

# Adult Education Dilemmas: A Preliminary Study Exploring Major Challenges Through Linguistic Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Adult education faces complex challenges beyond those in higher education. This preliminary study investigates the specific challenges perceived by adult learners and adult educators through a linguistic analysis. Using Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques, including Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), we analyzed video-based interviews with 23 adult learners and 4 adult educators in an US institution. Our findings revealed that adult learners emphasize practical concerns such as learning methods, technology access, and time management, while adult educators focus on systemic issues such as policy and institutional support. The findings also indicated that adult educators showed greater emotional variability regarding systemic concerns, whereas adult learners expressed consistent emotional patterns toward immediate concerns. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of integrating adult learners' practical needs with adult educators' systemic insights to develop responsive adult education programs.

## KEYWORDS

Adult Education, Adult Learner, Adult Educator, Dilemmas, Linguistic Analysis

## INTRODUCTION

Adult education aims to enhance technical or professional skills, expand knowledge, complete formal education, or acquire new competencies for individuals who are defined as adults by the society (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], n.d.). Adult learners are usually characterized as goal-oriented, highly motivated, and self-directed for seeking relevance and practical application in their learning, and they bring rich experience from their lives and jobs to their learning (Knowles, 1984). However, worldwide changes, such as health-related emergencies (e.g., COVID-19), rapid development of technology (e.g., artificial intelligence), and political shifts (e.g., the Trump administration's signed executive order to dismantle the Education Department),

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have posed significant challenges to the field of adult education, which may hinder its viability and future growth. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed systemic vulnerabilities in digital readiness and continuity of adult programs, while rapid technological change has accelerated the need for digital literacy and ongoing reskilling (Mortrude, 2021). At the same time, shifting political and policy landscapes have threatened funding stability and equitable access to adult education (Luan et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2022).

Specifically, policy restrictions including funding cuts and stringent qualification requirements act as one major issue to adult education. These restrictions would not only reduce the availability of adult education-related programs but also lead to the closure of existing ones, teacher layoffs, and a subsequent decrease in learning opportunities for adult learners (Ojobanikan et al., 2024). Access to technology is another challenge. Today, the lack of access to technology can prevent adults from participating in online learning opportunities, further exacerbating educational inequalities (Knightley, 2007; Luan et al., 2024). Additionally, adult education programs are required to adapt to evolving demands of the rapidly changing nature of work driven by the technology development and the growing demand for related skills (Guo, 2010; Luan et al., 2024). Otherwise, it will be challenging for adult learners to remain competitive in the job market. Understanding those issues would also enlighten stakeholders to develop effective strategies for adult education.

This study works as a preliminary study exploring major challenges in the field of U.S. adult education. By hearing the voice from both adult learners and adult educators who are directly engaged in adult education, we aim to discover the identified dilemmas. This way, we hope to offer an understanding of the issues that impact the field of adult education, along with providing insights to guide the development of effective corresponding strategies.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Adult education refers to the process of gaining new knowledge and involving a transformation of existing knowledge and perspectives through critical reflection and active engagement (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). However, the field of adult education faces several major challenges that could undermine its ability to meet the needs of adult learners.

### **Policy Restrictions**

Policy restriction is one major challenge. The scope of adult education programs can be limited by funding cuts, stringent qualification requirements, and regulations. First, funding cuts are a significant issue that will lead to a decrease in the availability of adult education program. For example, a reduced state funding in Michigan from \$75 million to \$20 million in 2004 for adult education programs resulted in a drop in the enrollment from 76,000 in 2001 to 35,000 by 2005 (Hull, 2018). Second, the implementation of stringent qualification requirements, such as high tuition fees, prior educational background requirements, and complex application processes, can make it difficult for learners to access to adult education. Such requirements may create barriers especially for disadvantaged populations. Adult education often serves those seeking to acquire basic skills or improve their competence. However, when requirements for accessing learning become overly demanding, students are less likely to enroll, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Weiss & Roksa, 2016). A survey showed that adults in lower socioeconomic groups are twice as likely to not participate in learning opportunities (Hall et al., 2022). Therefore, the complexity around eligibility criteria can prevent learners—especially those from marginalized groups—from engaging in adult education, subsequently exacerbating social inequalities. The political shifts, such as ideological movements to defund public education, will further impact adult education by limiting equitable access and institutional stability (Eden et al., 2024; Rasmussen & Lolle, 2022). Akwuole and Cacicio (2024) conducted a U.S.-based study across federally funded Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) programs, examining educator recruitment; they found a large variation in how

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