

A Pragmatic Look at *Hard to Serve* and *Ill Served*

Jeff Zacharakis, Kansas State University

Dr. Jacobson's analysis of *hard to serve* is well founded, especially from an academic and theoretical perspective, yet I am left wanting. Is the solution to merely change the language, the terminology of the legislation, or the terminology used by policy makers as well as practitioners? Are these adults hard to serve or ill served? When I first read his essay, I was struck by the quality of the foundational literature used in Jacobson's analysis, and quite frankly, I not only understood his argument but was also in agreement that the phrase *hard to serve* was pejorative, reflecting a deficit model. But as I read it again and again, I started to place myself in the shoes of the adult education center directors, coordinators, and teachers I've worked with in Kansas and the Midwest over the last 15 years, and started to question Jacobson's use of *ill served*. At first I considered writing an academic response, fully supported by scholarly references, but as I gathered articles and reports I determined that this type of response was hollow, missing the essence of what I have seen and experienced. So, I read Jacobson's essay again, then decided to write this pragmatic response relying upon what I have seen, heard, and experienced. In other words, this response is more anecdotal than scholarly, primarily based on my personal experience and conversations with a few directors I've known for years.

The adult learning centers I have visited cannot be looked upon as one size fits all. Some centers are in modern, well-appointed buildings; some are in repurposed storefronts in older strip malls. One I visited was in the old city hall, others in the basements of libraries, and a few in correctional facilities. Some have easy access by bus and public transportation while others require a car. Most all reflect the community they serve, the resources available, the proximity to the students they serve, and the leadership acumen of the center directors.

The staff I've worked with and met, with few exceptions, are exemplars in their teaching and commitment. Most centers have only a couple of full-time employees, typically the directors and coordinators. Many of these center leaders see themselves as pursuing their vocation, not looking for a better job, only striving to do the one they have at the highest level. The teachers often work part time earning \$15-25 an hour, working as little as 10 hours a week to 30 or more, and some have other jobs to supplement their income while others are retired teachers or professionals. These teachers often are members of the communities they serve, knowing their students personally, aware of the challenges they face at home and at work, and fully understanding the barriers these adult learners face day-to-day in order to attend class. In the rural communities, many of these

teachers drive 30 minutes or more to teach in satellite centers several times a week, and some drive to neighborhoods or communities that many of their friends wouldn't dare venture to. I have met center leaders and teachers who have been passionately doing this job for years, if not decades. Yes, they often experience frustrations, but they continue directing and coordinating these centers, or teaching in less than perfect situations with passion that exhibits a love for their jobs and students. Everyone wants only the best for their students and are exhilarated when a student advances to the next level or earns a high school equivalency diploma. They appreciate the commitment of the lowest level literacy student who continues to attend class regularly without giving up even though they struggle to achieve incremental steps, as much as those who move through their programs quickly. And each student presents unique challenges, some live with learning disabilities, some come from dysfunctional families, others face emotional trauma, some have experienced a series of bad luck, and a few are addicted to drugs and alcohol. Each student brings a unique story that account for their situation. Yes, these teachers see these students as hard to serve, yet work tirelessly to help each one reset their lives and not only learn literacy skills but also become more productive citizens. These professionals set the highest standards for our profession, often with little recognition.

The challenges of policy and legislative rules do impact and shape the work these professionals do. And of course, I have heard some grumbling and exasperation when the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was first enacted in 2014, questioning the rationale of tying literacy and basic education to workforce development. I also saw how Kansas adult

education partnered with workforce development and one-stop centers. Many teachers I've worked with see adult literacy and adult basic education as one of the most cost-effective job training programs, even before WIOA was implemented. They understand that overwhelming barriers their students face in unemployment and underemployment where paying their most basic bills is a daily challenge, and hence they see their literacy classes as a jobs program where students become more employable.

The idea of intertwining adult literacy with employability is not the problem for most of these local professionals, either strategically or intellectually. The challenges they see are logistical, how can they maneuver within the bureaucratic structures of adult education and workforce development to best serve their students; they approach each challenge pragmatically, asking only "how can we solve this problem." They do not perseverate about the language in rules or policy; instead, they roll up their sleeves and continue their work. These professionals accept that policy making is a political process, and many directors communicate with their state legislators in an effort to educate them but realize that even these state politicians have little influence over Federal policy, just as I as a university academic have little influence over policy makers. Across the country in the immediate years after 2014 when WIOA was first implemented, state adult education offices provided training on how WIAO could be implemented, how it was different than WIA, and what changes were needed in order to meet these Federal requirements. Granted, this maneuvering was not always smooth, but these state and local adult education leaders made it work.

So, I come back to this notion of *hard to serve* and agree with Jacobson's thesis this phrase is

not the best. Yet *ill served* is no better. In my travels across Kansas and the Midwest visiting adult learning centers, working with directors and coordinators, collaborating with various state directors, and meeting students, there are several lessons I've learned. First and foremost, the professionals I've met are very dedicated, hard-working, and often underpaid, yet what excites me is they are passionate, creative and student centered. They do everything they can to serve all adult learners who come to their center, and these students are not ill served. The challenge is how do we reach those who never come through our doors. I personally know many adults who would benefit by enrolling in an adult basic education program but have no interest in doing so for many reasons. Many of these adults who qualify for these adult education programs are lifelong learners but not in a traditional sense that includes attending classes and taking tests. Another challenge that is coupled with this first challenge is that in Kansas the adult learning centers are serving only about 5% of eligible adults. This is not to say that their programs do not have full enrollment—most do. This low percentage reflects the realities of their funding streams, and it can be argued that these centers are serving the maximum number of students that their funding allows. Within this educational reality, I do not know of any center or program that screens applicants only to select those who are most likely to succeed by either earning a high school equivalency diploma or easily advancing to the next the level, thereby accruing quality points for the center. Rather, most centers operate on a “first-come, first-served” protocol and take every applicant if they have room.

Connecting policy to practice is important, and policy does shape practice as in the case WIOA. Pragmatically though, WIOA has not hurt the

mission of these adult education centers. These center leaders and teachers continue to serve their students as best they can, and there are many examples of how they used the WIOA legislations to strengthen their efforts, such as Accelerated Opportunity (2014) where students can dual enroll in a certificate program at the local community college while enrolled in an adult basic education program. Another creative approach I've seen is where the adult learning program combines basic academic skills, financial literacy and cognitive thinking, with the goal to develop the student's reflective thinking skills so they can understand why they need to change their lives and become more productive. And I know of one program that is addressing emotional trauma in the curriculum with the help of counselors by building deeper relationships between teachers and students—the essence of this program is building strong relationships. Regardless of the language in Federal and state legislation, these adult education centers are continually reaching out to adults who qualify for their programs, creatively and effectively serving them once they enroll, setting up satellite classrooms, developing online programs, going into prisons, hiring qualified teachers and developing strategies to better serve their students. These programs succeed because they do more than merely teach basic academic skills.

Is *hard to serve* a pejorative phrase? Yes, at some level as articulated by Jacobson. But *ill served* is not only inaccurate but slights the work and efforts these front-line adult educators successfully accomplish every day. The profession needs more research on how adult education teachers and centers serve their students, such Rogers and Kramer's (2008) research that collected interview and observation data on nine adult education

teachers to provide a thick description of how they developed and delivered responsive literacy education. We need research on how policy shapes the practice of adult education teachers, as well as how these teachers work within said policies. Most importantly though we need to be careful when we state that our students are ill-served. Within the confines of Federal and state rules, within the economic limitations every center has, the majority of adult learning students are well served.

I suspect that Jacobson will agree with these thoughts I've shared. My central message that I will end on is that focusing on language and wording may be important to many, but for practitioners the goal is to successfully serve our students within the limitations they have little control over. While policies and rules may be inadequate, the adult educators I've worked with are pragmatists, problem solvers, and creative strategists. *Ill served* misses the essence of this front-line work.

References

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