SIX REASONS WHY ADULT EDUCATION GRADUATES SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED CNA TRAINING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the behavioral and environmental influences on adult education graduates from central Connecticut, who successfully completed a postsecondary certified nursing assistant program in the state of Connecticut, and how those influences can contribute to the success of other adult education graduates. Eight adult education graduates from central Connecticut who had successfully completed postsecondary certified nursing assistant (CNA) programs were interviewed face-to-face in semi-structured, one-on-one interviews to gather data. Six themes emerged from the data: the participants perceived they were successful in completing a postsecondary CNA program because they loved helping others and were in it for the right reasons, (2) had matured and no longer acted like they were in high school, (3) found the structure of the program and the teachers helpful to their learning style, (4) had inner strength, (5) had support in or out of the classroom, and (6) wanted more or better for themselves.

Keywords: adult education graduates, high school dropouts, certified nursing assistants, postsecondary education retention

INTRODUCTION

Students who enroll in adult education high school completion programs do so because they failed to achieve in the traditional K-12 U.S. school system for any number of reasons. The reasons students drop out of traditional education range from family issues to economic issues, to personal problems and behavioral issues (Sahin, Arseven, & Kiliç, 2016). These barriers to education do not disappear once a student has earned a high school credential. Adult education graduates may lack appropriate preparation for college level courses, have little guidance in navigating the confusing world of financial aid, and have poor transition planning, yet almost half of adult education graduates succeed in graduating from community colleges (Hector-Mason, Narlock, Muhisani, & Bhatt, 2017; Lott, & O’Dell, 2014). By the time these students earn a high school credential and go on to postsecondary education, they are
generally older than traditional college students (mid to late 20s or 30s instead of 18-22) due to loss of credit, or time elapsed before returning to school. In addition to being older than traditional college freshmen, adult education graduates often have other responsibilities such as families and employment, which leads to dropping out of college.

Failure to retain students in college is not a new problem. Research has been conducted for more than half a century to examine why traditional students drop out of college beginning with Kunhart and Roleder in 1964; Rose and Elton in 1966; Rugg in 1982, Edwards, Cangemi, and Kowalski in 1990; Barefoot in 2004; Daley in 2010; and more recently, Gray and Swinton's study in 2017. Research has been conducted to discover why adult education graduates drop out of college (Bailey & Phillips, 2016; Zacharakis et al., 2015), but there is little literature exploring the influences on adult education graduates who successfully complete a certified nursing assistant (CNA) program. Although there have been studies about traditional and non-traditional student retention and social programs to aid retention (Harris, 2017; Hlinka, 2017; Peña, 2013; Tovar, 2015), the information from that research is specific to certain ethnicities in community colleges or four-year colleges and not on adult education graduates or CNA certification programs.

Research was needed to explore the importance of behavioral and environmental influences on students who have graduated from adult education high school completion programs and have succeeded in completing postsecondary CNA certification programs. It was not enough to know why adult education graduates fail. The reasons for success needed to be discovered so they can be replicated with other adult education graduates to increase the number of trained direct care workers. CNAs work directly with older patients and patients with disabilities in nursing homes, residential facilities, and in clients' homes. Gao, Tilse, Wilson, Tuckett, and Newcombe, (2015) noted the current need for more direct care workers, and that need will grow even more dire as the population ages. Students who graduate from adult education facilities are more likely to attend community colleges and certification programs, such as CNA training courses (Prins & Kassab, 2015).

A phenomenological study was conducted to understand why eight adult education graduates who had completed a postsecondary CNA program felt they were successful. Eight adult education graduates from central Connecticut who had successfully completed postsecondary CNA programs were interviewed face-to-face in semi-structured, one-on-one interviews to gather data. Data were analyzed using Giorgi's (2009) Descriptive Phenomenological approach. Six themes emerged from the data to answer why the participants perceived they were successful in completing a postsecondary CNA program because they (1) loved helping others and were in it for the right reasons, (2) had matured and no longer acted like they were in high school, (3) found the structure of the program and the teachers helpful to their learning style, (4) had inner strength, (5) had support in and out of the classroom, and (6) wanted more or better for themselves. While adult education programs or CNA training programs cannot use some of these themes (love helping others, inner strength, maturity), they can use other themes to better prepare adult education graduates for success in postsecondary CNA programs.
METHOD

In a phenomenological study, the researcher is interested in studying the lived experiences of the participants; therefore, the sample size is small so that adequate time can be spent gathering in-depth, rich, data via face-to-face interviews. Eight adult education graduates who had successfully completed a postsecondary CNA program in Connecticut were interviewed for this study. The participants came from three different adult education programs and attended five different CNA training programs. There was a variety of ethnicities and ages (see Table 1.)

The interviews were conducted at a time and place of the participants’ choosing to make the participants as comfortable as possible, and all participants signed informed consent forms and were told they could stop the interview at any time. While the researcher had a list of prepared questions and follow-ups, the interviews were semi-structured to enable the participants to tell their stories in their own words. The interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and were recorded with permission. Interview observations of nonverbal cues were noted as well. After each interview, the researcher transcribed the interviews and sent the transcripts to the participants for member checking. When all interviews were transcribed, the researcher had 130 single spaced pages of data to examine.

Data were analyzed using Giorgi’s (2009) approach to phenomenological data analysis which incorporated key words in context, thematic analysis, and three reductions. In the first reduction, 36 units of meaning were identified. The second reduction looked at the units of meaning through the lens of the research questions. (RQ1: How do adult education graduates who completed a postsecondary CNA program perceive the role of behavioral influences in their successful completion of the CNA program? RQ2: How do adult education graduates who completed a postsecondary CNA program perceive the role of environmental influences in their successful completion of the CNA program?) By using the research questions as a focus, the units of meaning were reduced to 17. These 17 units of meaning created nine codes that were then applied to data in the third reduction.

RESULTS

Six themes emerged from the data after three reductions. The participants believed they succeeded in completing a postsecondary CNA program for the following reasons:

- Love helping others/in it for right reasons
- Matured/ not in high school anymore
- Structure of program/teacher
- Inner strength
- Had support in and out of class
- Wanted more/better for self

Table 2. details the number of times each code occurred.
DISCUSSION

Students who have dropped out of high school often have behaviors that affect their ability to persist in education, such as chronic absenteeism, poor study skills, and poor time management skills (Archambault, Janosz, Dupéré, Brault, & Andrew, 2017). For many students who graduate from adult education programs and wish to pursue postsecondary education, the factors and behaviors that induced these students to drop out of high school are still relevant. According to Hester (2017), 60% of non-traditional students, which includes adult education graduates, fail to complete the programs in which they are enrolled.

By investigating the perceptions adult education graduates have about the influences that enabled them to complete a postsecondary CNA program, more information can be gathered to aid adult education programs and CNA programs to increase the completion rate. According to the United States Department of Labor Occupational Outlook Handbook (2018), the need for CNAs is projected to grow by 11% by the year 2026. The need for home health care is projected to increase by 49% between 2012-2022 (United States Department of Labor, 2018). Understanding the influences on adult education graduates that help them successfully complete a CNA certification can address this growing need for skilled health care workers in the United States.

Two research questions were used to guide the study. The first research question was, how do adult education graduates who completed a postsecondary CNA program perceive the role of behavioral influences in their successful completion of the CNA program? Results indicated the following behavioral changes helped them complete the CNA program in descending order of frequency: they found they loved helping others and were in the program to help others, not for the money; they matured and could no longer act the way they had in high school if they wanted to succeed; they developed or found an inner strength they did not have in high school to persevere when the class got difficult or when obstacles got in their way; and they wanted to have more for themselves or their children so they needed to complete the program in order to have a better job and therefore a better life.

The second research question was, how do adult education graduates who completed a postsecondary CNA program perceive the role of environmental influences in their successful completion of the CNA program? Results indicated the following environmental influences enabled them to complete a postsecondary CNA program, in descending order of frequency: the structure, short length, small class size, hands on nature and flexibility of the program; the supportive nature and one-on-one attention from the teachers in the program; support from family and friends outside of the classroom; and a supportive bond with people in the CNA class.

This study provides six themes about how and why adult education graduates were able to complete a postsecondary CNA program. Not all of these themes can be applied by adult education or CNA programs; however, the information gleaned from the participants does offer insights for ways to improve the graduation rate of adult education graduates in postsecondary CNA programs. Adult education facilities can counsel potential graduates who express a desire to go into the medical field about what is expected of a CNA. Offering job
shadowing or an internship at a residential facility would expose potential graduates to the realities of the job before they waste time or money entering a CNA program. The participants uniformly agreed that going to the clinical experience opened their eyes to what it was really like to be a CNA. Several participants noted that it was at this point when people dropped out of their class because they realized it was not for them (they were not in it for the right reasons).

CNA programs in Connecticut vary in class size, length, location, and structure. The participants who had the largest percentage of students drop out of the class (50%–75%) were in programs that began with 30 or more students. The programs that had 90%–100% retention were smaller, approximately 14 students or fewer. Having smaller class sizes offers more one-on-one support with the teacher and a chance for students to form a bond with each other that could help them persist when confronting barriers to learning. Implications from this study show that CNA programs can improve retention by informing participants of what exactly a CNA does before they enter the program so the students will be starting for the right reasons. Having smaller class sizes, offering support in and out of class, and hiring supportive, knowledgeable instructors are also keys to successful programs. All the participants mentioned their instructors as having a large influence on their success.

Participants in this study identified several barriers to completion including lack of transportation, lack of support from family members, child care issues, balancing family life with work and going to school, and having to learn better time management and study skills. Some students had to take two busses for over an hour of commuting time, each way, to get to class. Other participants recalled leaving work and rushing home to get dinner on the table for the babysitter, so they could get to class on time. Two participants spoke to the lack of support from family members. These two particular participants believed that the bond they created with the other students in the class helped them to succeed. Some of these barriers can be addressed by adult education or CNA programs. For example, adult education programs can offer CNA classes on-site and provide child care, so current and former students have familiarity with the area, are closer to the location than if they were going to a community college or other CNA program, and would not have to struggle to find child care. Some adult education programs in Connecticut do offer CNA training, and they are very successful. Adding child care could help even more.

Universally, all participants felt their CNA instructors were dedicated professionals who were willing to help the students succeed. Every participant had an example of a teacher going above and beyond the norm to help them with the material and the course as a whole. The hands-on nature of the course and the support of fellow classmates were important aspects that led to eventual success for the participants. While not all programs can offer small class sizes or have such dedicated instructors, those factors should be considered when advising adult education graduates who are transitioning out of adult education and into a postsecondary program.
STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study addressed the gap in the literature about why adult education graduates complete postsecondary CNA programs. The main strengths of the study are the six themes that adult education and CNA programs can apply practically to help increase retention. One weakness of the study is the sample size. Only eight participants were interviewed for this study. Although saturation was achieved, the participants were from a small geographic location and many attended the same postsecondary CNA programs. Results of the study could vary if the population was changed to traditional high school graduates or to programs in other states.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study addressed the issue of how and why some adult education graduates were able to successfully complete a postsecondary CNA program in central Connecticut. Some themes offered practical steps that adult education and CNA programs can use to help more students, adult education graduates or otherwise, complete the program to help fill the growing need for CNAs in the workforce. Adult education programs can prepare potential graduates, who are interested in taking a CNA course, for success by offering them internships and job shadowing opportunities in health care facilities, so the students know what they are getting into before entering a CNA program. Both CNA training and adult education programs can screen potential students more thoroughly to ascertain why the student is entering the program and if the student is prepared for the reality of such a physically and emotionally demanding job. CNA programs can offer smaller class sizes, in central locations, with skilled instructors who offer a great deal of support to students. Either CNA or adult education programs can offer assistance with transportation such as bus passes or rideshare coupons to enable students to get to class. Offering on-site child care could help relieve some barriers to attending class and therefore aid in improving attendance and completion of the program.

Adult education programs can help their students by pooling resources with local community colleges who offer CNA programs to create programs that are adult education student friendly. The need for trained healthcare workers is only going to grow as the baby boomer population ages. Enabling adult education students to succeed in the healthcare field is one way adult educators can not only help their students, but also help the community as a whole.

Cathleen Cody, EdD, has been an adult educator for 22 years. She started working part-time at Middletown Adult Education shortly after her first daughter was born and has never left. She teaches English full-time in the Credit Diploma Program. Dr. Cody lives in Connecticut with her husband and a revolving door of college-aged daughters who move in and out of the house.
REFERENCES


Table 1. Demographic Information for Participants.

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*Note: All names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.*

Table 2. Occurrences of Most Common Themes.

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<th>Appearances</th>
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<td>Matured/ not in high school anymore</td>
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<td>Structure of program/teacher</td>
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<td>Inner strength</td>
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<td>Had support in/out of class</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wanted more/better for self</td>
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