the state adult education professional development contract held by the Center for Adult Learning and Literacy (CALL) was defunded. CALL was a structured professional development system run by the University of Southern Maine, and its mission was to plan and organize professional development activities for Maine ABE teachers, coordinating such initiatives as statewide STAR (Student Achievement in Reading) trainings. After CALL lost funding, this level of attention to professional development for ABE teachers ceased until recently, when a new source of funding was used to develop a contract with a Professional Development Coordinator through the state office. This Coordinator will work with data from a new Professional Development Needs Assessment and Program Planning process that all AEFLA-funded programs have been required to submit, to develop opportunities based on needs identified by programs (Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2009).

### **Learners**

According to statistics compiled by the U.S. Department of Education-Office of Vocational and Adult Education, more than half of the individuals who attended Maine

ABE programs in the 2009-2010 program year were young adults in the 19-44 age range, and the overwhelming majority was white. Additional defining characteristics of Maine's adult education program participants are outlined in Table 2; these data include participants in Adult Secondary Education and English-as-a-Second Language programs, in addition to those in ABE programs.

Table 2: Maine Adult Education Participants' Status on Entry into the Program

<b>Participant Status on Entry into the Program</b>	<b>Number</b>
Disabled	316
Employed	2,101
Unemployed	4,736
Not in the Labor Force	1,767
On Public Assistance	2,294
Living in Rural Areas	6,221
<b>Program Type</b>	
In Family Literacy Programs**	41
In Workplace Literacy Programs**	21
In Programs for the Homeless**	0
In Programs for Work-based Project Learners**	0
<b>Institutional Programs</b>	
In Correctional Facilities	756
In Community Correctional Programs	20
In Other Institutional Settings	60
<b>Secondary Status Measures (Optional)</b>	
Low Income	1,419
Displaced Homemaker	19
Single Parent	742
Dislocated Worker	342
Learning Disabled Adults	349

**Notes:**

\*Rural areas are places of less than 2,500 inhabitants and outside urbanized areas.

\*\*Participants counted here must be in program specifically designed for that

purpose.  
 CHART FROM--  
<http://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OVAE/NRS/tables/view.cfm?state=ME&year=2009&tableID=9>

The demographic data that describe students in Maine's ABE programs highlight the multiple socioeconomic factors that affect students' lives and learning and demonstrate the number of variables that ABE teachers must consider in their approach to teaching this student population.

### **Research Design and Methods of Data Collection**

Interviews are a primary method used in qualitative research, and individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection method in this study.

Additional descriptive data about each participant were collected with a "Demographic Data Sheet" (Appendix B) completed by the participant prior to the individual interview.

In order to determine the appropriate method to gather data in this study, the researcher investigated the potential fit of the interview method in terms of its inherent strengths, variety of styles and the role of the researcher in the interview process.

The purpose and strengths of the interview as a data-gathering tool supported its use in this interpretivist/constructivist study. Interviews provide an opportunity to explore an issue in depth (Johnson, 2001; Law, Stewart, Letts, Pollock, Bosch, & Westmorland, 1998) and are well suited to studies like this one in which the researcher has "an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). In this study it was important for the researcher to have extended time with each participant to allow them to process questions and reflect on their teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties, so individual interviews were used to gather those data.

There are many formats for interviews, and a “semi-structured approach” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006) was chosen for the in-depth interviews used in this study. Semi-structured interviews align well with the interpretivist/constructivist approach in several ways, namely that development of rapport between the researcher and participant is expected, and semi-structured interviews include open-ended questions that allow participants to respond in their own words, thereby privileging the voice of the participants. Pre-written questions are typically used, but deviations from these are encouraged and accepted to purposely enable new views to enter the data. When conducted in qualitative studies using the interpretivist/constructivist approach, a semi-structured interview ensures a collaborative process that results in rich meaning-making (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

The demands on the interviewer in an interpretivist/constructivist study are described succinctly by Rubin and Rubin (2005): expect individuals to have unique views of experiences and to make meaning of those experiences in their own way; try to elicit the interviewees’ view of their worlds, work, and events they have experienced or observed; and look for specific and detailed information to “build an understanding based on those specifics” (p. 28). To meet these three demands in this study, individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method best suited to highlight ABE teachers’ voices and perspectives as they described their practice with students who have learning difficulties.

To provide direction for the semi-structured interviews used in this study, an “Interview Guide” (Appendix C) was created with questions composed from review of the literature on adults with learning difficulties/disabilities in ABE programs and based

upon the researcher's experience teaching and doing fieldwork in ABE programs. These questions were tested in the pilot study (Spear, 2010) that preceded this research.

Creswell's (2008) advice was heeded in developing the draft interview questions for the pilot study, as he recommends using only five open-ended questions in a qualitative interview protocol. Posing only a small number of questions allows the participant "maximum flexibility" (Creswell, 2008, p. 233) in responding, and ensures that the participant does most all of the talking during the interview. As a means to test the draft interview questions, the pilot study interviews were effective in engendering discussion between the three participants and the researcher about the questions. On two occasions during the interviews, participants first responded, "That's a good question" when asked questions one and three. Discussions about the terms used in the questions were also informative, as one participant suggested to the researcher the importance of including "native English speakers" in the questions in order to focus participants on responding solely about that population. Another participant stated a preference for use of the term "learning difficulties" rather than "learning disabilities" when discussing the population of ABE learners, especially following the recent endorsement of that term by the National Institute for Literacy. This feedback from the pilot study participants informed the review and revision of the original interview questions by the researcher and the dissertation committee after the pilot study was completed. The revision resulted in seven questions comprising the Interview Guide for this dissertation research.

The pilot study (Spear, 2010) that informed this dissertation research addressed the same central research question—*How do adult basic education teachers describe their teaching practice with adults who have learning difficulties?*—for the dual purposes of



testing the effectiveness of the interview method and the draft interview questions in answering this research question and exploring themes that emerged about the topic in order to inform the design of this dissertation research. However the pilot study was conducted with a different population of ABE teachers: the three participants were white women, with an age range of 48 to 62, and teaching experience in ABE programs ranging from 12 to 30 years. Two of the participants had bachelor's level training as teachers, and one had both bachelor's and master's degrees in social work. All were certified teachers in the state of Maine; two held full-time, benefited positions in their respective ABE programs, and one was partially retired, continuing to work as a consultant to her former program. Teachers at this level of experience were purposely selected for the pilot study, since adult basic education teachers with at least 7 to 10 years of experience teaching in ABE programs would have worked in the field during a time of heightened recognition of the prevalence and needs of adult learners with learning disabilities in those programs. They would have been teaching in 2003, for instance, when the National Institute for Literacy introduced the *Bridges to Practice* (Sherman, 2003) teacher training initiative to the field; and in 2009 when *Learning to Achieve* provided updated training based upon new research specific to learning disabilities in the adult population.

The results of the pilot study confirmed that the interview was the best method to elicit the data that answered the research question and that revision of the interview questions was indicated, as described above. However, the pilot study did not provide compelling direction for determining the best group of ABE teachers to engage for the larger dissertation study. It was clear that very experienced teachers had much to offer to the discourse on adults with learning disabilities, but exactly because of the years of

experience they had in the ABE field, these veteran teachers had a lot to offer on most any topic related to practice in ABE programs. The researcher considered other defining variables, such as geographic location or size of the ABE program the teachers were affiliated with, but these factors did not connect in discernible ways to the topic of adults with learning disabilities. The question of population for this dissertation research became a burning one, discussed at length with faculty, peers, committee, and other mentors. Then serendipitously, while presenting the results of the pilot study at the Maine Adult Education Association's (MAEA) annual conference, this researcher met two ABE teachers who were trained in special education and had worked as special education teachers in the K-12 system prior to teaching in ABE programs. Their unique perspectives on teaching adults with learning disabilities seemed to fit well with the focus of this research, so the researcher proposed the idea of trying to solicit ten such ABE teachers to interview for the study. Dissertation committee members were in agreement with this plan, and the researcher then contacted both the Maine state Adult Education director, and MAEA's executive director for assistance in finding ABE teachers in the state who met these criteria. MAEA's executive director alerted ABE programs statewide to this request, but within weeks it was clear that ten ABE teachers with training or background in special education either did not exist in Maine, or if they did they were not interested in participating in the research, so a different population of ABE teachers would be needed to address the research question. In discussing this dilemma with the dissertation committee, the researcher mentioned another group of ABE teachers with connections to the topic of adult learning disabilities—the participants from the *Learning to Achieve* trainings she had facilitated throughout the southern half of the state that year.

The ABE teacher-attendees were not mandated to attend *Learning to Achieve*, and most seemed genuinely interested in the topic of adult learning disabilities and how to improve their skills in teaching adults with any learning challenges. In fact while facilitating the trainings, this researcher noted how readily the teachers embraced the opportunity to discuss their students' struggles in the ABE classroom, and to learn about ways to change their teaching practice to address those challenges. The dissertation committee agreed that this was a viable group of potential participants to recruit, so the researcher reviewed the attendance lists from the eight trainings she facilitated, highlighting the names of attendees who endorsed that they were either an ABE teacher or instructor. Thirty-six potential participants for the study were identified this way, and the researcher used the contact information on the attendance lists from the *Learning to Achieve* trainings to email a recruitment letter (Appendix D) to all 36 of them directly, requesting their participation in the study. Ten ABE teachers responded that they were willing to participate, and were included in the research.

After participants agreed to be interviewed and the time and place of the interview was scheduled, the researcher sent them the Demographic Data Sheet (Appendix B) to complete and return, as well as a copy of the interview questions to review in advance of the interview. Before beginning the interview, participants reviewed and signed the IRB Consent Form (Appendix E) and were given a copy of this to keep. During November and December of 2010 all ten study participants were interviewed by the researcher individually, face-to-face, in a location of their choice, using a semi-structured interview format. The interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to almost two hours, and participants were asked if they would be willing to review the transcript from their

interview for accuracy; all ten agreed to do this. Participants were compensated with a bookstore gift card upon completion of the interview.

### **Analysis and Synthesis of Data**

Analyzing the data collected in this research study began with organizing and preparing the data for analysis. Within 24 hours of completing each interview, the researcher transcribed each audiotape verbatim; this was done intentionally to provide the researcher with an additional opportunity to immerse in the data. When each transcript was complete, the researcher emailed it to the participant for her/his review. All ten participants endorsed the transcript as an accurate representation of their interview with the researcher.

The process of data analysis continued as the researcher read through all ten transcripts twice; the first read was used to record notable details about the process and content of each individual interview and to get a feel for the participants' individual stories and the transcripts as a whole. These notes were kept in the researcher's research journal. The researcher then devised a "Coding Scheme/Analysis Development Chart" (see Appendix F) to track the ensuing coding and analysis process that was updated throughout the study.

In order to extract the themes from the data to answer the central research question regarding how ABE teachers described their practice, the researcher chose to use a "template approach" (Crabtree & Miller, 1992, p. 18) during the second read of the data. In the template approach, the researcher applies her "template," or ideas constructed from prior knowledge and experience of the research topic, to the data in order to focus the

search for themes. This is a purposefully iterative process, which allows for alterations and modifications during analysis that lead to “an explanatory framework consistent with the text” (p. 20). During the second read of the transcripts, the earliest thematic categories emerged:

- identity/role as an ABE teacher
- influence of how the teachers themselves were taught
- taking the mystery out of students’ learning
- amount of time necessary for ABE student to get a high-school credential
- student outcomes
- frustration with ABE systems issues

These themes were used to construct primary codes after the second read of the data; Miles and Huberman (1994) called this a “mid-range accounting scheme” (p. 61) that falls between *a priori* and inductive coding. These preliminary codes—which comprised the researcher’s education and experience in the field, review of the research and literature of the field, and results of the pilot study that informed this research—served as categorizing containers for data while remaining flexible and available for change as the analysis proceeded.

The coding process continued with the six-step coding procedure for qualitative data outlined in Creswell (2008). To begin that process, the transcripts were reviewed a third time to compile Data Summary Tables (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) (Appendix G) that aggregated all of the participants’ responses to each interview question. Using details

gathered from the Data Summary Tables, the researcher refined and added to the initial thematic categories and used the following codes to begin coding the transcripts:

- student outcomes
- individual approach
- referencing their own education
- professional development
- identifying learning difficulties
- student readiness
- socioeconomic issues

Poster boards were created that had each of these codes as a heading; the coding process then involved reading each transcript to identify and highlight “text segments” (Creswell, 2008, p. 251) that related to the identified codes, and these were manually cut from copies of the transcripts and pasted to the appropriate poster board. This process resulted in another change in codes as the student readiness category was dropped and the following codes were added:

- special education
- teaching kids and adults the same
- teaching methods, and teacher identity/role

The resulting 10 categories were reviewed at length, and then collapsed into the 5 major themes that represented the issues discussed most frequently by the participants and that had the most evidence to support them. These were:

- identification of learning difficulties
- methods of teaching
- student outcomes
- professional development
- teacher identity and role

At this point, the researcher secured three external reviewers to provide peer review of transcripts. Three reviewers who were familiar with the researcher's work were each sent the same transcript and the code definition sheet and asked to test the researcher's initial codes. Across the three reviewers, the coding was found to be consistent. The reviewers all had suggestions about managing the description of the teacher's role, and these were discussed in light of the overall data. Finally, the researcher discussed the evolving themes and conceptual framework for the study with the dissertation committee, and from this reworked the themes into four major categories that responded to the research questions:

- teacher identity and role
- teachers' methods of identification of their student's learning difficulties
- teaching methods
- ABE systems issues

These four themes were used to proceed with the analysis and interpretation of the data in this study.

A set of Data Summary Charts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) (see Appendix H) was created to track the frequency of participants' responses to the four major categories of

the conceptual framework and their sub-themes. This set of charts was used to illuminate how the data responded to the research questions and to formulate findings statements that aligned with each research question in the study. The following three analytic categories emerged from the findings:

1. ABE teachers described their teaching practice with adults who have learning difficulties by talking about the people, tasks, and environments involved in ABE programs.
2. ABE teachers noted the influence of professional development on ABE teaching practice. (Research Question 2)
3. ABE teachers described the additional resources that would support effective ABE teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties. (Research Question 3)

These categories were processed through an “Interpretation Outline Tool” (see Appendix I), devised by the researcher as a method of brainstorming and thinking critically about the findings to ensure thorough interpretation of the data as suggested by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008). However, as analysis progressed toward interpretation, the researcher determined that the second and third analytic categories could be collapsed into the first one, as professional development and additional resources were identified as functions of the ABE environment. The researcher proceeded with interpreting the data using only analytic category 1 to organize the discussion, which integrated her knowledge of the topic, the voices of the participants, and the salient literature.



### **Ethical Considerations**

According to Creswell (2007), the perspectives that shape the design and procedures of an interpretivist research study also drive the ethical considerations that must be addressed by the researcher. Given that participants in interpretivist studies often comprise marginalized groups, researchers must engage in all aspects of the research with an approach that intentionally responds to the inherent power differential. This includes maintaining respect for the participants and sites involved in the research and “giving to or paying back those who participate in the research” (Creswell, 2007, p. 25).

Although no ethical threats to participants were anticipated during this study, several measures were taken to ensure their protection. Participants engaged in the study on a strictly voluntary basis and signed an informed consent prior to participating in the research interview. The researcher maintained confidentiality of participant information by locking research-related records and materials where only the researcher had access, and by using pseudonyms in reporting the data. Because the ABE community in Maine is relatively small and tightly knit, only general information was provided about the ABE programs and locations in which the participants worked to protect their identities.

### **Trustworthiness and Limitations of the Study**

Methods and strategies meant to maintain the rigor and trustworthiness of this study were embedded throughout the research process. This began with the researcher reflecting on and clarifying her bias, as recommended by Creswell (2007) and outlined in chapter one of this dissertation. Methodological validity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) was ensured by the choice of semi-structured interview as the data collection tool for this

study; this type of interview is known to provide reliable, comparable, qualitative data when used across a number of participants (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Seidman, 2006), and so it was purposely chosen to address this research question that asked ABE teachers to describe their practice. The pilot study conducted prior to this research also contributed to the rigor of this study, as the interview questions were tested and revised on the basis of the feedback from pilot study participants.

The researcher employed several methods to enhance the reliability of the research data, starting with transcribing all ten interview transcripts herself. In addition, member checking was performed in which participants reviewed the completed transcript of their interview and reported back to the researcher whether they thought it was an accurate representation of the interview. The researcher also engaged three peers to test her initial codes on the same transcript as a means of “inter-rater reliability” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 75).

Data collection and analysis in this study were enacted as an iterative process, as this is thought to demonstrate the “essence of attaining reliability and validity” (Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002, p. 12). From notes taken in the first few interviews, the researcher identified both expected and unexpected themes and was able to use this data to inform questions and feedback used in subsequent interviews. Transferability of research findings was supported by use of thick, detailed descriptions of the participants and their contexts, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the research in other settings (Creswell, 2007).

## Limitations

Qualitative interviews—the sole method of data collection in this study—have limitations as data collection tools. Limitations specific to this study included the subjectivity and bias related to the researcher’s role and position within the ABE field in Maine. At the time of this study, the researcher was a non-ABE teacher studying the practice of ABE teachers, so there were obvious limits to the researcher’s understanding of the participants’ experiences. At the same time, a possible advantage to being a relative outsider in this small ABE community in Maine is that participants may have felt more comfortable and perceived less risk in discussing their teaching practice with the researcher than they might have if she had been associated with a particular program or with the state Adult Education department. Also, only *Learning to Achieve* attendees who had participated in trainings facilitated by this researcher were solicited for the study. It is possible that they agreed to participate because of this prior—though very brief—relationship and that they provided responses they thought would be helpful to the researcher. To guard against consequences from these possible limitations, the researcher named and acknowledged them to each participant, and openly claimed her assumptions so that participants would be aware of them prior to engaging in the research interview. In addition, because of the small sample size and the demographic characteristics of the participants in this study, this research does not represent fully the views of ABE teachers who are male, who work part-time in ABE, who live in the northern half of the state of Maine or out of state, or who have not had specific training in adult learning disabilities.

### Summary

The interpretivist/constructivist research paradigm provided a lens through which this study explored the teaching practice of ten ABE teachers, as they worked with adults with learning difficulties. In the interest of contributing the teachers' voices to the discourse on this topic, this framework guided both the selection of data collection method and the conduct of the relationship between the researcher and the participants in this study.

The importance of the teacher's role in supporting adults with learning difficulties to find success in ABE programs demands that the ABE field focus on providing its teachers with what they need to effectively teach these learners. Seeking teachers' input about what they need is a necessary step in this process. Therefore, this study used in-depth qualitative interviews to gather ABE teachers' perceptions of their current practice in order to identify their needs in teaching adult learners with learning difficulties and to recommend ways to close the gap between ABE students' needs and ABE teachers' skills.

## CHAPTER 4: Presentation of Findings

The purpose of this study was to gather ABE teachers' perspectives about their teaching practice with students who have learning difficulties. Adding teachers' voices to the discourse on this topic will identify what teachers perceive they need to best serve this population of ABE learners, as well as allow for richer discussion of teaching and learning in ABE programs. This chapter provides detailed descriptions of the three major findings produced from the ten in-depth interviews:

1. All ten participants described their teaching practice with adults who have learning difficulties with responses that reflected the following four themes:
  - a. How they identified students' learning difficulties
  - b. Their perceived role and identity as an ABE teacher
  - c. The specific teaching methods they used with students in the ABE classroom
  - d. ABE system issues that affected their teaching practice
2. The overwhelming majority (9 out of 10) of participants discussed the importance of professional development opportunities in promoting ABE teachers' ability to work effectively with adults with learning difficulties in ABE programs.
3. All ten participants cited one or more teaching practices or additional resources that would better support teaching and learning in ABE programs.

To highlight the voices of the participants in this study and provide explicit detail and rich context about the topic, the following discussions of each finding emphasize the

actual words of the research participants. Pseudonyms are used to preserve their anonymity.

**Finding #1: All ten participants described their teaching practice with adults who have learning difficulties with responses that reflected four themes: how they identified their students' learning difficulties; their perceived role and identity as an ABE teacher; the specific teaching methods they used with students in the ABE classroom; and ABE system issues that affected their practice.**

### **Identifying Students' Learning Difficulties**

The most robust finding in this study, both in terms of frequency and in the way it connected all three research questions, was that all ten participants described how they identified their students' unique learning strengths, challenges, and needs, and how this knowledge informed their teaching practice in ABE programs. This finding is significant in that all participants acknowledged that they could identify specific markers or patterns in their students' presentation and/or performance in the classroom that suggested a learning difficulty to them. These included the students' pace of learning, as Kate noted, "...when we start a new lesson and we're learning new material, one student learns it very quickly and the other student takes a little bit longer." Participants also cited students' lack of foundational content skills as an indication of a learning difficulty; for instance Jane noted, "...if someone has an alphabetic issue, you can see it in their spelling." Other participants concurred:

...when it's just a chronic case of rambling with basically no punctuation, no sense of what a sentence is at all. (Pam)

You know, when we're doing [parts of speech] on the board, we're fine, we're getting it; then give him something and say "identify it," and he gets 20% of it...so I know it's a learning disability. (Carol)

Participants varied in their expressed need to label or clarify the learning difficulty in order to proceed with teaching. For some, the frustration of not knowing if a student had a diagnosed learning disability was obvious:

...in adult ed nobody comes to me with an identified difficulty or disability, and technically that's a complaint I have. (Carol)

...it becomes evident early on when they're doing their math that there is a learning issue. And you know it's a crapshoot as far as figuring out what it is. (Jim)

At the same time, other participants did not report a need to know about a diagnosis; for instance Deb stated, "In terms of diagnosis...I try to take them where they're at, and then give them whatever cushion they need to get to the point where some of the others are."

Theresa and Angela corroborated:

I'm not sure where I am on that, I don't feel in many cases that I need that identification because even if you give me a piece of paper and say, 'this, this, and this,' I don't always think that it's going to help me a lot, because I feel like I have to find what's going to work with the person, you know? (Theresa)

Because I'm not a special ed [teacher], that wasn't my specialty when I went for education...and I find it very interesting, the students that I deal with, because I can have a student who scores very highly in reading comprehension and cannot write a sentence. (Angela)

In relating the characteristics of their students, the majority of participants (7 of 10) noted that variables like students' personal traits or socioeconomic factors were often mistaken for learning difficulties, thereby influencing their approach to teaching in ABE programs. Anne and Ashley both described how personal issues—those from the past and in the present—influence the adult learner in the ABE classroom:

Many of the students, not all, but many had multiple challenges in their personal lives including poverty, dysfunctional families...lots of challenges. (Anne)

So what's going on in their lives plays a huge factor in any type of learning; whether they can even focus on what's going on in the classroom, if they have things that are on the back of their mind from home or job situation or family, anything... (Ashley)

Deb and Jane worked with ABE students whose early access to foundational academic skills was limited by their low socioeconomic status:

...and where I teach Algebra 1, a lot of "learning disability" is lack of access. They never had Algebra in high school, they never had any access to Algebra in high school...it's a big word. It was one of those things that other kids took that they were never part of... (Deb)

I think you can have a low-level learner, and they don't necessarily have a difficulty. But they've not had the right supports in place, they've not been engaged in their school, their parent hasn't been engaged in school, so they hate reading. They never read a book, they may be reading at the fifth-grade level when I get them...it's not a disability, they had the ability, they just didn't have the right things; it's a low socioeconomic issue—not going to school, moving around a lot... (Jane)

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 banned discrimination in educational settings based on disability, which means that ABE teachers are not able to directly ask a



student about learning difficulties or past involvement in special education. Younger ABE students who had special education services in K-12 would have had Individual Education Programs (IEPs) written for them as required by the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act of 2004, but these and any other documentation of a learning disability diagnosis and/or accommodations specific to the student's needs typically do not follow students from K-12 to ABE programs. Seven of the ten participants expressed frustration regarding the inability to initiate discussion about this with their students, and the resultant lack of information:

You know, sometimes we wonder, obviously I'm not in a position to diagnose anyone; this is not a special education program... (Angela)

Well very often these students coming from the main school system have been assessed and have, I think they call them IEPs [Individual Education Program] or whatever? So they're fully aware of it. And getting them to share that information with us... I don't know where this rule comes down from the powers that be says we can't ask, but who's telling us we can't ask, and why can't we ask? (Jim)

I never got a[n educational] plan. I never have gotten a plan to date, in three years of teaching I have never gotten an IEP. If they're diploma students it's supposed to follow them and that's my complaint. (Carol)

However, four participants noted that in the course of both formal intake and informal assessment, ABE students often revealed past learning difficulties or diagnoses on their own; as Pam said, "they'll just tell you."

### **Participants' Perceived Role and Identity as an ABE Teacher**

Participants in this study described their practice with adults with learning difficulties in terms of what they perceived as the role of an ABE teacher and how that intersected

with their identity as a teacher to influence their approach in the classroom. Views on this ranged from providing job training: “So what is my job? How am I to train them? What am I training them for?” (Angela); to teaching foundational skills: “I’m teaching them academics” (Kate); to joining with the students around their life goals: “I want to know what their aspirations are and I plan my instruction around that” (Carol). However the most frequently discussed issue was student outcome, since eight of the ten participants saw what they did or didn’t do in their teaching as having a significant impact on the relative success of their students:

Sometimes I’m surprised at how low [their skills] are, and I’m thinking, how am I supposed to move them as far as I need to move them, in 14 classes [of one semester], because they are so low? And in some cases it worries me more that I’m not helping; I’m probably going to lower their self-esteem when they get the assignments and they can’t do it, or they do it and they get it back and it’s really bad. And I feel worse about that than anything. (Carol)

Because there have been students where they’ve worked really hard, they’re kind of borderline... I’m going to give them the 70 they need to get on and do something else. They may regret that I did that, when they get to something else. (Deb)

So I constantly try to find information or if I see information that I should work with a student on outside of class... I’m just constantly searching for ways to make sure that I’m meeting my students’ learning needs, because you don’t know until they take that GED...if I did my job. You kind of have ideas because they can take a pre-test, but I just worry about it every day. (Kate)

Participants also expressed concern about what happens to their students after participation in the ABE program:

I guess what I want to know is...where do these people fit in life—what can they do? I feel like once the factories closed, and we didn’t have a place for people

who... academics isn't their primary expression or intelligence...they've really lost some footholds in society. (Angela)

I guess the only thing that I would be curious about is what happens to some of these students that either disappeared before they reached their goal, whether it was GED or high-school credit, or whatever; or if they did reach their goal, where did they go from there? (Jim)

Now they're losing those jobs that they could do, you know—work in the woods, work in the factory, or whatever and they can't find a job to replace that; those are the ones I really worry about. They have nowhere to go.... (Theresa)

Two participants also discussed how their role as ABE teacher was inextricably tied to the results of their students' experiences in the K-12 system, i.e. students who got through twelfth grade—and even got a diploma—without achieving grade-level skills so that they had to remediate through ABE:

...and so I am just frustrated with the K-12 situation here, because I think that I see so many people with reading issues. And it really makes me sad that somebody gets to eleventh grade and they're reading at the fifth grade level; why isn't more being done? (Jane)

I hear so much from my students, "They just pushed me on, I didn't understand but they just pushed me on,"—that's the way our system is set up. Because we don't teach to mastery; we teach to something that's passing. Well, passing is not mastery. (Theresa)

For these participants, ABE student outcomes were undeniably connected to the teaching practice of the ABE teacher. And in most cases, that practice explicitly reflected how the teachers themselves had been taught; 7 out of 10 participants described referencing their own formal educational experience when they were unsure how to

proceed in teaching adults with learning difficulties in ABE programs. Kate, for instance, recounted a conversation with the professor in the Literacy class she was taking, about the use of content mapping for teaching writing “and I told her that’s the only way I’ve ever learned it, and that’s the way that I teach it, because I teach what I’ve learned.”

Theresa’s experience was similar, as she described how she decided on a method to teach reading:

...and I can also take that and go back and look at my own reading experience as a student and say, you know, we had basal readers...there was the alphabetic component, we had to read out loud even though we didn’t like that, you know, they taught us how to read out loud—you’re supposed to use expression, you’re supposed to stop at the period, etcetera. We had vocabulary development, we had comprehension questions to do, you know?

Conversely, Ashley recounted her difficulty teaching math at levels far lower than her own skill level in the subject:

...because I love math, and I love working with it, some of the concepts I had such a hard time thinking about; like not necessarily dumbing myself down, but thinking about it in a different way that I hadn’t learned. So I was set in my ways; I was like—this is the way I learned it, and trying to learn it in a different way was very, very hard.

Participants relied on their own educational experiences to guide their teaching practice, but it was not clear if they used those methods because they thought they were effective for their students, or if they defaulted to what was known to them in the absence of other structure or guidance in their work with adults with learning difficulties.

Learning how to be an ABE teacher while on the job was a common experience for a majority (7 out of 10) of participants. However, since participants in this study have been

in the ABE field from 1.5 to 15 years, the way they described what they'd learned from their experience varied a great deal. For instance Angela, an ABE teacher with 2 years experience, described her response after she began to appreciate the speed at which her students appeared to acquire new skills, "We're going to keep persisting with these skills slowly, very slowly; I had to learn the pace people can go at, that's another thing..."

Kate, also a newcomer to teaching at 1.5 years in ABE, clearly struggled to feel confident about what she knew:

...and even compared to last year, I know a lot more this year, but that's when I get worried, because I'm like, am I teaching them the right thing here?

However with both pre-service training as a special education teacher and 12 years of ABE teaching experience, Theresa described succinctly the flexible approach that guided her teaching practice: "My motto is: whatever works!"

Finally, seven participants described their perceived role and identity as an ABE teacher in terms of the importance of their relationship with students. Several participants described that relationship as foundational; for instance Angela immediately identified it as a teaching method, "Well, like I said, I mean I learned that the most important tool is your relationship with that student." Jane and Anne both cited the intake and assessment process as the critical starting point of a viable working relationship:

The first time I meet them is just for me to get to know them, and I never waver from that, I never will [laughing]. I believe that's really important to create a relationship with somebody. I think you learn more from that than from the formal testing. And so it's a lot of trust-building, just getting to the 'What happened when you were in school? What did you like to do? What classes weren't your favorites?' So gathering some basic information... (Jane)

For the student, the most important part is the interview, because that is where they connect with me. So I have found it to be useful. And as I said, it breaks the ice for them, they're saying, "Oh, this person cares about what I have to say."  
(Anne)

Several other participants spoke to the ongoing benefits of developing relationships with their students:

I love, I love what I do, and I love teaching writing and I love my students, and I get all hyped up. So they tell me that because I'm all hyped up, they get hyped up.  
(Pam)

...but to be able to know that they're going somewhere with this, and they can call me anytime and ask questions, regardless of how long or recently it's been since they've been a student. And that I want them to have a good solid foundation, wherever it's going to take them. (Deb)

I have a kinship I guess, especially with women, but low socioeconomic...you know? I get where they're coming from and understand what's kind of happening and the chaotic lives and stuff like that. And I don't judge, I'm very supportive.  
(Jane)

Sometimes he'll just say to me, "I can't get it;" I mean, we have that relationship, you know? (Theresa)

Half (5 out of 10) of the participants also addressed the inherent power issues in the teacher-student relationship. The issue of power—who has it and how it is enacted—is clearly present in any teacher-student relationship, and ABE is no exception. From assigning grades on student work, to how and by whom the students' learning goals are determined, participants in this study grappled with how power played into their role as teacher:

And that's how some teachers are with the students, you know? They just put themselves up there and it creates barriers and makes for uncomfortable learning and so learning doesn't take place. (Jim, referring to K-12 teachers)

I just want them to take ownership. And something I realize as a teacher I need to work more on—I see their goals, and I have goals for them, right? But really they need to be setting their own goals. (Angela)

I don't have the power here, I want to give [the student] whatever information I have...and I show them copies of their IEPs that I've gotten from the school, and they're like, "I've never seen this." (Jane)

I think I realized that the more independent she could be, the more self-confidence she would have. And that in fact turned out to be true. (Anne)

The very first class I ever taught in adult ed, I failed a student. And she was a student I'd actually had when she was in middle school. And I hated that I failed her. Absolutely felt awful, because she was trying to get her diploma and she just wasn't bringing in work. (Carol)

### **Specific Teaching Methods Participants Use with Learners**

When asked to cite the teaching strategies or tools they used with ABE students who have learning difficulties, all participants readily listed methods they learned from their own educational experience, pre-service training or career experience, and trainings/workshops. These included using multiple ways to present material and assigning homework, as Ashley and Jane described:

We do one-on-one, graphic organizers, flash cards; we've been starting a math journal where they take their notes and I ask them questions about what we did during the day and they have to go home and write about it. (Ashley)

...and if you really want to improve your reading, you need to be reading at home. So one of the things we're going to start next semester is having reading logs, and providing reading material. (Jane)

Breaking down tasks into manageable parts was a key method that several participants used to ensure they were meeting students at the point of just-right challenge:

The first thing I want to do is make sure I'm using appropriate materials that aren't too hard. So I do have some scaffolded reading material that's fourth through sixth grade, then sixth through eighth grade, and I use what's appropriate. (Jane)

Simplify, simplify, simplify. As I said, I'm always overestimating what their understanding of fundamental concepts is...oh, and we write a lot of essays too, five-paragraph essays. But many people don't know the difference between the title and a sentence; they didn't know that a sentence requires a subject and verb, even if the subject is understood. So, things like that.... (Anne)

It would be nice if I knew if they'd had Algebra or didn't have Algebra or never heard of Algebra, but I just sort of take them where they're at and try to go as far as we can get. (Deb)

In addition to general teaching strategies, nearly all (9 of 10) participants also cited the use of direct and explicit instructional techniques as critical to teaching ABE learners.

Some participants had been trained in this style of instruction, while others figured out by trial-and-error that this was effective for their students with learning difficulties. As noted by participants, direct and explicit instruction involves the teacher using techniques that make the learning task transparent to the student and includes modeling the task, intentionally teaching critical thinking skills, revealing the metacognitive strategies to accomplish the task, and placing the learning task in a meaningful context for the student:

I use direct and explicit instruction. I try to do that no matter what I'm teaching, because I realize how important it is. It just stands to reason; there was some reason why they missed it the first time around, right? Their learning style is a little different. I think about anybody can learn from direct instruction. (Theresa)



We follow the ‘I do, we do, you do’ [technique] so I’m always modeling things first just to make sure, and then we do it all together. And that’s a process that creates a lot of comfort. (Anne)

I help them set up their essay; I help them outline it and plan it. And then read it aloud, have them read it aloud—the sentences to me. That’s about all I can think of. Help them set it up and organize it, and...spend a lot of time with them. (Pam)

...and to make it all transparent by saying to our students, “this isn’t mysterious,” you know? That thinking-aloud piece that’s emphasized in the Student Achievement in Reading (STAR) program; I let them know this is how the mind of someone who’s a good reader works. There’s no magic or mystery to how it’s done. (Anne)

We do a lot of critical thinking skills because that’s what’s needed on the GED, like cause and effect, drawing conclusions; so building their reading but also building their critical thinking skills. (Jane)

Situating the learning in the context of daily life seemed especially important to two of the math teachers, who clearly noted their explicit use of context in teaching math; Jim said, “I try to model the behavior...and so you explain how it does fit into everyday life.” Deb also found that she could engage students more effectively when the learning task had real-life meaning:

I always bring it back to the checkbook; we hope that none of them has to deal with negative numbers in terms of the checkbook, so that’s usually where we start with the positive and negative numbers.

In order to meet each student’s unique learning needs, eight participants reported that they “differentiated” their teaching methods by focusing on the techniques or strategies that resonated with each student’s learning style:

A couple of years ago I had a woman who would tell me, “I have anxiety, and tonight is one of those nights that it’s in really bad shape and so I can’t concentrate on this.” And I said, “Can you do one of these instead of the six I just assigned to people?” She said, “OK, I’ll do the one.” (Deb)

And so when I said to do a rough draft of his essay, he just went off and did this massive web design. And I said, OK, must remember—do more web things for him because that’s what he’s going to...that obviously works with his mind and the way he works. (Carol)

But when I’m working with the slower students, I give the faster students another assignment to work on, so they get additional work. For example, I have them write, do a free write, or I have them work in a workbook; I have them help the slower learner to understand and in their language describe it, so that the faster learner is actually teaching the slower learner. (Kate)

Most participants agreed that ABE students benefited from increased amounts of individual teaching time, whether that was with them or with a tutor. Carol described spending time at the beginning of a new class learning each student’s goals so she could be sure to individualize her approach:

If I’ve got students who are looking at getting into college and doing nursing, then I’m going to try and direct my lesson towards them; when I’m teaching something about grammar, I may say, when you’re in nursing you’re going to have to write up medical reports. So you really need to focus on this kind of language. If I’ve got somebody else who’s going to want to go to college, I’ll say well you need to write a college essay to get into college, so we’re looking at that; if you’re looking at a job, you need to write a business letter. You need to be able to fill out forms. I try and direct it a little bit, so that it hits them specific and I can draw them into what I’m teaching.

Other ways participants used an individual approach with students included:

They just need a lot of one-on-one. I do a one-on-one anyway in my classes, I mean I go over papers individually. I think an hour of one-on-one can’t even equal ten classes in a group. (Pam)

And even though the classroom size is small, which is a benefit, that still doesn't negate the amount of time that I need to spend with each student in order to help them see some improvement on an individual basis. It has to be individualized instruction within the four hours I see them every week. (Angela)

But I think for the people that it makes sense to provide one-on-one...if someone's not ready to be in a class, if we can bring them up and transition them to a class; because I deal with a lot of students who have anxiety and don't want to be in a class, so we help transition them. I believe in the beauty of a class, I think the way you learn from each other is awesome, but I recognize that not everybody is ready for that. (Jane)

At the same time, Angela described the challenge of students' need for individual attention in terms of her limited availability to provide it for one particular student: "He really needs one-on-one instruction, so a lot of times he ends up in the classroom without anything to do because I'm working with some other individual. And I don't like that."

Nearly half (4 of 10) of the participants recognized similarities and differences in teaching adults and children. For instance, Ashley found that her undergraduate degree in elementary teaching was useful when she applied for certification as an adult education teacher:

When I went to get certified for adult ed they said because you are teaching the elementary level to a lot of them, they allowed my 24 math credits even though they weren't high-school level, for my adult ed certification.

Angela described her difficulty finding age-appropriate teaching materials geared to her students' level:

I do find it challenging as far as finding literature that we can read that is...a lot of it is teen-aged, because it's young adult literature; so I wish there was somebody writing adult literature that was a little more geared toward my ABE students.

Deb, who teaches math in ABE part-time in addition to her full-time position teaching in a K-12 special education program, highlighted the crossover she recognizes in working with these two student populations:

Those two jobs have really melded well for me, and I use the tools that I use in my day school in my night school, and vice versa. I have a kid during one of my classes now who says, “This is just so much easier when you say it...” I say, “Well, I’ve had 25 years of doing it, and the things that my adults have taught me, I’m bringing to you, and the things that you guys are teaching me I’m bringing them to my adults.” It’s the same subject matter, and I’ll have an adult who’ll say something, “Oh, I hadn’t thought about it that way,” and so I’ll use it with the kids, and it’s like, “Oh, it’s so much easier!” And so they really...the pieces that I get from the adults I pass off on the kids.

Though only a few (3 of 10) participants mentioned it, teacher intuition and trial-and-error problem-solving also played a role in determining teaching methods to use:

It’s like a fishing expedition too sometimes; you throw things out there and see what it catches, and if it works then you use it more frequently, and if it doesn’t, move on. (Carol)

I think we still try to, we treat everybody individually, so if this isn’t working for them, we try something else, and I think it’s just a matter of practice...I don’t even know if I realize I’m doing it? (Jane)

I just follow my gut, I don’t have a strategy, really [laughing]! (Pam)

### **ABE System Issues that Affect Participants’ Teaching Practice**

At the same time that they identified factors about themselves and their students that affected their teaching practice in ABE programs, participants also described issues within the larger ABE system that affected their day-to-day practice in more removed, yet critical ways. For instance, seven of the ten participants described the relative utility of

the formal assessments their programs required them to use with students. In Maine, administration of the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) test to incoming ABE students is required in programs that receive federal funding, and test results must be submitted to the National Reporting System (NRS). Participants in this study had varying views on the usefulness of the CASAS for goal-setting and curriculum planning; Kate, for instance, did not see a connection between the CASAS and her classroom practice:

The formal method, the CASAS, I don't really feel like it's a great help as far as academics go. The reason why is because it's more real-life situations, like how to read an advertisement, how to look at a piece of information about an apartment for rent, you know what I mean? Directions, stuff like that, but that's not necessarily what I'm teaching. I'm teaching them academic skills, like I said before, so...

Angela, too, reported that the CASAS results were not useful in determining students' learning needs: "So I don't see the CASAS disappearing anytime soon, but it is not helpful for getting at specifically what the issues are behind the student's difficulties."

Other participants, though, saw the CASAS as a beginning way to plan for further assessment and to understand their students' needs:

And then she [intake coordinator] brings that information to me; obviously they're in need of math, and the CASAS doesn't help me a lot, because it's based on workplace math skills—you know, ready for the workplace, and so it's not grade-level based, it's not material based, it really doesn't show a whole lot, but it's a starting point. And just through my experience, the number that comes out of the CASAS gives me an idea on which of my assessments that I use, to give them when they start with me. (Jim)

We use an appraisal test to determine which CASAS level to give, you know, roughly, and then that gives you a scaled score, it gives you an idea of what people's weaknesses and strengths are...yes, that's the part that's required. The

piece that I do because I'm a STAR-trained instructor, is I do an interview also based on interests, based on how the student perceives themselves as a learner; these are adults, so they have some insights about all of that. So they're equally important. (Anne)

Seven participants also addressed the current service models used to deliver ABE programming as a factor in their teaching practice; both how they carry that out and how effective it is:

There needs to be intensity. Just like we're giving intensity to ESL people, or whatever, why aren't we providing this intensity to people who read at the fifth-grade level but cognitively could, one day, get a diploma? We need to be focusing on those people and we're not. And an hour and a half twice a week doesn't cut it. (Jane)

Despite the overwhelming support among teachers for providing intensive individual attention to students, Ashley reported that her program switched back to doing group classes from having exclusively individual lab time to accommodate burgeoning attendance at her program:

I think more group settings have really started working for our students. We've done classes, because we were—all day long—an open lab. And everybody was working on something different. And it was very hard getting to each person individually, to see how they were doing, what they were working on, and that one-on-one time that they needed.

As a way to maximize the amount of individual attention struggling students received,

Theresa reported that her program leveraged the availability of volunteer tutors:

We're really fortunate; we have Literacy Volunteers right in our building. So what we do, if we get someone at EFL [educational functional level] 1 or 2 that needs a lot of attention, we're asking [tutors] to deal with them. It's better, because you know some of the folks that are at that level need the one-on-one, they oftentimes aren't reliable about showing up; with a tutor instead of taking up my class time, it works out better.

Half of the participants in this study noted the effect of the “working conditions” in the ABE field on their teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties. Although seven of the 10 participants were working full-time in their programs at the time of this study, they indicated nonetheless that this was a rarity in the field. Theresa reported, “I’m full-time and I have benefits; that’s really unusual.” She also theorized that lack of full-time work contributed to turnover in the ABE workforce, “you’ve got a lot of good people working, but they can’t stay, necessarily, because they’ve got to earn money.” Anne, whose full-time work comprises part-time positions in three different ABE programs, agreed, to a point:

I think a lot of other people, even though I said that wouldn’t interest me, a lot of other people do feel that it’s a real limitation of adult ed programs that there are so few full-time [positions].

And Jane saw increasing the number of full-time ABE teaching positions as a strategy to increase the status of the field:

There should be math teachers...it’s too bad we can’t hire a really good one, share them, pay them benefits, and have them go from adult ed to adult ed. Because that’s what they want, they want full-time, they want benefits, and if we’re going to get the best people, why aren’t we looking at ways to get them...

Finally, the impact of both funding and available resources for ABE programs was identified by 4 of the 10 participants as germane to their day-to-day teaching practice with adults who have learning difficulties:

... if we had the time to actually use their assessments as we should, we would have a route mapped out for each student. If we have a class of eight students, we’d say, “Where does this overlap? Where do all my students need work? Or do I divide them into two groups—they need to work on this”... again, that comes

down to funding; do people have time to link the assessment to the instruction?  
(Anne)

[Referring to the GED] There are just some people that you know without extra accommodations for the test you know they'll never pass it. And so we've been trying to find ways to get those accommodations, and with adult ed there's no funding for it. There's nobody...without the public education, without being tested there...it's thousands of dollars. (Ashley)

We do so much with so little here...I wear all the hats. And I could do so much more if I had the right people, and I could meet the needs of so many students at a very direct level and feel like I'm making a difference. I would have more to offer them, or I could group people accordingly. (Jane)

**Finding #2: The overwhelming majority (9 out of 10) of participants discussed the importance of professional development opportunities to support ABE teachers' ability to work effectively with adults with learning difficulties in ABE programs.**

Participants described the relationship of professional development to their practice by identifying opportunities for further training or coursework they felt they needed, or by citing trainings, conferences, or workshops that had already effectively supported their teaching. Just over half (6 of 10) of participants cited a number of concerns regarding professional development. Jim, for instance, was aware of a lack of carryover after trainings:

They're all good, the things that I've gone to, the professional development programs and stuff. But the fact of the matter is, there's so little time to digest it, find the parts that you can use and get them implemented...and then it slips away and all of a sudden the thing was a month and a half ago and there was (sic) a couple of things in there that I thought about using...



Jane described not finding training opportunities that matched her expertise level:

... the thing about training that is my beef is; I feel when I go to trainings like the one that you provided [*Learning to Achieve*—I was already past that, like it was at a basic level. I want graduate-level reading training provided, and most of the trainings I go to in adult ed, I got before. Because I think a lot of people don't have a background in education, or I did, and so I was coming from that already and I didn't need that, so we have to have more robust professional development.

A subset of the general concerns expressed by participants pertained to developing skills to teach adults with learning difficulties. Half of the participants specifically cited the need for more training in this area, despite having attended the *Learning to Achieve* training designed for this purpose:

...maybe for ourselves, the training to know how to deal with specific learning disabilities. Because I'm sure in adults they're different; they have in some way manifested themselves differently than they do in kids, and also the other point is that at that stage in life, you may not ever be able to cure...you know, all you can do is teach them a few tricks, and if they haven't learned them, give them some new ones. I would like some tricks, you know? (Carol)

Honestly I think that if the National Institute for Literacy, for example, had specific conferences, more conferences, more learning; I find that when I go to conferences I learn so much. Have a class, in and of itself, just for learning difficulties. I think that if the teachers were to understand learning difficulties, and when I say understand I mean recognize students that have learning difficulties and recognize all of the different ways that you can help that student...I feel like if I could fill in the gap with that, then I would better serve the students with learning difficulties. (Kate)

...expand the instructor's bag of tricks. I know dyslexia lives out there, I know that dyscalculia lives out there, but what are some [tools]...and probably by the time my adults get to me, they have their own coping mechanisms. So for me to try to un-teach them their coping mechanisms is not going to help them at all. (Deb)

At the same time, six participants also described effective trainings they had attended, or other ways they sought to learn more and improve their teaching practice. Of the four participants trained in the Student Achievement in Reading (STAR) program, three noted measurable ways that learning about this evidence-based reading instruction changed their practice:

But I was on the Internet, I was looking at books, I just...I read some books; but until I did the STAR training I really felt like I was grasping at straws. And then we hired that reading specialist, and she and I just have some amazing conversations, we got some Wilson materials, we have better materials, and so now I think I'm able to help people. (Jane)

...and my gosh I was so glad to get my STAR training and say, "Yeah, I know this and I know this..." —they just put it all together for you. (Theresa)

I really feel there's a clear difference between the way I operated before STAR and after STAR—much more focused; much more productive...it's just a great tool for a great process for moving them along. And so I am; some people instinctively can be just as good with their students, but I think we've got a very evidence-based practice. People shouldn't have to be taking a shot in the dark and reinventing the wheel every time they step into an adult ed classroom; it's not necessary, it's not fair, and it's not being efficient. (Anne)

Other participants cited graduate-school coursework, informal or self-directed learning experiences, and participation in Communities of Practice (CoPs) as ways that they enhanced their practice with adults with learning difficulties:

I actually am taking...my first class toward my masters right now in adult ed; it's ESL, reading and writing. (Kate)

I went through a graduate program at a local university, and that was really a good learning experience. We had one class in special education, but it wasn't about particularly dealing with learning, it wasn't how to teach people with learning

disabilities; it was more around what to look for, or who might be in your classroom...(Angela)

It's a master's in education, and the concentration is "school educator" and so I'm working on that to have that under my belt and ... just start towards that and see if that's the direction I want to go, or figure out where I want to go...something else, to keep my options open. (Ashley)

In the absence of formal professional development opportunities, several participants used informal, self-directed means to gain the knowledge they felt they needed to effectively teach their ABE students:

...it hasn't been like this one class or that; it's really been my awareness of what I think people need, me looking for it on my own because I have nobody here to talk to. (Jane)

Even though I am certified in English, English is not my major and so it's kind of like I'm discovering how to be a writing teacher [laughing], because the writing teacher disappeared on me! (Theresa)

And finally, Communities of Practice as defined by Wenger (nd): "Groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly," were cited by two participants as an underutilized tool for support and professional development in the local ABE teacher community:

I definitely could use some professional development; or, like I said, some opportunity to share students' difficulties with other teachers and get feedback on what strategies they've come up with. I think having more than one brain is better. (Angela)

I certainly think for the programs I'm in, we have very few meetings where we can confer with each other and share ideas. Unless we're involved in one of those workshops that somebody else puts on...because of funding, there really aren't opportunities. We share occasionally; I've picked up really great suggestions from

people and likewise offered some that have made a lot of difference. And there are too few opportunities to use the resources we already have among the teachers. I think it's important to have opportunities to share what people already know. (Anne)

**Finding #3: All ten participants cited one or more teaching practices or additional resources that would better support teaching and learning in ABE programs.**

To fill the gaps they identified in their programs, participants suggested many resources to better meet the needs of students with learning difficulties in ABE programs. These included changes in assessment practice and service models; use of technology; adjustments to ABE funding; and adding resources to support both students and teachers, i.e., special education services.

Given their dissatisfaction with the mandated standardized assessments used in ABE programs and their frustration with having little information about their students, it was not surprising that the most frequently mentioned change to teaching practice—thorough assessment of the student's skills and challenges—was proposed by seven participants:

First of all, being able to identify them, and of course we're not even equipped to do that; ... if we had a suspicion that a student had something, the first thing you have to do is be able to identify it. So there's assessment, some kind of a test. You have to have personnel that are educated in it to deliver these kinds of assessments and stuff. And then digest the information and identify an issue. (Jim)

Pam and Angela concurred, particularly with the idea of gathering information about students' needs early on:

I think you really need to talk to the student ahead of time. You have to interview them and find out what the scoop is, you can't just plop them in a class...[you need to have] an intake process. (Pam)

... coming up with a better assessment process would be helpful for them to see what their gaps are specifically...and having strategies that are particular to those learning difficulties... (Angela)

Ashley suggested using different methods for assessment than the prescribed standardized test:

Get rid of the test! [laughing] Have some other way to measure their learning; they need some sort of assessment for it, but some other way to test them other than standardized tests—reading and filling in bubbles, it's not fair, to anybody [laughing].

A majority of participants (7 of 10) also referenced the use of new or unique models for service provision in ABE programs as a way to meet the needs of ABE students with learning difficulties. After reflecting on what she'd experienced in her 3 years in the field, Jane had several suggestions:

- We need very intense [service delivery]—more days, hours; and just immerse in reading, because that's how you can accelerate and [students won't] get frustrated. But nobody does it.
- [Students] come in and they're at fourth-, fifth-grade [reading level]; school takes so long! But if we had a reading institute that adult ed could send their people to and they're just immersed—to me that would be fantastic. Because there's so many people that have this issue...
- [What] if we had even a distance component [online coursework capability]...
- I can remember when I was younger the “Reading Is Fundamental” van coming through my town, and handing out books; I would love to give books to people...

Theresa focused on employment-related programming as an evolution of service provision and saw a place for that in ABE programs:

I mean we are connected to employment, you know? More so as the days go on. We used to rail against it and say, “We’re learning for learning’s sake,” and that’s not the way it is anymore. Much more practical; the idea of you coming here is so that you can get trained to get a job. And of course, we are moving to that Career Pathways initiative, which I think is a step in the right direction, but it is limited. You know, you’re going to have a couple of pathways, but if you want to go in our area, probably [using] the medical pathway because we have a local hospital as one of the largest employers... but they’re not hiring anybody!... The entrepreneurial spirit of Maine, I think we need more of that; we need people to discover what it is that they can do to contribute to the community and make a living at it—not just, go to what’s there, but what would you like to do for a business? Or how would you like to make your living?

Deb described her increasing use of technology to support students’ work between classes and also to expand learning opportunities for her students:

We have a week from class to class, and that’s a really long time. And [students] keep telling me, “If I don’t do it a little bit at a time or from here to there, when I go to do it on Monday before class on Tuesday, I don’t remember what I did.” The classroom I’m in this year I have a SMART Board and the SMART Board software. So I do the notes, I save them, I put them up to my website, they can go to the website...in fact, I’ve had a few say, “I went to the website, I looked through the notes and it was able to help me do the homework.” So it’s been a fantastic tool. And I had a woman who was out two weeks, here last night, and was out the week before. She said, “I went to the website, and I was able to follow most of what was going on.” And I was like—wow, cool.

And I do ask initially, “Do you have computer access and how often do you get online?” because I have some wonderful websites that are available for practicing math facts, so those are all linked to my website, they can go in and practice. quiz.org is an amazing site; it lets me assign things, it also lets them just plain old practice with whatever they think they need practice on.

Four participants described resources that did not already exist in ABE programs that they thought would support their teaching of adults with learning difficulties. Jane noted the contrast in funding and services between the K-12 system and ABE; “But there’s no money, that’s the other part. But we’re spending so much money on K-12, and once that student drops out, he gets me.” Carol agreed, in terms of the services that could be accessed for ABE students with increased funding:

Boy, if we had all the tools that a regular school program did, we’d be doing OK...those would definitely include the IEPs, a special ed teacher as a resource possibly, and an ed tech for students like the young man who had ADHD. (Carol)

Other participants listed resources they thought could specifically improve their practice and student outcomes; Jane addressed services for students, “I’d love to have special ed...” while Carol and Ashley spoke to teacher resources:

Seriously, I would do a differentiation course; I think everybody probably needs to do one every two or three years. (Carol)

I think every teacher should have some sort of special education background or psychology degree [laughing]...and having some sort of resource to test students for specific learning needs that they have would really help. (Ashley)

### Summary

In describing their ABE teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties, participants in this study discussed the practical and interpersonal methods they used in their work, as well as the influence of systems-level structures on their practice. They placed heavy emphasis on relationships—not only the immeasurable value of developing solid relationships with their students but also how leveraging teachers’ relationships

with each other and with the larger ABE system could better serve their teaching practice. These participants moved quickly and flexibly from describing the particularities of teaching adults with learning difficulties in ABE programs to identifying gaps in their programs and in their own skill sets to brainstorming possible solutions. This provides evidence that seeking ABE teachers' input about their daily practice in the classroom is a critical step to continually improving teaching and learning in ABE programs, in order to meet the needs of ABE students with learning difficulties.

From these findings, three analytic categories emerged that both aligned with the conceptual framework of this study and responded to each of the study's three research questions:

1. ABE teachers described their teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties by talking about the people, tasks, and environments involved in ABE programs.
2. ABE teachers noted the influence of professional development on ABE teaching practice. (Research Question 2)
3. ABE teachers described the additional resources that would support effective ABE teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties. (Research Question 3)

These analytic categories were used in the Interpretation Outline Tool (Appendix I) to structure the ongoing analysis and subsequent interpretation of the data to be presented in the next chapter.



Bringing the voices of ABE teachers to the fore in the ongoing discussion about how to teach ABE students most effectively places the burden on the researcher to then evaluate and interpret what they said and construct recommendations from their input. The final two chapters present this researcher's interpretation of the data informed by the context of the ABE field and current literature, and recommendations for teaching adults with learning difficulties in ABE programs.

## CHAPTER 5: Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

This study explored the current teaching practice of ten ABE teachers with students who have learning difficulties to better understand the alignment of the students' needs and the teachers' skills. Privileging the voices and experiences of ABE teachers was intended to add rich data to the discourse about effective teaching and learning for adult learners with learning difficulties in ABE programs. It was also meant to further inform the field about the professional development and resource needs of its workforce that would support successful outcomes for its students. The data collected in this study showed that this sample of ABE teachers recognized the unique and often complex needs of the population of students they teach. Participants were able to describe ways that they assessed and responded to those needs in their teaching practice as well as their perceptions of what they need to effectively teach this population of students. They expressed high levels of commitment to their students and their craft, while simultaneously reporting significant frustration with problems or barriers presented by the ABE field and programs in which they work. This suggests that the concerns of ABE teachers have remained stable over time, since these same issues are reflected in the results of several past studies of ABE teachers and their practice (Bingman, Smith, Stewart, Burnett, Devereux, Gooden, Hayes, Lachance, LaMachia, Meader, Tate & Tiedman, 1998; Dirx & Spurgin, 1992; Sabatini, Daniels, Ginsburg, Limuel, Russell & Stites, 2000). Change has been slow to come to the ABE field.

As in all qualitative research, analysis of the data gathered in this study was ongoing throughout the research process, as outlined extensively in chapter 3 and the Coding Scheme/Analysis Development Chart (Appendix F). To support a thorough interpretation

of the data that would lead to meaningful recommendations, this researcher used an Interpretation Outline Tool (see Appendix I) as a method to brainstorm and critically assess the implications of each finding of this study. Three analytic categories were developed that aligned with the research questions in this study, and were used in the Interpretation Outline Tool:

1. ABE teachers described their teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties by talking about the people, tasks, and environments involved in ABE programs.
2. ABE teachers noted the influence of professional development on ABE teaching practice. (Research Question 2)
3. ABE teachers described the additional resources that would support effective ABE teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties. (Research Question 3)

However, further analysis suggested that for the purpose of interpretation, the second and third analytic categories could be collapsed into the first one, as professional development and additional resources were identified as components of the ABE environment. The researcher was also influenced by the synchrony she noted between the “Person-Environment-Occupation” (PEO) model of occupational therapy practice outlined in chapter one—which describes human function as the transaction of the person, her or his environment, and the “occupation,” or meaningful task—and the way participants in this study described their teaching practice. Therefore, the interpretation presented in this chapter represents a synthesis of the researcher’s thinking, the study’s findings, and the supporting literature, and is organized by the way participants described

their teaching practice in terms of the people, tasks, and environments involved in ABE programs.

### **People**

The central research question in this study addressed how ABE teachers described their practice within the conundrum identified as the research problem, i.e., how ABE teachers who are not specifically trained to teach adults with learning difficulties manage the complex learning needs of their ABE students. Analysis of the data within and across cases showed that participants' responses to this question consistently placed primary emphasis on the people involved in the ABE teaching/learning transaction—the student and the teacher. People and relationships seemed very important to this group of participants in terms of their satisfaction with their work. Anne, who works part-time in three different ABE programs, summed up what several other participants also expressed; “Well, you know, adult education teachers are very warm, compassionate; we love our students!” This is both a compelling level of connection and a critical component of ABE teaching practice to understand, since what teachers believe about themselves and their students and how they make sense of this, is known to influence the effectiveness of their teaching (Dirkx & Spurgin, 1992)—especially in the ABE context with a population of students that often presents unique teaching challenges.

With regard to the people involved in ABE, participants in this study focused on their relationships, years of teaching experience, self-directed learning skills, and their role in the legal and diagnostic issues that affect their students, in describing their teaching practice.

## Relationships

For adults with learning difficulties, returning to school in an ABE program is often fraught with trepidation and anxiety because of negative past school experiences (Isserlis, 2008; Quigley, 1992). In fact, in Quigley's 1992 study of people who chose not to attend ABE programs, he described participants as not simply influenced by their past school experiences but actually so "haunted" (p. 107) by those memories that they did not return to any type of schooling. In his five years of teaching, Jim has tried to make sense of his students' similar experience:

Some of the students that we're talking about with the learning challenges, they already come through the door with a pretty lousy attitude. And it's just—their past experience with teachers and education has been horrific, and now they're back in it, at some level of adulthood, and trying to deal, and just not expecting success...so they just have a bad attitude.

Insofar as these earlier negative experiences involved teachers, ABE students could be expected to have difficulty engaging in any subsequent teacher-student relationship. Participants in this study acknowledged this possibility and were therefore intentional in developing trusting relationships, using approaches such as maintaining a safe learning environment, using students' interests to design assignments, and scaffolding the complexity of tasks—all strategies that were recommended in recent research on the affective components of adult learning (Caine & Caine, 2006; Cozolino & Sprokay, 2006). The feelings of trust and safety that participants engendered in their students appeared to allow them access to sensitive information about their students that provided direction to their teaching—up to and including students' revelations about how they understood their own learning difficulties. Jane and Theresa both capitalized on their ability to quickly join with students to get this information:

Well, from the minute I work with somebody, they're usually pretty free...I'm not able to ask if they got special help in school, but they always tell me. I just had a conversation with someone who called yesterday, wants her GED, she [said] "I'm really nervous to tell you this but I did have...I have a hard time reading." They come right out and tell you. Most people tell me they've never read a book, they don't like reading, they tell me why they left school, usually they were falling behind. The boys it's usually reading; the girls will tell me, it's math. (Jane)

Obviously, you're not supposed to ask them if they have any learning issues, but if you're sitting across the table and you're getting into conversation, then often times they'll share with you, they'll reveal it. (Theresa)

Participants clearly relied on their own interpersonal skills to engage students in this manner and cited this as the most useful tool they had available to support their teaching practice. Nonetheless, relationships can also be complicated and messy, and for some participants the role of power in the teacher-student relationship was recognized as an element at play in the teaching transaction. Participants described a variety of ways that they managed the dynamic of implicit authority in their relationships with students. Some ceded to it entirely—in their classrooms, students had full choice and control of learning tasks. For instance, Pam, an ABE teacher for 10 years, described her approach this way:

And also, another thing, if somebody doesn't want to do something I don't make them do it. I mean if they don't like the topic or something, I ask, "What do you want to write about then?" I say, "This isn't going to be happening in college, they're going to tell you what to do, but right now, what do you want? Because if you don't like it and you don't care, then you're not going to be any good at it." (Pam)

Others—mostly the newer teachers—appeared to have little awareness or acknowledgment of the power differential in the teacher-student relationship. Isserlis (2008) used the term "school privilege" (p. 22) to describe the unearned privilege of

those to whom literacy acquisition came easily, which is typically not recognized as powerful by those who have it. School privilege is, however unconsciously, recognized by students who never had it, like many who attend ABE programs. Left unchecked, this power dynamic can produce deleterious effects on the teacher-student relationship. Kate, as the newest ABE teacher in the sample with one and a half years of experience, described an interaction with her English class that reflected little awareness of her own school privilege; however, in this case she leveraged her relationship with the students to better understand their experience:

Because we've talked; I've said to them, "I learned about prepositions...I was drilled with prepositions in seventh grade, I will never forget how drilled we were on prepositions." And they said to me, "But we're trying to get our GED." And I said, "Can I be honest with you? I learned this stuff in seventh grade; so if we're at a seventh grade level right now, we still have eighth grade level to get through before you can even get to the GED level" and they were surprised, you know? So that's how these things come up. And then they say, "Well, in seventh and eighth grade [school] isn't what I was doing; I wasn't able to focus on prepositions." And then they tell me the stories of...they actually tell me their horror stories...because I am close with them, at this point.

While many factors contribute to teacher-student relationships, this contrast in approaches demonstrates how one variable—years of ABE teaching experience—can influence if or how power is recognized and used. Smith and Gillespie (2007) addressed the progression from being a novice in a field to becoming an expert:

...to develop expertise, individuals need to develop not only factual knowledge but also procedural knowledge of when, how, and under what conditions to use their new skills. This kind of knowledge can only be developed by actually practicing the new skills and then reflecting on those practices (p. 220).

Developing expertise as an ABE teacher, then, requires time, practice, and reflection. In this sample, the more experienced teachers like Pam seemed better able to strike a power

balance that blended student control of their own learning with the expertise of the teachers.

### **Years of Teaching Experience**

Participants in this study also varied in other ways based on their years of ABE teaching experience. For instance, while all participants expressed worry and concern about their ability to teach students with learning difficulties effectively, as well as about student outcome, teachers with fewer years of experience expressed more concern and uncertainty than those teachers with more experience in the ABE field. Whether they thought it was important to their teaching to have a diagnosis or label for their students' learning difficulties was another key area of difference; the newer teachers (less than 3 years experience) seemed to struggle more to figure out how to manage their students' needs, possibly leading them to want more structure—such as a diagnostic label—around what they didn't know. The teachers with more ABE teaching experience (10 to 15 years) expressed less need for a diagnosis or label and more effortlessly found ways to match their teaching methods to students' needs. And certainly experience level was a variable in the larger number of tools and methods that more experienced teachers listed for teaching adults with learning difficulties. While most prior studies of teacher characteristics did not specifically address teaching adults with learning difficulties, research like that conducted by Dinnan, Moore, Wisenbaker, Ulmer, and Spinks (1996) demonstrated a robust effect of the number of years that an ABE teacher taught adults in the same location on student achievement in reading. When literacy achievement was the goal of students' involvement in the program, these researchers recommended that a teacher's years of ABE teaching experience be a primary consideration in the hiring and



retention process. Similarly, Smith and Gomez (2011) cited research showing that “student achievement drops when experienced teachers leave the field and are replaced by new and inexperienced teachers” (p. 29). This places the burden on the ABE field to respond to the qualitative differences between new and experienced teachers, recognizing that this has an impact on student achievement and outcome. Concrete actions that could best support new teachers as they come into the field include apprenticeship and mentoring models; professional development specifically designed to meet the needs of new teachers; and formative assessment of new teachers that provides feedback on their mastery of new knowledge and skills (Smith & Gomez, 2011). However, research has also produced some counterintuitive findings about the effect of teacher experience:

Some research shows that teachers with many years of experience are less effective than teachers with 2 to 3 years of experience and that teacher quality improves during the first two or so years of teaching, but not much after that. These variables have special importance because retired K-12 school teachers often work on a part-time basis teaching adults. (Smith & Gomez, 2011, p. 30)

Numbers of years experience teaching in ABE programs is only one of the factors that affects teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties in ABE programs and is one over which teachers have no control. On the other hand, reflection and action on her or his own style of learning and teaching is within the teacher’s grasp at any level of teaching experience and can be mobilized to the benefit of her or his students.

### **Self-Directed Learners**

Self-directed learning plays a role in ABE programs for both teachers and students. In this sample, teachers at all levels of ABE teaching experience reported using self-directed

learning skills as a function of their teaching practice, although newer teachers at the start of their ABE teaching practice especially seemed to rely heavily on these skills in the absence of training or mentorship. In referencing their own educational experiences and other ways they determined effective teaching methods to use with their students, teachers with the least ABE teaching experience provided clues about their own skills as self-directed learners:

I kind of want to know right now, kind of an answer, and I don't know where to go; but I find the answers by researching a lot myself, which is typically what you have to do anyway, for anything ... (Kate)

The basis for what participants considered intuitive responses to their students' needs in fact appeared to comprise a combination of what they remembered and valued—or did not think was useful—from their own educational experience, what they learned formally or informally about teaching methods, and trial-and-error practice in their classroom. Regardless of their level of teaching experience, this group of teachers seemed to have high levels of flexibility in their thinking, problem-solving skills, and ability to brainstorm creative ideas. These executive function skills (Caine & Caine, 2006) that support teachers' self-directed learning are the same ones that they scaffold for their students with learning difficulties. These are also the skills that play a role in the determining the balance of self-direction from the student and “other-direction” (Terry, 2006, p. 36) provided by the teacher that contributes to successful learning for ABE students (Grow, 1991; Terry, 2006). For this to work well, however, teachers need to assess what level of external direction is required and also know how to provide that direction in the manner best matched to each student. But since only 45% of ABE teachers in a large survey by Sabatini et al. (2000) responded that they “felt prepared to

use strategies for recognizing and accommodating adults with learning differences” (p. 16), it is not clear that finding that nexus of self- and other-direction can be so easily determined.

### **Legal and Diagnostic Issues**

The significance of the teacher-student relationship and intensity of the connection with their students may also account for the high level of frustration expressed by participants regarding several student-related issues, for instance, when participants didn't have information about students they thought would be helpful and when methods they tried didn't work. Both Jim's and Carol's experiences are relevant here, as they expressed frustration with not receiving diagnostic or special education documentation about their students. For example, despite having attended the *Learning to Achieve* training that explicitly addressed legal aspects of disability and the teacher's role and responsibilities around that, Jim continued to question why he was not “allowed” to ask students about their disability status. White and Polson (2001) noted how common it was for ABE staff to not have awareness of ADA mandates and also recognized the disadvantage to teachers when they lacked resources to “assist in disability identification” (p. 15). In the absence of clear information about their students' learning difficulties, teachers in this sample acknowledged both over-identifying learning disabilities and mistaking the student's socioeconomic and personal traits for learning disability. Pam admitted, “I may actually have more people that I think are learning disabled and they're not at all...I've been wrong on that, many times.” And Jane frankly addressed the socioeconomic factors that affect her students:

...it's not a disability; they had the ability, they just didn't have the right things. It's a low-socioeconomic issue; not going to school, moving

around a lot, living in their car for a while...so I think there's a lot of people who have the capability, but they just have all this chaos going on in their lives.

However, a student's failure to learn can be just as much a "teaching disability" on the part of the teacher, making this at least a two-sided problem if not solely situated with the teacher. For instance, in discussing how they assessed and planned for students' learning needs, many participants' described scenarios about student performance in the ABE classroom that suggested that participants believed the problem of learning difficulty was located in the student rather than in the teachers' practice. This sometimes resulted in the teacher "diagnosing" the problem in the student, and in fact several participants in this study took just such a diagnostic stance toward addressing their students' learning needs. Carol, who is a full-time middle-school teacher and part-time ABE teacher, drew from her middle-school teaching experience in diagnosing one of her ABE students:

Last year I actually had a student that I mentioned quite a lot to the director of adult ed because this student obviously had serious learning disabilities and the major one was language, and here he was in an English class. And part of it was ADHD, and even though he would have been an older student, he behaved quite often like he was a sixth-grade kid.

And Angela did both—she diagnosed students:

Sometimes we're looking at memory; short-term memory loss is a problem that I see. Where they can read one paragraph, two paragraphs, three paragraphs; by the time they get to the third one, they don't remember what happened in the first paragraph. So we work on things like that.

—while at the same time acknowledging that she wasn't always sure what the problem was:

[There are] missed connections between what [they're] reading and the questions [they're] being asked; I see it a lot in writing. I mean, writing is a really hard thing for someone who struggles with comprehension and then just remembering from day to day how to write a sentence, you know? Or, what is that stumbling block? I don't know, sometimes I don't know, I don't know what it is...

Participants in this study demonstrated a significant interest in participating in more professional development activities, which suggests some ownership by them of the learning “problem,” i.e., they feel some need to improve their teaching skills rather than simply diagnose the student with a problem. Although many participants expressed worry about their students' outcomes and in some cases how they were doing their job, Kate was forthright in her concern about poor outcomes being related to her failure to teach effectively:

The thing that's tough is that adult ed doesn't have standard guidelines like I think K-12 has...so I feel like I am somewhat of an animal let loose in a cage, and I can't get out sometimes, and I don't know what to do, and I just hope for the best, and I hate that feeling. I would really like some structure...

Carol was similarly concerned about a struggling student in her class who nevertheless had a firm plan to take a military entrance exam immediately following his class with her:

You know, here he is, and I'm supposed to have taught him, and then he goes and takes his test and he can't pass it? He's going to think I didn't really teach him anything, what kind of teacher was I? So I'm really stuck at the moment.

Regardless of whether they perceived their role as an ABE teacher to be teaching academic coursework, helping students to achieve their goals and dreams, or preparing

students to enter the workforce, participants in this study focused on the people involved in the teacher-student relationship. The strength of this relationship was described as foundational to ABE teaching practice, as it supported students to disclose sensitive details about their learning that then allowed teachers to assess their needs and inform their choice of teaching method more accurately. While the ABE teacher population may already be self-selected in terms of skill and comfort level with developing relationships, the importance of this relational component may also have implications for the ABE field in terms of its professional development agenda and its future vision for certifying and credentialing teachers.

### **Tasks**

The tasks of ABE comprise all the elements of the practical, day-to-day teaching transactions in which teachers and students engage. These include the tools and methods used by teachers, and how they design these to meet the complex needs of their students.

### **Tools**

The tools of a profession define and symbolize the practice of that profession. Current research in the area of adult learning disabilities indicates that there are, in fact, particular teaching tools that best address students' learning difficulties, namely, the direct and explicit instruction of learning strategies and metacognitive skills within content areas. For both math and reading, explicit instruction has been defined as teachers providing "clear statements of process, modeling target behaviors, guided practice, independent practice, corrective feedback, and post-testing" (NIFL, 2009, p. 188). All the participants in this study described using such techniques even prior to the *Learning to Achieve* training where they were presented, reporting that they'd learned about them through a

variety of means, including pre-service and in-service trainings and on-the-job trial-and-error. In addition, participants' beliefs that intensive, individual attention most benefits students with learning difficulties is supported by current studies that found that instruction delivered in a one-to-one or small group format and that employed explicit teaching methods produced the largest gain in student skills (NIFL, 2009). This suggests that the intuitive skills of ABE teachers regarding what their students need, in combination with their relationship development and self-direction skills—i.e., finding out what they need to know and enacting it—is a powerful teaching tool in and of itself.

### **Methods**

In this study, participants talked about their ABE students in ways that indicated both that they believed this was a unique, special population that required special methods of teaching and that they were learners like any others that would benefit from whatever was considered current best teaching practice. The idea that teaching this population of students would require the use of special methods may have provoked participants' interest in more training about teaching students with learning difficulties, especially since even Theresa, one of the most experienced teachers in the sample, expressed surprise at the presence of these students in her ABE classroom, "I didn't think there would be students that would be learning disabled." Certainly what was prevalent in teachers' descriptions of their practice once they identified some learning challenge or difficulty on the part of their student was the tension of teaching adults and teaching remedial skills—they wondered if remediating was always needed or useful, and if it was, how it could be done artfully. Angela, for example, struggled with choosing materials that her students could manage but that also respected their maturity and life

experience, “Because you’re an adult, I’m not going to give you baby books.” At the same time, Deb relied on being able to use the same methods in her daytime special education classes and nighttime adult education classes, feeling they were equally effective in either setting. Quigley (1992) firmly indicted adult education programs for their connections to “the classroom trappings and ideological goals of early school and remedial education” (p. 116) that can re-traumatize and further distance students. The use of a remediation model in ABE programs has also been challenged as inappropriate and unrealistic in effectively teaching the ABE student with learning difficulties, while an “accommodations model” (White & Polson, 2001, p. 16) was proposed instead as a more practical and reasonable approach to what ABE students really need from the programs. However designing accommodations that are well matched to a student’s learning needs demands a clear understanding of how to do that, and as this research indicates, ABE teachers are typically not trained to do this. Good practice may dictate further exploration of newer models for addressing the needs of all learners in school environments, including those with learning difficulties. These include “Universal Design for Learning” (UDL), which originated from the premise that viewing curricula and learning environments as “disabled” rather than labeling learners as such, opens opportunities for learners to get what they need in learning settings (Meyer & Rose, 2008).

### **Environments**

The ABE field and its programs represent the macro and micro environments in which ABE teachers practice. A solid thread underlying participants’ descriptions of their teaching practice in ABE was the influence—implicit or explicit—of the ABE field on their day-to-day function in the ABE classroom with their students who have learning



difficulties. They cited areas where they could see these effects: assessment practices, funding, resources, models of service provision, and professional development.

### **Assessment**

A common area of concern for participants in this study was assessment—specifically, the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) test that is mandated by ABE programs to be administered to students with scores reported for federal funding purposes. Kate tried to use content from the CASAS to plan her lessons:

We do CASAS. We spent a lot of time last year going over CASAS and working with CASAS and understanding it, and having a lot of meetings, and basically we look at the CASAS sheets to see what their skills are lacking. But those are more or less like daily living skills, I've found, versus actual, I guess, academic skills. But on the same hand, I can incorporate lessons into...for example, they always have things about jobs, reading a job bulletin board—you can incorporate that into your class by doing a lesson using a job advertisement, you know what I mean?

But none of the other participants found this particular assessment to be useful in their classroom practice with students, i.e., with designing instruction or goal setting. Mellard and Anderson (2007) agreed and called for better alignment of the placement tests used in ABE programs with the reading and math requirements ABE students have to meet in order to continue with post-secondary education. Mellard (NIFL, 2010) went on to suggest that beyond using placement tests, “more specific diagnostic assessment” (p. 13) was needed to support instructional planning for adults with learning difficulties in ABE programs. And while Mellard was referring to assessment conducted by professional diagnosticians, participants in this study described developing their own methods of assessment that they felt were more pertinent and relevant to their day-to-day teaching.

For example, Anne used a practice version of the Accuplacer, a computerized post-secondary placement test, knowing that this had immediate application for her students:

We were doing some practice Accuplacers on the computers the other day because they're going to be taking the Accuplacer soon, and we realized the main reason they got answers wrong was because they didn't understand the vocabulary of the questions.

And Jane followed up the CASAS test with another formal assessment that she found more useful for instruction purposes:

So if somebody's CASAS is below the eighth grade, then I would do a STAR assessment. And what that does, is it assesses them in the four components of literacy: alphabetics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. And we do it pretty in-depth; we have the means to do that through STAR.

The teacher-participants in this sample were keenly aware of the discrepancy between the results of the assessments they were mandated to give to their students and the information they needed in order to plan well-targeted instruction. In nearly every case, participants found ways to resolve this dilemma while still meeting program requirements and student needs.

### **Funding**

Funding is a major driver in ABE practice, and all participants described the working conditions of ABE teachers with a heavy focus on the intersection of funding, resource needs, and models of service provision. Indeed, the correlation between funding and working conditions is inextricable. In their recent update on the proposed certification process for ABE teachers, Smith and Gomez (2011) cited earlier research by Comings that contrasted the funding parameters of the K-12 system and ABE programs and concluded that adult education tends to be harder to fund precisely because it is configured to respond to the particularities of the adult learner, i.e., the varying ways they

persist in programs, their different learning styles, and need for different content. Lower per-student funding results in less funding to support the ABE workforce, leading to higher reliance on part-time and volunteer instructors. Isserlis (2008) also connected the persistent problem of low ABE funding to the marginalized status of the ABE population, and this idea was not lost on the participants in this study. Theresa offered her take on the societal view of ABE learners that perpetuates that marginalization:

There are people who feel that it's a double-dipping situation, that these people had the chance to go to school at one time and now we're paying for them another time. But you're not paying a lot for them another time [laughing]!

She also shared that the director of her program recently told the staff, "We get \$250 per student, and if they're in the regular (K-12) school district, they get \$1,300 (per student)." Clearly, doing more with a lot less has become another problem for the ABE teacher to solve, and with funding now so closely tied to recently established accountability measures, ABE learners and programs face continued challenges regarding whose agenda is met in ABE programs and how this is accomplished (Amstutz, 1999; Condelli, 2007; Isserlis, 2008). While less-than-ideal working conditions are the very reason that many teachers choose to leave the field, the value that these participants placed on the teacher-student relationship and their high level of commitment to and investment in their students' success may explain why they stay in a field where the working conditions persistently don't meet their own needs.

### **Resources**

In the face of program funding that stays stable at best and gets reduced at worst, participants shared a vision of additional resources that they felt would improve their

teaching practice. And, in spite of—or perhaps because of—the fact that this sample was highly unusual in that 70% were full-time ABE teachers, participants felt these resources should include more full-time, benefited positions. Increasing the amount of available teacher time, they theorized, would allow for a more thoughtful approach to teaching, as well as for use of assessment data to design curriculum and develop student plans, and more time to apply what’s learned in professional development offerings. There is ongoing discussion in the field about the hours worked and benefits received by ABE teachers, and the relationship of those variables to the state of the field. Despite the demographics of this study’s ABE teacher population, the norm in ABE programs is part-time work, which is thought to influence everything from time available for professional development and collaborating with colleagues, to levels of student achievement (Sabatini et al., 2000; Smith & Gillespie, 2007).

Participants were easily able to list other resources that were currently not available in ABE programs that they thought would support their teaching practice with adults who have learning difficulties. Topping this list was having the means to assess for learning difficulties in a way that directly translated into their daily practice with students. Participants saw that their students’ needs often outstripped their skills and knew that in the K-12 system that same situation would result in a referral for special education services. Typically there are no such resources available in ABE, and several participants expressed a desire to have special education services in their programs or for ABE teachers to have special education training. Mellard and Patterson’s (2008) proposal of a “diagnostic or clinical teaching approach” (p.143) for ABE students with learning

disabilities dovetailed with some participants' suggestions that special education has a place in ABE programs:

And I think every teacher should have some sort of special education background...(Ashley)

I would love to have special ed...(Jane)

If we had all the tools that a regular school program did, we'd be doing OK; those would definitely include a special ed teacher as a resource and ed techs. (Carol)

While teachers could imagine the benefits of having special education services available for a population that by definition has unique and specific learning needs, enacting this type of change would require careful consideration by ABE programs, since the possibility exists of re-traumatizing or further stigmatizing adult learners whose past experiences with just such programs may not have been successful. In many cases these are learners who sought out ABE programs exactly because they expected them to be different from their prior school experience, and teachers are acutely aware of this. Their call for special education in their programs appeared to be in response to their perception that what their students need in the classroom surpasses their skill set and requires particular expertise that in most cases, they do not have. This does raise questions about the relative risks and benefits of having "special education" services available in ABE programs; namely, what exactly does special education provide for the K-12 population that would help ABE students; would engaging in these services stigmatize ABE students; would ABE students even access special education services if they were offered; and could supportive services be offered but called something other than special

education? More research that explicitly links the adult learner population with special education services is indicated to explore the application of that service in ABE programs.

### **Models of Service Provision**

Current models of service provision in ABE programs were implicated by participants as yet another system-related barrier that affected their practice. Despite what teachers clearly saw as effective, programs were often designed in ways that didn't necessarily fit what students needed or provide the intensity that would support their success. Ashley, a math teacher with three years' experience, offered a prime example from her rural program; with attendance skyrocketing because so many local residents had recently lost their jobs, the program moved from having open labs where students got 1:1 attention back to group classes because they can accommodate more students. Even as most participants emphasized how much individual instruction time ABE students need to be able to master content, in Ashley's case, at least, the program responded by putting program efficiency ahead of what students needed.

The ABE field is moving toward different service models that specifically focus on employment, supporting the notion that not all students will continue to post-secondary programs after ABE (Isserlis, 2008). The Career Pathways initiative is meant to structure this vocational alternative, and may in some ways be a resource that responds to participants' concerns about the post-ABE outcomes of their students. Participants in this study described numerous situations in which their students were being left behind in the burgeoning information-based economy, highlighting the socioeconomic disparity they experienced because, as Angela said, "Academics is not their primary intelligence."

While welcomed, this shift in program focus will likely change what and how ABE teachers teach and will demand more resources and perhaps additional or alternative ABE teacher training.

### **Professional Development**

Professional development—whether opportunities for this existed and if so how effectively they supported their practice—was another major way that participants in this study saw the impact of the larger ABE field on their daily practice in the ABE classroom. However unclear they were about the specific learning difficulties of their students, participants nonetheless clearly identified the gap between their teaching skills and their students’ needs. Participants could see that this population of students required teaching knowledge and skill beyond what their training and experience would support; or alternately, they didn’t see their students as having particularly special or unique learning needs—in either case, participants perceived that they couldn’t teach their students effectively and that they required more professional development opportunities to remedy this. This was true across the sample; whether teachers were new to the field or had many years of ABE teaching experience, they all described a need for ongoing, robust professional development to improve their practice.

That said, participants shared specific feedback about two professional development opportunities—the *Learning to Achieve* training they had all attended and the evidence-based Student Achievement in Reading (STAR) reading training that 4 of the 10 participants completed. There was a notable difference in teachers’ reports of the effectiveness of each of these trainings, which begs the question of how the trainings were perceived as different and what parts were most effectively transferred into the

classroom; i.e., what works and what doesn't in professional development for ABE teachers? Two participants in this study directly addressed the effectiveness of their professional development experience: Jim focused on how to effect immediate carryover of new skills into the classroom while Jane implored the field to provide more rigor in its professional development offerings and to present content that better matches the teachers' skill levels. These needs are also well documented in research on professional development in ABE (Bingman, Smith & Stewart, 1998; Marceau, 2003; Smith & Hofer, 2003). But both within the larger ABE field and across this sample of participants, it was not easy to find trainings that specifically addressed the topic of learning difficulties in ABE students (Smith & Gillespie, 2007). This may explain why participants approached the *Learning to Achieve* training so hopefully on the chance that it would reveal the "magic bullet" for teaching adults with learning difficulties. However, the participants in this study identified a continuing need for training about learning disabilities; most participants said they already knew the information covered in *Learning to Achieve*, and further stated that they had not changed their practice in any way as a result of attending. While this could be related to the quality of the presentation or other factors related to the training itself, it may also indicate the potency of the self-directed and intuitive practice of ABE teachers in determining methods to use with students with learning difficulties. For example, many participants in this study reported knowing about and using teaching methods such as content mapping and scaffolding well before they attended the *Learning to Achieve* training, where those techniques were also presented. Alternately, participants' descriptions of the STAR reading training indicated that it helped to codify some of what they were already doing but in a way that enhanced their conceptual



knowledge about teaching reading, and it also bolstered what they didn't know. They felt able to apply the content of this training with their students immediately, and also reported concrete ways that this changed their teaching practice, such as using STAR assessment tools to more quickly identify and begin to work with the student's areas of reading challenge. There are many variables that could account for participants' varied views on the relative utility of these two trainings, but this example appears to confirm the strength of Marceau's (2003) suggestion that ABE students will ultimately benefit when practitioners are included and actively participate in the creation of a robust professional development system. In their large study of ABE teachers' views on the profession, Sabatini et al. (2000) concluded that a comprehensive system of professional development for ABE teachers should:

...recognize the skills and competencies that teachers already possess, and provide a flexible, multi-tiered delivery system that can provide them with access to help in obtaining skills and competencies they know they need. In addition, it should provide in-service professional development that reflects the special responsibilities of teachers of adults, and that will help to build adult education as a profession. (p. 21)

In summary, teaching in ABE programs is a complex and multi-faceted process, and each one of the components of ABE practice addressed by participants in this study has relevance and affects their practice on a daily basis with adults who have learning difficulties. No single one—the teacher-student relationship; years of ABE teaching experience; self-directed learning; teaching methods; assessment practice; working conditions; resource needs; models of service provision; or professional development—is solely to credit or to blame for the current state of teaching practice in ABE programs. As Smith and Gillespie (2007) note:

There is a recognition that it is not only what teachers learn and do that supports the improvement of student learning, but also when the standards, curriculum assessments, and accountability system are linked and aligned. (p. 225)

It is precisely this artful merging and collaborating of critical components within the larger ABE context that will successfully support its students, teachers, and programs.

### **Revisiting the Researcher's Assumptions**

As is typical and expected in an interpretive study like this one, the researcher's original assumptions outlined in Chapter 1 influenced her interpretation of the data; here the analysis of the study's findings informs her assumptions with additional perspective. Based on her background and professional experience, the first assumption the researcher made was that ABE teachers want to understand their students' learning difficulties and that they recognize their own strengths and limitations in working with adults with learning difficulties. As reflected in the first and second findings (Chapter 4), this assumption held true. The sample of ABE teachers in this study described the importance of their relationships with students as a critical starting point in understanding them as learners and also provided an extensive list of the ways that they then further assessed students' learning needs. They evaluated their own strengths and challenges as teachers by reflecting on both their professional identity and the role they felt teachers played in ABE programs. Their call for professional development opportunities demonstrated ownership of their teaching challenges as well as their commitment to surmounting them and continually improving their teaching practice.

The researcher's second assumption was that ABE teachers adopt an intuitive approach to assessing and working with their students' learning challenges. This

assumption proved partially true, inasmuch as intuition is a characteristic one would expect to see in people who value relationships to the extent that the teachers in this sample did, and so it was clearly at play in their teaching. However, when probed more deeply, teachers' claims that they weren't using any teaching strategies, or that they were going strictly by their "gut," did in fact reflect the use of solid and often evidence-based teaching practices.

The third assumption was that ABE teachers know what resources they lack and can identify resources they need to effectively teach their students in ABE programs, and this assumption turned out to be true. Finding #3 demonstrated that teachers identified resource gaps and moved forward to problem-solving around those—they offered numerous suggestions for resources that they thought could better support both their teaching and their students' learning. This also connects to the researcher's fourth assumption, which was that occupational therapy services, an educational support service that is already available to students in the K-12 system, should be offered to support ABE learners in their student role. While the teachers in this study described the potential utility of many other additional resources, including special education, not one mentioned occupational therapy. This is perhaps easily explained by the obvious discrepancy in familiarity with what occupational therapy can offer ABE students—the researcher is a practicing occupational therapist, and it is likely that if the ABE teachers in this study have even heard of occupational therapy, they would not have a vision of its application in the ABE setting.

### Summary

According to Marceau, “Adult basic education instructors are a hardy, dedicated lot” (2003, p. 67). This certainly proved to be true in this study’s sample of ABE teachers, who described a very high level of commitment to their students and to continued learning about their teaching practice. Variations in how they approached their practice with students who have learning difficulties reflected their differences in years of ABE teaching experience, teacher training, and frankly, confidence in what they were doing.

The analysis of this study’s findings must be viewed cautiously and understood not to represent the larger ABE teacher population since the sample size of ten was small. Also, an inherent weakness of qualitative research is the use of the researcher herself as a research tool. By definition this results in subjective analysis and interpretation of the research findings, and the researcher in this study engaged in intentional discussions with critical colleagues, as well as frequent memoing about the research to address this. However, the interpretation of this research represents the researcher’s thinking only, and is therefore necessarily limited.

This study presents just a snapshot of the experience of a small group of ABE teachers who teach adults with learning difficulties; however, it speaks clearly to the issues they face in their practice on a daily basis. While larger inferences from this study are limited, recommendations can nonetheless be offered to improve day-to-day practice in the ABE classroom, and many of the recommendations in the following chapter were generated by the teacher/participants themselves.

## CHAPTER SIX: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to highlight the voices of ABE teachers as they described their teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties, in order to inform the ABE field about the current status of teaching and learning in ABE programs. The conclusions of the study are bound to the research questions and the findings and thus address three areas: teachers' descriptions of their practice with adults with learning difficulties; the importance of professional development opportunities for ABE teaching practice; and additional resources that would support teaching and learning in ABE programs. The researcher also offers recommendations for the ABE field, ABE teachers, and further research in this area.

### **Conclusions**

#### **Teachers' Descriptions of ABE Practice**

The first finding of this research was that teachers described their teaching practice in terms of: how they identified students' learning difficulties; their personal identity as an ABE teacher; specific teaching methods they used; and the impact of the ABE system on their teaching practice. A conclusion drawn from this finding is that teaching adults with learning difficulties in ABE programs is a complex practice, one that defies a singular descriptive factor, and causes varying levels of concern and uncertainty in the teachers who are doing it. In describing how they taught this population of students, teachers addressed the overlap of multiple factors affecting their practice. They provided numerous examples of instances when their own intuition and emotional intelligence skills promoted the development of relationships that allowed their students to share information about their learning difficulties. Teachers could then choose effective

teaching methods best suited to each student. A solid, trusting teacher-student relationship was seen by most as a critical gateway to facilitating successful student outcomes in ABE programs. This led to the additional conclusion that to practice effectively in ABE programs, teachers need high levels of interpersonal skills to develop relationships in addition to content knowledge of teaching methods that work for students with learning difficulties.

The multi-factorial manner in which teachers described their practice also fit readily into categories of the people, tasks, and environments involved in their practice and demonstrated alignment between ABE and occupational therapy practice as posited by the researcher. Both fields focus heavily on making the best possible match between individuals' skills and challenges, the demands of the tasks they face, and the components of the environment in which they are doing those tasks, as well as on making changes in those variables as indicated to facilitate effective performance. These like-minded models of practice led to the further conclusion that there may be a role for occupational therapists to support learners in their student role in ABE programs. Occupational therapy assessments that reveal students' cognitive, motor, and sensory skills and challenges increase the precision of the match between what students need in order to learn and how teachers teach. For example, the assessment data could inform how teachers present material, plan class activities, and design the learning environment. Using assessment information, occupational therapists working in the ABE classroom could also collaborate with teachers and students to solve learning difficulties as they emerge.

### **The Importance of Professional Development**

The second finding in this study was that the overwhelming majority of participants noted the crucial role of professional development opportunities in promoting ABE teachers' ability to work effectively with adults with learning difficulties. From this finding it can be concluded that regardless of their years of experience, ABE teachers feel underprepared to teach these students, especially with large numbers of students, all with different needs in the same classroom. Teachers believed that professional development could provide what they don't know about teaching students with learning difficulties. They also had very specific ideas about the type and structure of professional development activities that would most benefit them and their students, including those with immediate carryover to the classroom and trainings rigorous enough to push them to new skill levels in their teaching. As confidence in their teaching skills increases with more training, teachers may also be more likely to engage in the field's effort to professionalize ABE teaching practice. This leads to an additional conclusion from this finding: that ABE teachers who perceive themselves as professionals in a specialized field—in this case, teaching adults with learning difficulties—may be more likely to participate in the work of certification and credentialing for ABE teachers than those teachers who perceive themselves as marginalized teachers of marginalized students. For this reason, the ABE field would benefit from further exploring ABE teachers' perceptions of their role and how that influences their teaching practice.

### **Additional Resources for ABE Programs**

This study's third finding was that all participants cited one or more additional resources that would better support teaching and learning in ABE programs. A

conclusion drawn from this finding is that the teachers' call for resources (e.g., special education and diagnostic assessment services) was in response to their perception that they lacked the particular expertise to meet their students' needs. These resources were seen as either supporting effective teaching in a collateral fashion, i.e., with assessment results that inform the choice of teaching methods for students; or by directly managing the students' learning needs, as would happen if a special education teacher were available in the ABE classroom. Creating different models of service provision in ABE programs was also seen by teachers as an additional resource that would support student success. A related conclusion was that engaging teachers in ABE program evaluation and development would uniquely inform that process with their input about the effectiveness of service provision.

### **Recommendations**

In the course of the ten interviews conducted in this study, the participants shared freely with this researcher their ideas and suggestions for improving ABE practice. The wisdom and insight of the teachers who do this work every day was undeniable and clearly informed the following recommendations. Also, as of the writing of this dissertation, the ABE field has begun active evaluation and planning around the status of its teachers and students. This process includes taking steps toward certifying and credentialing ABE teachers in order to acknowledge the unique skills, traits, and training necessary to do this teaching, while also professionalizing the field (Chisman, 2011; Smith & Gomez, 2011). Therefore, these recommendations offered for the ABE field and its teachers and for further research may reflect activities that are already underway in the field.



## **Recommendations for the ABE Field**

In the areas of professional development for its teachers, and additional resources for its programs, the policy-makers, funders, and leaders in the ABE field should consider the following:

### **Professional development**

1. Engage ABE teachers as the primary stakeholders in the profession. Seek their input by survey and focus groups in advance of professional development opportunities; actively include teachers in the planning and design of their professional development; and promote their participation in research related to their practice.
2. Provide and fund creative, progressive means of professional development—e.g., using job-embedded models that incorporate professional development within the daily work of ABE teaching; bringing experts and consultants directly into programs; and offering more online and hybrid versions of professional development and training.
3. Promote and fund research specific to the adult ABE learner population, rather than continuing to extrapolate teaching approaches and strategies for adults from research on the K-12 population.

### **Additional resources**

1. Support and fund action research projects that pilot the use of special educators, occupational therapists, and psychologists to provide assessment and intervention with students directly in ABE programs and evaluate the utility and effectiveness of these resources in that setting.

2. Investigate models of addressing learners' needs that are used in K-12—Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Response to Intervention (RTI)—for their possible adaptation and application with ABE learners.

### **Recommendations for ABE Teachers**

To promote effective practice with students with learning difficulties, ABE teachers should:

1. Explore mentorship models that intentionally bring the expertise of experienced teachers to bear on the nascent practice of the newest ABE teachers.
2. Create and facilitate Communities of Practice (CoP) for teachers at all levels of experience. Organized geographically and held regularly, meetings of CoP provide opportunities for teachers to share both concerns and strategies for their teaching, and problem-solve with support.
3. Take an active role in broadening their own access to professional development and networking opportunities by participating in modalities other than face-to-face workshops and conferences; these include using video and webcasts, taking online coursework, and joining professional listservs.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The researcher recommends further research in this crucial area of ABE practice, as many questions persist regarding effective teaching practice for adults with learning difficulties in ABE programs. Therefore, the following studies should be considered:

1. A study similar to this one that highlights the voices of ABE teachers but corrects for the limitations of this study, in order to assess similarities and differences in the findings. In other words, conduct similar research but with a larger sample that is more representative of the ABE teacher population, including more teachers who are men, who work part-time in ABE, who work in other areas of the U.S., and who have had no training in learning difficulties.
2. Research that addresses possible correlations between the variables in this study, i.e.:
  - Exploring the relationship between how teachers identify their students' needs and the teaching methods they subsequently use. Further, if teacher assessment does link to practice, investigating how this connection could support the planning of potent professional development opportunities for ABE teachers.
  - Studying the relationship between teachers' years of ABE teaching experience and their teaching practice with adults who have learning difficulties. If a correlation was found between these factors that positively contributed to student achievement, this data could then inform training and mentoring initiatives for new ABE teachers.

Listening to the voices of ABE teachers as they describe their practice with adults with learning difficulties is just the first step in understanding the current state of teaching and learning in ABE programs. Teachers' stories also provoke questions that should move the field to deeper inquiry about how best to support them in their work so that they, in turn, can promote their students' success.

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## Appendix A: Conceptual Framework

A central question guided this research:

- How do adult basic education teachers describe their teaching practice with adults who have learning difficulties?

CATEGORY: *How/whether to identify learning difficulties*

DESCRIPTORS:

- How teachers find out or figure out that there even are learning difficulties
- Whether they think this is important to know, and if knowing informs their teaching practice
- What kind and how much information they think they need to inform their practice
- What other things might be mistaken for learning difficulties, i.e. lack of access, socioeconomic factors, etc

CATEGORY: *Identity/role as ABE teacher*

DESCRIPTORS:

- Importance of relationship to the teaching
- Their role in student success/failure
- How they know how to teach
- Importance of level of experience
- How their own education informed their teaching

CATEGORY: *Student outcomes*

DESCRIPTORS:

- High level of concern about outcomes
- The not-knowing: whether they did their job as teacher; what students end up doing after the program
- Passing vs. mastery of content
- ABE student's place in competitive workforce/world
- Impact of ABE delivery models

CATEGORY: *Methods of teaching*

DESCRIPTORS:

- Differentiation
- Critical-thinking skills
- Direct, explicit instruction
- Multi-sensory
- Clear expectations, give students power

In addition, two sub-questions supported the central question:

1. What are the training and professional development needs of adult basic education teachers for teaching adults with learning difficulties?

CATEGORY: Professional development

DESCRIPTORS:

- Learning disability training
- STAR (Student Achievement in Reading) program training
- Graduate teacher education
- Communities of Practice (CoP)

2. What teaching practices or additional resources do adult basic education teachers think would support teaching and learning in adult basic education programs?

CATEGORY: Additional resources

DESCRIPTORS:

- Special Education
- ABE system: funding, teacher working conditions

## Appendix B: Demographic Data Sheet

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study! Please complete this form **before** our interview and return to Susan Spear as an email attachment to: [sspear@maine.rr.com](mailto:sspear@maine.rr.com). Please note that the information collected in this Data Sheet is completely confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this research study.

NAME:

ADDRESS:

PHONE/EMAIL:

DATE OF BIRTH:

YOUR GENDER:

YOUR ETHNICITY: White/African American/Asian/Hispanic/Native American/\_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been teaching in adult basic education (ABE)?

Where do you work now, and what is your position?

What subject(s) do you teach?

Who are your students:

- ELL students only
- native English speakers only
- both ELL and native English speakers

What is your educational background?

- Do you have certification as an ABE teacher in the state of Maine?

What modules (or topics) of the *Learning to Achieve* training did you participate in?

## Appendix C: Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me. Did you have a chance to read the description of the project that I sent you? Do you have any questions about any aspect of the study or about your involvement in it? If you think of a question during the interview, please feel free to ask it.

Before we begin, I want to assure you, as I did in my letter, that everything you say will be kept confidential. If there is a question you don't wish to answer, please let me know. Also, you may end the interview at any time.

I'd like to talk before we start with the actual interview about the terms we'll use to discuss learning problems: i.e., learning disability, learning difficulty, learning preference, etc., so we can be sure we're talking about the same thing. What term(s) do you use to describe your students' learning struggles?

First, let's review the Demographic Data Sheet you completed before the interview. I'd also like to ask a bit about your overall work history and what brought you to adult basic education as a teacher.

Now we'll start the actual interview questions. These are the same questions that I sent you before our meeting today. They all pertain to your teaching practice with native English-speaking ABE students:

1. When you are starting with a new class of students, how do you determine their learning needs?
  - a. What formal methods do you use?
  - b. What informal methods do you use?
2. What suggests to you that a student has learning difficulties?
3. What kinds of teaching strategies or tools do you use with students who have learning difficulties?
  - a. How did you come up with them?
4. In 5 minutes or less, tell me a story about a time when you were worried about a student's learning or unsure about how to meet a student's learning needs.

5. How do you think ABE programs can better serve students with learning difficulties?
  
6. Have you changed your teaching practice since you attended *Learning to Achieve*?
  - a. If so, how?
  - b. If not, why not?
  
7. Is there anything more you'd like to add about the topic of teaching students with learning difficulties in ABE? What questions didn't I ask that I should have?

**Thank you so much for participating in this research study. Please accept this gift card as a token of my appreciation.**



## Appendix D: Recruitment Email

Dear Participant,

Hope all is well! I am writing to you because we met when I was a trainer at the *Learning to Achieve* training you attended this year. I am now beginning dissertation research as part of my doctoral work in adult learning at Lesley University, and I am looking for adult basic education teachers to participate in the research. The purpose of my study is to gather the perspectives of ABE teachers regarding teaching adult learners who have learning difficulties.

I am seeking to interview 10 to 12 ABE teachers who attended the *Learning to Achieve* training, and who primarily teach native speakers of English in an ABE program, in any subject area. These individual interviews will be scheduled at a time and place convenient for the participant, and will take approximately 1 ½ hours to complete. All data collected in this study will remain confidential and anonymous; your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only I will know your identity.

As an incentive to participate, study participants will be given a bookstore gift card on completion of the interview. The expected benefit associated with participation in this research study will be the contribution to the ABE field of teachers' perspectives on practice with adults with learning difficulties.

I will be conducting interviews from November 2010 through January 2011. If you are interested in contributing your perspective on this topic and are willing to participate, please contact me at your earliest convenience.

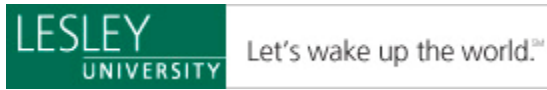
Thank you, and I hope to hear from you soon!

Susan Spear

### Contact Information:

Susan Spear  
40 Essex Street  
Portland, ME 04102  
(207) 233-1794  
sspear@maine.rr.com

## Appendix E: Consent Form



## ~Consent to Participate in Research~

**Title of Study:** “Teaching Adults with Learning Difficulties in Adult Basic Education Programs: Teachers’ Perspectives on Practice”

The following information is provided to help you decide whether you wish to participate in the present study, conducted by the investigator as part of her work at Lesley University as a student in the PhD in Educational Studies program. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate, or to withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with this investigator or Lesley University.

The purpose of this study is to gather the perspectives of adult basic education (ABE) teachers regarding teaching adult learners with learning difficulties. Data gathered in this study will be used to bring ABE teachers’ voices to the discourse on teaching ABE learners with learning difficulties, and is expected to contribute to the development of teaching practice in ABE programs.

Data will be collected using demographic data sheets and individual interviews with participants. Interview sessions will be audio taped, and the investigator will also take hand-written notes of participants’ responses during the interviews. Participants’ written responses on the demographic data sheet and oral responses to the interview questions will be the only data collected in the study. Demographic data sheets, audiotapes, handwritten notes, and transcribed interview responses will be kept in a locked box, accessible only to the investigator. The data collected in this pilot study may be used for future research presentations and/or published papers; however, your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only the investigator will know your identity.

There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with this study. The expected benefit associated with your participation is the information gained about teachers’ perspectives on practice in adult basic education. Do not hesitate to ask questions about

the study before participating or during the study. I would be happy to share the findings with you after the research is completed.

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign this consent form. You are signing it with the full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the procedures. A copy of this form will be given to you to keep.

**Signatures and names:**

**a) Participant's Signature:**

*I am 18 years of age or older. The nature and purpose of this research have been satisfactorily explained to me and I agree to become a participant in the study as described above. I understand that I am free to discontinue participation at any time if I so choose, and that the investigator will gladly answer any questions that arise during the course of the research.*

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Date	Participant's Signature	Print Name
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**b) Investigator's Signature:**

---

Date	Investigator's Signature	Print Name
------	--------------------------	------------

**Investigator:**

Susan Spear, MS, OTR/L  
40 Essex Street  
Portland, ME 04102  
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**Principal Investigator/Senior Advisor:**

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*There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise:*

**Lesley University's Associate Provost/  
Chair of Institutional Review Board:**

Gene Diaz, PhD  
Lesley University  
29 Everett Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
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## Appendix F: Coding Scheme/Analysis Development Chart

## CODING SCHEME/ANALYSIS DEVELOPMENT CHART

<i>Developmental Phases of Analytic Framework</i>	<i>Explanation and Description of Resulting Changes to Coding Scheme</i>
Transcribed all 10 interview audiotapes, verbatim	
Sent each transcript back to participant for their review and endorsement that it was an accurate representation of our interview	Received all 10 back from participants with positive endorsement
(1) Initial read through all 10, to highlight where each question was located in each transcript, and for overall feel of transcripts as a whole and to see what general themes emerged	Logged all in data analysis journal
(2) Second read through all ten for overall feel, a few notes taken of more general variety	Earliest categories emerge: amount of time for student to get credential; identity/role as a teacher; student outcomes; influence of how they were taught; frustration with ABE systems issues; taking mystery out of learning
(3) Third read: compiled Data Summary Tables with answers from each interview question	Using details gathered from Data Summary Tables, refined preliminary categories to begin coding: student outcomes; individual approach; referencing their own education; professional development; identifying learning difficulties or not; student readiness; socioeconomic issues
(4) Read all transcripts again to perform open, in-vivo coding according to refined preliminary categories; cut and pasted similar excerpts from all transcripts onto poster boards under above codes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student outcomes</li> <li>• Individual approach</li> <li>• References own education</li> <li>• Professional development</li> <li>• Identification of LD issues</li> <li>• Socioeconomic issues</li> <li>• Special education</li> <li>• Teaching kids and adults the same</li> <li>• Teaching methods</li> <li>• Teacher identity/role</li> </ul>	Fourth review of transcripts lead to dropping the student readiness category and adding: special education; teaching kids and adults the same; teaching methods; teacher identity/role
(5) Reviewed 10 initial categories and	Resulted in collapsing “individual approach” into

<p>collapsed them into the 5 major themes discussed most frequently, and that have the most evidence to support them:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify learning difficulties or not</li> <li>• Methods of teaching</li> <li>• Student outcomes</li> <li>• Professional development</li> <li>• Teacher Identity/role</li> </ul>	<p>“teaching methods” and “referencing own education” into “teacher identity/role.” Leaves “socioeconomic issues” “teaching adults and kids the same” and “special education” as minor, undersupported, themes</p>
<p>(6) Secured 3 external reviewers for inter-rater reliability of transcripts; sent transcript T6E and code definition sheet for their review of initial codes; created excel sheet in “data analysis” file to track their responses</p>	<p><b>ALL COMPLETE AND REVIEWED WITH EACH REVIEWER AS OF 3/19/11.</b> Specific notes on each included in excel sheet.</p>
<p>(7) Extracted sub-themes from each of the 5 major themes</p>	
<p>(8) Reviewed conceptual framework with committee <b>4/15/11</b></p>	<p>Reframed into five major categories: teacher ID/role, how teachers identify their students’ learning difficulties, teaching methods, ABE systems issues, professional development; each of these has sub-themes</p>
<p>(9) Created Data Summary Charts that quantified participants’ responses to the five major categories and their subthemes in the conceptual framework</p>	<p>Used this set of Data Summary Charts to formulate findings statements from the research data</p>
<p>(10) Developed Interpretation Outline Tool to brainstorm and critically appraise each finding of the research</p>	<p>Resulted in development of 3 analytic categories that aligned with conceptual framework and research questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ABE teachers described their teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties by talking about the people, tasks, and environments involved in ABE programs</li> <li>2. The influence of professional development on ABE teaching practice. (Research Question 2)</li> <li>3. Additional resources that would support effective ABE teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties. (Research Question 3)</li> </ol>
<p>(11) Continuing analysis results in second and third analytic categories collapsed into the first one, as professional development and additional resources were identified as functions of</p>	<p>Interpretation of data uses only analytic category 1 to organize the discussion</p>

the ABE environment	
(12) Synthesized content of Interpretation Outline Tool with participant quotes and salient literature to produce interpretation of this study's findings	

## Appendix G: Data Summary Tables

DATA SUMMARY TABLE 1

	<p><b>1. When starting with a new class of students, how do you determine learning needs?</b></p> <p><b>A. Formal methods</b></p> <p><b>B. Informal methods</b></p>
Pccpt 1	<p>A. CASAS: often surprised at how low their scores are and worried that she can't help them progress because of limitations</p> <p>B. Writing prompts, pre-tests, watching while people are completing the work to assess for numbers/kinds of errors, index card questionnaire: connecting teaching materials to meaningful contexts given what student says goals are</p>
Pccpt 2	A. CASAS; B. Ask students what they feel they want to learn—verbal discussion
Pccpt 3	A. CASAS; B. His experience allows him to use the CASAS score to decide which informal assessment to use; he's made some, found some online, some are in the texts he uses; also interview including self-assessment of math skills
Pccpt 4	A. CASAS; B. I sort of scan through them and you can tell the ones that are anxious, intro sheet about math background, pair interviews/present to class; observation, she looks for what she calls "stereotypical" presentation of those with lower socioeconomic status: old clothes, tired, scruffy—then makes extra effort to attend to them
Pccpt 5	A. Accuplacer for entry to program B. has them write an essay
Pccpt 6	A. CASAS, it is telling, if someone's EFL is 2 or 3 I know they're probably lower middle school B. writing prompts for English, journal for English and math; look at their pre-GED tests—if score lower than 390 I know they're struggling with some kind of gap in their knowledge or else some kind of learning issue, can see patterns emerging in content areas; just conversation, just talking with students; assessment of reading comprehension, memory; helping them to assess themselves—metacognition [she uses this word]
Pccpt 7	A. CASAS [state requires this], GED pre-tests, STAR assessment [everyone has the same two areas: alphabetics and comprehension]; B. I believe it's really important to create a relationship; a lot of trust-building; we give them [students] the power. Show them the GED pre-test: can tell by their body language or what they say [ <i>means of assessment</i> ]. Photocopy actual practice tests for them to take home so they can try them, uses this as form of skill assessment as well; so I gather so much information before I've even formally assessed them, just through that informal process
Pccpt 8	A. CASAS; STAR for reading B. I've worked with a lot of them before; I talk to them, I say, "Where do you struggle?"; I work with them on an individual basis in the open lab before class. After they do their testing I ask them where they feel comfortable and where they don't, and that's where we start. I get a feel and see where they struggle and we kind of



	focus on those areas; state will soon require a goal sheet and questionnaire at intake about where they started struggling in school, what things worked well for them and what didn't
Pccpt 9	A. CASAS and orientation B. uses STAR as “informal, non-standardized inventory”; observation (notes how they read a word list, i.e., getting the beginning of a word right but not the ending); conversation to find out what's going on, see how they're reacting—you get a lot of information that way
Pccpt 10	A. We must give them the CASAS, we pre- and post-test after X numbers of instruction. We use an appraisal test to determine which level of CASAS to give—gives an idea of what people's weaknesses and strengths are B. use STAR methods, i.e., interview based on interests, how student perceives themselves as learner—sees this as the most important part “because this is where they connect with me”—considers STAR stuff informal because it's conversational and leads to a narrative write-up after; then we plunge into the work and that tells me a lot

DATA SUMMARY TABLE 2

	<b>2.What suggests to you that student has learning difficulties?</b>
Pccpt 1	Inability to identify basic English grammar as identified from writing prompt she gives at beginning of class
Pccpt 2	Students who repeatedly take longer than others to process same information; faster learners get bored in class while slow learners can't keep up
Pccpt 3	It becomes evident early on when they're doing their math that there is a learning issue, it's a crapshoot as far as figuring out what it is; students who can't do math when the context changes from how they learned it; issues with language interfering with ability to do word problems; no retention = memory problems evident
Pccpt 4	Students saying they've never been good at math, telling her what parts of math they never understood; students who fall behind others in picking up the content; memory issues—in general, people reveal to her
Pccpt 5	Accuplacer score reveals a learning issue, not difficulty but disability usually— noted by a big discrepancy between the reading comprehension score and the sentence skills score [ <i>she's been told a 20-point difference is significant</i> ]; I can see in their essay where they ramble, not just disorganized writing but chronic case of rambling with basically no punctuation, no sense of what a sentence is at all; spelling is off with all words, not just big ones; writing doesn't make sense at all; I actually have more people that I think are learning disabled and they're not at all—wrong on that, many times
Pccpt 6	Missed connections between what you're reading and the questions you're being asked; I see it a lot in writing—remembering from day to day how to write a sentence, writing informally like they talk
Pccpt 7	They always tell me—they come right out and tell you. Usually you can tell cognitively if somebody is not kind of, in the average range; i.e., processing

	speed, their vocabulary, if I need to change my way of communicating, if I need to slow down, how they're carrying themselves, if they're not looking at me, feel like they're not confident, look like they're really afraid. Show them the GED pre-test: can tell how they feel by their body language or what they say ( <i>means of assessment</i> ). Photocopy actual practice tests for them to take home so they can try them, uses this as form of skill assessment as well. I don't have the power here, I want to give students whatever information I have. (later)—if someone has an alphabetic issue, you can see it in their spelling
Pccpt 8	They get frustrated very easily; sometimes they give up very quickly; I try every different way I can think of to explain a topic, I use manipulatives, but sometimes they just don't get it—or they get it at one time, and then it's totally gone, there's no retention. Students will reveal learning problems “pretty frequently,” the big population of our students do have special needs. Tells story of getting one woman's records, transcript review revealed grades started dropping in fifth grade and “you could tell something happened.” In absence of records, trying to find ways to get students current testing for learning disabilities/accommodations
Pccpt 9	Students often share that information with her, in addition to things she observes during assessments that indicate learning issues to her. Younger people more likely to reveal and if so they try to get prior documentation. Harder with older people who often equate any learning problems with having mental retardation. “I think reading aloud is a dead giveaway”
Pccpt 10	Everything! Not sure this comes under the category of learning difficulties, it just means absence of learning; maybe they weren't receptive at the time; motivation; many had challenges in their personal lives, poverty, dysfunctional families. Re: Accuplacer, realized that the main reason they got answers wrong was because they didn't understand the vocabulary of the questions

DATA SUMMARY TABLE 3

	<b>3. What kinds of teaching strategies or tools do you use with students who have learning difficulties?</b> <b>A. How did you come up with them?</b>
Pccpt 1	Checklist about multiple intelligences/learning preferences; differentiate instruction according to learning styles; use techniques she uses in teaching foreign language (songs, demo); “bring them on board” with the learning by making them aware of their own learning styles
Pccpt 2	Content mapping to organize ideas/thoughts for writing; start classes with 10- to 15-minute writing assignment for practicing how to write A. Drilled with maps in high school; most of the things I've taught, it's a way that I was taught
Pccpt 3	Repetition, just keep doing more of it; encouragement; modeling behavior; explain how math fits into everyday life
Pccpt 4	Backing up, trying to unravel, trying to figure out what caused the confusion; visual representations of math concepts (ladder, thermometer for negative numbers); changing language around ‘tests’, allows them to use notes for quizzes

	<p>as she sees this related to real-world contexts; explicitly teaching critical thinking skills around use of resources/tools—knowing where to find what you need[mentions early on]. Require practice of skills; posts her class notes to website from Smartboard, makes available hard copies of all class materials in adult ed office; posts links to math practice websites on her website; makes up mnemonics</p> <p>A. Trial and error, borrowing, stealing, begging!</p>
Pccpt 5	<p>Help with planning and outlining essays, read their essays aloud, spend a lot of time with them; if somebody doesn't want to do something, I don't make them do it—especially around writing topics. I love what I do, I love teaching and writing and I love my students and I get all hyped up, students say because I'm all hyped up , they get hyped up</p> <p>A. I don't know, I've been teaching for so long...then tells story about working with her own son around his ADHD</p>
Pccpt 6	<p>Most important tool is your relationship with student; trust is a big one; scaffolding their learning, you give them one step at a time clearly articulating what it is you expect from them; allowing more time if they need more time; modeling, graphic organizers, choices and giving them power in what they can do, make it more geared toward their interests. I usually make up my own, I come up with my own materials. Explicitly works with metacognition, asks “what are you thinking right now?”, try to get them to ask questions when they're not understanding, model metacognition a lot by reading aloud and thinking aloud; they need to be setting their own goals [states earlier]--I had to learn, first, be very encouraging; learn the pace people can go at, and keep persisting with these skills slowly, very slowly</p> <p>A. Graduate coursework; had one class in SPED, strategies just come from best practices “this is the way that education is, a good teacher should be this way;” learned some of the metacognitive stuff in a literacy class. My professional goal is to be able to differentiate effectively in my class.</p>
Pccpt 7	<p>Gathering all the information, building the relationship, placing them in the appropriate places, provide individualized tutoring during the day; make sure I'm using appropriate materials that aren't too hard, scaffolded reading material, science and social studies vocabulary books for words in context; dialogue journals; freerice.com for vocabulary; choral reading; critical thinking skills [here I asked about how she'd adapt strategies/tools for learning difficult] Wilson program, they have a trained teacher; white board for increased visual input; repetition; vocabulary flash cards; crossword puzzles...I'm not SPED trained, but we try to treat everybody individually so if this isn't working for them we try something else, and I think it's just a matter of practice, I don't even know if I realize I'm doing it? (p 21); “clear the decks” at start of every class. 90% of what I do is counseling.</p> <p>A. It's been a process because I wasn't trained in literacy; I'm passionate about reading myself, refers to her own education here; when I started I felt like I had no clue what I was doing, I grasped at/pulled from just thinking about what do I know about reading? I was on the Internet, I was looking at books, did STAR training, conversations with reading specialist, got</p>

	Wilson materials. It's really been my awareness of what I think people need, me looking for it on my own because I have nobody here to talk to
Pccpt 8	<p>Manipulatives; they need repetition and sometimes need to use rote memorization; one on one, graphic organizers, flash cards, math journal [I ask questions about what we did during the day and they have to go home and write about it]; repeated practice at how to dissect word problems</p> <p>A. Trainings, got some from school [college], Marilyn Burns book, Maine Adult Numeracy Exploration training through CALL [no longer funded, was Center for Adult Learning and Literacy at USM]; talks about how she loves math and how she learned it, got "set in my ways," and had a very hard time learning it differently in order to teach it differently (p 15)</p>
Pccpt 9	<p>Direct and explicit instruction, I try to do that no matter what I'm teaching because I realize how important it is; the 'I do, we do, you do' method of scaffolding; graphic organizers; looking for strategies, 'I'm teaching you the way to do it, here are steps that you can do'; addresses the idea of readiness for learning; repetition; you have to start at that concrete level because you have to make it real somehow. As a system we don't teach to mastery, we teach to something that's passing—students keep getting pushed through whether or not they have mastered the content; alludes to intuition: "so you really have to kind of have the feel, you know? You have to develop it"</p> <p>A. Experience, trial and error, interacting and being direct with the students; I notice that 'implicit' doesn't work real well with most of our students, STAR training reinforced 'direct and explicit'; references her own educational background: "because they say you teach the way you were taught"; in my own experience as a student, we had basal readers—they had the alphabetic component, reading aloud was explicitly taught, vocabulary development, comprehension questions; "I also have a very strong phonics background, because I was taught that way"</p>
Pccpt 10	<p>Simplify, simplify, simplify. We write a lot of essays; we follow the "I do, we do, you do"; I'm always modeling things first just to make sure; using STAR methods which are intentionally focused</p> <p>A. References own education "I learned to diagram sentences...but actually for them to visually see subject, verb, object and prepositional phrases, and adjectives, adverbs; it helps to map it out</p>

DATA SUMMARY TABLE 4

	<b>4. In 5 minutes or less, tell me a story about a time when you were worried about a student's learning or unsure about how to meet a student's learning needs</b>
Pccpt 1	Young man who can't identify sentences; she's checked in with the middle-school English teacher [a former SPED teacher] for advice. Even if he passes her class he still won't have the skills he needs to pass the military exam he desperately wants to take; worried about "crushing his dreams"—actually ended up telling me numerous stories. Concerns about even knowing how to accommodate so it was

	legal
Pccpt 2	Worries about all of them, everyday; never tells a specific student story, talks about her own extreme anxiety
Pccpt 3	Student he describes as having both learning and psychological issues who was easily overstimulated in the environment but who had clear, possibly unrealistic goals. She got overwhelmed by amount of work he assigned and didn't come back to class; when she did he used repetition, persistence, encouragement and "keeping the barriers down, being friends to the students." She did some art for him; "I think she bonded quick because she could see I was down to earth."
Pccpt 4	Guy who got laid off from paper mill; Career Ctr sent him to adult ed for diploma, so he needed a math class and got to Algebra. Had weak foundational math skills and was very far behind at the halfway point. Didn't finish/pass, felt like she didn't put as much energy into him as she could have. Speaks here about developing relationships with students and wanting to know if they reach their goals but doesn't always find that out
Pccpt 5	Story is about her lesson planning, and verbalizing concerns to students about how they're doing, arranging for individual work even in group context—"I start talking about their needs aloud," "I think a lot of things are mistaken for somebody who can't get it when actually it's that they don't care, they're rushing" Big proponent of engaging as many senses as you can at the same time
Pccpt 6	Constant worry about my student who's visually impaired, has HS diploma and has MR, his mother wants him to continue working on his reading/writing/math. He can't do a lot of the things we do in the classroom; if he's enjoying the community of the classroom, that is really positive. I have him write about things that he really loves to talk about. I could use a one-on-one tutor with him in every class. People do have limitations and I think it's OK to recognize that and help them get to where they can go
Pccpt 7	Boy with diabetes that tested at fifth-grade level, had been bullied and expelled from school, lots of anger issues. Comes to class because his girlfriend is; has physical disabilities as well as diabetes, and is poorly engaged/attended—still trying to figure out his cognitive skills, doesn't read at home, doesn't do homework. There's only so much we can do
Pccpt 8	30-year-old woman who moved around a lot as a child, came to ABE in 2008 and said she has dyslexia. Her reading was not as low as her math, and she passed everything except the math portion of the GED. Worked with her for two straight years on the math, but knows without extra accommodations for the test, she'll never pass it; trying to find ways to get those accommodations, but there's no funding for it; without prior testing from public ed, new testing costs thousands of dollars. Student is frustrated, she works occasionally and wants to go to college but can't without the GED. There needs to be something, some other way than the standardized tests; it's very frustrating
Pccpt 9	Woman who dropped out in ninth grade because she wasn't getting the help she needed and went to work. Eventually got repetitive motion injuries and was out of work on comp and came to adult ed. Started with pre-GED stuff since she'd finished eighth grade, but those were too hard for her, Career Ctr testing showed she was at fourth-grade reading level. It took a long time for her to make any

	<p>advancement. Consulted with mentor about lack of progress and brainstormed other ways for her to get credential. Had her in a reading group, doing computer work, and reading aloud; as a group they made faster progress. She was in ABE for a while on and off, but finally got GED. She got to the point that she was reading at ninth-grade level, worked as an ed tech.</p> <p>My motto is, “Whatever works”</p>
Pccept 10	<p>A young woman I work with at the prison, recently got her GED. She was argumentative and complaining about everything, and my breakthrough was to let her work on her own more; she was asking me for attention all the time. And for her the breakthrough was the persistence. I think I realized the more independent she could be, the more self-confidence she would have. Well you know adult education teachers are very warm, compassionate; we love our students, sometimes more than we should!</p>

DATA SUMMARY TABLE 5

	<b>5. How do you think ABE programs can better serve students with learning difficulties?</b>
Pccept 1	<p>“If we had all the tools that a regular school program did, we’d be doing OK”: IEPs, special ed teacher as a resource, ed techs, professional training; knowing what they need is the first step</p>
Pccept 2	<p>NIFL should have specific conferences, a class just for learning difficulties available for ABE teachers. Asks what others have said in response to this and then agrees when I tell her they spoke of having access to SPED resources; “If the ABE programs taught the teachers better, then it would directly affect students”</p>
Pccept 3	<p>Being able to identify students with learning difficulties—have resources for testing, etc. Access to IEPs, if students have them, the ability to ask students about their learning difficulties</p>
Pccept 4	<p>Expand the instructor’s bag of tricks; know how to support student’s intact coping mechanisms and build new ones; be able to identify student’s learning difficulties as they come in</p>
Pccept 5	<p>Talk to the student ahead of time, interview them and find out what the scoop is, you can’t just plop them in a class; like an intake process, give the CASAS or something</p>
Pccept 6	<p>A better assessment process; having strategies that are particular to those learning difficulties; some specific professional development; some opportunity to share students’ difficulties with other teachers and get feedback on what strategies they’ve come up with</p>
Pccept 7	<p>Assessment is key, assessment at the right time, informal and formal assessment; really getting to know somebody is huge, building that trust; giving them all the information upfront; emphasize the need to commit to this and it’s going to be a lifelong process; putting people in the right class; having reading specialists—why does K-12 have reading specialists and adult ed not? I think there should be, just like there should be math teachers. Teachers want full-time jobs with benefits; if we’re going to get the best people, why aren’t we looking at ways to get them;</p>



	providing materials they can take home—books and workbooks; having material available on the internet, make sure you've got whiteboards; we started giving out gas cards so they can get here; I've mailed materials to housebound students; option to slowly transition into group classroom setting; having classes during the day and evening both; group classes by gender; graduate level training for teachers—more robust professional development
Pccept 8	Get rid of the test [standardized assessments]—some other way to measure their learning, speaks to the time involved in people getting the credential they need through ABE, and that, “it's very frustrating and heartbreaking to kind of burst their bubble”—so you have to have those conversations, what's a realistic goal for them; more group settings have really started working for our students, classes as opposed to open labs—more efficient and necessary due to exploding enrollment, having them work together in groups really helped; having some sort of resource to test students for specific learning needs that they have would really help; and I think every teacher should have some sort of special education background or psychology degree
Pccept 9	I think they need training for the teachers, a lot of support, oftentimes we don't even have anybody who has a degree; our director has tried to make them jobs that we can subsist on; “you've got good people working, but they can't stay necessarily because they've got to earn money”; teach the adult learners to advocate for themselves, relates this to her concern about outcomes and what is available for students to do after they finish the program or get the credential
Pccept 10	We have very few meetings where we can confer with each other and share ideas; there are too few opportunities to use the resources we already have among the teachers, and I think it's important to have opportunities to share what people already know. I think the programs I'm involved in actually serve their students very well; we're lucky to live in areas where adult education has been reasonably funded

DATA SUMMARY TABLE 6

	<b>6. Have you changed your teaching practice since you attended Learning to Achieve?</b> <b>A. If so, how?</b> <b>B. If not, why not?</b>
Pccept 1	Not a lot; she's done lots of what was talked about already so went to L2A “to review”
Pccept 2	A lot of it felt like review; even before I was using maps (content mapping)
Pccept 3	Not really although it all sounded good B. not sure
Pccept 4	Haven't reviewed the materials since the training, but some things have stuck and some haven't; I'm a “special education ed tech” so I'm always interested in new ways to work with any population with learning disabilities
Pccept	I didn't really know why they wanted me to go; I didn't really know what it was

5	about; I'm sorry I wasn't into it; I mean, my problem is I couldn't stand sitting there; I didn't know what the scoop was
Pccpt 6	What was useful was just to see what I was doing that was already presented, and also to be reminded of the importance of scaffolding
Pccpt 7	Probably not, because I had STAR training
Pccpt 8	Not a whole lot
Pccpt 9	I wouldn't say that I have, except maybe in the area about writing, which made me think about the writing piece as being more direct and explicit. Talks here about colleagues referring their students to her because of her SPED background, plus their inability to deal with the student's challenges, creating a de facto SPED department in ABE
Pccpt 10	Well, the whole distinction between "difficulties" and "disabilities" was really an eye-opener and made me look at those things very differently. We were being much too casual about how we used the term "learning disabilities"

DATA SUMMARY TABLE 7

	<b>7. Is there anything more you'd like to add about the topic of teaching students with learning difficulties in ABE? What questions didn't I ask that I should have?</b>
Pccpt 1	no
Pccpt 2	Biggest challenge with adult ed is not knowing where to go; there's certain times when I've been uncomfortable and didn't know what to do. Need for ABE programs is clear to her, especially increasing intergenerational expectations about education; general population lacks information about what adult ed is
Pccpt 3	I would be curious about what happens to some of these students that disappear before they reach their goal, or if they did reach it, where did they go from there—some form of connection after they've moved on. When we don't know what the issues are, we have to guess, pull out of a bag of tricks what to do to get them through, and even then you think they won't make it; and the person that I go to [director] doesn't know either; better, more specific accommodations for GED. So it's just a horrible thing to entrap somebody like that, over one section of the GED—the math. There should be something done about that.
Pccpt 4	Learning difficulties vs. social difficulties, i.e., autism, wonders where the SPED population she sees in high school ends up if not in ABE; re: "invisible" [my word] disabilities like dyslexia, "hopefully by the time they come to me they've got what they need in terms of coping skills to get through"; are we seeing new diagnosis or new retraining expectations? In the new information economy "the retraining piece means not just retraining the muscles but retraining the brain too" [Early on]—speaks to intersection of her teaching experience in middle school and ABE, reflexively using same techniques, adapted to audience
Pccpt	No, I just wish our school system was better; the GED test does not even come



5	close to what the Accuplacer is, i.e., they can get the GED but they're no more ready for the Accuplacer since it requires Algebra
Pccpt 6	I want to know where do these people fit in in life, what can they do? And what can we do to advocate for them? So what is my job? How am I to train them? What am I training them for?
Pccpt 7	Why isn't more being done to improve reading in K-12, since she sees people get to the eleventh grade who are at the fifth-grade reading level; why are they in content classes when they can't even read the textbook? I would love to have intensity [ <i>in the programs</i> ], to have four hours during the day and we're just immersed. It's funding. Why aren't we providing the same level of intensity to people who are reading at fifth-grade level but could get a diploma, as we are to ESL people—native speakers are frustrated because I think they see so many of the resources in English and reading being put toward the non-native speakers. Adult ed reading immersion institute [idea]; distance learning for adult ed [idea]; give books to people free—Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) van [idea]. Nobody in the K-12 system talks to me—I can give them so much information about student struggles and dropping out. I would love to have special ed, can't get same accommodations on GED as on IEP. I could do so much more if I had the right people [staff]—meet student needs at a very direct level, feel like I'm making a difference, have more to offer them, group people accordingly. But there's no money; we're spending so much money on K-12 and once that student drops out, he gets me [with no money]
Pccpt 8	I don't know, there's so much with our students, this population, so different, where do you begin? Tells two student stories that illustrate her point “what's going on in their lives plays a huge factor in any type of learning, whether they can even focus on what's going on in the classroom, if they have things that are on the back of their mind from home or job situation or family...so it's hard to specifically figure out if it's a difficulty, or if it's life, or a mixture of all of the above
Pccpt 9	The identification piece of the learning disability, not sure where I am with that, I don't feel in many cases that I need that identification—I feel like I have to find what's going to work with the person, you know? I don't really discriminate what I do between someone I look at as having a learning disability and what may just be “behind” where they ought to be. STAR was put together with the idea that it was Universal Design. I think anybody can learn from direct instruction; some kind of bridge between what we're doing and where they're going—again referring to post-program outcomes. It's going to be the downfall of our society. Speaks to role of adult ed in work: “We used to rail against it and say, ‘We're learning for learning's sake,’ and that's not the way it is anymore, the idea of you coming here is so that you can get trained to get a job. There are people who feel it's a double-dipping situation, that these people had the chance to go to school at one time and now we're paying for them another time, but you're not paying for them another time. What we need is to invent that layer that we're looking for, it's got to be sustainable, and it's got to be something that's productive, a real contribution.
Pccpt	I can't think of any, off-hand. I really feel there's a clear difference between the

10	<p>way I operated before STAR and after STAR: much more focused, much more productive, it's a great tool for a great process for moving them along, I think we've got a very evidence-based practice. Making it all transparent to our students, that thinking aloud piece that's emphasized in STAR. The thing about the CASAS assessment which has yet to happen but it's supposed to happen, is that the assessment can be used to inform your instruction. So again this comes down to funding—do people have time to link the assessment to the instruction? Personally I would not want a full-time job at one location, I actually like the variety (<i>of 3 different programs</i>). A lot of other people do feel that it's a real limitation of adult ed programs that there are so few full-time</p>
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## Appendix H: Data Summary Charts

DATA SUMMARY CHART: TEACHER IDENTITY/ROLE

	Pseudonym	Reference Own Education	Student Outcomes: Teacher's Role; Student's Place in Society	Power	Importance of Relationship	Define Role in ABE	What they Learned from Experience of Teaching
1	Carol		X	X			
2	Kate	X	X	X	X	X	X
3	Jim		X	X		X	
4	Deb		X		X		
5	Pam	X			X	X	X
6	Angela	X	X		X	X	X
7	Jane	X	X	X	X	X	X
8	Ashley	X	X				X
9	Theresa	X	X		X		X
10	Anne	X		X	X		X
	N=10	7=70%	8=80%	5=50%	7=70%	5=50%	7=70%

## DATA SUMMARY CHART: TEACHING METHODS

	Pseudonym	Identified Tools/ Strategies	Individualized Approach/ Differentiated Instruction	Teaching Adults / Kids the Same Way	Critical Thinking Skills	Direct, Explicit Instruction/ Multisensory	Give Students Power
1	Carol	X	X	X		X	
2	Kate	X				X	
3	Jim	X				X	X
4	Deb	X	X	X	X	X	X
5	Pam	X	X			X	X
6	Angela	X	X	X	X	X	X
7	Jane	X	X		X	X	X
8	Ashley	X	X	X			
9	Theresa	X	X		X	X	
10	Anne	X	X			X	X
	N=10	10=100%	8=80%	4=40%	4=40%	9=90%	6=60%

## DATA SUMMARY CHART: ABE SYSTEM ISSUES

	Pseudonym	Funding	Service Models	Working Conditions	Assessments	K-12 /Systems	Resources	How Does ABE Prepare Students for Post-Program
1	Carol		X			X	X	X
2	Kate		X	X	X	X		X
3	Jim				X			X
4	Deb							X
5	Pam		X		X			
6	Angela		X	X	X		X	X
7	Jane	X	X	X	X	X	X	
8	Ashley	X	X		X		X	X
9	Theresa	X	X	X		X		X
10	Anne	X		X	X	X		
	N=10	4=40%	7=70%	5=50%	7=70%	5=50%	4=40%	7=70%

DATA SUMMARY CHART: IDENTIFYING STUDENTS' LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

	Pseudonym	Identifying Students' Learning Needs: How They Do It	Information About Students That Informs Practice	Knowing Students' Special Education History	Socioeconomic or Other Factors: Things that Might Be/Are Mistaken for LD	Alternate Views
1	Carol	X	X	X		
2	Kate	X	X		X	
3	Jim	X	X	X		
4	Deb	X	X	X	X	
5	Pam	X	X	X		X
6	Angela	X	X	X	X	
7	Jane	X	X	X	X	
8	Ashley	X	X		X	
9	Theresa	X	X	X	X	X
10	Anne	X	X		X	
	N=10	10=100%	10=100%	7=70%	7=70%	2=20%

## DATA SUMMARY CHART: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

	Pseudonym	LD Training	STAR Training	Graduate Teacher Education	Communities of Practice	Other: Informal or Self-Directed Learning, Mentoring	Concerns/Needs
1	Carol	X					X
2	Kate	X		X		X	X
3	Jim						X
4	Deb	X					
5	Pam						
6	Angela			X	X		X
7	Jane		X	X		X	X
8	Ashley		X	X			X
9	Theresa	X	X				
10	Anne	X	X		X	X	
	N=10	5=50%	4=40%	4=40%	2=20%	3=30%	6=60%

## Appendix I: Interpretation Outline Tool

### RESEARCH QUESTION 1

- **How do adult basic education teachers describe their teaching practice with adult learners who have learning difficulties?**

### FINDING 1

In describing their teaching practice with adults who have learning difficulties, all ten participants' responses reflected the following four themes:

- a. How they identify their students' learning difficulties
- b. Their perceived role and identity as an ABE teacher
- c. The specific teaching methods they use with students in the ABE classroom
- d. ABE system issues that affect their teaching practice

### RESEARCH QUESTION 2

- **What are the training and professional development needs of adult basic education teachers for teaching adult learners with learning difficulties?**

### FINDING 2

The overwhelming majority of participants discussed the importance of professional development opportunities in promoting ABE teachers' ability to work effectively with adults with learning difficulties in ABE programs.

### RESEARCH QUESTION 3

- **What teaching practices or additional resources do adult basic education teachers think would support teaching and learning in adult basic education programs?**

### FINDING 3

All ten participants cited one or more teaching practices or additional resources that would better support teaching and learning in ABE programs.



**Analytic Category 1: ABE teachers described their teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties by talking about the people, tasks, and environments involved in ABE programs.**

*>ABE teachers describe their teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties by talking about the people involved (teacher/student) and how their transactions inform the practice*

WHY? (...are people important in describing the people involved and their transactions?)

- People and relationships are very important to them and their satisfaction with their work. ABE teachers seem like very nurturing, people-oriented people, so it makes sense they would focus on their relationships with students and how much those matter to how they teach. (Anne’s quote about “we love our students...” and several others say the same thing, just differently)
- To some extent do they feel like these skills are enough in assessing students’ learning difficulties; that the personal skills make up for other ways they don’t “qualify” as teachers?
- Also why power is addressed as part of the teaching transaction; in most cases but not all, they identify the presence of the power dynamic and have different ways of managing it. Some cede to it entirely—students have full choice and control of learning tasks; others (mostly the newer teachers) aren’t so clear about being aware of it or acknowledging it and thus behave as if they are or should be in control of the learning—which seems to unnecessarily complicate their jobs. Seems like the more experienced folks were able to strike an effective power balance that blended giving control to the student with the expertise they brought to the teaching and that this might be learned over time. (links to Schön? And other lit about how expertise is developed)
- And why affective perspectives were important and shared about teachers’ feelings about their students. This didn’t seem solely related to students with learning diff either; I think this is equal-opportunity relationship-building, regardless of the student’s needs
- How they saw their role as an ABE teacher and even how they got into it in the first place was key; i.e., what they perceived their role to be (teaching academics, achieving goals and dreams, etc) shaped how they interacted and the methods they chose to use. They could see ways that characteristics of the students interacted with their own characteristics to develop relationships and inform choice of method; their own intuitive skills were key here
- Some see the problems that come up with teaching in ABE programs as seated in the students themselves or in the system and therefore feel no ownership of them
- Because they didn’t see the ABE population as having learning difficulties by definition and were just thinking about all learning not just LD

- Some wanted to know about LD dx and others didn't think they needed to in order to teach effectively
- Includes the connection of their teaching role to student outcomes, i.e., how much does what/how they teach determine the ultimate fate of their students' success. But they also implicate the "system" in the ways they see system issues getting in the way of their ability to control good outcomes—CASAS is limiting, can't know real info about LD so have to intuitively address it or wait for self-disclosure, professional development variously available or good, program structures don't support student success in terms of intensity of instruction or availability of helpful resources
- Teachers referencing their own education experiences to have tools to use with their own students, whether that's effective; something is better than nothing? Angela's experience of "dumbing herself down"

>the tasks they are engaged in (teaching methods)

WHY? (...do the tasks they engage in describe their teaching practice with adults with LD?)

- The tension of teaching remedially for adults; how do you do this well, artfully, is it always what's needed? Does the fact that this is what they're doing get acknowledged: by the teacher herself, between teachers, between teacher and student? (*COULD CONNECT TO MELLARD'S WORK ABOUT BEST PRACTICE IN ABE FOR TEACHING READING; UDL too*)
- They felt it communicated the complexity of what they were doing to describe the ways they actually taught this population
- The tools of your profession matter; what you use defines/symbolizes what you do
- Focus on the actual methods seemed a way to say what they did know to do (from whatever place they learned it or figured it out) and also what they didn't know or were unsure of
- Got more robust lists of methods from 3 extremely experienced participants in my pilot study; experience seems to play a role in this area too
- That somehow this list of methods would read differently than if I was asking "traditional" high-school teachers? Except for the ones who said they'd do the same thing with adults and kids, and the ones who said they used the same approaches no matter who they were teaching because certain "best practice" methods would/should work for everyone
- One referenced UDL
- So there was a mix of responding in ways that indicated both that this was a unique, special population and that they were learners like any other that would benefit from whatever current best practices were
- To best teach this population they needed to know special techniques, and this likely connects with the request for more LD training. In most cases, seems like

teachers were surprised and felt unprepared for the needs their ABE students would present.

- CONNECTS TO LIT ON SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING IN ABE
- Power was part of this discussion too, one of the ways power plays out is in the methods and how self-directed or self-selected the methods were (*CONNECTS TO LIT ABOUT SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING IN ABE*)
- How much of content IS universal? i.e., Deb's quote about toggling back and forth between K-12 and ABE using some of the same techniques, with good success. Goes to learning styles instead of age???
- Intuition in determining methods, some note this explicitly and others allude to it without calling it that. As a group, they seem to use this well and easily, seem to have high level of problem-solving skills and willingness to brainstorm/intuit outside of their formal knowledge to find ways to meet student needs.

*>and the macro/micro environments in which they are teaching (ABE field and programs)*

WHY? (...is the state of the ABE field important in describing teaching adults with LD in ABE programs?)

- Because the field does not seem to understand or support the day-to-day practice of ABE teachers, as evidenced by the mandated assessments that determine federal funding. As reported by participants, these do not help them with lesson planning or goal setting with students, necessarily, so they become just so much paperwork.
- MELLARD ARTICLE ABOUT ABE ASSESSMENTS HAS MUCH TO SAY ABOUT THIS
- Therefore, teachers develop their own methods of assessment that feel more pertinent and relevant to their day-to-day teaching
- The GED and its restrictive accommodation rules also impinge on student success, according to teachers who can see that particular accommodations outside of what's allowed would support more students to do well on GED.
- Current service models that don't necessarily fit what students need. Ashley's example a prime one: program that moves to group classes instead of 1:1 open labs because attendance has skyrocketed and grouping accommodates more students. Even though others talk on about how much individual time students need.
- Individual models that rely on tutors are also at the mercy of the training of those tutors; are they all LitVol tutors, or just nice people who volunteer? Do they know anything about teaching, LD, etc?
- Working conditions remain an issue, although my sample is highly unusual for the number of full-time ABE teachers—a real anomaly. Why do they remain an issue? This is where this issue intersects inextricably with funding and resource themes. Because funding that affects working conditions stays stable at best, gets reduced at worst, and teachers can see

the possibilities of improved service delivery if they had more resources-- meaning more full-time, benefited positions that they say would allow more thoughtful approach to the teaching, use of assessments to design curriculum/student plan, more time to apply what's learned in professional development (although Jim is full-time and says he still doesn't have time to do that). Does increased funding = increased time, as they predict?

- Has the quest for full-time, benefited positions not just become the rally cry of the ABE teacher population, without looking further for new, alternative methods for ABE staffing that respond to real circumstances while system change occurs? Do teachers see a bigger picture in which the move to full-time/benefited positions is movement toward professionalizing the field? Or both? (*LOTS OF REFERENCES TO THIS ISSUE IN SMITH/GILLESPIE/BELZER*)

### **Analytic Category 2: Influence of professional development on ABE teaching practice**

WHY? ...*(is professional development (PD) important in teaching adults with learning difficulties in ABE programs?)*

- Teachers identify their students as a population with unusual, complex, unique learning needs; something outside of what their training and experience will support; OR, they don't identify them this way and find nonetheless that they feel they can't teach them effectively
- PD needs should have seemed related to level of prior training but were equally distributed among the sample—both teachers trained as teachers and those who weren't described the need for ongoing, robust, high-level PD
- Curious about the issue of people continuing to ask for PD about LD when they all had L2A. Does this indict that particular training as ineffective? Most participants said they already knew all the information that was covered. Does this mean that there aren't special ways to teach this population? Or that in fact teacher intuition is as potent as some of the empirical research in determining methods to use with students with learning difficulties?
- What people seemed to say about STAR in particular is that it helped to codify some of what they were already doing and bolster what they didn't know. The combination that most matches teachers' descriptions of where they already are and what they need to know. Wonder about the differences between the design of STAR and the design of L2A and why the different feedback about each of them...
- CoPs and self-directed learning: Does it make a certain kind of sense that teachers who are operating intuitively with their students' needs will do the same thing with their own learning needs? Although they find these outlets for support, there is an isolated quality about these modes that may contribute to teachers wanting

more PD—is part of that the need for connection, validation, etc., around the work

\*\*\*DRAW HEAVILY HERE FROM SABATINI ET AL. All links with LOTS of lit from Belzer book on PD for ABE teachers; self-directed learning, and CoP lit\*\*\*

### **Analytic Category 3: Additional resources that would support effective ABE teaching practice with adults with learning difficulties**

WHY? (...do teachers think additional resources would support their teaching practice?)

- Being able to assess for LD, assess differently than with only standardized testing, felt important, and that's not the way the system works right now. If this happens, it's because teachers create their own assessment mechanism. Making assessment relevant with clear connection to the teaching is important and in teachers' minds requires additional resource in terms of people to do the testing and funding to support it
- Technology as a resource is still ramping up both in the programs and for students outside of class; issue remains the number of ABE students who have or can get access to computers outside of the program. Another way now that this population remains marginalized and kept away from information/society
- The move to Career Pathways is an important shift in focus and changes what teachers teach and how they see their role. Not sure how it connects to resources, other than that probably other agencies will partner with ABE to effect positive employment outcomes. It's the jobs version of the college transition programs, which speaks to the idea that the ABE population needs support to figure out what they want to do after ABE and/or move successfully forward after their ABE credential. Also supports the notion that college is not for everyone and attempts to structure the vocational alternative. This does demand more resource and perhaps additional/alternative ABE teacher training
- K-12/ABE resource discrepancy issues: teachers see that their students' needs often outstrip their skills and know that in K-12 that same situation would result in a SPED referral. There are no such additional resources available in ABE and several teachers expressed a desire to have SPED services in their programs, or that teachers should come with SPED training.
- Pros/cons of SPED for adults. Does raise questions about the similarities/differences in kids/adults getting SPED services; i.e., what is it exactly that SPED provides for kids that would be useful for ABE students; would having these services further stigmatize ABE students, would they even access services if they were available based on past experiences with SPED, could similar services be offered but just called something else, i.e., is there a way to embed the effective parts of SPED into what already happens in ABE without labels, special programs, etc? (*LINKS TO LIT ON SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS IN ABE*)

**SUMMARY:** to describe their practice with adults with learning difficulties, ABE teachers talked about the people, tasks, and environments that shaped that practice.