Volume 35 Issue 2

cjsae
the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
rcééa

WELCOME BACK: EXPLORING PERSISTENCE FACTORS FOR ADULT LEARNERS' RETURN TO BASIC EDUCATION IN RURAL CONTEXTS

Conor Barker, Grace Madden and Bonnie Petersen

The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
Editors-in-Chief: J. Adam Perry and Robin Neustaeter
French Language Editor: Jean-Pierre Mercier
www.cjsae-rceea.ca

35,2 December/décembre 2023, 93–109
ISSN1925-993X (online)

WELCOME BACK: EXPLORING PERSISTENCE FACTORS FOR ADULT LEARNERS' RETURN TO BASIC EDUCATION IN RURAL CONTEXTS

Conor Barker
Mount Saint Vincent University

Grace Madden
St. Francis Xavier University

Bonnie Petersen
Mount Saint Vincent University

Abstract

Adult education, particularly adult basic education (ABE), plays a crucial role in enabling individuals to attain secondary education or elevate their academic proficiency for post-secondary pursuits. ABE is often the only adult education physically accessible in rural communities in Saskatchewan. ABE offers a supportive classroom environment with the necessary resources, helping learners achieve educational credentials and enhancing their personal well-being. However, many rural ABE students face challenges that impede course completion, necessitating substantial support. This study investigates the hurdles confronting rural ABE students and the existing support mechanisms in a rural regional college system in Saskatchewan. To that end, this study explores the following questions: (1) What obstacles do ABE students in rural settings encounter? (2) What support systems are in place to foster persistence among rural ABE learners?

Résumé

L'éducation des adultes, surtout la formation de base pour adultes (FBA), joue un rôle essentiel pour aider les individus à terminer leurs études secondaires ou améliorer leurs compétences scolaires afin de poursuivre des études postsecondaires. Souvent, la FBA constitue la seule forme d'éducation pour adultes accessible sur le plan physique au sein de communautés rurales en Saskatchewan. La FBA offre un milieu scolaire accueillant, doté de ressources nécessaires, qui aide les personnes apprenantes à obtenir des qualifications scolaires et à rehausser leur bienêtre personnel. Pourtant, plusieurs personnes en FBA en région rurale rencontrent des obstacles découlant de l'isolement géographique qui empêchent la réussite des cours, ce qui exige un soutien

The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
35,2 December/décembre 2023, 93–109
ISSN1925-993X (online)

important. La présente étude aborde cette question en examinant les obstacles que rencontrent les personnes apprenantes en FBA en région rurale ainsi que les mécanismes de soutien actuels au sein d'un système collégial régional rural en Saskatchewan. Pour ce faire, cette étude se penche sur les questions suivantes : Quels sont les obstacles auxquels font face les personnes apprenantes en FBA en contexte rural? (2) Quels sont les systèmes de soutien en place pour favoriser la persistance parmi ces personnes?

Introduction

Adult education programs provide avenues to different levels of education for many different individuals. Adult basic education (ABE) provides students the necessary space, support, and resources to achieve secondary education not previously obtained or to raise their grade level to one necessary for post-secondary education. It consists of teacher-supported, classroom-based programming geared to these goals. ABE is essential, as it not only offers learners the opportunity to obtain credentials and education levels they may require for other goals (Madden, 2022), but also allows them to develop skills needed to enhance their own personal well-being. While there may be clear motivations for a return to education, ABE learners may not always complete their courses, and they may require significant support to overcome the barriers they face as adult learners. Rural students in particular experience unique difficulties in completion of ABE courses due to their relative isolation and distance from places of learning. It is therefore important to understand the key factors that contribute to rural student persistence in completion of ABE courses. To that end, this study explores the following questions: (1) What are the obstacles faced by ABE students in rural contexts; and (2) What supports are in place to encourage persistence in ABE in the rural regional college system?

Context

There is an increasing need to attain formal education credentials in Canada for reasons of health and employment. According to a study done by Statistics Canada (Uppal, 2017), "In 2016, 8.5% of men and 5.4% of women aged 25 to 34 had less than a high school diploma, representing about 340,000 young Canadians." The same study found that the employment rate of this age group with less than a high school diploma had dropped from 75% of men and 50% of women in 1990, to 67% for men and 41% for women. Uppal also pointed out that while 40% of women and 12% of men without their high school diploma were not employed in 1990, the proportion in 2016 had risen to 51% of women and 22% of men. These findings suggest that there is a rising need for education, even beyond secondary school standards, to secure employment. As Zarifa et al. (2019) described it, "By the year 2031, reports suggest that roughly 70 to 80 percent of jobs in Canada will require some form of post-secondary education (PSE), rendering skilled workers a vital commodity" (p. 252).

More disturbingly, the results of a study based on two cohorts of Canadians (one from 1996, one from 2011) indicated that "people with higher levels of education or higher income live longer and are expected to spend a greater portion of those years in good health, compared with those with less education or a lower income" (Statistics Canada, 2020). Education not only affects employment, but also has a major impact on life and death.

Adults returning to education face significantly different life circumstances than young people, with added responsibilities, such as family and employment, that they need to balance with studying. This contributes to high attrition rates in ABE programs. Estimates of attrition range from 38% to 54% (Greenberg et al., 2013), and 74% within the first three weeks (Quigley & Uhland, 2000).

Adult students in rural locations—a setting in which dropout rates have been found to be almost double that in big cities (Gilmore, 2010)— are at a further disadvantage. Rural schools can experience the same issues as schools in big cities, but with fewer resources available to them (Jordan et al., 2012; Tuters, 2015) and with a greater need to maintain relationships with their communities (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Loreman et al., 2008). There is also a higher likelihood of students coming from low-income families if they are from rural Saskatchewan or Manitoba, for example, compared to their urban counterparts (Fortin, 2008), and poverty is one of the factors that influences academic achievement (Tuters, 2015; Zvoch, 2006).

This study

This study seeks to identify what students experience as obstacles, and what supports students found helpful to encourage persistence, using a sample of students attending a regional college in Saskatchewan. We believe the current study has wide reach in terms of potential impact. It will not only aid and inform educators, policy makers, and social service providers, particularly in rural settings, but also future students of ABE themselves. Regardless of the motivations that may inspire rural adults to begin ABE programs, it is essential that all stakeholders gain an understanding of the factors that inspire and support persistence and success, thus reducing attrition rates.

Literature Review

Adult learners live "complex lives" (Wynne, 2005, p. 1) and have very different life circumstances than younger learners (MacGregor & Ryan, 2011). Their roles, responsibilities, and life experiences can present obstacles that need to be overcome in order for them to return to education. And having overcome these obstacles to begin an ABE program, "[obstacles] may continue to exist, exerting greater or lesser pressure" (Burton et al., 2011, p. 26) throughout any program; at the same time, new obstacles may be introduced, making persistence very difficult to achieve. An adult's return to education, "in many instances, requires a profound leap of courage, and yet their learning success is integral to the health of our communities and our economy" (Wynne, 2005, p. 1).

Those who have not experienced low literacy or numeracy skills often do not see the repeated adverse experiences that occur outside the education system. Daily events of reading text messages, emails, forms, and menus, or calculating a tip or the tax on a purchase, are constant reminders of the obstacles these individuals face. Communication is also a key component when it comes to self-advocacy. From filing a grievance to writing a petition or making a formal request, many of these acts of self-advocacy are done today in a written context. Without fluent literacy skills that can be applied in different contexts, many individuals are unable to engage in these acts or are at a disadvantage when they do engage. Participants in a study by Cieslik and Simpson (2015) shared their experiences of repeated daily reminders of their low literacy skills and how they felt that this directly influenced life

decisions, their current low social standing, and access to resources (see also Greenberg et al., 2013; Jenkins, 2021; MacGregor & Ryan, 2011; Marcotte, 2008). Indeed, skill levels in literacy and numeracy not only affect the motivating factors for a return to education (Boeren, 2017; Jenkins, 2021; Nieuwenhove & Wever, 2022), but are also a predictor of completion, as returning adults with higher math and literacy levels are more likely to complete their ABE program (Greenberg et al., 2013). Personal skills, such as having strong coping strategies, and identifying as strong, confident, and assertive were also factors that students identified as contributing to persistence in adult education, as was determination (Castles, 2004; Markle, 2015).

Negative childhood schoolroom experiences and self-perception can also influence future decision making related to a return to education (Jenkins, 2021). Long's (2002) review of basic literacy programs across Canada found that participants had negative preconceptions of how teachers in an ABE classroom would feel toward them, how they would feel in the classroom, and how lessons would take place. In the minds of the participants, these feelings appear to justify a non-return to education (Dayton, 2005; MacGregor & Ryan, 2011; Marcotte, 2008). These findings were backed up in a study by Scanlon (2008) in which students expressed negative feelings about their past school experiences and described how, through life events, their current self-identity did not match their learner identity, which had been defined in their past.

Lack of confidence and negative self-ideation also affect factors related to the concept of *human capital*—i.e., that our personal worth is linked to employability skills and levels of education. The desire to increase one's human capital is a powerful motivator for returning to education (Boeren, 2017; Jenkins, 2021), while struggles with related concepts of self-worth and the need to earn a living can lead to adult learners dropping out of secondary school (MacGregor & Ryan, 2011). This is particularly true for young men in Canada, who are more than twice as likely as women to list wanting/needing to work as a reason for dropping out (Raymond, 2008), and also more likely to list financial support and flexibility of employment as contributing to educational persistence (Markle, 2015). Meanwhile, young women are four times more likely to leave secondary school for personal reasons (Raymond, 2008), and are more likely to identify a reduction in courseload or work hours as contributing to persistence (Markle, 2015).

Adults may also perceive, or experience, judgment or stigma related to their return to education based on aspects of themselves, such as their age, gender, race, or abilities, or may fear being seen as not fulfilling their adult roles in some way. Students over 25 frequently juggle multiple roles, such as being parents, partners, and employees, so are at an increased risk of "role conflict, role overload, and role contagion" (Markle, 2015, p. 269). Their ability to juggle these roles is seen as crucial to persistence, and family and friends play an important role in this.

Adult education does require a substantial time commitment, so it can be difficult for caregivers to enter these types of programs without a supportive social network. Frequently, a desire for personal growth or an increase in human capital works in tandem with a student's wider community to inspire a return to education and persistence once there. Communities can provide moral, financial, and personal support, as well as assistance with childcare needs or study help. Supportive individuals can play a large role in encouraging a given adult to return to or persist in education (Davey & Jamieson, 2003). In fact, supportive environments are seen as contributing to persistence in adult education, while the lack of

such an environment has been identified as a definite barrier (Beder & Valentine, 1990; Cincinnato et al., 2014; Davey & Jamieson, 2003; Markle, 2015; Quigley, 1992; Quigley & Uhland, 2000).

Another aspect of persistence for adults returning to education relates to learning and institutional support experienced within the first three weeks. Quigley and Uhland (2000) explain that "in our own experience across the United States and Canada, literacy and ABE teachers are virtually unanimous that the first three weeks are the most critical if programs are to keep students involved in classes" (p. 55), while others have noted that not providing initial and ongoing support throughout ABE can be a significant barrier to persistence (Burton et al., 2011; Castles, 2004).

With this need for support, it is not surprising that Quigley and Uhland (2000) found that providing a small group approach to the ABE classroom resulted in a 60% completion rate at the three-month mark compared with a 0% completion rate for the control group. In a small group setting, ABE students build strong relationships with the instructor and peers (Quigley & Uhland, 2000). These relationships also helped counteract the negative feelings about past school experiences that some participants had.

Accessing resources and adult education programs themselves is easier for some individuals than others. Students or potential students in rural areas need to consider where programs take place in addition to all the competing factors presented above. Zarifa et al. (2019) investigated literacy and numeracy in rural and urban environments, and found that rural participants had lower literacy and numeracy skills than those in urban areas. The study identified lack of proximity to educational institutions and a lack of incentives for those with high educational attainment to remain in rural settings as causal factors of these results. Further studies signalled lower participation in adult education in rural areas (Patterson, 2018).

One solution to the lack of proximity to ABE and similar programs in rural areas is blended or remote learning (Li et al., 2018; Terry, 2006). In studies investigating this possibility, participants have stated that while they appreciate the flexibility involved in online and self-directed ABE programs (Terry, 2006), they also felt that they operated best in face-to-face settings (Li et al., 2018; Quigley & Uhland, 2000; Terry, 2006). These studies also identified the need for skills in technology on the part of the student, and dependence on Wi-Fi strength and broadband width, both of which are affected by rural location.

While students in rural areas experience a lack of programming, there is also a lack of individuals to facilitate ABE programs (Carr & Keflas, 2009; Zarifa et al., 2019). This problem may then be exacerbated if potential students and teachers leave rural areas for urban centres where ABE programs and employment opportunities exist, creating the spiral effect of a brain drain (Alasia, 2004; Carr & Keflas, 2009; Corbett, 2015; Malatest, 2002; Rothwell et al., 2002; Zarifa et al., 2019).

It is important to note that it is not solely the lack of accessible ABE programs that may be problematic in rural settings. Other factors include the ability to access transportation, the time required to travel to the program and back, and the cost of travelling to the program. While advances in online programming have been made, for adults seeking basic education opportunities, personal, contextual, and programming limitations signal the need for in-classroom experiences for ABE (Kara et al., 2020).

Methods

In partnership with Great Plains College (GPC), a regional college that offers classroom-based ABE program at several satellite campuses across southwestern Saskatchewan, the research team explored the persistence factors (e.g., obstacles and supports) associated with participation in ABE programming. GPC is part of the regional college system in Saskatchewan, which is tasked with meeting the educational needs of adults residing in rural spaces. The programming GPC offers is responsive to the economic and social needs of communities, and its ABE programming is offered in six rural campuses in a teacher-led, classroom-based model. About 200 students enroll in ABE programming each year, working on secondary school programming (i.e., Grade 12 standing) based on personal goals for credit upgrading (e.g., improving on previous grades), credit completion (e.g., completing courses), or general equivalency diploma (GED) test preparation.

The current study uses a qualitative constructivist approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to gather comprehensive data from adult learner participants. Participants were recruited through student email and through referrals from student advisors and ABE instructors. Purposive sampling was conducted in conjunction with snowball sampling from the GPC ABE program to gain a representative sample of 12 GPC students. Participants were invited to attend a one-hour recorded interview and a 30-minute follow-up to review transcripts and initial summaries of the responses.

A total of 12 individuals ($n = 12$) participated in the interviews. All were presently enrolled in ABE. The final sample consisted of nine self-identified females and three self-identified males. In a qualitative study, this sample size should be adequate to achieve code saturation, as per Guest et al.'s (2006) recommendation, thus revealing themes that would likely be present even in a larger sample. Recruitment methods included the student email system, student advisors, instructor referral, as well as snowball and purposive sampling to ensure regional representation.

The interviews were semi-structured, designed to allow participants to elaborate on their answers. Participants were asked about their experiences in the ABE program as part of a larger study exploring the inclusive educational experiences of adult learners. Specific to this present study, experiences in ABE were explored, including reasons for enrolling in ABE, overall evaluation of their experience in ABE, identification of supports, evaluation of relationships with ABE participants (e.g., students, staff, and instructors), financial supports, barriers experienced, and evaluation of support provided. Additionally, demographic information and experiences prior to ABE were described. Interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. They were transcribed, and transcripts with initial analyses were reviewed by the participants.

After transcription, these qualitative data were imported into NVivo 11 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018), a qualitative analysis software program designed to facilitate organization, coding, and retrieving data. Participant responses were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to allow researchers to draw on the experiences of participants.

Coding of the resulting transcripts was done sequentially. The transcripts were reviewed entirely and broadly coded into themes of support and obstacles for ABE. Once this broad analysis was completed, Madden began initial coding of responses within the themes of "supports" and "barriers," and then similar codes were gathered into themes. The themes

were reviewed by Barker, and discrepancies evaluated using analysts' consensus (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse & Field, 2005). Once data were coded and reviewed, researchers synthesized the data into initial interpretations to assess the current obstacles and levels of support experienced by students attending a rural ABE program and how these encouraged or discouraged persistence in their studies.

Results

Participants

The sample consisted of 12 participants. Nine participants self-identified as female and three as male. The age range of the participants was between 18 and 47 years old. Of the sample, two participants completed high school but returned to ABE to gain credits or improve their marks; 10 participants had dropped out before graduating high school. Six participants identified as Indigenous. Students were purposefully selected from campuses in Swift Current, Maple Creek, Kindersley, and Martensville, and were proportionally distributed. They were offered $40 in gift cards for participation, as well as any incidental costs (e.g., transportation and child care) that were needed to facilitate participation. Interviews were conducted in March 2021, in the later stage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Obstacles to Persistence in ABE

Results of the study found that obstacles to persistence at ABE centred around three main themes that arose from the data: External, Educational, and Personal/Social. The most discussed theme related to Personal/Social obstacles, with 11 out of 12 participants mentioning it 40 times in the entire data set.

External Obstacles

External obstacles were defined as obstacles outside ABE and/or outside ABE's control. These included COVID-19, employment, rural locations, child care, and finance. More than half of the participants mentioned external obstacles. Three participants made specific references to COVID-19 being a barrier. One participant noted:

> I had strep throat for a little while, but because of the pandemic, it wasn't like, "All right, I'll just wear a mask." It was like, "Oh, got to get a COVID test. You got to prove that you're not contagious," all that sort of stuff. It was like, I was out of school for 10 days, and for a while, I was like, "This is just piling on me."

Participants also discussed employment as a barrier, describing both the need to work and the limited numbers of hours they had available to do so. The rural location was mentioned by four participants, with one of them saying, "Getting to class over the winter was a little hairy." As noted by some participants, travelling to school takes additional time and, in the winter, can become unsafe. Two participants described their difficulties relating to accessing and maintaining safe and consistent child care, discussing their fears of how relying on loved ones could potentially put strains on relationships.

Educational Obstacles

Educational obstacles were identified as obstacles directly affecting participation/persistence in ABE. Stigma related to ABE was discussed as a barrier in one interview, with the participant describing their impression of ABE as being easier than high school. Inexperience with technology was another barrier mentioned, while two participants referred to their negative experiences with math, describing their math abilities as a barrier to persistence in the course: e.g., "Everything else was pretty good, but I'm still struggling with math." Participants also referred to problems that could be solved by more staffing. One participant compared two ABE programs:

> I tried to [contact another postsecondary institution] first and nobody answered my calls, nobody returned my emails, nothing. I just went down the list to places around, and I was like, "[This small town] looks nice, and they called me back first." [My advisor] was so wonderful to talk to and had so much information and was so helpful. I was like, "That sounds really good. Yes. I'll try it, yes. [This town] sounds good."

Personal/Social Obstacles

Personal obstacles as a category refers to individualized obstacles that impact multiple facets of the individual's life, both externally and internally. Three participants mentioned their difficulties with asking for help as a personal barrier.

> I didn't ask for help until it was almost too late. It was about, probably, I had a month left into the class before I had asked for help, but I had missed so many [class sessions], and a lot of it is a personal responsibility. It is totally on me when I do stuff like that. That's my own personal—I need to manage my own emotions and ask for help, but everybody has their moments.

Two participants described their age as a barrier, referring to struggles to connect with other students and feeling the need to mentor. Participants also referred to curriculum-specific instances of systemic racism and/or racism outside the ABE program. One Indigenous student explained it this way:

> The only thing that really was hard for me [was in social studies] when they talk about the Natives…They made it seem like we were the burden. When here they even talked about how some Natives, they had this really long travel down into the States. They travelled that way but they left out the part where they were forced to. It's just stuff like that. It just really gets to me because that's part of my family.

Finally, financial obstacles were also mentioned by participants, including the cost of child care, transportation, and being on a "tight budget" as a result of the fact that attending school both reduced their income and limited their ability to undertake opportunities to earn extra income.

Supports for Persistence in ABE

Identifying effective supports for persistence in ABE is essential to the development of ABE programming. As with obstacles to persistence, support for persistence fell into the themes of External, Educational, and Personal/Social. One positive outcome of this study was the fact that all 12 participants mentioned support, and there was significant discussion on all themes.

External (Financial)

Financial factors were discussed by 11 of the 12 participants, who made specific mention of financial support and/or income. One such support is the Provincial Training Allowance (PTA) that is allocated to some students and is dependent on student income.

> They offer PTA, which helps you afford your life, because if I didn't get PTA, I wouldn't have been able to come back to school because I wouldn't be able to pay for anything.

Educational Supports

The theme of educational supports covered references to the classroom, learning, and teaching. All 12 participants commented on educational support. Six participants described the positive impacts of flexibility in ABE, mentioning ways in which their education was adapted to their individual needs or situation.

> But then with the ABE program, like I said, everybody's kind of going at their own pace. We have a schedule that we are encouraged to stick to, but if it's taking us a week to finish, it's fine. You can hand your assignment in whenever. Maybe because of the individual who's instructing us, like in charge [chuckles], but it definitely made it feel like I could actually—It felt like I've actually completed. I was actually keeping up for once.

Classroom and class size were both mentioned as positive supports, with participants describing having generous desk space and feeling that they had room to work in the classroom, while also commenting on increased teacher support due to small class sizes.

> At first, I wasn't sure about what it was going to be like, but then once I got into school, I like it smaller. The teacher can focus on their students individually. You just get lots of support. That's what I always like because I feel like that lacked in school sometimes.

Some of the students described receiving a referral or diagnosis of a learning difference or mental disorder as a part of ABE. The students described how this helped them understand their learner identity and explained suspensions they had received in the past, before their diagnosis.

> My diagnosis, I actually got not from here, but from a psychology place that the school set me up with. If it wasn't for them, I would have to pay $1,500 to get a diagnosis, which I never would've been able to do. They've been very helpful with that. It's actually a very good environment here.

Learners who were identified as having the need for specific accommodations described elements such as extra time, support, and/or a memory aid to support their learning.

Technology was also observed to be a significant support for students and included use of technology to assist learning and facilitate communication. Three participants specifically referenced technology as a support for their learning. It was noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic (the period when this data was collected), technology was more prominent in the classroom. The participants noted that they appreciated technologies that facilitated real-time connections with their teachers, or offered text-like features (e.g., Microsoft Teams) so that they had increased access to their teachers. It was noted by the researchers that the participants did not talk about assistive technology (e.g., voice to text, text to voice, organizational software) that is commonly recommended for students with exceptional learning needs.

Participants in the study referred to the positive support they felt from peers in the classroom or program, describing how the lack of competition and the increase of common interest helped improve their experience.

> We're all adults, sorting my life out. Nobody's better than anybody. We're in the same—sorting everything out. I just always liked how it was very—I never have huge problem here ever.

Every participant in the study made specific reference to teachers, tutors, teachers' aids, and administration as a support. Participants felt they had strong relationships with their teacher and felt these relationships had links to their positive school experiences.

> It's really nice set up. Teachers connect with you. They're really nice. I can't say anything bad about them. I can't think of anything bad to tell. One thing too is they're approachable. Back in high school, teachers are intimidating. You can't just go to them and be open. Here, they're more understanding, more chill. They don't pick on students. They will explain the material they're teaching more.

Personal/Social Supports

Personal and Social supports as a category refers to support specifically aimed at student needs outside the classroom. Almost every participant made reference to social supports. Two participants specifically referred to how safe they felt in the physical environment outside ABE. Participants also commented on their ability to access child care, including one who described a member of ABE programming helping them secure it. Learners also mentioned individuals in their social life/family who provided support (outside of child care).

> I didn't actually do it, because my sister was the one that arranged most of this [chuckles] for me because it was very daunting. We were talking about it before COVID, but then in the middle of 2020, I think, was when we actually went through the process. I always wanted to do it, it was just buried [chuckles], dragging my feet. In the end, so I ended up here and I think was enrolled for a year and a half before I had completed all of my courses.

Several participants referred to having personal supports available to help them address negative challenges and provide positive insight.

More than half of the participants mentioned having access to mental health resources that supported their persistence in ABE. They made reference to "the counselor who comes every Wednesday," indicating that they had been to or were thinking about going to see them. Participants also referred to their ability to access health benefits associated with PTA.

Finally, determination was observed among the participants and was made clear through comments stating that adults in this study were also supported in persistence through their own determination.

> Yes. I had strep throat for a little while, but because of the pandemic, it wasn't like, "All right, I'll just wear a mask." It was like, "Oh, got to get a COVID test. You got to prove that you're not contagious," all that sort of stuff. It was like, I was out of school for 10 days, and for a while, I was like, "This is just piling on me." But then I really just like, all right, it's reading the material and then doing the work like that. That was great because I knew it was just buckling down and doing the work.

Discussion

Findings of this study align with previous research regarding both obstacles to and supports for persistence, categorized under the general themes of Educational, Personal/Social, and External.

It is very encouraging to note that students in this study spoke much more frequently of supports (143 references) that enabled them to persist in their education than of obstacles (64 references), as can be seen in Table 1 It is also very telling that, when discussing obstacles, participants identified and discussed personal and social obstacles more than twice as often as external obstacles, and more than four times as frequently as educational obstacles. This signals the significant impacts that social and personal factors have on the decision to engage and remain in ABE programming.

Table 1: Supports and Obstacles to Persistence

Themes	Number of Participants	Number of References
Educational Supports	12/12	99
Educational Obstacles	5/12	9
Personal/Social Supports	11/12	24
Personal/Social Obstacles	11/12	40
External Supports	11/12	20
External Obstacles	8/12	15

All 12 participants in the study discussed their teachers and educators as strong supports to persistence, although two did refer to scenarios in which having more staff available would have been helpful to them. The positive relationships educators built with their students were felt to play a large role in students' learning experiences. Participants felt that the educators were approachable in ABE—more than in high school—and as a result, easier to access. Students also commented positively regarding the small group setting they experienced in ABE. As discussed above, Quigley and Uhland (2000) found that participants preferred and performed best in a small group setting, which allows for the ability to form relationships while having greater access to the teacher. Participants also referred to the fact that discipline and the need for discipline by their teachers was not a common occurrence in their ABE classrooms, unlike their high school experiences; this had a noticeably positive affect on their learning. This could be due to the size of the class or could be a result of maturity. As one student noted, "Sometimes I think, too, that because my brain is mature, so I can understand them well, rather than back in high school that I'm struggling in lots of things. That's the difference." One student also noted that because educators were not as involved with discipline, they had more time to work on building relationships with their students. These points all underscore the need for small class sizes and generous staff-to-student ratios in ABE.

Some students in the study identified areas of weakness first recognized in K–12, such as math, as continuing to be areas in where they needed support. This draws attention to the question of learner identity and how it is formed. As noted in studies mentioned above (e.g., Dayton, 2005; Kasworm, 2005; Long, 2002; MacGregor & Ryan, 2011; Marcotte, 2008; Scanlon, 2008), previous negative experiences can affect learners' confidence and belief in their skills and potential in all areas of life. It is important for ABE programs to introduce activities involving transformational practices (Dyson, 2010), such as reflective writing, self-authoring (Scanlon, 2008), and portfolio development (Brown, 2001), to help adult learners change the narrative of their self-doubts as students and create better self-awareness, a greater appreciation for the learning experience, and increased communication skills (Brown, 2001). Additionally, in key areas such as literacy and numeracy, returning learners can benefit from learning these topics in a new, more experiential setting, especially if this is a setting of strength and confidence for the student. For example, if math is a challenge for an ABE learner and it is presented in the same classroom context they struggled with in high school, the student may perceive it as an unsurmountable challenge. However, if math is presented in a setting of strength—for example, in the context of automotive and electrical work—this may alter the student's self-perception of capability. It is important for ABE programs to consider settings of strength in a learner profile as possible tools for success.

Adult learners benefit from the flexibility in ABE programs that is not part of typical K–12 classrooms. Participants in the study frequently stated that they would have benefited from this flexibility in their K–12 education. Having a flexible program that allows students to work at their own pace is essential for adult learners' perseverance. This flexibility must also extend to an understanding of the number of roles and complex circumstances that exist in the learner's life outside the classroom. Flexibility must operate in conjunction with social/emotional support to be fully successful. Counselling, financial aid, and flexible learning environments must work simultaneously to support the learner. Flexibility coupled with a biopsychosocial approach (a systematic consideration of biological, psychological,

and social/environmental factors, alongside their complex interactions) facilitates the full support adult learners require. The key to this approach is the understanding that adult learners require support in multiple aspects of their lives to enable them to feel empowered to navigate the complicated personal and external obstacles they experience as they attend school.

Participants in this study identified struggles with specific external aspects of their identity, such as age and race, as well as inner struggles, such as their own ability to ask for help. Counselling can help with some issues, but it is important for all faculty and staff at ABE programs to take note that these struggles are taking place. A collective approach to addressing these issues is essential for all students to feel safe and supported.

The first few weeks of any program are crucial in developing and supporting persistence in adult learners. Many of them are facing fears related to their learner history and identity that may convince them that they are destined to fail as they navigate complex practical obstacles such as transportation or finance. A single unanswered phone call may convince a potential learner that they are unwanted, as was seen in the example above, so supportive staffing at all levels is required. These early weeks can also be vital in reshaping a learner identity, helping individuals overcome the negative narrative of themselves as students that they created for themselves in their past.

Adult learners may also have undiagnosed learning difficulties that they have carried with them throughout their lives. It is important for ABE programs and policy makers to ensure that all learners have the opportunity and, most importantly, the funding to receive assessments they may need to support their learning. Many of the participants in this study expressed relief and gratitude for assessments they received, while others expressed an inner certainty that they had an undiagnosed difficulty that would have hindered them in their learning and that a comprehensive assessment and diagnosis would have helped them engage with appropriate support for their learning.

Adult learners are likely to experience financial difficulties as an obstacle to their participation and persistence in studies. Participants in this study who received provincial funding (PTA, a provincial training allowance once available in Saskatchewan) acknowledged that they would not have been able to participate in ABE if it were not for that funding. PTA allowed some of them to receive funding for the much-needed learning assessments mentioned above. Participants also identified financial difficulties related to finding safe and dependable child care and transportation, and their need for employment that might clash with ABE timetables (also highlighting the importance of flexibility in programs). Financial worries add to the general worries of an adult learner, further complicating an already stressful situation. It is essential for ABE programs to partner with policy makers to ensure funding is available to support adult learners throughout their studies.

Technology was mentioned by participants as a support, but others described a lack of familiarity with technology as a barrier. Adults returning to education may have widely varying knowledge of and previous experience with technology, especially regarding laptops and computers (versus phones). Some of them may have limited access to computers at all. The reasons for this can vary from simply not having a computer to having limited Wi-Fi, Internet, or broadband. It is essential for ABE programs to recognize this reality and offer supports to students ranging from use of laptops to basic workshops on computer use, as well as access to libraries and other institutional areas that have solid Wi-Fi access. ABE programs in rural areas must pay particular attention to this requirement, especially

if they are offering online programs or online course activities or meetings to supplement in-person courses. Rural areas are known for having patchy Internet coverage in general, and some areas may offer very limited access.

The rural location itself was specifically mentioned as a barrier by four participants, with one of them noting that "Getting to class over the winter was a little hairy." A key element to understanding rural education is that there are always additional steps to take, and obstacles that need to be overcome. As noted by some participants, travelling to school takes additional time and, in the winter, can become unsafe.

While our qualitative study provides insights into the experiences and perspectives of ABE students in the GPC regional college system, it is contextualized in a rural bounded system. It is essential to acknowledge certain limitations that warrant the need for further research to enhance the generalizability of the findings. First, the study's focus on a specific rural context with bounded parameters may restrict the applicability of its conclusions to other rural settings with differing socio-cultural, economic, or geographic characteristics. The limited sample size and homogeneity of the participants may also limit the broader representation of diverse perspectives that exist in other or larger rural populations. Additionally, qualitative studies inherently rely on subjective interpretations, making it challenging to extrapolate the results to larger populations or make causal claims. Therefore, future research with larger and more diverse samples, encompassing various rural contexts, is necessary to corroborate and extend the current study's findings, thus allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the broader implications and generalizability of the research outcomes.

If ABE programs aspire to achieve genuine success in supporting their students through to completion, it is imperative that all partners involved in the educational process thoroughly comprehend the multifaceted obstacles adult learners encounter. Adult learners often face unique challenges compared to traditional students, such as juggling familial responsibilities, financial constraints, work commitments, and personal life demands. A comprehensive understanding of these hurdles is crucial for program administrators, educators, policy makers, and community leaders if they are to design and implement effective support systems that cater to the specific needs of adult learners. By identifying and acknowledging the various challenges, ABE programs can proactively develop targeted interventions and services aimed at mitigating these obstacles. These can significantly enhance the likelihood of adult learners persisting and succeeding in their educational pursuits.

References

Alasia, A. (2004). *Mapping the socio-economic diversity of rural Canada* (Vol. 5). Statistics Canada. http://www.deslibris.ca/ID/203009

Beder, H. W., & Valentine, T. (1990). Motivational profiles of adult basic education students. *Adult Education Quarterly, 40*(2), 78–94.

Boeren, E. (2017). Understanding adult lifelong learning participation as a layered problem. *Studies in Continuing Education, 39*(2), 161–175. https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2017.1310096

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brown, J. O. (2001). The portfolio: A reflective bridge connecting the learner, higher education, and the workplace. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 49*(2), 2–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/07377366.2001.10400426

Burton, K., Lloyd, M. G., & Griffiths, C. (2011). Barriers to learning for mature students studying HE in an FE college. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 35*(1), 25–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2010.540231

Carr, P. J., & Keflas, M. J. (2009). *Hollowing out the middle: The rural brain drain and what it means for America.* Beacon Press.

Castles, J. (2004). Persistence and the adult learner: Factors affecting persistence in open university students. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 5*(2), 166–179. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787404043813

Cieslik, M., & Simpson, D. (2015). Basic skills, literacy practices and the "hidden injuries of class." *Sociological Research Online, 20*(1), 17–28. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.3569

Cincinnato, S., De Wever, B., & Valcke, M. (2014). The learning divide in formal adult education: Why do low-qualified adults participate less? *Local Change, Social Actions and Adult Learning : Challenges and Responses, Proceedings,* 401–415. http://hdl.handle.net/1854/LU-5030388

Corbett, M. (2015). Rural education: Some sociological provocations for the field. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education.* https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Rural-education%3A-Some-sociological-provocations-for-Corbett/c3458271527a44711069343eb7ebf8b09f8bcbe3

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (Fifth edition.). Sage Publications.

Davey, J. A., & Jamieson, A. (2003). Against the odds: Pathways of early school leavers into university education: evidence from England and New Zealand. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 22*(3), 266–280. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370304839

Dayton, E. (2005). Factors that influence adult success at community college. *The Community College Enterprise, 11*(1), 45–60.

Downing, J. E., & Peckham-Hardin, K. (2007). Supporting inclusive education for students with severe disabilities in rural areas. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 26*(2), 10–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/875687050702600203

Dyson, M. (2010). What might a person-centred model of teacher education look like in the 21st century? The transformism model of teacher education. *Journal of Transformative Education, 8*(1), 3–21. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344611406949

Fortin, M. (2008). A comparison of rural and urban workers living in low-income. *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin.* https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/21-006-x/21-006-x2007004-eng.pdf?st=zpJfvD_7

Gilmore, J. (2010, November 3). *Trends in dropout rates and the labour market outcomes of young dropouts.* Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/81-004-x/2010004/article/11339-eng.htm#d

Greenberg, D., Wise, J. C., Frijters, J. C., Morris, R., Fredrick, L. D., Rodrigo, V., & Hall, R. (2013). Persisters and nonpersisters: Identifying the characteristics of who stays and who leaves from adult literacy interventions. *Reading and Writing, 26*(4), 495–514. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-012-9401-8

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods, 18*(1), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903

Jenkins, A. (2021). Patterns of participation and non-participation in learning in mid-life and their determinants. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 40*(3), 215–228. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2021.1937357

Jordan, J. L., Kostandini, G., & Mykerezi, E. (2012). Rural and urban high school dropout rates: Are they different? *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 27*(12), 21.

Kara, M., Erdogdu, F., Kokoc, M., & Cagiltay, K. (2020). Challenges faced by adult learners in online distance education: A literature review. *Open Praxis, 11*(1), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.234110355704611

Kasworm, C. (2005). Adult student identity in an intergenerational community college classroom. *Adult Education Quarterly, 56,* 3–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713605280148

Li, J., Kay, R., & Markovich, L. (2018). Student attitudes toward blended learning in adult literacy and basic skills college programs. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology, 44*(2), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.21432/cjlt27573

Long, E. (2002). *Nonparticipation in literacy and upgrading programs: A national study.* ABC Canada. http://en.copian.ca/library/research/abc/programs/programs.pdf

Loreman, T., McGhie-Richmond, D., Barber, J., & Lupart, J. (2008). *Student perspectives on inclusive education: A survey of grade 3-6 children in rural Alberta, Canada. Students perspectives on inclusive education: A survey of grade 3-6 children in rural Alberta, Canada, 5*(1), 12.

MacGregor, C., & Ryan, T. G. (2011). Secondary level re-entry of young Canadian adult learners. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 51*(1).

Madden, G. (2022, July 25). *Welcome back: Exploring supports needed in adult learners return to basic education.* Educational Research Forum, St. Francis Xavier University.

Malatest, M. A. (2002, July 1). *Rural youth migration: Exploring the reality behind the myths.* Rural Youth Migration. https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/468175/publication.html

Marcotte, J. (2008). Quebec's adult educational settings: Potential turning points for emerging adults? Identifying barriers to evidence-based interventions. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 77,* 1–18.

Markle, G. (2015). Factors influencing persistence among nontraditional university students. *Adult Education Quarterly, 65,* 267–285. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713615583085

Miles, M., & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis.* Sage Publications.

Morse, J., & Field, P. (2005). *Qualitative research methods for health professionals.* Sage Publications.

Nieuwenhove, L. V., & Wever, B. D. (2022). Participation of low-, medium- and high-educated adults in lifelong learning: Psychosocial factors as barriers. *INTED2022 Proceedings,* 9282–9289. https://doi.org/10.21125/inted.2022.2417

Patterson, M. B. (2018). *The forgotten 90%: Adult nonparticipation in education, 68*(1), 41–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/074171361773181

QSR International Pty Ltd. (2018). NVivo (Version 12) [Computer software]. https://support.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/s/

Quigley, A. (1992). Looking back in anger: The influences of schooling on illiterate adults. *The Journal of Education, 174*(1), 104–121.

Quigley, B. A., & Uhland, R. L. (2000). Retaining adult learners in the first three critical weeks: A quasi-experimental model for use in ABE programs. *Adult Basic Education, 10*(2), 55–68.

Raymond, M. (2008). High school dropouts returning to school. *Statistics Canada.* https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/81-595-m/81-595-m2008055-eng.pdf?st=eaglH-6V

Rothwell, N., Bollman, R. D., Tremblay, J., & Marshall, J. (2002). Migration to and from rural and small town Canada. *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin, 3*(6). https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=f90a0854e7f5c3f1dcfb48a4ee8770650afecc9c

Scanlon, L. (2008). Adults' motives for returning to study: The role of self-authoring. *Studies in Continuing Education, 30*(1), 17–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/01580370701639869

Statistics Canada. (2020, January 15). *The daily—Health reports: Life expectancy differs by education and income levels.* https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200115/dq200115c-eng.htm

Terry, M. (2006). Self-directed learning by undereducated adults. *Educational Research Quarterly, 29*(4), 29–38.

Tuters, S. (2015). Conceptualising diversity in a rural school. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 19*(7), 685–696. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2014.964573

Uppal, S. (2017, May 4). *Insights on Canadian society: Young men and women without a high school diploma.* Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/75-006-x/2017001/article/14824-eng.pdf?st=-EOeqgtz

Wynne, K. (2005). Letter from the parliamentary assistant to the minister of Education. In *Ontario learns: Strengthening our adult education system.* Ontario Ministry of Education. https://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/adultedreview/ontariolearns.pdf

Zarifa, D., Seward, B., & Milian, R. P. (2019). Location, location, location: Examining the rural-urban skills gap in Canada. *Journal of Rural Studies, 72,* 252–263. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.10.032

Zvoch, K. (2006). Freshman year dropouts: Interactions between student and school characteristics and student dropout status. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR), 11*(1), 97–117. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327671espr1101_6