Building Self-Efficacy and Higher Education Programming for Welfare Leavers

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Abstract

Women leaving welfare seeking self-sufficiency, has been closely examined from an external focus. This article purposes to augment the discussion on self-sufficiency by focusing on an internal factor, i.e., self-efficacy, as it relates to women seeking self-sufficiency; and the construction of higher education programming as a tool in building self-efficacy. Critical to the construction and development of higher education programming is the awareness and understanding of those elements that serve as supportive tools in building self-efficacy for women leaving welfare, while participating in higher education programs. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory and learning model were considered key elements in the design of the Human Services certificate program at the University of Wisconsin for women transitioning from welfare to work through higher education.

Introduction

Since the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, welfare reform has shifted from Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC) to Temporary Assistance for Needy Children (TANF), with the later being based on work participation and personal responsibility. Unlike the process driven AFDC program that provided limited assistance to its' participants, the outcome driven TANF program's main goal was to help families reach self-sufficiency through work and work related supports (Danziger, 2001; Weaver, 2000).

Welfare participants are typically women of various ages, ethnicities, work histories, levels of education, and marital status. Unmarried women as head of households are most likely to live in poverty, live in substandard or overcrowded conditions, and be uneducated (Medley, 2005; Boldt, 2000). Advocates maintain that PRWORA has not done enough to address the critical conditions that plague these women in America. For example, Hays (2003) noted that single uneducated women and their families continue to be at the greatest risk of poverty. As single parents, they face the challenges of economically providing for themselves and their families, while they also face many barriers associated with limited job skills, limited educational growth and some obvious disparities in employment (Hayot, 2001). In light of the inequity in the labor

market for women exiting the welfare rolls and seeking self-sufficiency, the attainment of higher education as a tool to build self-efficacy and enhance self-sufficiency appears to be an overlooked factor in most welfare reform programs. The need exists to examine the malleable perceptions of self-efficacy and its relationships to educational investment for women leaving welfare.

Education and Building Self-Efficacy
Literature reveals that the inauguration and implementation of higher education programs and the promotion of higher levels of self-efficacy both appear to be absent as supportive tools for welfare leavers attempting to transition to self-sufficiency in a majority of states' welfare reform policies. Comings (1995), posited that education is viewed as a supporting tool in building self-efficacy for those who either lack or have low levels of self-efficacy. Empirical evidence supports that upon completing and attaining a higher education, an individual's self-beliefs about their capabilities will be raised (Rider & Rayner, 2001). As such, these higher levels of self-beliefs, i.e., self-efficacy, have direct influence concerning the choices an individual makes, as well as the course of action they intend to purse. For women transitioning from welfare to self-sufficiency, higher education programming is a direct path to raising women's self-efficacy and assisting in their movement toward self-sufficiency.

At the outset, self-efficacy must not be confused with self-confidence. According to Bandura (1997), one of the most noted theorist and researchers on the concept of self-efficacy, self-efficacy is the belief, perception or the expectation that one embraces concerning their capability to engage successfully in a specific course of action. Self-confidence, on the other hand, is readily used to describe one's goal attainment from a global perception of being able to accomplish most or a variety of stated tasks (Pace, 2002). Perceived self-efficacy, the 'can do' belief, is considered a powerful facilitator and mediator of behavioral change, which can be the catalyst to changes in lifestyle, commitments, and achievements in life (Bandura, 1997).

According to Comings, Parrella, & Soricone (2000), the attainment of higher education is instrumental in helping individuals to build self-efficacy, which can be learned or acquired. In addition, self-efficacy is largely subject to influence. Such influence was revealed in Bandura's (1977) research, in which he determined that personal feelings concerning self-efficacy can be learned or acquired from four sources of information: performance accomplishment (mastery), vicarious experience (observation of others), social persuasion, and the physiological and emotional states of the individual see figure 1.

Figure 1. The Bandura model of factors that effect self-efficacy. Source: Botterill (1996).

Beliefs about personal agency are considered foundational to motivated activity, as motivation is a key concept in achieving higher levels of performance. When individuals believe that they have the power to make things happen, they will likely put forth more effort (Silvia & Duvall, 2002). Conversely, if they believe that they lack the ability to influence or change the event, they

will limit the extent to which they participate in an endeavor or not even to try, in the first place (Bandura, 1986; Hackett & Betz, 1981).

Performance Accomplishment
The opportunity to not only experience success, but also the manner in which it is received has an influence on individual self-efficacy expectations and overall actions. Performance accomplishments are a powerful source of efficacy information because they provide direct experience of personal mastery (Liebert & Spiegler, 1994). An individual's own experience of success provides evidence of their capability, while failure experiences raise doubts about one's ability to perform an activity under consideration in light of their social environment, job discrimination, racism, and sexism, etc. In this instance, individuals gauge the effects of their actions. The interpretations of these effects aid in creating their own efficacy beliefs.

Vicarious Experience
 By observing the performance and actions of competent models, the observer gains valuable information about the sequence of actions one should use to succeed (Schunk, 1991). Through vicarious experience, individuals learn that they can accomplish the task, if they too follow the same sequence of actions. Schunk (1987) suggests that once an individual believes that they can perform the task, self-efficacy is raised, thereby motivating the observer to perform the task.

Verbal Persuasion
Verbal persuasion is conveyed through the messaging of others, who offer encouragement and support. These persuasions involve exposure to various verbal judgments that others provide; it is a weaker source of efficacy than mastery or vicarious experiences. During this learning process, individuals are subjected to negative persuasion, as well as positive persuasion, which can weaken or defeat self-efficacy beliefs (Zeldin and Pajares, 1997). Liebert & Spiegler (1994) suggests that persuasion is likely to be more effective, if the person presenting the verbal persuasion is perceived as being a trust worthy source of information and perceived as possessing the knowledge or expertise required to make that particular judgment. Furthermore, while verbal persuasion is considered the most common source of self-efficacy, some research suggests that it is generally the weakest in terms of its effect on the strength of self-efficacy.

Physiological State
Bandura (1986) argued the interpretation that people make of this physiological state could have an effect on self-efficacy as stress and anxiety could present negative consequences. "The brain learns optimally when appropriately challenged, but downshifts under perceived threat or stress" (Caine & Caine, 1990, p.68). However, the physiological state functions best in a supportive environment. Zeldin & Pajares (1997) suggest that the physiological state promotes and supports stress and anxiety during challenging events or threats, thereby allowing humans the capacity to alter their own thinking and self-efficacy beliefs, at that time. Recognizing the bodily changes that take place during stress or anxiety, allows for appropriate preparation for action, which can serve as reassurance to the performer, thereby, enhancing one's self-efficacy.

Needs of Welfare Leavers
Strategic plans are required in assisting welfare leavers toward their goal of self-sufficiency, when transitioning from welfare to work. Conventional administrative policies address the external barriers associated with the transition from welfare to work. The external barriers that welfare leavers experience include, but are not limited to, childcare, transportation, and health care benefits (Pavetti, Olson, Nightingale, Duke & Issacs, 1997). However, in developing a

program of higher education aimed at disenfranchised and disengaged women who seek self-sufficiency, the program plan must consider additional supports.

Such supports include the implementation of a tutor and close linkages to networks, i.e., mentors or role models, which must be primary and foundational elements in supporting welfare leavers, during their pursuit of education. Tutoring is defined as a tool to help individuals to learn. The responsibilities of tutoring include diagnosing student needs, monitoring student progress, recommending materials and task, and providing feedback. In other words, the tutor serves as a liaison between the student and the instructor (Frank, 1999).

Mentors are generally defined as someone who has previously experienced a particular role that is new to the mentee. The mentor offers guidance, advice, and support to the mentee, as a result of their own personal experiences (Garner, 1994). Mentors, both peer and professional, serve as linking factors to personal development, upward mobility in careers and occupations, and success in educational attainment.

The higher education program must also be prepared to address negative, as well as positive elements, as both can affect an individual's persistence, while attempting to move forward in reaching their educational goals. In other words, one's own awareness level and one's ability to help manage both positive and negative elements that influence perseverance must be addressed in the developmental stages of a higher education program for adult welfare leavers. Additionally, identification and periodic reviews of the stated goals are critical as a motivating factor in the individual's own expectations and achievement. Being able to measure the progress at specific intervals through writing, such as in journaling, allows for reflection concerning strengths or identification of problematic areas before they become barriers.

Persistence Awareness
The welfare leaver's transition toward self-sufficiency is a positive element as the desire of financial gain or stability supports individual persistence toward attaining a form of higher education. However, individual persistence may be interrupted by negative elements, such as a lack of available time to study or the lack of availability of computer equipment or Internet access. How an individual understands this negative element and the impact it may have concerning their ability to persevere is important. It is critical that a program of this nature assist individuals in recognizing and understanding those negative elements that can derail their persistence. This can be accomplished by helping individuals to develop strategies, plans, and resolutions that help maintain persistence when they affect their lives and could possibly cause them to quit or drop out of a higher education program (Crawford & Smith, 2005).

An effective tool in managing individual persistence and the influence of negative and positive elements is associated with record keeping, such as dedicated and consistent journal entries that identify individual barriers and supports. Finally, sharing strategies, plans, and resolutions during open course room discussions promotes group support and networking. Such activities are useful in identifying ways and means to manage negative and positive elements via the feedback from others who are simultaneously engaged in the same program (Crawford & Smith, 2005).

Establishing & Reaching Goals
A program of higher education that is designed for welfare leavers who seek self-sufficiency must include assisting individuals in clearly defining their goals and understanding the instructional objectives that will need to be met during their progress toward their goals. It is

important that the individual's goals be continuously visited and periodically reviewed by the program instructor or teacher, as they may change over time (Comings, 1995).

Progress toward reaching goals must be documented. Programs that provide services of substantiated quality must require that individuals be able to measure their own progress. Benchmarks or measurable tools must be included in individual goal description, while progress is made toward reaching the stated goals. Utilizing an assessment procedure to measure progress is the most appropriate measurement tool for a program of higher education that is designed for welfare leavers who seek self-sufficiency.

Discussion

Incorporating the specific tools that build self-efficacy, i.e., performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states, along with the supportive tools of persistence awareness, goal identification and goal measurement are important factors in developing a program of higher education for welfare leavers. Utilizing supportive tools allows the program to provide services that effectively meet the needs of the individuals, particularly for women who face external social and structural inequality. In other words, Bandura's theoretical concept on perceived self-efficacy and his disclosure of the relative sources of learning, enhances the understanding as to how individuals persevere and build their own self-efficacy. Bandura's theory is a critical element in the design of higher education programming for specific populations, such as women who lack high levels of self-efficacy, while seeking transition from welfare to work.

It is the opinion of the writers, that programs that provide education, intensive employment/retention services, mentoring, and shadowing, are needed as they provide the human element in assistance that many welfare leavers require when taking responsibility for themselves and their families. It translates to productive citizenry, good parenting and role modeling, which can help to build self-efficacy vicariously for welfare leaver's own children.

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