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EXPLORING CHALLENGES OF ADULT LEARNERS IN SELECTED ADULT EDUCATION AND TRAINING CENTERS IN SOUTH AFRICA: AN ANALYSIS OF KNOWLES' THEORY OF ANDRAGOGY

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Abstract

Even though the idea of adult learning sounds impressive, adult learners face a set of challenges. This is explained by the theory of andragogy which clarifies that adult learners might have external responsibilities that could hinder and have a negative impact on their learning process. Adult learners experience a wide range of challenges that require a suitable learning solution that addresses this barrier while assisting adult learners. The main aim of this article is to probe and delve into challenges encountered by adult learners in their respective adult learning centres. This would not be possible without the examination of relevant literature and adult education theories. This is an interpretative qualitative study of 12 participants. All the participants were adult learners who were currently registered in the adult education and training centres. The theoretical framework combines the theories of andragogy and experiential learning. The theory of andragogy explains that adult learners are generally independent and self-directed; their learning is based on their personal and future needs. Experiential learning theory requires learners to be active participants in the learning process and they should be at the centre of learning. Factual evidence was validated through online interviews from purposively selected adult education centres in Ekurhuleni North. This present study was formulated to assist the Department of Higher Education and Training, adult education authorities, centre managers, teachers and instructors with adult learners' challenges that may hinder the process of teaching and learning. The study revealed convincing findings that adult education centres are not well supported in terms of resources, finances, infrastructure and other educational needs. Most participants declared the need for continuous monitoring and visitations from educational department authorities to assess the state of affairs in these centres. A major recommendation from the study was for the government and the Department of Higher Education and Training to revisit the budget allocation for Adult Education and Training Centres. They should also ensure that the learning needs of adult learners are met to improve the quality of education.

Keywords: adult learners, AET centres, challenges, educational needs, improvements.

Introduction

This article focuses on how to address hindrances and challenges encountered by adult learners in their respective adult education training (AET) centres. Wu (2020) argues that, across the globe, a demographic shift with a greater number of enrollments in adult learning is being observed. In the andragogy theory, adult learners actively seek knowledge and are self-directed, seriously goal-oriented and motivated. Adults have external responsibilities meaning they have clear needs; the methods of teaching should vary from traditional methods in order to realise their goals. However, after plucking up courage to go back to school, adult learners are faced with challenges that demotivate them from continuing their learning. According to Alfaifi (2024) any nation's progress depends heavily on education, and adult learning and education play a significant role in that development.

Atkinson (2021) is of the view that adult learning has different challenges from those experienced by younger learners. Such challenges can be overcome only if they are recognised and addressed effectively. According to

Stevens (2021), adult learners' challenges include lack of support, financial barriers, lack of time, conflicting information and irrelevant programmes. Findings reported by Wallenstein (2022) on a recent survey by the Education Advisory Board were that resource limitations and budget limitations are the most common barriers in adult education. Reviews on adult learners' challenges by the likes of Sutton (2022) and Bok (2021) suggest that adult learners' challenges hinder the process of learning and affect learning outcomes. However, the majority of authors and scholars do not dwell much on possible solutions to address these challenges. The majority of these challenges are associated with a large dropout rate and low enrollment in adult education centres. The motivation for this article was not only to explore the challenges of adult learners but also to investigate possible ways of addressing their needs.

Literature Review

The concept of adult education is not a simple one to describe. Many scholars brought up and put forward different definitions. Griffin (2022) suggests that adult education serves the needs of a large number of people from all walks of life including publicly and privately employed, entrepreneurs, under-employed people and young adults both in rural and urban areas. Chakma and Tumbaach (2022) contends that adult education is aimed at bringing forth changes in skills, attitudes and knowledge to identify and solve community problems. Adult education can be in diversified forms and can provide different education programmes and many school subjects making it possible for learners to align the programmes and subjects with their goals. According to Stevens (2021), the idea of studying further is exciting but the journey is not smooth sailing as adult learners face a wide range of challenges and barriers. Biao (2022) claims that education is perceived as a human right across the world, yet inequalities are experienced daily in adult education. This study by Biao (2022) suggests that most challenges in adult education are a result of inadequate funding. This study highlighted four challenges in adult education that are caused by lack of funding and adequate budget allocation by the state:

- Prioritisation of formal schooling.
- The lack of tools and adequate resources.
- Hope that the employer will provide adult learning programmes.
- The supposition is that the extension of official schooling will result in literate societies free of inter-generational crises.

Adult learners' challenges are not limited to financial challenges but include challenges of support, poor infrastructure, technological challenges, security and safety. All these challenges have a negative impact on their learning process if they are left unaddressed. It is the main intent of the education system to provide good and up-to-standard education for all learners irrespective of their backgrounds so that they can reach their full potential and contribute meaningfully to their societies throughout their lives. Barriers and challenges of learners should be addressed as stipulated in Education White Paper 6 Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (DoE, 2001) which states that the needs of the economically and educationally disadvantaged should be addressed to maximise learning.

Adult Learners' Challenges

Adult learners face a distinctive array of challenges, and among them, a conspicuous issue is the absence of adequate support. These learners require various forms of assistance including academic, emotional, physical, mental and financial aid, which should ideally come from teachers, peers, families, the community, stakeholders, and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). When support is lacking, it can lead to adverse outcomes such as depression, stress and academic failure.

An additional critical challenge encountered by Adult Education and Training (AET) centres is the insufficiency of proper infrastructure. Inadequate infrastructure not only infringes upon learners' rights to safety and well-being but also emerges as a substantial impediment. Particularly concerning is the issue of security within these centres, as the prevalent high crime rates, especially in black townships, significantly impact adult learners' safety.

Furthermore, a universally acknowledged challenge in adult education pertains to the scarcity of resources. Adequate resources and teaching materials are vital for nurturing learners' comprehensive development and boosting their academic accomplishments. In the modern era, everything comes at a cost, and the scarcity of funding within AET centres is the primary underlying cause of financial hardships faced by adult learners. This lack of funding might also be the root cause behind the shortage of educators in AET centres, thus limiting the availability of subject choices and skill-based programmes for these learners.

Wagner (2022) disclosed that teachers have numerous responsibilities with regard to learners' lives which are not restricted to academics or extracurricular activities, as they need to mould learners for a better tomorrow and better society.

Related Adult Learning Theories

Among relevant adult learning theories, the theory of andragogy (Knowles, 1984) and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) underpin this article.

Theory of Andragogy

The theory of andragogy supported and gave direction to the study. Andragogy is an adult learning theory developed by Malcolm Knowles which asserts that adult learning is distinct in many ways and lays down appropriate learning methods for adult learners. This theory is crucial for this study as it outlines how adult learners prefer to learn. Based on this theory, teachers are given four principles which serve as guidelines in adult learning. Bouchrika (2022) emphasises the following principles: participation, previous knowledge, applicable subject matter and problem-centric learning are a mind map for teachers. Knowles's (1984) theory of andragogy contends that adult learners are independent and study according to their needs. This theory recommends that learners should learn what is relevant to them and must be able to apply what they learned in real-life situations. For example, AET centres should provide skill programmes that will better their lives and solve a specific problem and subjects that are relevant to their career choices. This theory was suitable to examine the experiences of adult learners including the relevance of the curriculum and programmes offered in the adult education centres. Learners, in general, are always at the centre of learning. This theory made it easy to investigate academic choices that adult learners have and determine whether learners' needs were met. Involvement which is one of the principles of the theory of andragogy was examined in the study to reveal the level of support adult learners receive from fellow learners, teachers, stakeholders and the DHET.

Experiential Learning Theory

Conner (2022), relying on Kolb's (1984) theory, notes that experiential learning is a learner-centred approach, a hands-on approach where learners learn by doing and learning happens through an active process of doing and reflection. Kurt (2020), relying on experiential learning, affirms that experience is crucial in constructing knowledge and affirms that learning occurs through discovery and active participation. Placing learners' needs at the centre, using resources that promote active involvement and provision of skills that are useful and in demand as advised by this theory, might be effective in addressing adult learners' challenges.

Significance of the Study

Challenges of adult learners call for urgent attention and they ought to be addressed as the demand for skilled and educated employees is high. Education is a right, not a privilege, majority of the adult learners' challenges violate their rights to education. It has become apparent that even though adults are motivated to learn, they are demotivated by the challenges that they are faced with within the AET centres. These are not seasonal challenges but challenges that they have to face daily. Research by Shadovits, Helsing and Cummins (2021) was conducted to explore the objections and difficulties in the participation of low-skilled adults in education and training. This study revealed that AET policies and programmes, finance, support and motivation were explored as key barriers and difficult encounters for adult learners. Bok (2021) suggests that for the government to create a strong and sustainable adult education system, numerous challenges must be addressed, including but not restricted to insufficient funding and inadequate support systems. The contemporary study seeks to examine the challenges of adult learners in AET centres in Tembisa. Furthermore, Carter (2021) maintains that there is an ongoing absence of capacity regarding centre managers and teachers in the AET centres.

Conceptualisation

Adult learning as a concept

According to Morris (2023), adult education is an action through which adults who are no longer in school or who do not fully attend school or school dropouts assume successive, sequential and organised educational activities on various subjects. Morris (2023) contends that the intent is to birth skills, knowledge and attitudes that help them to solve personal and community problems. Nicolaou (2022) suggests that the main role of adult education is for adults to develop and acquire new skills in order for them to navigate through the increasingly digital twenty-first century demands. However, Kosyakova and Bills (2021) maintain that the basic objective of adult education is to empower individuals through lifelong learning, fostering personal development, addressing societal inequalities and promoting sustainable growth and use of resources. There are rapid changes throughout the world that require one to study further to keep up with times and to ensure social cohesion and economic prosperity.

Bouchrika (2022) explains that adult learning is modelled for mature learners, and it is learning that is relevant to immediate application. Furthermore, Bouchrika (2022) posits that adult education is defined by three crucial attributes: learner-centredness, self-directed learning and a humanist philosophy. Adult learning differs from schooling and these dissimilarities are thoroughly explored in adult learning theories.

Adult learner as a concept

Wasilewsky and Baumeier (2023) define adult learners as lifelong learners, mature learners and non-traditional students. FutureLearn (2022) reports that adult learners are divergent individuals who are 25 years and older with a wide variety of diverse backgrounds, responsibilities and experiences who decide to return to school for personal or professional reasons. In agreement with the above scholars, Bengo (2020) states that adult education is different from the education of school learners because in andragogy it is believed that adult learners have particular learning demands and expectations. To understand the concept of adult learners, Knowles (1968) identified assumptions about how adult learners are different from young learners. In expanding on andragogy, Caruso (2022) states that adults choose what they want to learn, want to experience the immediate application of learning and will learn due to extrinsic motivation.

Adult learners' challenges

As much as adults are willing to engage in adult education which has been shown to have numerous advantages and opportunities, adults experience challenges during their learning years. It is undisputed that the importance of adult education is immense but adult learners experience challenges that are internal (within the AET centres) and external. Considering that furthering studies is thrilling, nevertheless taking that journey as an adult can prove to be difficult. Being an adult comes with obligations and commitment, yet studying requires money, time, commitment and energy.

A study by Kimaro et al. (2022) postulates that across the globe the major challenge for adult education is to reach those who need it the most owing to factors such as personal problems that come with being an adult learner, lack of support, financial challenges, lack of resources and safety issues. Moreover, the study suggests the following in meeting adult learners' challenges: more financing is needed, stronger policies should be in place, progress in governance and improved quality. Time seems to be a huge problem for adult learners, it is crucial to provide subjects and programmes that are aligned with their future aspirations. Amongst many challenges, poor infrastructure is a common concern. Ceppi (2022) emphasises that school infrastructure is the most influential point for optimal learning. Inadequate allocation of funds has resulted in many challenges like lack of resources and financial constraints in AET centres. Educational resources are a prerequisite in any learning environment to experience a successful learning experience. Singh (2022) supports the above statement by suggesting that learning resources are crucial for both teachers and learners as they furnish learners with the convenience to analyse ideas and knowledge and work together to solve problems.

Method

This study was conducted in Tembisa in Ekurhuleni North district under the Gauteng Department of Education in South Africa. To explore adult learners' challenges, a qualitative approach was chosen. Considering that the interviews were conducted online, no recorded observations or written reports were provided as this is the case with most case studies. Qualitative methodology was convenient for this study because qualitative methods are used to understand complex concepts, ideas and experiences. One major advantage of qualitative study is that it permits the understanding of the social world through first-hand experiences of the participants. Vaughan (2021) argues that one of the advantages of first-hand data collected from primary sources is that the data is authentic and the focal point of the research is the problem at hand.

This qualitative study was conducted through semi-structured interviews which were conducted online with 12 participants. A sample of the population was picked for this investigation. The choice and the number of participants were determined by the objectives of the study and the characteristics of the study population. The researchers opted for purposive sampling in this study since the basic intent of this study is to get an accurate understanding and knowledge of the topic being investigated. Three AET centres in Tembisa were selected. Based on the needs of the study, participants' sound knowledge of the phenomenon and their characteristics, 12 participants were purposively sampled. There were four participants from each centre and were both women and men who were currently registered at the AET centres.

Determined to collect comprehensive information, purposive criterion sampling was used. Owais (2020) posits that criterion sampling requires all cases or individuals to satisfy the pre-determined criteria. The characteristics of the participants, their age, geographic areas and years in the AET centres were used to select participants. The

adult learners were identified as AL 01- AL 012 and the centres as Centre 1-3. All participants were interviewed on the basis that they met the criteria and they were relevant to the study. Individual interviews were conducted without interference in the participants' natural environments. To adhere to COVID-19 protocols all interviews were semi-structured interviews and the Zoom platform was used. All the interviews were scheduled for and conducted after school hours to avoid disrupting learning time. With permission from the participants, interviews were recorded and the details were captured verbatim. Open-ended questions were posed and the researchers sought clarity in cases where answers were vague. The participants' experiences and responses to adult learners' challenges were useful and profitable for the study. The research questions concentrated on the challenges of adult learners and possible solutions. George (2022) concludes that semi-structured interviews are often open-ended, allowing flexibility and making it possible to gather detailed information to answer research questions. Interviewing adult learners brought clarity and revealed the many challenges experienced by adult learners.

Ethical Considerations

A request to conduct research in three AET centres in Tembisa was sent to the Gauteng Department of Education and the District of Ekurhuleni North and was granted. Consent letters were also sent to the centre managers of all three centres for their authorisation to conduct the study. Consent was also sought from all 12 participants in the study. Ethical considerations of confidentiality and anonymity were ensured before the start of the interviews as researchers are bound by the rules of ethics.

The aim of the study was communicated to the participants ahead of time. Participants were all made aware of the fact that they were not compelled to partake in the study and had the right to withdraw at any time. They willingly agreed to participate, and were made aware that participation was voluntary and that there would be no benefits or reimbursements for participation. All the participants were made aware of data archival plans, the availability of data to other researchers and the precautions taken to confidentially handle data. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities and their respective centres. Due to COVID-19, the interviews were conducted online, in the afternoons when they were in the comfort of their homes. All the interviews were conducted in the afternoons to avoid disturbing the participants. All the interviews lasted less than 45 minutes.

Findings

Challenges experienced by adult learners.

Responses of adult learners on being an adult learner as a challenge.

Based on the participants' responses, being an adult learner proves to be challenging as studying requires time. Juggling other responsibilities with studies is difficult. Time seems to be the biggest challenge for most of the participants. An adult learner from Centre C had this to say:

"I wish I obtained my matric on record time owing to the fact that I had less responsibilities and my family was much supportive of my studies. Currently, everything has changed; my family and friends portray little or no interest in my school work. Being a single parent has an impact on my studies, I have a responsibility of looking after my daughter. Juggling parenting and my studies is a big challenge for me."

Adult learners' responses to technological challenges

Research carried out by Ceppi (2022) indicated that educational centres with technological resources have the ability to improve learning outcomes ten times more. All the participants declared their feelings about the impact of technology on their learning process. One of the adult learners (AL 01) claimed that:

"We know the importance of technology in learning, but unfortunately in our centres technological resources are unavailable, we are still utilising the old traditional learning and teaching methods. This is usually common in rural areas not in big cities. We always wonder if adult education centres who are not in the townships face the same challenge as us"- AL 01

Infrastructural challenges

The Development Bank of Southern Africa (2023) conducted a study which revealed that poor infrastructure not only causes devastating damage to learning but contravenes the learners' rights to education. Participants from all three centres divulged their dissatisfaction about the state of infrastructure within the AET centres. This was unearthed during the interviews. The AET centres do not have their own buildings and space. They share classrooms with other schools. Participants from Centre A expressed that they were being accommodated in mobile classrooms at some schools as they did not have their own facilities.

Challenges of security and safety

Similar sentiments regarding safety and security in the centres were voiced by the participants. Waldvogel (2022) suggests that a safe classroom environment is one where learners feel safe emotionally, socially and physically. A large number of the participants admitted that safety and security measures at the centres were minimal. One of the extremely important requirements for conducive teaching and learning is ensuring safety and security which is non-existent in these AET centres. Below is an extract from a participant AL 04:

“The high rate of crime in the township is a well-known concern, Tembisa is known for being a haven for criminals. Unavailability of security personal, access control and sufficient CCTV cameras is an issue of concern. The only security we have is the gate keeper who is an unarmed.”

Resources and financial challenges

Based on the findings, the absence of resources could be attributed to financial problems. Lack of funding results in lack of resources, and results in inability to invest in what is important for learners' finances. Lack of funding has an impact on learners' academic progress and impacts negatively on learners psychologically (Toff, 2020). AL 08 had this to say regarding resources and financial challenges:

“Unlike in public schools, adult education centres are not provided with stationery and textbooks. This has made things very difficult for me as I come from a disadvantage family. I cannot afford to buy the required stationery especially the textbooks as they are very expensive.”

Shortage of teachers and instructors

The involvement of teachers and instructors in learners' lives is very unspeakable, learners could never learn without instructors and teachers. It was revealed by all the participants that all the AET centres being studied have a challenge with teacher shortages. A shortage of teachers has a negative impact on learners' achievement and their future careers, as they are forced to take subjects that are offered in the AET centres even though these are not their first choices. An adult learner said this:

“We are blessed with the most dedicated teachers but regrettably they are not enough. Shortage of teachers needs to be addressed as this affects the majority of adult learners. Learners are left with no choice but to opt for available subjects because some subjects have no teachers.”

It is evident from their responses that adult learners are faced with a lot of challenges and that learners' needs and expectations are not met. This has brought about a need for future improvements. Matters that have an impact on quality education ought to be given attention by the DHET. The challenges of adult learners should be addressed to promote learning and motivate even those who have not decided to study further. The DHET, centre managers, teachers and all the stakeholders need to be understanding when it comes to learners' needs. They are the first-hand experiencers of any challenges at the AET centres.

Summary of the Findings

Based on the findings collected during the interviews, it is evident that adult learners experience a unique set of challenges. During the interviews, a great number of participants divulged that they encountered challenges that had an impact on their daily learning. These challenges were detrimental to their learning process. Almost all the participants indicated that they desired flexibility in terms of time of attendance. All participants validated that digital learning and technology in their centres are non-existent. During the interviews, the participants disclosed that they had no access to the internet, computers or photocopying machines. All the participants emphasised the negative impact on learning caused by the lack of infrastructure. They mentioned the unavailability of classrooms, labs, the shortage of toilets and . It was divulged by participants that the lack of resources and poor infrastructure might be the result of poor financial planning and lack of financial support from the government. It is possible that the unavailability of resources and poor infrastructure are the causes of teachers unwillingness to take up jobs in these AET centres.

Discussion- Conclusions

This paper produced interesting findings about adult learners' challenges. The main finding is that although adult learners welcome the opportunities as a result of attending the AET centres, their challenges seem to overshadow the benefits. In support of this, Stevens (2023) emphasised that although engaging in adult education is a worthwhile endeavour the journey proves to be difficult.

A study conducted by Inspired E-Learning (2023) revealed that several common barriers discourage adults from continuing learning including family commitments, time constraints and unavailability of resources and academic challenges. It has been demonstrated by Caruso et al. (2022) that a lack of support whether informational, financial or social can be a barrier to learning. Concurring, Mohan (2022) revealed that a lack of resources in AET centres

results in a shortage of programmes offered by the centres. Lack of support seemed to be the biggest challenge as adult learners complained about the absence of support from families, community, stakeholders and the DHET.

Another big challenge that frustrated most adult learners was the undersupply of teachers and the unavailability of wider subject choices. Explaining this further, Land (2021) showed a decline in the number of teachers in adult education. The majority of adult learners emphasised that this has an unfavourable effect on their future careers. It has been open acknowledged by a high number of adult learners taking subjects they do not need demotivates them as they are irrelevant to what they want to achieve. The unavailability of a skills programme was a prime discovery.

All adult learners agreed about the state of affairs in adult learning centres. The majority of adult learners moaned about inequalities in education, revealing that AET centres are treated differently from mainstream schools. Biao (2022) contended that globally adult education has been under-funded with the main focus being mainstream schools. In consequence, Triple E Training (2023) pleaded with the government to take adult education seriously, claiming that the government has seemingly overlooked the impact of adult education on the economic system. Oberoi (2023) suggested that adult education centres have to adapt to changing learner needs as the world is evolving due to many factors such as technology. Challenges of adult learners demand high-priority attention from the centre managers, the DHET and all other stakeholders involved in adult education. Moreover, Steed (2023) stated that individual learner needs must be recognised and properly addressed to ensure effective learning. Seemingly, the DHET has a lot of work to do in meeting reasonable standards in adult education.

Conclusions

The paper revealed that the experiences of adult learners are similar in most AET centres. It is critical to note that adult learners are faced with challenges that obstruct the realisation and achievement of their learning goals. It was divulged that sharing space and amenities is a determinant of many challenges in AET centres. The participants indicated that they would value it if the government could be of assistance to AET centres and provide the same support that it offers to schools. Furthermore, it was revealed that the centres ought to cater for other school subjects and skills programmes. The findings revealed that scarcity of resources and financial shortcomings not only frustrate adult learners but have a huge impact on their grades and marks. A pivotal point surfaced from the discussion of the findings that the government should do an analysis and assessment concerning adult learning policies not only for the learners' benefit but for the quality of education.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The main intention of this investigation was to unearth difficulties encountered by adult learners from primary sources. The indicated was a qualitative study of adult learners' challenges in AET centres in Tembisa, in the district of Ekurhuleni, Gauteng. Adult learners who were currently registered in those AET centres were selected for data collection. No other sources were used. Due to COVID protocols, data was collected through semi-structured online interviews. The findings of this paper may not be concluded and generalised for a larger group since only three adult centres were selected for data collection.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Most complaints centred on lack of support by the Department of Education. The government should revisit adult education policies and offer AET centres more support. Lack of resources has a negative impact on educational outcomes. AET centres do not have an online application option. They should keep up with the times and allow for online applications which makes things easier for both the learners and the institution. This could save more time and reduce the administration work. AET centres need to be equipped with technological resources and digital learning which is popular now in most educational institutions. It was found that most AET centres do not own their facilities and the current ones which are mostly mobile classes are not in good state. Poor infrastructure should be dealt and the government should provide buildings and facilities for adult learning. The limitations in subject choices result from teacher shortages. The DHET should employ more teachers and instructors for AET. The majority of AET centres do not offer practical skills sources, and this needs to be addressed to meet learner's individual learning needs.

ABBREVIATIONS

AET: Adult education training

ALE: Adult learning and education

DHET: Department of Higher Education and Training

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