The Role of Education and Training for Welfare Reform Recipients in California

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Abstract

The Center for Career Studies at California State University, Long Beach provides employment and training services to dislocated workers and economically disadvantaged persons. This study investigated (a) to what extent did the Centers trainees perceive that their learning transferred to their jobs and (b) to what degree did learning increase after the training. This study included 138 participants enrolled in the program and examined the data from the Center on how many participated in the training program and how many finished.

The total count for those who were not working or with no experience before their training at the Center was 87 (63%), compared to those working or with little experience 19 (14%). The findings indicated that 101 (73%) recipients found jobs after they completed the training program compared to only 7 (.05%) that were not able to find job, still looking for job, in school full-time or unemployed after training. The differences indicated that many welfare recipients who seek training to better their lives could be productive and that the training was successful in meeting their needs.
The Role of Education and Training for Welfare Reform Recipients at California State University Long Beach Center for Career Studies

Introduction

The Center for Career Studies (Center) at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) has for many years been helping individuals achieve financial independence by providing quality training and supportive services. These efforts have had a significant impact on recipients’ ability to obtain and retain employment and have helped many low-income families achieve total financial independence and self-sufficiency. Because education and training are so essential to helping welfare recipients make a transition to the labor force, it was essential that the Center quantify this impact to further support its success. The purpose of this study was to determine (a) to what extent the trainees perceived that their learning transferred to their jobs and (b) to what degree the trainees’ learning increased after training.

The Center is a non-profit research and development organization that was founded in 1972. The Center’s mission is to provide employment and training services to dislocated workers and economically disadvantaged persons. The Center has served over 6000 individuals in the last 20 years with a variety of classroom vocational training, on-the-job training, and case management. The Center’s programs consistently have satisfied the performance standards specified by funding agencies and have received positive feedback from service recipients.

The fundamental mission of the Center was to provide needed education and training to welfare recipients to move them into jobs that would sustain them and help them off welfare rolls and out of poverty. To accomplish this objective, the Center has introduced program participants to informal networks that are often needed to identify the many quality jobs that go unadvertised. Most program participants are young single-mother adults and other low-income adults with
limited skills and experience to the labor force and who remain, even after training, at risk for dependency.

Childcare is a concern that has garnered significant public interest. Title II of Amendments to the Child Care and Development Block Grant of 1990 has been of particular interest due to the dramatic increase in the number of women participating in the labor force; particularly those who are the sole or primary financial supporters of their children.

According to the Committee on Education and the Workforce (2002), two million of adults receiving welfare do not have a high school diploma or GED and 12% of adults receiving welfare are foreign born. It is not reasonable to expect the majority of these families to find and hold jobs without basic language skills. Nor can they be expected to adequately support their families without an opportunity to receive additional training and education. The Committee has proposed a law that will be a step backwards for states and families with respect to education and training. Under current Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) law, states may place families in training for unlimited duration and in vocational education for up to one year.

Background

In California, many welfare recipients lack the basic skills needed to succeed in the workplace. They tend to have substantially lower basic skills than welfare recipients in the rest of the nation, and the basic skills gap between welfare recipients and workers is greater in California than in the nation. The number of families receiving welfare declined 22 percent between January 1997 and September 1998 due mainly to a drop in the number of applications for welfare (Johnson and Tafoya, 1999).

The basic skills requirements of the workplace are increasing; therefore, women’s success in the labor force and their economic self-sufficiency depend upon both literacy improvement and employability training. An estimated 23 million adults in the United States lack basic literacy skills and an estimated 23% of all adult females have severely limited literacy skills (compared to 17% of all males). About
seventy-five percent of female heads of households with less than a high school diploma are living in poverty and young women with below average skills and below poverty incomes are five and one-half times more likely to become teen parents. Also, nearly 40 % of female single parents and 35 % of displaced homemakers have an eighth-grade education or less (Kerka, 2000).

The Working Toward Independence Act of 2002 (HR 4092. RH) provided estimates that hourly earnings increased from 19 to 23% for women earning an associate degree. The Working Toward Independence Act of 2002 also reported the following data documenting important connections between education, employment, and income:

- Single female heads of households who have a high school diploma are 60% more likely to have jobs than those without a high school diploma or GED, and those with an associate degree are 95% more likely to be employed. For a TANF recipient with basic skills equal to a high school diploma, an additional 200 hours of education and training (the equivalent of a semester's worth of courses) could lead to jobs that pay $5,000 to $10,000 more per year.

- With at least one year of postsecondary education, poverty declines from 51 % to 21 % for families headed by African-American Women, from 41 % to 18.5% for families headed by Latino Women and from 22% to 12% for families headed by Caucasian women.

- Graduating from high school increases working mothers’ earning by $1.60 per hour (1997 dollars). A college degree is worth an additional $3.65 per hour (1997 dollars). In contrast, each year of work experience adds only seven cents per hour to a recipient's hourly wage.

- A survey of 5,200 families who left the welfare rolls after 1996 found that "the only group likely to escape poverty by their earnings alone was those workers with at least a two year post-secondary or vocational degree". Only 29% of welfare recipients who left welfare lacked a high school degree, compared to 41 % of those still receiving welfare (O’Lawrence and Sanchez, 2003).
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education (2000) stated that former TANF recipients who were most successful in sustaining employment were also twice as likely to have a technical or two-year degree. The Department’s NEWWS study of state welfare reform programs found that the most successful programs used a mix of education, training, and work, rather than simply encouraging recipients to accept the first available employment.

Many programs are getting people off welfare but not out of poverty. To get people out of poverty takes more time, constant training, and consistent motivation to overcome recipients' personal problems that often include physical and mental disabilities, drug abuse, and early pregnancy and parenting responsibilities. Overcoming these challenges requires ongoing mentoring, motivation, education, and training (O’Lawrence and Sanchez, 2003).

Many former welfare recipients remain in a state of poverty. More than 40% of former welfare recipients continued to live below the poverty line in 1999. Many welfare leavers lack funds for food, housing, medical assistance, childcare, and other basic living expenses. Poverty not only impacts former recipients, but their children also experienced higher incidences of problems in school, behaviour and mental health issues, and health problems (Library of Congress Webpage, 2001).

Recent Changes in California Welfare Reform Program

The California welfare reform program “California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids” (CalWORKs) formally known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) began in 1998 as one of the last states to pass legislation in 1997 to implementing the reforms specified in the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). The focus of PRWORA has attachment to the labor market, or “work first” to encourage welfare recipients to move directly into employment rather than to training or education. The CalWORKs is a state-run, county-administered program. At the state level, the Health and Human Services Agency (formerly the Health and Welfare Agency) oversees both the eligibility and employments components of the CalWORKs
program through its Department of Social Services (Montgomery, Kaye, Green and Martinson, 2002).

Federal and state administrative and employment-related funds are provided to counties through a block grant while counties designed their own CalWORKs plans beyond the policies. The decision making authority to the counties predates federal welfare reform in California and is more pronounced under CalWORKs. According to (Montgomery, Kaye, Green and Martinson, 2002) CalWORKs recipients are limited to the 60 month time limit for cash assistance. After being approved for cash assistance, non-exempt CalWORKs adults have an 18 to, or 24 month period during which they can receive welfare-to-work services to help find unsubsidized employment. After fulfilling the initial four-week job search requirement, able-bodied recipients must participate in work or work-related activities for 32 hours per week (35 hours for two-parent families).

The program encourages work through a modified earned income disregard for recipients working full time, which is slightly more generous than the disregard under the old Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. After the 18 or 24 month period of time-limited job training and education has elapsed, participants must participate in community service to continue receiving cash assistance and other supportive services. An individual may participate in community service activities until he or she has received aid for a total of 60 months while recipients must also participate in community service or unsubsidized employment to receive assistance up to the federal time limit (Montgomery, Kaye, Green and Martinson, 2002).

The Welfare to Work (WTW) program has been relatively successful in providing additional services to clients, providing work-related services such as job readiness assistance, employment assistance for non-custodial parents, and supplemental resources for poor communities. WTW has been more effective in getting participants back to work, increasing their earnings, and reducing their dependency on the system. However, it has been only relatively successful in reducing poverty (Gueron & Hamilton, 2002).
Problem

California has the largest welfare caseload in America and more restrictive participation requirements than those of the federal government (Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, 2000). The economy is currently suffering the fourth consecutive year of a geographically widespread labor market slump, with most states facing uncertain economic situations.

There is a necessity of a minimum wage that allows low-wage workers to meet basic needs. However, there is still a strong opposition to minimum wage increases, especially from those who don't view the weak labor market as an imperative to raise minimum wages, rather as a reason to oppose them. Opponents of state-level minimum wage increases claim that these increases are the cause of weak labor markets, especially in the form of high unemployment rates (Chapman, 2004).

According to Chapman (2003), there is eight years without raising the minimum wage and each year the federal government fails to act, minimum wage workers pay the price, as the rising cost of living erodes the value of their paycheck. The need for a minimum wage increase is clear because a stagnant minimum wage has a significant impact on the earnings of low-wage workers.

Another area of major problem may be lack of training or education of those on welfare. O’Lawrence and Sanchez (2003) indicated that, the United States has failed to invest sufficient resources and effort into promoting transitional services in education systems, a failure that increases the numbers of recipients needing government assistance. The lack of a clear, direct connection between education and employment opportunities for most young people is one of the most devastating aspects of the existing welfare system.
Without adequate transition services in the U.S., students may be less well-motivated, spend more time finding appropriate jobs, lack basic skills upon graduation from high school, have poor work habits, have little training, and be unable to succeed in even mid-level jobs. These difficulties cause many individuals to end up utilizing public assistance programs, such as welfare, in order to survive. In order to have a competitive workforce in the global economy, we must invest more resources to develop in the development of work transition services (Gray & Herr, 1998).

The lack of sufficient programs providing training and education for unskilled, nonprofessional, and hourly workforce, including welfare recipients, also undercuts the United States' competitive position in the global market. Due to our high standard of living, U.S. producers have difficulty competing with other countries in the area of low-paid, low skilled labor. The Human Capital Investment Theory suggests that investing in human capital and increasing the skills and wages of employees is the best way to increase productivity. In order to create high-skills/high-wage workers, it is necessary to invest in training (Gray and Herr 1998).

The major focus, therefore, needs to be on investing in welfare recipients and other low-skilled workers, in order to get them into high-skill, high-wage jobs. While it is clear that education and training must play crucial role in welfare reform, the exact shape and dimensions of that role are debatable. Welfare policy reflects an ongoing effort to balance the dual objectives of reducing poverty and ending dependency. In order to accomplish the objectives that lead to clients' self-sufficiency, a flexible and mixed strategy of both job search and short-term training appears to be the most effective method for Welfare to Work (Gueron & Hamilton, 2002).
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to examine the degree of learning and learning transfer achieved by participants in programs offered by the Center of Career Studies at CSULB and (b) to identify the effects of trainee work experience and job position on learning and learning transfer provided to recipients by Center. These programs were funded by the federal government to provide educational services for economically and educationally disadvantaged participants.

The WTW program in California today is based upon efforts to reform welfare in order to successfully move participants into self-sufficiency. The WTW program grew out of the 1996 decision to make welfare a temporary, but beneficial, program designed to develop and improve the careers and lives of the individuals receiving assistance, rather than long-term assistance without responsibilities. The TANF block grant was created through legislation from the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (Welfare Information Network, 2002).

According to Friedman (2000), to break out of the cycle of poverty and welfare dependency successfully, young people need assistance as well as programs that support the transition from school to work. Continuing education, job-readiness, and life-skills training can play a major role in helping them attain self-sufficiency. Under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), more than $1 billion is available annually to help low-income youth acquire the education, skills, work experience, and support they need to transition to a productive adulthood. Also, the U.S. Department of Labor's WTW grants provide transitional assistance to the hardest-to-employ welfare recipients by providing them with job readiness and job-placement services, transitional employment, and other job-retention and support services they need to achieve long-term, unsubsidized employment and self-sufficiency.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative research methods to explore the degree of learning and transfer of
learning made by the trainees at CSULB. Qualitative research using a case study approach was chosen to achieve the following objectives:

1. To better understand observed changes in status following completion of training.

2. To fully explore the reasons for the high rate of the program success.

According to Yin (1994), a case study is an in-depth inquiry of a setting, group, or event that observes historical facts and developmental occurrences, presents conditions, and shows environmental interaction. Stake (1995) suggested that in an "instrumental case study," the case study is instrumental in accomplishing something other than understanding. In this particular case study, the focus was on insight, discovery, and interpretation of the welfare recipient fact sheet, rather than on hypothesis testing. Its objective was to develop an understanding of the dynamics of the welfare-to-work transition process for Center trainees and to discover how participants were being prepared for successful entry into the labor-market.

The two fundamental uses of the case study are to obtain descriptions and the interpretations of others (Stakes, 1995). In this study, data collection occurred in two phases: the open-ended interview phase and the document review phase. Document review was used to gather information on the recipients.

In the second phase of the study, which used quantitative methods of analysis, data was exported from the Center’s database to the Statistical Program for the Social Science (SPSS) for descriptive analysis. This quantitative approach helped to distinguish differences between before training and after training outcomes for the participants.

Data Analysis and Findings

The population for this study included 138 participants enrolled in the Center for Career Studies at California State University, Long Beach. Data from the Center reporting how many participated in the
training program and how many finished the program were examined.

The following research questions were studied:

1. To what extent did the trainees perceive that their learning transferred to their jobs?

2. To what degree did trainees' learning increase after the training?

An 11-item questionnaire was developed for use in telephone interviews, and to minimize bias and enhance consistency, one researcher with experience in interviewing conducted all of the interviews. Data collected from the Center were analyzed using the SPSS, Version 11.0 for Windows. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the effects of training on before and after outcomes for the participants enrolled at the Center.

The number of participants who were not working or who had no experience before their training at the Center was 87 (63%), compared to 19 (14%) who were working or who had little experience; 32 (23%) of the participants did not indicated either they were working, not working, no experience or had little experience. To determine the effects of training, the study examined how many of the participants found jobs after they completed the program. The findings indicated that 101 (73%) participants secured jobs after completing the training program, compared to only 7 (5%) who were not able to find; and the remaining 30 (26.5%) did not give any indication of their status or unable to verify. The results suggest that many welfare recipients who seek training to better their life could be productive and that the training was successful in meeting their needs.

There were major differences between hourly rate of income before and after training. The incomes reported by the participants varied. However, the average hourly income before training was $4.50, and after training was $7.50.

An 11-item questionnaire developed for the study was used in telephone interviews to determine participants' personal perceptions of the effects of the training program. The following eleven questions
were presented during telephone interviews of focus group participants:

1. Can you tell us about the training you received from the Center?
2. Are you better prepared now for the workforce (job)?
3. Did you have assistance in finding a job?
4. Were you able to find a job after your training with the Center?
5. Was it in an area related to your training?
6. How many jobs have you had since your training?
7. Are you working now?
8. If you were to receive additional training would you come back to the Center?
9. How friendly were the personnel and instructors in the programs?
10. What would be your recommendation(s) for the Center?
11. How confident did you feel about yourself and the completion of the program?

Fifty-two participants participated in the telephone interviews. Other trainees had either relocated or could not be reached at the telephone number listed in Center records.

The results of the 52 telephone interviews can be summarized into a few points. In response to the first question, 44 respondents indicated that the training they received was very helpful in getting a job. They all received at least between 4-8 hours of training. The remaining eight respondents do not feel that the training helped them because they have not used the experience to do anything.

Overall, 49 respondents believed they were now better prepared for the workforce than before. Remaining respondents were not sure how well they were prepared for the workforce because they had not attempted to look for job.
In regard to job assistance provided through the Center, only four respondents indicated that they sought help in getting employment. However, 12 respondents indicated that they were unable to get employment after their training. All except seven respondents indicated that they did not get a job in the area of their training. All the respondents reported having secured up to two jobs since completing their training. Only one respondent reported having secured up to four jobs. Only 19 respondents indicated that they were not working at the present. Of these 19, five were in school full-time.

All the respondents indicated that they would come back to the Center for additional training if offered. All respondents reported very favourable perceptions of the personnel and the instructors at the Center. All respondents also indicated that there should be more training and support for those who needed it. Most importantly, they felt that they should be able to have access to child care. Finally, all respondents indicated that they feel more self-confident than they did before the training.

This study sought to provide an analysis of the attitudes of the participants and the degree of learning and learning transfer they achieved and to identify the effects of training provided by the Center on recipients' subsequent employment and job position. However, as is the case with most research studies, caution should be applied when interpreting the results and generalizing the findings to other populations.

Conclusion

This study confirmed the positive effects of job training on employment rates and income levels. Of the 138 participants enrolled in the Center, 73% secured employment following completion of training, and participants who completed training enjoyed significant increases in hourly rates of pay. These findings support the continued emphasis on training and transition services as an effective means for moving high-risk participants from welfare to employment.

This study also revealed how participants' perceptions of the training they received from the Center at CSULB through the WTW program. All respondents indicated they felt there should be more
opportunity for education and training. The length of the training period also appeared to be a major concern of respondents. They all indicated that they should be allowed to continue training as long as needed to achieve self-sufficiency.

This study suggests that life is a struggle both for those on welfare and those who have recently left it. Those who participated in the telephone survey are still living in poverty, and a few were unable to find jobs even after completion of the training. All participants were young mothers with an average age of 25 years. They are members of a high-risk population who need consistent support and encouragement and ongoing, incremental training and education for change. They need to feel the sense of belonging in society and seeing themselves as capable of being competitive in the labor market.

Additional education and enhanced preparation and development would provide welfare-to-work services to families whose incomes are not adequate to meet their basic needs. Mandatory basic education is important since all participants expressed a desire to continue additional training or education that would help them escape poverty. However in other studies, only 8% stated that they wanted to go back to school to study basic education, while about 60% preferred to get specific skills training, and 30% indicated they desired help in seeking employment (Gueron & Hamilton, 2002).

Workforce education can improve adaptation to the new global economic environment by teaching a broader set of skills and a global mindset (Kerka, 1993). To guide professionals who are training these people, the main goal has been to adopt four-principles outlined by Gray and Herr (1998). These principles are aimed at meeting trainees' needs and helping the provider (Center) responsible for such training to focus efforts. The principles are summarized as follows:

1. The curriculum for WTW programs should be designed by formal methods of task analysis.

   Formal task analysis is the most reliable and valid method, because it is based upon objective descriptions of occupational tasks. Skills, knowledge, and attitudes for a certain occupation are identified and used as the basis for curriculum content design.
2. Workforce educators need to design curricula to incorporate a specific set of ethical standards. In the case of workforce education, the four ethical imperatives are to promote learning, ensure health and safety, protect the public or private trust, and facilitate the transition from school or training to work.

3. The Welfare to Work curriculum needs to promote the learning of job readiness techniques, ensure the health and safety of participants, protect their confidentiality and trust, and assist them in their transition from welfare to the world of work.

4. In the Welfare to Work program, it is necessary to teach welfare recipients methods of job search that will help them to become employed within a limited amount of time. If a client is not tested on their new learning and if they are not successful in their job search, and then there has been a failure on the part of the workforce educator to determine how to assist the client in their learning.

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