

Who Has Access: The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and Incumbent Workers

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigated the impact of Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding on the providers and planners of programs for incumbent workers in one Midwest WIA region. From a critical theory perspective, the study applied Matland's ambiguity/conflict framework to WIA implementation. Conflicts over participants' roles in the WIA system and over interpretation of the legislation and ambiguity about the process of implementation emerged. Methods to better address the needs of incumbent worker development using the functional context approach are discussed.

Introduction

Incumbent workers are employed members of the labor force who may need additional skills or training to remain employed. Using critical theory as a lens, the researchers described the effects of WIA, demonstrating how the application of critical theory to an education program planning can illuminate the *process* of planning and help create more effective legislation on workforce development and its implementation. The research question was: How did the WIA funding system impact the providers and planners of programs for incumbent workers?

WIA authorized funding and established a system for the implementation of local and state workforce development systems. While the legislation specifically provided for the inclusion of incumbent workers (Patel & Strong, 2003), few resources have been directed to upgrading their skills, with the majority of documented efforts focusing on placement services for unemployed or new workers (Workforce Investment Act, 1998, Atkinson, 1999). Incumbent workers may be served by WIA funds in three ways: through the regular employment and training services by the one-stop centers, through on-the-job training or special employer-based curriculums provided by the local WIA system, and through state-reserve funding that allows the states to provide innovative services directly (Workforce Investment Act, 1998). Several critiques of WIA have been published, addressing services provided to the unemployed and to those entering the workforce (Barnow & King, 2003, Patel & Strawn, 2003, Savner, 1999). This research showed no indication that WIA implementation was addressing incumbent workers. Cervero and Wilson (2006) explain that educational programming is a political process that defines "*who* is at the planning table making evaluative judgments" as well the "political dynamics that occur *at* the table" (p. 230). WIA's effects on program planners for incumbent workers can be better understood by asking what the decisions reveal about stakeholders' objectives, how their spoken objectives conflict with their actions, and how both conflict with the explicit program objectives.

Methodology

Six participants were purposively selected and interviewed to create a cross section of those involved with the WIA implementation process in the region. The participants were Mary,

a current one-stop center director; John, a local business representative and former Workforce Investment Board member; Jane the county's manager of service and performance for workforce development; and Dan, Ann and Dave, three upper-level managers at the state's workforce development office. Interview data was analyzed through the constant comparative method, using Matland's (1995) ambiguity/conflict framework. Matland's framework divides policy implementation conflict into jurisdiction conflict and interpretation conflict. Jurisdictional conflict involves disagreements over the roles that participants play. Interpretation conflict is conflict that arises from differences in the interpretation of a policy. Ambiguity is also divided into two types: goal ambiguity and means ambiguity. Goal ambiguity refers to a lack of clarity on a policy's intended results—the *goals* of the policy. Means ambiguity refers to a lack of clarity on the *process* by which a policy is to be carried out (Cohen, Timmons & Fesko, 2005, Matland, 1995). Trustworthiness (validity) was ensured through multiple methods of data collection, building an audit trail, working with a research team, and utilizing member checks.

Findings

Study participants shared an understanding of WIA's two-fold goal of creating a seamless, locally tailored workforce development system and of helping develop the skills of the incumbent workforce. Participants agreed that WIA strived to ensure that the system was substantially influenced by the needs of local businesses, and that the means WIA required planners and implementers to follow called for a system that emphasized job placement for the unemployed. This emphasis was achieved by requiring everyone who sought WIA-funded career training to undergo job placement and general-literacy and job-skill development before accessing training. An incumbent worker could not access training unless the first two services failed to provide an increased income. These requirements presented obstacles to incumbent workers obtaining the skill development they needed to maintain their current employment or improve their ability to contribute to the competitiveness of the local workforce. Analysis utilizing Matland's framework revealed four themes in the data. *Change Agent Conflict* relates to conflicts about what the roles should be under the WIA system and who should foster implementation of the new policy. *Power Broker Conflict* relates to who had the real power irrespective of the assigned change agent roles. *Policy Interpretation Conflict* revolved around the participants' interpretation of the intention of the legislation toward incumbent workers. Finally, *Ambiguity of Means* addresses the clarity (or lack thereof) of the process for carrying out the programs to help incumbent workers.

Change Agent Conflict. This conflict centered on who had the power for change: the power structures that existed prior to WIA implementation continued after its implementation, blocking substantial change and favoring the maintenance of the previous system. Both John and Mary cited strong resistance to the role of a change agent by the long-term powers and supported the point that the legislation was presented as a way for change to be driven from the local level, making businesses and their current workers competitive, rather than just helping under-prepared workers to enter the job market. However, as John stated, the reality was that "though we were led to believe that there was going to be a change...there was a bureaucracy in place and it was not going to change." The state-level participants in this study suggested that WIA had been successful in its redistribution of decision-making power because, at the local level, power had been distributed more broadly and included much more influence from representatives of business. Dan, the highest-level state administrator participating in this study, explained that

“there’s a much larger shared responsibility for the decision making, as opposed to the past, where it was limited probably to high-ranking officials in the area.”

Power Broker Conflict. This second jurisdictional conflict involved a disagreement in the perception of who had the real power to be a change agent. Local-level study participants perceived the state as maintaining control over the redesign of the workforce development system while state level study participants said that the power to redesign the system had moved from their hands to the local level. As a specific example, Jane described a situation where local providers would agree on how to collaborate, and then when an agency reported back to their state-level supervisors “the state agency said ‘we’re doing all of it’”. This prevented any integration at the local level. This jurisdictional conflict involving the disagreement in the perception of power between the local and state levels was demonstrated in the description of the state “option” system for WIA. The option was implemented at the state level as a way for any interested local WIA area to essentially merge with others into one large WIA region, in effect, delocalizing the workforce development system. Participants from the local level viewed this option as a state initiative to diminish local power. Jane further explained that this attempt to unite local areas was challenged on the federal level. This conflict was also evident in the local recommendations on how to improve WIA implementation, which centered on the need for the state to involve the local areas in decision making

Policy Interpretation Conflict. This conflict centered on how participants interpreted WIA’s language regarding the incumbent workforce: some study participants interpreted the legislation to focus on incumbent worker training, while others interpreted incumbent workers as a minor concern of the legislation. However, Mary questioned whether this was an acceptable interpretation of WIA: “There have been several communities that have found ways to use these resources for incumbent workers but I would push that somebody might question whether that was legitimate.” The state level participants’ interpretations were summed up by Dave who said “I think that it was for incumbent worker training...What it did was it told the locals they could use their money for incumbent worker training, but it didn’t give them any extra money for it.” Mary pointed out that early in the WIA process, the legislation was interpreted as an initiative to address incumbent worker skills: “the Workforce Investment Board at the State level was adamant about [incumbent worker training] being a focus.” And there was a lot of talk and discussion about employers getting involved because it was an opportunity for them to have some influence over not only incumbent worker training, but other training as well. So, while all interpreted the legislation to at least allow for incumbent worker training, there was conflict in 1) the perception of the importance of the incumbent workforce in the achievement of the goals of WIA, 2) the definition of incumbent worker, and 3) interpretations regarding the supply or lack of resources to fund the incumbent worker portion of WIA.

Ambiguity of Means. This theme revealed that planners and providers did not find clear guidance on the process for providing incumbent worker development. Instead, they found guidance only on developing a system for serving youth, the unemployed and very low-income workers as individuals, independent of their workplace. Jane, the local legislative expert, made it clear that WIA did not provide much guidance about incumbent worker training. She explained, “if you look through [the guidelines] there’s really not a lot...in terms of providing services to employers, although you are expected to...help employers [with] incumbent worker kind of training.” The state level administrators agreed that trying to apply a fair standard in incumbent worker training is a major challenge, raising the issue of how to decide whose employees received such training. Ann also pointed out the WIA guidelines describe qualified participants

in terms of individuals and make no provisions for qualifying a group of workers in a specific job classification. The means to meet adult, dislocated and youth goals were clear in the legislation with funds allocated to them, creating an unambiguous set of funded means and accountabilities that directed planners' attention toward dislocated workers, unemployed adults and youth. However, the legislation did not have any clear means, funding, accountabilities, or even incentives, for addressing incumbent worker training needs.

Discussion

The two conclusions drawn from this research reveal that WIA had effects on planners and providers of services for incumbent workers that are contrary to the stated goals of the legislation. First, WIA created a systematic structure that inhibited providers and planners from engaging in incumbent workforce development. Second, WIA implementation disempowered and disengaged business representatives in supporting government-based workforce development efforts.

WIA Structure Prevented Incumbent Workforce Development. Several legislation issues contributed to WIA creating a system that supported services to unemployed and new workers only—effectively preventing providers from addressing incumbent workers. While WIA included incumbent workers in its goals, it laid out specific tasks and requirements for serving the unemployed without providing any such guidance on addressing the incumbent worker. This centered implementers' attention on serving unemployed and new workers. Evaluation criteria, which focused on obtaining employment and increasing wages, reinforced the system's focus on the unemployed. Participants indicated that the resulting WIA system did not have the issue of incumbent workforce development as a goal, and it did not offer the structure, services or expertise necessary to address incumbent worker issues. This is evident in their descriptions of how the system required a quick increase in individual income for incumbent workers as the criteria for both eligibility in and for program success. Incumbent workers often need training just to maintain their income. The goals of workplace education should include both maintaining employment of the worker and keeping the business competitive.

Disempowering and Disengaging Business Representatives. WIA's language emphasized incumbent worker development, local decision making, business influence on implementation, and services to employers. This created an expectation that local business representatives would be empowered to significantly change the county workforce development system to help employers provide incumbent worker training. But WIA made no provisions for that training. Many business people lost hope that the system was willing or able to collaborate with businesses, and would actually address workforce development. Several forces contributed to this. First, even though businesspeople were brought into the system for guidance on how to address their workforce needs, the mandated one-stop structure did not provide a way to offer employer-based workforce development. Second, participants described a system that resisted change. Efforts to direct the system toward incumbent worker development were blocked by the power structures that existed prior to WIA implementation. Those in power used WIA's explicit requirements to defend these decisions. Trust between business representatives and public sector bureaucracies broke down. This was exacerbated by differences in the pace of change that participants required: businesses must plan and respond to changes in the environment on a short timeline. Failure to do so can result in devastating effects to the business economy. This contributed to the breakdown in relationships between the public and private sector. These

conflicts disempowered and disengaged business leaders who had been highly motivated and committed to contributing to the workforce development system.

This study described a policy-mandated system that failed to meet one of its explicit goals: employer-based workforce development. The system design did not consider the context of incumbent workforce development from the employers' perspective. In both practice and theory, it might be useful to look at the role that workforce development plays in economic development. Considering economic development puts a focus on local businesses—its strengths, weakness, challenges and opportunities. It considers improved competitiveness of the workforce as a whole as one basis for evaluation, in addition to the benefit provided to each individual, making economic competitiveness a driving force behind decision making. While the services to meet individual needs are still primary, local employers' workforce needs play a much greater role in determining what skills are addressed and how they are addressed.

Adult Educators at the Planning Table. Adult education practitioners who specialize in the functional context approach (FCA) must have significant power at the planning table to ensure a well planned and conscious development of policy and programming that will meet stakeholder objectives. FCA integrates the work context into the learners' process to develop a practically skilled workforce (Philippi, 1991). FCA practitioners bring a unique ability to build links between the other stakeholders that guarantee the identification and programmatic achievement of their objectives. They link the policy makers with the employers by providing the methods to identify employers' workforce development objectives—methods that can form the foundation for policy objectives that truly address workforce development. They link policy makers with local providers by helping develop policy objectives that can be effectively implemented, ensuring a system that will support incumbent workforce development. They link local providers with both workers and employers through a structured method of designing and implementing workplace education programs that achieve both the policy objectives and the employers' objectives. And most significantly, FCA practitioners link employers with workers by eliminating assumptions about skill needs, identifying the skill gaps between a particular workforce and the job-skill demands of their workplace, and closing that gap in a way that necessitates the transfer of learning to the workplace. Adult educators must see their input as crucial from the very inception of policies such as WIA, and become willing and active participants from the beginning. Adult educators can play a unique role for government and business, negotiating the abstract needs and desires of both into practical policies and programs that can address the concerns of both, and they must take the initiative to making sure they play that role. Finally, if business is to rely on the government for support of workforce development, trust must be rebuilt and the timeline conflict must be reconciled. The fact that business must frequently plan on a short timeline cannot be changed. Planners, practitioners, employers and government entities must resist the temptation to blame each others' limitations, reinforcing negative perceptions and giving up on collaboration, while the workers suffer from these disputes in ways that none of the parties can afford.

Further Research. Future research should investigate the development of systems for workforce development funding including effective evaluation methods. Investigation into how organized labor might be brought to the planning table to represent the objectives of the workers could prove valuable, as would research into the positive and negative roles that organized labor has played in the formation and implementation of similar policies. Since all study participants who were directly involved in WIA implementation cited difficulties in ensuring fair selection of employer participants in a way that is uncontrolled by political influences, research into fair and

effective means of establishing eligibility criteria is also recommended. Research on the integration of the functional context approach into a workforce development system that relies on government resources and is directed at the needs of business is important. Finally, scholars may contribute significantly to workforce development that benefits workers by addressing ways to reconcile the public and private sectors' differences in timeframes they require for implementing change.

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