



Exploring Challenges in Adult Learning: A Qualitative Study of Community Learning Centres in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Adult learners in Community Learning Centres (CLCs) face numerous challenges that hinder their educational progress, including inadequate infrastructure, financial constraints, socio-cultural barriers, and limited institutional support. Thus, this study explored these challenges using a qualitative research approach, with secondary data collection and thematic analysis employed to identify key patterns and trends. Findings revealed that overcrowded classrooms, outdated learning materials, and insufficient financial resources negatively impact adult learners' engagement and retention. Additionally, cultural perceptions, gender roles, and psychological barriers such as low self-esteem further discourage participation in adult education programs. Grounded in Knowles' Andragogy Theory, the study highlights the importance of self-directed learning and the role of prior experiences in shaping adult education. Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive interventions, including increased funding, enhanced lecturer support, and policy enforcement. Strengthening institutional structures and fostering an inclusive learning environment can improve educational outcomes and promote lifelong learning among adult learners in CLCs. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by exploring how inadequate institutional resources undermine learner retention, while low self-esteem and prevailing cultural norms hinder adult participation in Community Learning Centres. The findings address a gap in adult education research and provide critical insights for strengthening support systems and promoting learner engagement in resource-constrained environments.

Keywords - Community Learning Centres, Institutional Challenges, Lecturer, Lifelong Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Adult education plays a crucial role in equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to enhance their social and economic well-being. The development of a nation is heavily dependent on education, particularly adult education.¹ Globally, Community Learning Centres (CLCs) serve as essential institutions that provide second-chance education, vocational training, and literacy programs for adult learners. Despite their significance, CLCs face numerous challenges that hinder effective learning and retention. Many adult learners struggle due to inadequate institutional support, outdated

¹ Mousa Alfaifi, "Enrollment at Adult High Schools in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: An Exploration of Motivation, Age, and Gender Using Boshier's EPS A-Form," *Adult Education Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (November 20, 2024): 302–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/07417136241239328>.

teaching methods, financial constraints, and the challenge of balancing work and home responsibilities. Stevens highlights that adult learners often experience setbacks that impact their educational progress.²

In the United Kingdom, adult education has long been a key component of lifelong learning policies.³ However, adult learners, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, face several barriers. Financial constraints remain a significant obstacle, as many learners struggle to afford study materials, tuition fees, and transportation costs.⁴ Social and cultural barriers also contribute to low participation rates, with many adults, especially older individuals and members of minority ethnic groups, experiencing stigma associated with returning to education.⁵ Additionally, cultural perceptions surrounding adult education, particularly among older learners, deter participation in lifelong learning initiatives.⁶

In India, learners often encounter socio-economic challenges, with many persons from rural areas struggling to attend education due to budgetary constraints, transportation issues, and a lack of infrastructure.⁷ Gender disparity is another barrier to education and is driven by cultural expectations that limit women's access to educational opportunities, with deeply ingrained gender roles and social norms that reinforce barriers to their educational advancement.⁸ With traditional perspectives on education and little support for adult education, particularly for people who have been out of formal schooling for a long time, cultural obstacles also play a big role. According to a study by Reddy et.al., most Indian students in 2017–2018 lacked access to crucial digital infrastructure, such as computers or internet-connected tablets.⁹

Adult learners in Nigeria confront many socioeconomic obstacles, particularly in rural areas where poverty, poor infrastructure, and a shortage of qualified lecturers restrict access to education.¹⁰ High dropout rates are the result of many adults juggling their education with obligations to their families and their jobs. Cultural and gender barriers, such as early marriage and societal norms prioritizing domestic roles, continue to limit women's participation in adult education programs in Nigeria, particularly in conservative regions where these expectations are deeply rooted.¹¹ Traditional gender roles and cultural norms prevent women from pursuing education due to things such as early marriage and household responsibilities.

In Kenya, adult education initiatives, such as the Economic Empowerment and Functional Adult Literacy Programme, have been implemented to promote skill development and reduce poverty by equipping adults with literacy and entrepreneurial skills.¹² Despite this initiative and others, Kenya, like many African countries, struggles with issues related to socio-economic status, with adult learners facing financial hardships that make education inaccessible.¹³ For many adults, transportation and the cost of education remain significant barriers. To ease this challenge, the Kenyan government introduced

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- ² H. V. Stevens, "Access, Barriers to Participation and Success amongst Adult Students in an Undergraduate Academic Programme at a University in the Western Cape" (University of the Western Cape-Institutional Repository., 2020), <https://uwcscholar.uwc.ac.za/items/d9cc4507-11e4-4c48-9080-a97400023fd0>.
- ³ Jonathan Michie, "Special Issue on Lifelong Learning," *International Review of Applied Economics* 38, no. 4 (July 3, 2024): 383–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02692171.2024.2371624>.
- ⁴ Idowu Biao, "Financing Adult Learning and Education (ALE) Now and in Future," *International Review of Education* 68, no. 2 (2022): 213–31.
- ⁵ Leon Feinstein and Cathie Hammond, "The Contribution of Adult Learning to Health and Social Capital," *Oxford Review of Education* 30, no. 2 (2004): 199–221.
- ⁶ Tilahun Adamu Mengistie, "How Do Learners View Adult Education? Women Learners' Perception on the Ethiopia's Adult Education Programme," *Heliyon* 8, no. 4 (April 2022): e09272, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e09272>.
- ⁷ Arjun Kumar et al., "Educational Inequality and Its Impact on Social and Economic Opportunities in Rural India," *International Journal of Humanities, Management and Social Science (IJ-HuMaSS)* 7, no. 2 (2024): 87–96.
- ⁸ Scientific and Cultural Organization United Nations Educational, "2019 GEM Report: Building Bridges for Gender Equality," 2019, <https://gem-report-2019.unesco.org/gender-report/>.
- ⁹ A. Reddy, S. Jose, and R. Vaidehi, "Of Access and Inclusivity: Digital Divide in Online Education," *Economic & Political Weekly* 55, no. 36 (2020): 23–26, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344171426_Of_Access_and_Inclusivity_Digital_Divide_in_Online_Education.
- ¹⁰ C. Okeke, P. Eze, and T. Adebayo, "Socio-Economic Barriers to Adult Education in Rural Nigeria: A Qualitative Study.," *Journal of Education and Development* 15, no. 1 (2023): 45–58.
- ¹¹ Adedolapo Femi-Aderinto, "Challenges Nigerian Women Face as Adult Learners in Learning Spaces" 1(November 1, 2021):151–70.
- ¹² Kenya Adult Learners' Association, "Economic Empowerment and Functional Adult Literacy Programme.," <https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/litbase/economic-empowerment-and-functional-adult-literacy-programme-kenya>, n.d.
- ¹³ D. Mutisya, "Technology and Learning Challenges in Kenya: Adult Education in the Digital Age.," *African Journal of Adult Education* 29, no. 1 (2015).

mobile learning platforms in adult education programs to improve access to basic education for adults in remote areas, enhancing their career prospects.¹⁴ Gender inequality in adult education is reinforced by societal expectations, where women are often pressured to prioritize family responsibilities over educational opportunities, limiting their participation in learning programs.¹⁵ Furthermore, participation may be restricted by cultural views on adult education, especially for elderly people or those who return to learning centres after a prolonged absence.

The South African government, like other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, came up with good initiatives to implement adult education.¹⁶ The government has initiated the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET), although there are challenges, such as insufficient teaching and learning materials.¹⁷ Additionally, adult learners face socio-economic barriers similar to those in other developing countries, including poverty and limited access to resources. The racial and historical divide continues to affect access to quality education, particularly in rural or historically disadvantaged communities. Furthermore, there are gender disparities, and women in many communities have fewer opportunities for education due to cultural norms, family responsibilities, and limited access to support networks.¹⁸

Additionally, adult learners face psychological barriers, such as low self-esteem, fear of failure, and a lack of confidence in their academic abilities due to past educational experiences. Challenges such as inadequate teaching materials, insufficiently trained lecturers, and limited support from stakeholders contribute to high dropout rates in many Community Learning Centres across South Africa.¹⁹ South Africa has made strides in policy to support adult education, yet the implementation and access to these programs remain inconsistent. Adult learners encounter a variety of comparable difficulties worldwide, including socioeconomic, cultural, and technical obstacles as previously indicated. These issues are particularly noticeable in underdeveloped nations, where adult education results are impacted by a lack of infrastructure, gender inequality, and restricted access to resources.

This study's main aim is to investigate the challenges adult learners encounter in CLCs. Through the review of current literature, the study aimed to identify the barriers to adult learning and propose possible solutions. The following research questions are addressed to direct the study:

1. What are the common barriers adult learners encounter at CLCs?
2. What effects do institutional, personal, and socioeconomic factors have on adult learners' experiences and achievements?

This study highlights the importance of adult education by deepening our understanding of learning in CLCs and their critical role in national development and lifelong learning. The findings provide evidence-based insights with significant policy implications, providing guidance for strategic reforms to better support adult learners. Furthermore, the study informs institutional development by equipping CLC administrators and lecturers with practical ways to improve teaching strategies, strengthen student support systems, and improve curriculum design, thereby fostering a more effective and inclusive learning environment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: Knowles' Andragogy Theory

¹⁴ Anastasia Gakuru, "The Influence of ICT on Teaching and Learning in Adult Education Programs in Nairobi County Kenya," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 8, no. 5 (2024): 788–99.

¹⁵ X. Tawana and P. Higgs, "Alleviating Gender Inequalities in Public Community Learning Centres in the Eastern Cape," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 35, no. 6 (December 2021), <https://doi.org/10.20853/35-6-4157>.

¹⁶ DHET., "National Policy on Community Colleges. ," 2015.

¹⁷ Doria Daniels, "Exploring Adult Basic Education and Training as a Transformative Learning Space for Alienated Out-of-School Youth in South Africa," *International Review of Education* 66, no. 2 (2020): 363–85.

¹⁸ Sadia Shaukat and Anthony William Pell, "The Impact of Socio-Cultural Factors on Females Passing through Higher Education in Pakistan," *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research* 17, no. 71 (2017): 193–214.

¹⁹ Morakinyo Akintolu and Chinaza Uleanya, "Ensuring Sustainable Development Goal in Rural Africa through Adult Literacy Programme: A Case Study of Technology Usage in Developing Nations," *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 9, no. 4 (April 2021): 713–19, <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2021.090401>.

This study is guided by Malcolm Knowles' theory of andragogy, which outlines core principles that shape adult learning.²⁰ Central to this theory is the recognition that adult learners are self-directed, bring valuable life experiences to the learning process, and are primarily motivated by internal goals such as personal growth or career advancement. These principles are particularly relevant within CLCs, where learners often balance education with work, family, and other responsibilities.

Knowles emphasizes that adults learn best when content is relevant to their lives and when they are treated with respect. In the context of CLCs, this means creating learning environments that are flexible, learner-centred, and respectful of learners' diverse backgrounds. Many adult learners face challenges, such as limited digital literacy, inadequate institutional support, and socioeconomic constraints. Understanding these barriers through the lens of andragogy allows educators to design responsive and inclusive strategies that promote meaningful engagement and success.

However, the theory is not without critique. Scholars like Cross have pointed out that not all adults are naturally self-directed or intrinsically motivated.²¹ Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds may need more structured support. Therefore, although andragogy provides a valuable foundation, its application must be context-sensitive, especially in under-resourced settings. Despite its limitations, andragogy remains a key framework for understanding and addressing the complex needs of adult learners in CLCs, offering practical insights for improving teaching, curriculum design, and learner support.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a rigorous desktop research method, a qualitative research approach, and a critical analysis of academic literature on adult education in community learning centres (CLCs) and institutional regulations. This is because it enables a thorough and methodical analysis of secondary data sources. This allows for the discovery of important trends, enduring problems, and best practices in adult education. Using what is already known and avoiding direct fieldwork, this method guarantees a comprehensive and effective assessment of the educational dynamics and institutional frameworks that influence adult learning in CLCs.

Data Collection Methods

This study used secondary data collection, which entails obtaining and examining previously published information from reliable sources. Journal papers and theses that concentrate on adult education, learner retention, and educational policy in CLCs are key sources. Since this study did not collect primary data, no organisations or individuals were contacted directly outside of the body of publicly available literature. As such, the researcher made certain that all sources were properly cited. First, a sample of five theses and six journal articles was taken. However, four of these eleven documents were later excluded due to irrelevance, leaving seven sources that directly address learner challenges in CLCs.

Data Analysis

The study used thematic analysis to examine secondary data from publicly accessible theses, articles, and policy documents. Following Clarke and Braun's six-phase method, the researcher systematically familiarised themselves with the data, generated initial codes, and developed key themes. Through this process, the following themes emerged: institutional challenges, socioeconomic hurdles, cultural and psychological variables, **and** lack of support from the Department of Higher Education and Training. These themes were reviewed, defined, and used to structure the analysis. The findings were then written with supporting evidence from the literature, ensuring a credible and well-contextualised interpretation of the challenges facing adult education.

Ethical Considerations

²⁰ Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge Books, 1980); Anne Hartree, "Malcolm Knowles' Theory of Andragogy: A Critique," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 3, no. 3 (April 9, 1984): 203–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0260137840030304>.

²¹ K Patricia Cross, *Adults as Learners: Increasing Participation and Facilitating Learning* (John Wiley & Sons, 1992).

In this study, a desktop qualitative technique was used, drawing on previously published works from publicly accessible sources, such as theses, articles, and other materials. The study did not directly engage with people or organisations because it only used secondary data. Maintaining academic integrity required the researcher to take full responsibility for ensuring all sources were correctly cited and acknowledged. To ensure the legitimacy and dependability of the sources employed, ethical considerations were paramount. Because the study only uses publicly accessible data, it recognises any potential biases in the literature and offers a fair assessment of various viewpoints.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The Concept of Adult Learning and Adult Education

Adult learning is the process by which adults pick up new information, abilities, values, or attitudes to improve their social, professional, or personal lives. To acquire new skills, attitudes, or behaviours, adults actively participate in structured, supervised, self-directed learning activities.²² This type of education covers a wide range of learning activities outside the confines of conventional schooling. It includes more sophisticated learning styles targeted at social empowerment, professional advancement, and personal growth, as well as more fundamental literacy and numeracy abilities.²³ Adult learning differs from childhood learning in that it emphasises learners' past experiences, independence, and the application of knowledge in real-world situations. In addition to non-formal and informal settings, including workplaces, community centres, and homes, adult learning can occur through official programs like literacy and vocational training.

Importance of Adult Education

Approximately 17 million people, or 40% of South Africa's population between the ages of 15 and 60, were classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) in 2020, highlighting the critical need for focused educational activities.²⁴ Adult education is essential as it greatly enhances individual growth and the wider community. It meets the requirements of individuals denied access to formal education, allowing them to acquire the skills required for work and social engagement. Adult education provides marginalized people a way out of poverty and gives them the tools they need to make more meaningful contributions to their communities. It is associated with economic growth, social integration, and civic engagement.

Lifelong Learning

The idea of lifelong learning emphasises how crucial it is for people to continue learning throughout their lives.²⁵ This is especially pertinent to adult learners, who might need to update their skills or adjust to shifting social, technical, or economic contexts.²⁶ Section 29(1) of the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa clearly declares that "everyone has the right to basic education, including adult basic education." Many that sustain employability, personal development, and well-being require lifelong learning. Community Learning Centres (CLCs) play a pivotal role in advancing this approach by offering flexible, accessible, community-based educational opportunities and the enhancement of employability.²⁷

²² Temesgen Guyassa, Tamiru Olana, and Rufael Disasa, "Exploring EFL Teachers' Site-Based Professional Development: Beliefs and Practices," *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development* 10, no. 4 (April 30, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.24940/ijird/2021/v10/i4/APR21003>.

²³ Guyassa, Olana, and Disasa, "Exploring EFL Teachers' Site-Based Professional Development: Beliefs and Practices."

²⁴ M. Khuluvhe and A. Negogogo, "Understanding the NEET Phenomenon: A South African Perspective on Youth Unemployment and Underemployment.," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 2 (2021): 1-15.

²⁵ J. Field, "Lifelong Learning and the Knowledge Society: Implications for Education Policy.," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 42, no. 1 (2023): 1-15.

²⁶ Constantinos Nicolaou, "Information and Communications Technologies through Technology-Enhanced Learning in Adult Education: The Re-Approach of the Adult Educator and the Adult Learners," in *Technology Training for Educators from Past to Present* (IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2022), 73-94.

²⁷ Tumelo Dithhale and Geesje van den Berg, "Bridging the Skills Gap: Integrating Mobile Learning in Adult Basic Education and Training for Enhanced Employability in South Africa," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 23, no. 8 (August 30, 2024): 591-604, <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.23.8.30>.

Role of community learning centres (CLCs)

Community Learning Centres link formal and informal education, giving adults from underserved communities access to education. They are informal learning environments that offer chances for adult learners who have either dropped out of school or are looking to improve their skills. To reduce illiteracy, adult education is provided by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). To combat illiteracy and give jobless adults and youth useful skills that can improve their prospects of finding work, Community Learning Centre programs are essential.²⁸

The programs offered by these facilities open doors for adult learners to enrol in skill-based educational institutions. The majority of the ABET's courses, according to OECD, are more academic in nature and do not give students skills that would help them in the workforce.²⁹ Furthermore, Chombo (2014) lists several issues that most learning centres face, such as a lack of resources, insufficient funding, and lecturer absenteeism.

Challenges faced by Adult Learners in Community Learning Centres (CLCs)

Institutional challenges

Numerous Community Learning Centres (CLCs) function with minimal resources, such as antiquated instructional materials, inadequate staff training, and inadequate infrastructure. Additionally, Kara et al., note that institutional barriers that deter adult learners include learning materials that are often unsuitable and challenging, and programmes that are too demanding on the adult learner.³⁰ These problems limit adult learners' access to learning opportunities and have a substantial negative influence on the quality of education. Furthermore, because many programs are not designed to meet the unique needs of adult learners, curriculum-related issues impede effective learning. Students often find it difficult to apply their knowledge in real-world situations since the curriculum lacks contextual and practical relevance.

Socio-economic barriers

According to Mohan, financial constraints pose a major challenge for adult learners, particularly in low-income communities.³¹ Many struggle to pay tuition fees, transportation costs, or even the time required to attend classes due to financial responsibilities such as supporting families or managing household expenses. Rakoma and Schulze assert that the primary challenge preventing most learners from participating in the adult learning programmes is a lack of financial resources.³² Additionally, balancing work and family commitments with education is a significant hurdle. Adult learners who are parents or caregivers often find it difficult to allocate time to their studies, leading to high dropout rates.

Cultural and Social Barriers

Cultural factors, such as language, family expectations, and community norms, often influence the willingness of adult learners to engage in CLC programs. Returning to school later in life can be stigmatised in some communities, where adult education is not valued. This social perception can discourage learners from pursuing further education.³³ Additionally, gender inequalities create further obstacles, particularly for women in patriarchal societies where access to education may be limited or where they face discrimination within educational settings.

Psychological and Emotional Barriers

²⁸ I. K. Biney, "Adult Education and Entrepreneurship: Getting Young Adults and Disadvantaged Communities into Lifelong Learning and Work Readiness," 2024.

²⁹ OECD, *Community Education and Training in South Africa (Getting Skills Right)* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264312302-en>.

³⁰ Mehmet Kara et al., "Challenges Faced by Adult Learners in Online Distance Education: A Literature Review," *Open Praxis* 11, no. 1 (March 31, 2019): 5, <https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.11.1.929>.

³¹ Charlotte Mohan, "Challenges Faced by Adult Learners in a Technical Vocational Education and Training College in the Uthukela District of Kwazulu-Natal South Africa" (University of South Africa, 2022), <https://uir.unisa.ac.za/items/7fb41530-afb1-4b88-8e1a-4b13b662353b>.

³² M. M., Rakoma and S. Schulze, "Challenges of Curriculum Implementation in Adult Learning Centres," *Journal for New Generation Sciences* 13, no. 2 (2015): 23–40.

³³ Tawana and Higgs, "Alleviating Gender Inequalities in Public Community Learning Centres in the Eastern Cape."

Lack of confidence, fear of failure, and low self-esteem plague many adult learners, particularly those who have had bad experiences with formal schooling. According to Kearney, adult learners who exhibit low self-esteem, school rejection, anxiety, and behaviours associated with emotional issues frequently resort to verbal and physical aggression.³⁴ These mental obstacles may prevent students from giving their best to their schoolwork. Additionally, burnout is frequently caused by emotional exhaustion that comes from balancing work, school, and family obligations, making it challenging for students to remain dedicated to their studies. This has a detrimental effect on adult learners' capacity to attend and engage in class. According to Mello, these factors contribute to high dropout rates in CLCs.³⁵

The Impact of these Barriers on Educational Participation and Outcomes

Limited resources in CLCs, such as outdated instructional materials, inadequate staff training, and poor infrastructure, negatively impact the quality of education and limit adult learners' ability to engage effectively in their studies.³⁶ The lack of suitable learning materials and overly demanding programmes discourages participation and makes it difficult for learners to apply their knowledge in real-world situations. Additionally, financial constraints create major obstacles, as many learners struggle to afford tuition fees and transportation costs while managing work and family responsibilities, leading to high dropout rates.³⁷ Cultural and social factors further exacerbate these challenges, as social stigma around adult education discourages many from returning to school, and gender inequalities limit women's access to learning opportunities.³⁸ Psychological and emotional barriers, including fear of failure, low self-esteem, and anxiety, diminish learners' confidence and motivation, often preventing them from fully engaging in their studies.³⁹ Moreover, the emotional strain of juggling work, education, and family responsibilities often results in burnout, further increasing dropout rates.⁴⁰ Collectively, these institutional, socio-economic, cultural, and psychological challenges create significant barriers to learning, ultimately reducing educational success and limiting opportunities for adult learners.

Educational Approaches and Teaching Strategies in Community Learning Centres

The instructional strategies used in community learning centres must consider the particular requirements of adult learners. Interactive and learner-centred approaches encourage engagement and deeper learning, while traditional lecturer-centred methods are frequently less effective.⁴¹ Active participation is promoted by techniques such as group projects, discussion-based learning, and real-world knowledge applications. Due to their emphasis on practical experiences and real-world applications, experiential learning, problem-based learning, and project-based learning are especially well-suited for adult learners. Peer learning and group conversations also boost motivation and engagement by establishing a sense of community and shared knowledge.⁴² The concepts of adult learning should also be reflected in the assessment techniques used in CLCs; formative, self-, and peer evaluations are more successful than traditional exams.⁴³ By allowing students to evaluate their own development and pinpoint areas for improvement, these methods promote ongoing progress.

Retention and Motivation of Adult Learners

³⁴ Mary-Louise Kearney, "Higher Education, Research and Innovation: Charting the Course of the Changing Dynamics of the Knowledge Society," *Higher Education, Research and Innovation: Changing Dynamics* 7 (2009).

³⁵ Masefora Victoria Mello, *Absenteeism of Adult Learners at the Sekgosese West Circuit in Limpopo Province: A Critical Reflection* (University of South Africa (South Africa), 2017).

³⁶ Kara et al., "Challenges Faced by Adult Learners in Online Distance Education: A Literature Review."

³⁷ Mohan, "Challenges Faced by Adult Learners in a Technical Vocational Education and Training College in the Uthukela District of Kwazulu-Natal South Africa"; Rakoma and Schulze, "Challenges of Curriculum Implementation in Adult Learning Centres."

³⁸ Tawana and Higgs, "Alleviating Gender Inequalities in Public Community Learning Centres in the Eastern Cape."

³⁹ Kearney, "Higher Education, Research and Innovation: Charting the Course of the Changing Dynamics of the Knowledge Society."

⁴⁰ Mello, *Absenteeism of Adult Learners at the Sekgosese West Circuit in Limpopo Province: A Critical Reflection*.

⁴¹ Jack Mezirow, "Transformative Learning Theory," in *Contemporary Theories of Learning* (Routledge, 2018), 114–28, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315147277-8>.

⁴² J. Cowan, "Peer Learning and Community in Adult Education.," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 40, no. 3 (2021): 283–99.

⁴³ David Boud and Elizabeth Molloy, "Rethinking Models of Feedback for Learning: The Challenge of Design," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 38, no. 6 (September 2013): 698–712, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2012.691462>.

Adult learners are motivated by extrinsic (like job requirements and money incentives) and intrinsic (like career progression and personal fulfilment) aspects, making motivation crucial. According to Knowles' theory of andragogy, adult learners are primarily internally driven and creating programs that engage them requires a knowledge of these motivations.⁴⁴ Several factors, such as financial hardship, a lack of institutional support, and individual obstacles, including family obligations or health issues, hamper retention. CLCs must use tactics, such as flexible learning schedules, financial aid, and learner support services like counselling and mentorship programs, to increase retention rates. Adult learners can stay involved and finish their educational programs successfully if these issues are resolved.

Policy and Institutional Support for Adult Learners

Institutional and Policy Assistance for Adult Learners is greatly aided by institutional strategies and government regulations. Strengthening CLCs and improving adult education access are the goals of numerous national literacy programs, legislative frameworks, and government funding initiatives.⁴⁵ However, proactive measures such as curriculum change, ongoing lecturer training, and greater community involvement are necessary for CLCs to be effective. This is supported by Evans and Rainbird (2020), who assert that continuous professional development for educators and aligning curricula with adult learners' needs are essential for enhancing adult education programs. Adult education programs can offer more inclusive and productive learning environments by adjusting institutional rules to meet the needs of adult learners.

DISCUSSION

Through the analysis of secondary data, the study pinpoints important themes that influence adult education, such as institutional challenges, socioeconomic hurdles, cultural and psychological variables and a lack of support from the Department of Higher Education and Training. To improve adult learning experiences and educational outcomes, the findings point to important areas that need attention.

Institutional Challenges in CLCs

A primary challenge facing CLCs is inadequate infrastructure, which affects effective teaching and learning. Limited financial resources result in overcrowded classrooms, insufficient learning materials, and poor facilities, negatively impacting both lecturers and learners. Mandlize and Sepeng found that many learners reported unsuitable environments, with inadequate teaching resources and concerns about the relevance of educational content, leading to low participation rates.⁴⁶ Overcrowding reduces individual attention, weakening instructional quality and negatively impacting academic performance. Furthermore, outdated resources and insufficient teacher training exacerbate these challenges. Financial constraints also continue to be a major barrier to adult education. Feinstein & Hammond highlighted that adult learners, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, often struggle with access to learning materials, tuition fees, and transportation costs, which limit their ability to participate.⁴⁷ Similarly, Mokgwathi et al. found that poor infrastructure in learning centres directly impacts learning outcomes, which is also evident in CLCs.⁴⁸ Financial and infrastructural constraints were key factors contributing to low participation and high dropout rates in adult education programs.⁴⁹

Socio-economic Barriers affecting Adult Learners

⁴⁴ Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*.

⁴⁵ R. V. Mabuza, "The Role of Community Learning Centres in the Empowerment of Youth towards Employment or Self Employment – Gauteng Province" (University of South Africa Institutional Repository. <https://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/32456>, 2024).

⁴⁶ P. N. Mandlize and M. S. Sepeng, "Exploring Challenges of Adult Learners in Selected Adult Education and Training (AET) Centres in South Africa: An Analysis of Andragogy Theory," 2024.

⁴⁷ Feinstein and Hammond, "The Contribution of Adult Learning to Health and Social Capital."

⁴⁸ T. Mokgwathi, K. Maponya, and A. Mahlangu, "School Infrastructure and Its Impact on Learner Achievement: A Case of Selected Schools in South Africa" (University of Pretoria, 2023), https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/2263/94144/1/Mokgwathi_School_2023.pdf.

⁴⁹ N. S. Jamile, "Students' Perceptions on Determinants of Dropouts from TVET Colleges in Gauteng Province, South Africa" (University of South Africa, 2025).

Financial constraints remain a significant challenge for adult learners, especially in low-income communities. Many adult learners face difficulties covering tuition fees, transportation costs, and study materials while balancing work and family responsibilities.⁵⁰ Mohan found that some learners were forced to miss classes due to financial hardships, leading to a lack of continuity in their education. These financial barriers often result in reduced participation and high dropout rates in adult education programs. Similarly, Maina and Orodho noted that economic difficulties prevent adult learners from accessing education, particularly when they cannot afford essential materials and transportation costs, contributing to absenteeism and early withdrawal from programs.⁵¹

Cultural and Psychological Barriers

Cultural views significantly influence participation rates in adult education, particularly in regions where adult learning is undervalued. Cultural and societal norms around gender roles often discourage individuals, especially women, from enrolling or continuing their education. Femi-Aderinto found that gender inequality and cultural beliefs about the roles of men and women, particularly in patriarchal societies, limit women's willingness to engage in adult education programs.⁵² Similarly, cultural beliefs and religious views in many communities further restrict women's educational pursuits, reinforcing gender inequality.⁵³ Additionally, psychological barriers, such as low self-esteem and anxiety about failure, are common challenges that hinder adult learners, as highlighted by Mlungisi and Nyathi.⁵⁴ These barriers, often exacerbated by cultural expectations and societal norms, discourage individuals from pursuing educational opportunities, thus affecting retention rates in adult education programs. These factors contribute to a significant decrease in participation and progression in adult education, especially for women.

Lack of Support from the Department of Higher Education and Training

Effective supervision of adult education centres is crucial to maintaining and improving learning conditions. The Department is responsible for conducting regular visits to monitor adult learning programs, ensuring that students receive quality education in a conducive environment. Without consistent monitoring and intervention, the overall learning climate may deteriorate, negatively affecting adult learners' engagement and academic progress. Zeelen, Rampedi and de Jong emphasizes the importance of addressing these challenges to enhance adult learner participation and uphold the quality of education.⁵⁵ Similarly, Akintolu, Uleanya, and Letseka highlight that inadequate support and a lack of accountability from education authorities often result in insufficient resources and poor infrastructure, which further hinders learning outcomes.⁵⁶ Moreover, Daniels argues that the lack of institutional support from the Department of Higher Education and Training contributes to high dropout rates, as adult learners face barriers related to limited access to resources and outdated educational materials.⁵⁷ Government and other adult education providers must take proactive measures to improve infrastructure, resources, and overall program effectiveness to prevent a decline in educational standards.

⁵⁰ Mohan, "Challenges Faced by Adult Learners in a Technical Vocational Education and Training College in the Uthukela District of Kwazulu-Natal South Africa."

⁵¹ Ndonga James Maina and John Aluko Orodho, "Financing Adult Education: How Adequate Are Current Sources in Facilitating Access and Participation in Centres in Murang'a South Sub-County, Murang'a County, Kenya?," *Journal of Education and Practice* 7, no. 12 (2016): 170–79.

⁵² Femi-Aderinto, "Challenges Nigerian Women Face as Adult Learners in Learning Spaces."

⁵³ Femi-Aderinto, "Challenges Nigerian Women Face as Adult Learners in Learning Spaces."

⁵⁴ Mlungisi Moyo and Vuyiswa Sandra Nyathi, "Opportunities and Challenges for the Adult Learner in the 21st Century: A Case Study of One Tertiary Education Institution in Zimbabwe," n.d.

⁵⁵ J. Zeelen, M. Rampedi, and G. de Jong, "Adult Education in the Limpopo Province of South Africa: Challenges for Policy Implementation," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 30, no. 3 (June 2011): 385–402, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2011.570874>.

⁵⁶ Morakinyo Akintolu, Chinaza Uleanya, and Moeketsi Letseka, "Examining Key Challenges in the Programmes of Adult Community Learning Centres in KwaZulu-Natal," *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education* 28, no. 2 (November 21, 2022): 595–614, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14779714211070307>.

⁵⁷ Daniels, "Exploring Adult Basic Education and Training as a Transformative Learning Space for Alienated Out-of-School Youth in South Africa."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, several key recommendations are proposed to enhance the quality and effectiveness of adult education in community learning centres (CLCs).

Improvement of Infrastructure and Learning Resources: The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and adult education providers need to prioritise the improvement of infrastructure, including the provision of adequate classrooms, furniture, and teaching materials. Investment in modern technologies and access to digital tools should also be prioritised to bridge the digital divide and support blended learning approaches. Policymakers must ensure the allocation of sufficient funding to address these infrastructural challenges.

Financial Support for Adult Learners: Given the financial constraints faced by many adult learners, government and educational institutions must introduce funding mechanisms, such as scholarships, transportation subsidies, and low-cost study materials. These interventions can help alleviate financial barriers and ensure the continued participation of learners in adult education programs.

Cultural Sensitivity and Gender Inclusion: Adult education programs must address cultural and psychological barriers that disproportionately affect women and other marginalised groups. Programs should incorporate gender-sensitive approaches and support mechanisms, such as mentorship, counselling, and awareness programs that challenge patriarchal norms. It is important to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment where gender equality and empowerment are central.

Enhancing Oversight and Monitoring by the Department of Higher Education and Training: The DHET must conduct regular monitoring and evaluation of adult education centres to ensure quality control and the proper implementation of policies. It is crucial to provide ongoing professional development for teachers to equip them with the necessary skills to support adult learners effectively. Consistent intervention and support will improve the learning climate and foster better engagement and academic progress among learners.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the key barriers to effective adult education in CLCs, focusing on infrastructure, financial constraints, cultural and psychological factors, and the lack of support from the Department of Higher Education and Training. The findings revealed that inadequate resources, overcrowded classrooms, outdated materials, and limited institutional support significantly hinder the learning experiences of adult learners. Additionally, socio-cultural challenges, such as gender inequality and low self-esteem, further discourage participation in adult education programs. Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive approach, with concerted efforts from the government, education providers, and communities. By improving infrastructure, offering financial support to learners, addressing gender inequality, and enhancing the monitoring and support of adult education programs, the quality of adult education can be significantly improved. This will not only contribute to the personal growth of adult learners but also support broader socio-economic development by empowering individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to improve their livelihoods.

Limitations of the Study

Although desktop research offers insightful information, it has certain limitations. Existing data, which might not always be current or adequately address the research problem, is what the study depends on for availability and correctness. Furthermore, some contextual and experience ideas might not be adequately captured due to the lack of direct interaction with adult learners, lecturers, centre managers and policymakers. However, the findings are more reliable and thorough when a variety of sources are used. By ensuring a thorough and methodical examination of the body of knowledge on adult education in community learning centres, this methodological approach helps to clarify the difficulties and tactics required to enhance learning outcomes in these centres.

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