

## Challenges in Adult Education in the Rural Areas of Limpopo Province in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** Limpopo has been identified as a province in South Africa characterized by high levels of illiteracy that cause unemployment and poverty. However, many adults do not participate in the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programs, while others drop out in high numbers. This study, therefore, investigated the challenges that are faced with regard to adult education in the rural areas of Limpopo. A phenomenological research design was followed. Interviews were conducted and focus group discussions were held with 30 educators and 60 adult learners. The findings revealed that situational, institutional, dispositional and informational factors inhibited the learners' participation. Situational factors were related to financial constraints, institutional factors pointed to the location of the classes, irrelevant program content, behaviorist teaching methods and a lack of teaching resources, dispositional constraints included the fact that the learners did not feel respected as adults, lacked confidence, experienced guilt over domestic responsibilities that suffered while they attended classes, and traditional views about gender roles, and informational factors pointed to a lack of information about ABET classes. In the end, recommendations are made for improvement.

### INTRODUCTION

South Africa has undergone major democratic transformations since 1994. Before this time the Nationalist Party was in power. Its policies resulted in the demise of tolerance, and the placing of education for black people under strict unequivocal state control (Mncube 2008). After 1994, South Africa was engaged in the huge task of transforming the education system from one that reflected the imbalances of apartheid in general and Bantu Education in particular. Several educational policies were formulated that were geared towards addressing, among other things, the high level of illiteracy in the country. In one policy the following mission was formulated by the Department of Education (DoE) (1996), namely to strive for,

*...a South Africa where all people have equal access to lifelong education and training opportunities, which will contribute towards improving the quality of life and build a peaceful, prosperous and democratic society.*

In Limpopo, poverty and unemployment are starkly present in the everyday lives of the people in the rural areas, as was pointed out by Hlalele (2012). There is high dependency on social grants and pensions, and this is linked to high levels of unemployment (Human Sciences Research Council 2005: 25). It is reported that Limpopo has an unemployment rate of forty-nine percent. As a result, the men migrate to other provinces where there are more employment opportunities. The women thus head most of the families. The grandparents also take care of the families, as the young mothers also leave their homes to look for jobs elsewhere.

To address the question of illiteracy and to reduce unemployment centers are offering Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programs in South Africa, in the Limpopo Province in particular. ABET programs are designed mainly to offer education and training to persons who have little or no education, and to those who are over the statutory school-leaving age (Mabasa 2000). The DoE (1997) indicates that ABET is the foundation of lifelong learning and development. It comprises the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values required for social, economic and political participation and transformation applicable in a wide range of contexts. McBer (2000) maintains that in these situations the educators use their knowledge, skills and behavior

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to create learning environments which maximize the opportunities and motivation to learn, and to overcome barriers to adult learning (Bates and Aston 2004).

In line with a constructivist approach (as will be explained later), Tennant (2000) contends that the task of adult education is to design programs, which promote voluntary participation, self-respect, collaborative learning, praxis-activity/reflection, collaborative analysis, as well as the nurturing of self-directed and empowered adults. To this end, a new teaching approach, referred to as Outcomes-based Education (OBE) was introduced in South Africa. Post 1994 this approach was also used in the provision of ABET in order to encourage learner-focused, problem-solving and creative thinking. A number of researchers, such as Drago-Serverson et al. (2001:7-8), indicated that most ABET classes are populated by adults with different kinds of experiences that had to be acknowledged. Therefore, educators who, in line with OBE used this varied experience as a point of departure were likely to be successful, and this would improve the retention of learners.

However, during informal interaction with the educators who were enrolled for an Advanced Certificate in Education at the University of Limpopo, it was established that although outcomes-based approaches were envisaged, in reality the ABET programs in Limpopo resembled the formal schooling programs. These programs were mainly teacher-centered, and relied on summative assessment. This could be a cause of an observed high dropout rate and the minimal participation in these programs, as reported by Miller (2000) in the Report on the ABET on Trial Conference.

In the light of the above, the primary aim of this study was to gain insight into the factors that deterred illiterate adults from actively participating in the ABET programs. The study set out to answer the following important question, namely, what were the barriers that prevented illiterate adults from participating in ABET programs, which caused learners to drop out? This question was investigated against the background of the following theoretical framework on learning and the motivation to learn.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As a learning theory constructivism is of particular importance for this study. A construc-

tivist perspective “sees knowledge not as given, but as actively and continuously constructed and reconstructed by individuals, groups, and societies” (Donald et al. 2013:79). Constructivism challenges positivism. Positivism is a behaviorist approach to learning. It views learners as empty vessels that need to be filled with knowledge, and it is teacher-focused, and relies on direct instruction (lectures) (Nel et al. 2013). In contrast, constructivism supports the idea that knowledge is actively constructed and reconstructed throughout life, it is personal but is also socially constructed, and it is a process of making sense of the world (Henze 2009). Such sense-making is context-bound, and thus related to the social and historical culture in which it is embedded. The teachers can help the learners attain higher levels of knowledge than what they would be able to reach on their own. This refers to Vygotski’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development. To this end, language is seen as a powerful tool of cognition. The implications of constructivism for teaching and learning are as follows, namely the teachers should create opportunities for active learning, they should start with the familiar and connect the learner to the unfamiliar, they have to individualize learning according to the learners’ needs, they should challenge the learners, and guide them to solve problems, and they have to scaffold learning in different stages (EduTech Wiki 2012; Donald et al. 2013; Nel et al. 2013).

Teaching cannot be effective without considering motivation. Maslow (1943) made use of a humanist approach to explain motivation. He identified a hierarchy of needs, and stated that a person will only be motivated by a higher level of needs if the needs on a previous level have been fulfilled. In rank-order the needs include physiological needs, safety needs, the needs of belongingness and love, and of esteem and self-actualization. Although the model can be criticized for being too restrictive, it is useful in helping teachers understand how internal and external influences interact to motivate learners. The behaviorist models are also useful to understand motivation because they indicate that certain behavior can increase if the teacher uses positive reinforcement (pleasant consequences), or negative reinforcement (avoiding unpleasant consequences). Likewise, specific behavior can decrease if the teacher exercises punishment (unpleasant consequences) or if no consequen-

es follow, which lead to extinction (Donald et al. 2013). In addition, constructivism indicates that motivation is a natural drive in humans when trying to adapt to the world, although some learners may lose their motivation due to challenging environments. Educators can prevent such demotivation if they question and guide the learners, connect learning tasks with the interests and concerns of the learners, implement social interaction and cooperative learning, and promote a sense of confidence and competency in the learners (Donald et al. 2013).

With the above as background, in the remainder of the paper the researchers explain the research design and method of data collection, the findings and a discussion thereof, and the conclusions. Finally, recommendations will be given.

## THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The study was qualitative in nature. According to Cresswell (2003), *qualitative research* enables one to investigate the actual experiences of the participants and thereby obtain in-depth information about people and places. A phenomenological research design was followed. McMillan and Schumacher (2010:24) state that *phenomenology* describes and explains the meaning of the “lived experiences” of the participants. Researchers need to set aside all preconceived notions about a phenomenon, and should collect the data on how the individuals make sense of their experiences.

### Sampling and Data Collection

Purposeful sampling was used in this study in order to solicit specific data. Burns (2000) argues that in purposeful sampling the participants are selected because they serve the real purpose and objectives of the research. In this study the participants had to be from the rural areas in the Vhembe district in Limpopo and had been participating in the ABET programs. The rural areas were chosen because these areas are the most impoverished and have the greatest number of illiterate persons in need of education (Hlalele 2012). Ten ABET centers that had been functioning for more than five years were selected. This duration was chosen as it had the

advantage of illuminating how serious and consistent the problem of dropout was as well as highlighting the problem of minimal participation in ABET. From each centre, three educators and six adult learners were identified for individual and focus group interviews, respectively. Thus, 30 educators and 60 learners participated in the research.

### Ethics and Trustworthiness

For ethical reasons, a letter was written to the Limpopo DoE to obtain permission for the research. The District offices were also informed as they serve as the gatekeepers to the ABET centers, the educators and the learners. Informed consent was obtained from the participants. They were told what the purpose of the study was and how the data would be used. Ketlhoilwe (2010) indicates that participation should be of a voluntary nature, and that anonymity and confidentiality should be assured. Therefore, the participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity.

The trustworthiness of the data was also ensured (McMillan and Schumacher 2010). According to Mafora and Schulze (2012), it is important to record and transcribe the interviews verbatim in order to present the direct quotes of the participants. Low-inference descriptors were used. Informal member-checking enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings. Observations were also made during the classes, in addition to the interviews and focus group discussions. Thus, the multi-method strategies guaranteed the triangulation of the data collection process.

### Research Methods

In this study, individual semi-structured interviews were used as the main method of data collection with the educators. These interviews with the educators in the selected centers were concerned with the development of the programs and their relevance, the outcomes and the target group, and also on the possible impact of these programs on the lives of the adult learners. This information was, however, verified by means of document reviews and observations in and around the centers. The adult learners were interviewed during focus group sessions to determine their views about the running of the programs, about adult education in general in their

area, and about the challenges they were experiencing. All the interviews were mechanically recorded and transcribed.

### Data Analysis

Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that text or less organized responses allow the researchers to note recurring patterns and themes that pull together many separate pieces of data. To a large extent, the theoretical framework referred to above formed the basis of the interviews and thus also of the analysis. The generation of the interview questions within the theoretical framework of the study facilitated the identification of categories during the analysis of the data. The transcripts were read thoroughly in order to identify units of meaning that were compared to the theoretical concepts formulated in the study. The findings below are discussed with regard to the following four categories, namely situational, institutional, dispositional and informational. An additional category that emerged during the study was also noted, namely learner dropout.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As indicated, the problems preventing participation in the ABET programs are presented with regard to situational, institutional, dispositional and informational factors. Learner dropout is also explained.

### Situational Factors

Lack of money emerged as one of the biggest factors preventing participation in the ABET literacy programs, together with problems with respect to using their new-found knowledge to start their own businesses. For example, one learner and one educator indicated as follows.

*I want to continue to learn and progress with my learning but there are many difficulties for us as adult learners, for example, we learn under conditions that are not conducive to learning and we also do not have money to pay for ourselves to continue our education.* (Learner)

*You see, it is very difficult for the learners to do anything because they do not have start-up funds. They want to start their own small businesses but money is the problem.* (Educator)

Thus, this research confirmed previous findings by Henry and Basile (1994), namely that, for adults, financial constraints are a significant barrier to learning. Adults who are poor cannot afford to pay for the programs, no matter how relevant they may be. As a result, they are not able to participate in the ABET programs. The lack of the availability of affordable transport to and from the classes also posed a major problem. The adults often indicated that they did not have the money to pay for it.

Related to the above is the lack of childcare facilities, which were also indicated as a problem, especially for the women. Most of them had children and did not have anyone to take care of them while they attended the ABET classes. The importance of providing care for small children and infants where classes for adults are presented was also alluded to by Pausigere (2013). This problem is aggravated when there are many children in the household or when there is no one who can take care of the children without remuneration. The following serves as an example,

*Sometimes I do not have relatives nearby who can stay with my children when I go to class. So I stopped attending.* (Female learner)

The abovementioned problem of a lack of funds seems formidable. The question that arises is, how can the objectives formulated in the ABET policies and plans be realized without sufficient resources? The demands for education and training are growing, yet government expenditure is constrained. ABET seems to be failing to address the issues of unemployment and poverty due to inadequate financial support for skills-training, as envisaged in the government's strategy.

### Institutional Factors

The institutional circumstances that discourage the participation of adult learners are called *institutional barriers*. Hirsch and Wagner (1995) regard institutional factors as factors that include the characteristics of a particular adult learning program. During the interviews the adult learners indicated that they were deterred by problems such as the location of the classes, the content of the programs, the way it was taught, and the funding available for an institution to obtain the necessary resources to keep the programs running smoothly.

In Limpopo, which is predominantly rural, the classes were held in the primary schools after the children had left in the afternoons. The classes were mostly conducted in the afternoons or evenings in areas where there was no electricity or where the classes were far from the adult learners' homes. These factors present huge challenges.

The adult learners also complained that the content of the ABET programs was not as relevant as they would have liked it to be. They indicated that they needed to be able to fend for themselves and their families by being able to generate their own income in case they could not find formal employment. However, the programs did not equip them with the necessary skills to become self-reliant and self-sufficient. Brindley and Cuthbert (1996:81-93) emphasized that in teaching "old dogs new tricks" the content should be useful to the learners, they should be actively involved in the learning process, and the content should be linked to what they already know. During the ABET classes, no use was made of cooperative learning, as the learners merely listened to lectures. One learner stated,

*The learning environment is not conducive because we sit in rows and each one works individually.* (Female learner)

The above illustrates that the OBE principles and intentions were not effectively implemented, as was often the case in South Africa (Donald et al. 2013), and the classes were not presented in line with the constructivist learning principles (EduTech Wiki 2012; Donald et al. 2013; Nel et al. 2013). Adult education should promote voluntary participation, respect for self-worth, collaborative learning, praxis-activity/reflection, collaborative analysis, and a spirit of critical reflection, and nurture self-directed learning in the adults. The adults should see themselves as proactive initiating individuals who are engaged in a continuous re-creation of their knowledge and social circumstances, and not as reactive individuals buffeted by uncontrollable forces.

Both the educators and the adult learners protested that they did not have any money to buy equipment and other resources that would enable them to teach and learn practical skills. The following are some examples of their comments,

*We want to start with income generation projects but the educators tell us that there is no money from the department.* (Learner)

*The department always promises but nothing is taking place. We do not have our own buildings. Educators do not have offices...we cry for better salaries.* (Educator)

The educators reported that there were not even enough textbooks for all the adult learners in each class. The learners had to share books, and that caused a problem, because they were unable to do individual work, such as reading at home. In line with this finding, Kamper (2008) asserts that the lack of resources may lead to a lack of work-motivation by the educators. The Report on the ABET on Trial Conference quotes Miller (2000) as saying that there has been a huge dropout of learners of ABET classes because the necessary resources were not provided for the learners. If there were not sufficient funds for the programs, the learners would not be able to gain by the appropriate programs that addressed their daily needs.

### Dispositional Factors

Hirsch and Wagner (1995) regard dispositional factors as internal beliefs and attitudes about the learners, their learning and the educational programs, and that impede participation. Merriam et al. (2007:88) also referred to these factors as "psychological" obstacles. In this study, dispositional factors related to the learners' feeling that they were not respected as adults, a lack of confidence, guilt over domestic responsibilities that they could not attend to while participating in ABET classes, and views about gender roles. Regarding the lack of respect, a learner said the following,

*We are made to sit in little chairs as if we are children.* (Female learner)

One educator indicated that the learners sat in rows because the fulltime school educators did not want them to rearrange the desks as it disorganized their classes. The educators therefore believed that they were forced to teach in the traditional way, where they and the content were central. Thus, the classes were not presented in line with the constructivist learning principles (EduTech Wiki 2012; Donald et al. 2013; Nel et al. 2013).

The above uninspiring teaching approach resulted in a lack of confidence in the learners to the point that they wanted to drop out. For example, three female learners stated,

*I don't think I will pass the exam. I just wasted the whole year only for this.*

*Maybe it is better if we just go looking for jobs...ah, any kind of job.*

*I feel I am wasting time. My friends are working in Jo'burg (Johannesburg).*

Another example of how dispositional factors may impede participation in the ABET classes is the fact that the persons associate education with their past experiences of Bantu Education offered to black people in the homelands in South Africa during the apartheid regime. Participation in education was not encouraged, and it was a top-down transmission of content from the educator to the learners. In the interviews the adult learners alluded to this fact and associated themselves with this teaching method.

Another noteworthy fact is that the respondents indicated that they did not participate in educational programs because of anxiety, related to a lack of confidence. Van der Kamp (1995) argues that anxiety and resistance can hinder the learning of people who were initially poorly educated, and who returned to school or participated in ABET programs after a long time. Related to their lack of self-confidence was the fear that other adults would witness them to fail. The learners also believed that other members of the community had negative images and perceptions of adult learners and adult education practitioners. Some adult learners only attached significance to the reading and writing aspects of ABET, and were uncertain if these skills were important for improving peoples' lives. Thus, the poor and unemployed learners lacked insight into the importance of being able to read and write, and how literacy could help them move towards other spheres of life. One educator said:

*Some members of the community do not understand what ABET is all about. They think it is for old men and women.*

The above comment confirms previous research findings by Rakoma (1999) conducted in the Limpopo Province where it was found that members of the community often ridiculed adults who attended the ABET classes. People who were illiterate themselves, saw the adult learners as foolish. For example,

*They are just ashamed. They do not want other people to know that they are illiterate. That is why they pretend that they do not need any ABET classes.*

One reason for the ridicule may be related to the fact that the adult learners are seen to be in their first years of schooling, sitting in small chairs and tables like children, using almost the same curriculum as the one used in formal schools for foundation phase learners. Some adult learners also indicated that their children were similarly ridiculed because their adult parents were attending ABET classes. These children did not want to go to school because they were being laughed at by their peers, who made derogatory remarks about their parents' illiteracy.

However, it was not only the dispositions of the adult learners that played a role, but also those of the ABET educators. Some ABET educators were not dedicated to the task of teaching illiterate adults. A number of these educators saw teaching ABET merely as a "stepping stone" that could perhaps lead to better jobs or promotions. For unemployed educators, it could be a way of creating job opportunities for themselves, especially if they did not have fixed teaching contracts. These beliefs and perceptions have serious implications on the development of ABET programs, and also act as barriers to the adults' participation in the programs.

Gender was also cited as a crucial issue in adult education, confirming Malale's (1996) study. In the rural areas the men do not discuss serious matters in front of women, and this negatively impacts their attendance of the ABET programs. For instance, in this study, one adult educator indicated that adult male learners were not inclined to attend classes if the educators were female. Similarly, some men did not want to attend classes with their female counterparts in the same room. Consequently, the main participants in the programs were women. The educators also mentioned that some men did not allow their wives to go out at night to attend classes. This in itself contributed to the minimal attendance at programs, and also created the potential for increased dropout rates.

### Informational Factors

Informational factors, such as poor access to information and guidance as well as the absence of suitable training opportunities, may be called "structural barriers". The issue of recruitment in adult education was cited as crucial. The educators and the learners stated vehemently that recruitment did not receive aggressive and

rigorous attention in the Limpopo Province. They said it was done casually through the schools and the churches, and at funerals and wedding celebrations, and sometimes in the media, when the people's minds were occupied by other equally important issues in their lives.

Because of the limited funds allocated to ABET, the educators mentioned that it was difficult to use posters, brochures and other printed media to market the programs. They emphasized that road shows were not an option. Some of the educators indicated that they did door-to-door recruitment but it was a time-consuming and tiresome exercise. As a result, they did not reach many households. Henry and Basile (1994) proposed that the educators should try and make use of more sources of information to inform the people about the adult education activities in their communities.

### Learner Dropout

As explained earlier, the behaviorist model of motivation indicates that learning behavior will continue if the consequences are positive or if unpleasant effects are removed. Likewise, the involvement in learning can decrease if no positive consequences follow (Donald et al. 2013). The constructivist theory also indicated that learners may lose their motivation to learn due to their challenging environments. In this study it was ascertained that many learners dropped out. It therefore became crucial to establish why the rate was so high, particularly where the persons volunteered to participate. A number of female adult learners mentioned some of the reasons. The following are two examples.

*Due to poverty and unemployment, we must stop going for a while because sometimes we have special work to do at the farms. When we return they say we have dropped out.*

*I did not drop out...my child was sick and I had to stay at home for more than a month. When I came back they told me that it is too late to continue, others were far ahead with the syllabus. I did not have any choice, so I left and came back this year.*

In one of the centers, the learners indicated that they were not motivated enough to continue with the programs because there were no clear benefits derived from their participation. They indicated that they had never seen anyone use

the knowledge and skills acquired from ABET. They expressed feelings of disillusionment, and argued that ABET offered them no progress or development. The following are two examples.

*We just sit and listened to the educators all the time. I do not think we benefit much from this exercise.*

*There are no learners furthering their studies beyond ABET. They experience problems and their certificates take too long before they can receive them. It is discouraging.*

### CONCLUSION

Especially in the rural areas of South Africa, ABET could contribute to improving the lives of the illiterate and poor people in the communities. This aspect therefore needs special attention. Thus, the aim of the study was to investigate the barriers that prevented illiterate adults from participating in the ABET programs and which caused some learners to drop out. The study used a qualitative research approach and phenomenology as research design. Interviews were conducted and focus group discussions were held with 30 educators and 60 adult learners. Although the study was limited to one district in rural Limpopo, the findings are nonetheless useful in respect of the ABET programs in other rural areas in South Africa, and possibly elsewhere.

The findings indicated that certain situational, institutional, dispositional and informational factors influenced learner participation and learning negatively and aggravated learner dropout. The situational factors were related to financial constraints. The institutional factors pointed to the location of the classes, the content of the programs and the uninspiring and behaviorist way they were taught, and the lack of resources to implement the programs effectively. The dispositional constraints included the fact that the learners did not feel respected as adults, lacked confidence, felt guilty about domestic responsibilities that they could not attend to while participating in ABET classes, and the traditional views about gender roles, in particular those of the men. The informational factors pointed to a lack of information about the ABET classes in general that prevented many illiterate adults from participating. Many learners therefore, dropped out of the programs, as they simply were not motivated to attend further as they could not

see any clear benefits for doing so, even if they were living in appalling conditions of poverty and ill health.

To address the abovementioned inhibiting factors that the study identified, the following recommendations may be considered.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Providers of ABET programs and practitioners should recognize adult education as a necessary and specific component of the entire education system, and as a permanent element of social, cultural and economic development policies. The education system should, therefore, address the financial and physical constraints that prevent full and meaningful participation of the adults in the rural areas in the educational programs. Moreover, the needs of the adult learners should be assessed so that relevant programs could be developed. The educators of the adults need to be properly trained in socio-constructivist teaching methods and theories about learning and motivation. In addition, they have to be provided with the necessary resources to teach effectively. More respectful discussion on gender roles and family responsibilities in class could create a supportive learning environment for the female learners. Information about the classes that are to be presented and the venues are also needed. Finally, the monitoring and evaluation of the ABET programs should be done regularly to ensure quality and to address the problems immediately as they occur. Sufficient funds should be allocated towards this process, and coordinators should be supported in this regard.

If the abovementioned recommendations are considered more illiterate adults may be motivated to learn and thus be empowered to improve their lives and those of their families.

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