

## Causes of Adult Illiteracy at an Adult Community Learning Centre in the Nkowankowa Circuit, Mopani West District, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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**ABSTRACT:** Adult illiteracy has been one of the most persistent socio educational challenges in South Africa over time. The problem is especially noticeable in rural and peri urban communities that are still suffering from the effects of historical injustices and have been affected structurally and socio economically to hardly access the lifelong learning they need. This research is a qualitative inquiry to the causes of illiteracy among adults in an adult community learning centre located in Nkowankowa Circuit, Mopani West District, Limpopo Province. The study backed by Knowles' Andragogy, Freire's Critical Literacy Theory, and Social Practice Theory regards literacy as a practice that is socially and culturally mediated and politically situated rather than just a technical skill. Semi structured interviews with adult learners and educators were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis to uncover the experiences that informed the literacy trajectories of adults. The results reveal that adult illiteracy has its roots in the combination of factors such as early educational disruption, intergenerational poverty, gendered labour expectations, linguistic marginalization, negative schooling experiences, and institutional constraints within the adult education sector. Participants referred to literacy as the core of personal agency, social participation, and identity reconstruction, thus implying the transformative nature of literacy in the everyday life. The research argues that the provision of adult literacy should be community responsive, relational, and dignity restoring and proposes pedagogical, institutional, and policy measures to facilitate adult learning pathways in disadvantaged communities.

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### INTRODUCTION

Adult literacy has been a major issue that continues to trouble South Africa for a long time, mainly the rural areas, which have been so affected by the past injustices of the country, and suffer from the recurring socio economic problems, thus making it difficult for people to get proper education (Statistics South Africa, 2024; Johnson, 2018). Although the nation has made various attempts to improve adult education through the establishment of community centres and by setting up conducive policies, a high percentage of adults in the country are still so illiterate that they are practically excluded from economic and social participation (DHEA, 2025; Blanchard, 2023). The Nkowankowa Adult Community Learning Centre (NACLC) in the Mopani West District of Limpopo Province is one of the places where this problem is being resolved through the facilitation of vocational and literacy programs which can be accessed by adults who have had little or no formal education in the past (LEDA, 2021).

Adult illiteracy is the result of a complicated interaction of conditioning agents. Amongst which are the socio-economic factors such as poverty, lack of income, and domestic chores, that very often double as excuses for lack of regular attendance and involvement in educational programs (Arendse, 2016; Batan, Baguio, & Galigao, 2025). Cultural attitudes which reject adult education due to a supposed lack of necessity and learners' low self-esteem and psychological barriers are some of the factors that hinder adult learners from making progress, weakening their resolve and discouraging them from approaching instructors for motivation levels (Pratt, 2014; Teslim & Obafemi Awolowo University, 2024). Besides these, various systemic problems such as antiquated curricular

materials, levels of inadequacy in terms of teaching resources, and low probabilities of rural students having access to technically advanced learning centres impact negatively on the adult literacy rates of such centres (LEDA, 2023; Training Centre LEDA, 2021). Considering the above, the current research intends to probe into the issues leading to illiteracy among adults at NACLC through hearing and understanding the experiences of the adults who come to learn and the teachers. Unpacking socio economic, cultural, and institutional factors influencing the phenomenon of adult illiteracy would be the first step towards generating pertinent insights from these to guide implementation of strategies, which, besides improving literacy, also help to enhance learner retention and promote the concept of lifelong learning. This way, a study builds a link to the wide conversation of adult education in South Africa and presents the issues dealt with there and shows programs that can be implemented to elevate rural dwellers with literacy and skill training, thus alleviating poverty and unemployment.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

To get to the root causes of adult illiteracy in Nkowankowa, one must first understand the dynamics that have come from the past, the history, and the economic, social, and cultural aspects of the area the dynamics that are basically the result of different factors and have long been existing. This research uses a combined framework based on Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy), Freire's Critical Literacy Theory, and New Literacy Studies (NLS) Social Practice Theory. These theories, in effect, articulate the processes by which adult illiteracy develop, persist, and get deeply rooted in the daily lives of people.

### **2.1 Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy)**

Knowles maintains that adult learners operate at their optimum when the learning process is self-managed, problem centred, is of importance to their lives and draws on their previous experiences (Knowles et al., 2015). Adult learners in Nkowankowa, with a history of disrupted schooling coming into the learning space, would inevitably have less motivation and confidence due to their limited exposure to literacy and perhaps a negative experience of the past. Andragogy sheds light on the occurrence of illiteracy among adults as a continuation of the chain where education has failed in the early stages due to lacking a proper learning environment and unmet developmental needs. Besides it illustrates how a bad adult learning condition like a shortage of learning materials, unqualified facilitators, or a curriculum that is not appealing can lead to a low uptake of such classes and hence illiteracy cannot be gained.

### **2.2 New Literacy Studies (NLS) and the Social Practice Theory of Literacy**

New Literacy Studies (Street, 1984; Barton & Hamilton, 1998) do not consider literacy as a mere skill that one needs to have, rather, the concept is seen as a set of social practices that are deeply rooted in the life of a community. This theory can be a good match for the situation in Nkowankowa, where the ways of literacy depend on the local languages, the respect of the community, the economic activities, and the community networks. Quite a lot of adults may be considered "illiterate" if we are to use the standards of formal school, at the same time, they are holders of other literacies, that may include oral storytelling, informal numeracy, or multilingual communication, all of which find their use in markets, churches, or households. Social Practice Theory provides the ground for recognizing the reasons behind: (1) the correlation between disrupted schooling and adult illiteracy, (2) the influence community literacy norms have on reading and writing habits, and (3) the impact family responsibilities, traditional gender roles, and the informal labour economy may have on literacy development. This theory demonstrates how illiteracy among adults is kept going by the lack of literacy integration in daily social practices.

### **2.3 Synthesis of Theories**

The combination of the three perspectives, i.e. Knowles' Andragogy, Freire's Critical Literacy Theory, and the Social Practice Theory of Literacy, serve as an all-embracing tool for looking at the different sides of the causes of adult illiteracy in Nkowankowa. Andragogy is diligent in highlighting the individual and experiential aspects of adult learning. It emphasizes that personal motivation, previous educational experiences, and learner centred pedagogical approaches largely determine the extent to which one is willing to participate in literacy programs. Adults who have experienced interrupted schooling or negative learning environments might find it difficult to engage in self-directed learning and moreover they may not be able to see the connection between literacy and their day-to-day life.

Freire's Critical Literacy Theory works well with this point of view as it ties up illiteracy with the big picture structural and historical frameworks. Accordingly, adult illiteracy should not be treated as a mere personal defect but a heritage of systemic discriminations, which includes historical deprivation, socio economic marginalization, and lack of quality educational opportunities. These structural factors come interlocked with local socio-cultural norms making the accessibility and relevance of formal literacy interventions doubly difficult.

The Social Practice Theory of Literacy goes on to say literacy is socially and culturally embedded and not just a separate technical skill. In Nkowankowa, adult literacy is linked with community norms, economic activities, and everyday social interactions. Adults may be doing quite advanced literacy related tasks in informal or occupational contexts, yet by formal standards, they are still considered illiterate. This model explains that literacy practice is impacted by language, culture, family responsibilities, and local labour economies, thus the hurdles to joining formal adult education programs are getting higher.

These theoretical approaches working together reveal the intimate personal, structural, and social factors that interact to bring about adult illiteracy. They constitute a critical base for exploring the life experiences of adult learners in Nkowankowa and hence the research can study not only individual learning challenges but also the socio economic, cultural, and institutional conditions that maintain illiteracy.

### **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Adult literacy is an issue that has been puzzling the world for quite a while, which is most apparent in the rural and marginalized communities where the roots of the problem are the socio economic, cultural, and historical factors that have been there for a long time and continue to intersect (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2022). The effects of apartheid are a significant factor in the determination of educational patterns, and as a result, adults living in the rural provinces of South Africa, such as Limpopo, continue to be the most affected groups (Spaull, 2019). The literature shows that the adult illiteracy situation is not only a mirror reflecting individual shortcomings but is deeply connected to systemic inequalities, socio cultural norms, and institutional restrictions (Bénabou & Tirole, 2016). This chapter reviews the scholarly viewpoints on the causes of adult illiteracy, concentrating on the socio-economic limitations, cultural and community influences, educational policies, and pedagogical challenges and places the discussion in the context of Nkowankowa Adult Community Learning Centre.

#### **3.2 Socio Economic Barriers to Adult Learning**

Adults' education takes its chances from the socio-economic factors that mold the possibilities. Poverty, unemployment, and financial insecurity come up as three major barriers to the access and continuation of adult learning programs (Chakraborty & Mushtaq, 2020). Adults living in the rural areas are burdened with different tasks simultaneously, such as taking care of their families, doing the seasonal labour, and employing various economic survival strategies, which means they have less time and energy for education (Breen et al., 2021). In South Africa, rural adult learners often say that the cost of transport, lack of learning materials, and the opportunity cost of forgone income are what discourage them from taking part in literacy programs (LEDA, 2021; DHET, 2024). These socio-economic pressures generate a cycle of exclusion in which illiteracy causes poverty, and poverty, in turn, is a barrier to literacy acquisition (World Bank, 2022).

#### **3.3 Cultural and Community Influences**

Cultural norms and community perceptions are among the most influential factors determining adults' participation in education. In a few rural communities, it is commonly believed that learning is only for children and adults who seek literacy may be stigmatized or called "missed their chance" (Pratt, 2014; Batan et al., 2025). The learner's motivation and the community's support can be affected by this cultural prejudice and thus, the enrolment and retention rates may be lower. On the other hand, if communities are aware of the benefits of adult education for the economic empowerment and social inclusion of the local people, engagement in the same is bound to increase because adults get support from their families and local institutions (Blanchard, 2023). The literature demonstrates that culturally responsive pedagogy is very important as it helps the usage of local languages, practices, and knowledge systems in adult education, and this way, it becomes more relevant to the needs of the learners, and their participation gets enhanced (UNESCO, 2017).

#### **3.4 Historical and Policy Context**

The educational system of South Africa through the years has deeply influenced the patterns of the adult literacy in the country. Apartheid policies aimed at closing the doors to quality education for black South Africans, especially for those living in rural areas, thus creating a gap that has since been widening in terms of literacy levels (Spaull, 2019). The post-apartheid programs such as the National Qualifications Framework and the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) were designed to fix these inequities, but often their effectiveness is limited by resourcing issues, lack of teacher training, and implementation problems (DHET, 2024; LEDA, 2023). The literature indicates that the adult literacy programs that serve rural communities need well thought out policies that take into consideration past injustices and at the same time provide flexible paths for learners from various educational backgrounds (Taylor & Vinjevold, 2020).

#### **3.5 Pedagogical Challenges in Adult Literacy**

Adult literacy education, if it is to be effective, requires learner centred strategies that recognize adults' prior experiences, learning styles, and practical needs (Knowles, 1984; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Nevertheless, research carried out in the rural areas of South Africa reveal that the teaching methods employed in adult programs are usually outdated, the programs are devoid of practical exercises, and literacy is not integrated with vocational skills (LEDA, 2021; Blanchard, 2023). The mismatch may, therefore, cause the drop in participation as learners may find it difficult to relate literacy to their everyday lives and employment prospects (Pratt, 2014). Additionally, the scarcity of professional development opportunities for instructors lowers their potential to use new, adaptable, and learner centred teaching methods that cater to varied literacy levels and learning paces (Coombe et al., 2018).

### 3.6 Digital Divide and Access to Technology

Recent studies point to the connection between the digital exclusion and adult literacy, mainly in the rural areas where both infrastructure and technological access are still a challenge (OECD, 2022; World Bank, 2022). Lack of access to computers, internet connectivity, or digital literacy skills puts adult learners in a disadvantaged position compared to others, who can choose from a variety of blended and online modes that are becoming increasingly popular in learning. The studies reveal that the introduction of technology such as educational videos, simulation software, and mobile learning platforms can attract learners and enable them to learn at their own pace, but this has to be accompanied with a step towards capacity building and targeted investment in order for it to be successful (Dhawan, 2020; LEDA, 2023).

### 3.7 Psychological and Motivational Barriers

Psychological issues such as low self-confidence, previously having had negative experiences with learning, and fear of failure can act as barriers to the participation as well as the persistence of adult learners in literacy programs (Brookfield, 2013). Motivation is one of the factors closely related to perceived relevance, self-efficacy, and support networks. The findings show that adults are willing to be engaged in and persist with a program that acknowledges their previous knowledge, makes a connection between the learning and everyday life, and provides positive reinforcement (Knowles, 1984; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). At Nkowankowa, motivational factors are in a relationship with socio economic pressures and family obligations, thus the importance of the holistic approach that acknowledges and addresses not only the external but also the internal barriers to learning (LEDA, 2023). 2.8 Intersectionality of Barriers The scholars point out that the obstacles to adult literacy are not even, and often, they coalesce in a complicated manner. These are socio economic, cultural, historical, technological and psychological factors, which all together determine the lived experiences and the results of adult learners (Crenshaw, 1989; UNESCO, 2023). For instance, a female adult learner from a rural area might be handling at the same time poverty, taking care of the family, cultural expectations of gender roles, and having low self-confidence, thus creating a multitude of hardest to literacy (Batan et al., 2025). An essential part of the game is also to acknowledge the existence of these intersecting barriers when it comes to designing the responsive programs that contribute to better accessibility, relevance, and retention in adult education (Brookfield, 2013). 2.9 Gaps in Existing Literature There exists extensive research focusing on adult literacy in the South African area; however, very few of them dedicate their attention to rural adult learning centres in the Limpopo Province specifically Nkowankowa. Most of the studies concentrate on quantitative results or evaluations of policies at the national level, thus putting into question the understanding of the experiences of adult learners and the local factors that lead to illiteracy at the level of communities (LEDA, 2023; DHET, 2024). The necessity of the qualitative, community-based research that captures the interplay of socio economic, cultural, institutional, and personal factors that affect literacy acquisition in rural communities is undeniable.

### 3.10 Conclusion

The review of literature reveals that adult illiteracy in rural South Africa is a complex matter that has its roots in various interwoven factors, such as socio economic deprivation, past injustices, cultural practices, inadequate teaching methods, lack of access to technology, and even psychological issues. Programs for adult education that manage to achieve success in such settings are those which are learner centred, culturally aware, adaptable, and associated with real life and vocational skills. This study, therefore, extends the existing body of knowledge by offering a detailed, locally relevant investigation into the factors leading to adult illiteracy at Nkowankowa Adult Community Learning Centre with the primary goal of producing practical insights that will lead to effectiveness of the programs, engagement of learners, and literacy outcomes in rural communities of South Africa.

## 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Introduction

This section provides a detailed explanation of the research design, methodological approach, the population and sampling strategies that were used, data collection techniques, data analysis procedures, measures that were taken to ensure trustworthiness, and the ethical considerations that guided the study. The research aimed to investigate the reasons behind adult illiteracy at the Nkowankowa Adult Community Learning Centre in Mopani West District, Limpopo Province. A qualitative approach was utilized to understand the lived experiences, views, and social contexts of adult learners and educators, thus providing deep insights into the complex factors behind literacy challenges (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### 4.2 Research Design

The study exploring the phenomenon of adult illiteracy in a rural South African context by means of descriptive case study design. This design permitted the researchers to thoroughly delve into the experiences of the adult learners and facilitators within a confined framework the Nkowankowa Adult Community Learning Centre (Yin, 2019). A descriptive case study is a method especially suitable for grasping issues deeply in a certain context as it permits the detailed recording of program structures, learner engagement, and institutional practices. The research has, through its focus on this single centre, illuminated the mixture of personal, socio cultural, and structural factors that affect adult literacy outcomes. As a result, it has made a full exposition of the challenges and openings in rural adult education possible (Spies & Plake, 2022).

#### 4.3 Research Approach

This study was guided by a qualitative research approach which focuses on the understanding of human experiences and the meanings that people give to their social world (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method is specially suitable for research the aim of which is adult learners, whose literacy is influenced by past injustices, economic pressures, and cultural norms. Giving priority to the participants' subjective interpretations, the qualitative method opened the space for the rich and contextualized data to surface. The use of semi structured interviews and non-participant observation was a means of getting at the same experience; thus, they provided both the depth and the flexibility whereby the researcher was able to probe the unanticipated insights that happened to be there at the time of data collection.

#### 4.4 Population and Sampling

The study population was made up of adult learners and educators at Nkowankowa Adult Community Learning Centre. In 2020, the center had 32 registered adult learners enrolled in technical and vocational programs like Plumbing, Electrical, Carpentry, Welding, and Automotive skills (NACLC, 2021). The educator population consisted of eight facilitators responsible for teaching these programs. The purposive sampling method was used to select those participants who could give rich and relevant information regarding the problem of illiteracy among adults (Patton, 2015). To be exact, 24 adult learners who were available and willing to take part were chosen and they represented different ages, genders, and literacy levels. All eight educators were also part of the sample to provide a thorough perspective on program delivery and learner engagement. This has ensured that the data collected were rich in the context and were in line with the aim of the study which was to find out the causes of adult illiteracy at Nkowankowa.

#### 4.5 Data Collection Methods

The core of the data collection methods was the semi structured interviews which gave the participants an opportunity to express their experiences and points of view in the most natural way (Tisdell, 2020). Separate interview guides were developed for adult learners and educators, containing questions about literacy program participation, barriers to literacy, instructional methods, and institutional support. To maintain privacy and security as well as to enable open and honest answers, interviews were conducted in a comfortable yet secluded place. Each discussion was of 30 to 45 minutes. It gave the participants an opportunity to unfold their experiences and at the same time, the researcher was able to probe into the new topics and get clarifications from the responses. By non-participant observations, the researchers were able to collect data that would supplement those from the interviews and inform them about the real conditions of the learning environment, teaching activities, and learner engagement. Observers paid attention to the interactions in the classrooms, workshop activities, availability of resources, and learners' practical application of skills. Field notes were diligently documented and later compared with interview transcripts to verify the reliability of the findings and to note the differences between the accounts and the observations (Kumar, 2023).

#### 4.6 Data Analysis

Information was processed using thematic analysis, a technique that makes it easy to identify, analyse and describe patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). It started with familiarization where the researcher went through the transcripts of the interviews and observation notes several times to get a deep understanding of the data. After that, the process of coding was started, and the most frequent ideas and notions were put together to form categories that reflected the main research questions. These categories or codes were then combined to form even bigger themes that reflect, among other things, the socio economic, cultural, and institutional factors that influence adult literacy in Nkowankowa. Thematic analysis gave the researcher an opportunity to move descriptive accounts and come up with interpretations and explanations of the underlying dynamics of adult illiteracy while at the same time the voices of the participants were dominant in the findings.

#### 4.7 Trustworthiness

The research introduced qualitative standards that were strict enough to ensure the four criteria of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was achieved through extensive interaction with participants, data triangulation from interviews and observations, and member checking to confirm interpretations. Transferability was achieved by giving a detailed and richly contextualized description of the learning environment, learner demographics, and program structures, which allowed the readers to judge the applicability of the research in other settings. Dependability was guaranteed through the detailed and systematic account of the research processes, including field notes, interview transcripts, and coding decisions, which provide an audit trail of the research process. Confirmability was accomplished through reflexive journaling and the clear documentation of analytic decisions aimed at reducing researcher bias and maintaining congruence with participants' perspectives.

#### 4.8 Ethical Considerations

Morally correct behaviour was the main guideline for the researcher in every stage of the study. All participants agreed to take part in the research after being fully informed about the study's aims, the methods to be used, the potential risks, and the benefits. Pledges of confidentiality and anonymity were given to participants with the use of pseudonyms in reporting results to ensure the safeguarding of identities. Taking part was free and apart from that, if any participant wanted to discontinue the study, he or she

could do so at any point without any disadvantage. The researchers approached the sensitive topics with gentleness and caring, and offered support to those in need, especially for the issues related to literacy challenges and family obligations. Institutional approval was granted by the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee as well as by the management of the Nkowankowa Adult Community Learning Centre, thus the research was in line with the established formal governance requirements.

#### 4.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a rigorous account of the qualitative methodology employed to explore adult illiteracy in Nkowankowa. Using a descriptive case study design, purposive sampling, semi structured interviews, and non-participant observations the study was able to obtain detailed, context specific insights into the challenges and enablers of adult literacy. Thematic analysis offered a systematic way of handling complex qualitative data while the trustworthiness strategies and ethical safeguards that were employed ensured the integrity of the methodology. Such a methodology serves as a solid basis for identifying the roots of adult illiteracy as well as for planning the context sensitive interventions that are needed in adult education centres located in rural areas.

### 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings that respond to the main research question about the causes of adult illiteracy at the Nkowankowa Adult Community Learning Centre. The analysis looked at the kinds of adult learning programs provided, the barriers faced by learners, and the ways of improving the effectiveness of the programs. The discussion draws on the views of the participants and the available literature and, also, the theoretical framework of Knowles' Andragogy. It thus shows the significance of adult learners' experiences, their motivation, and their realities, which, in turn, shape the educational outcomes.

#### 5.2 Programs Available at Nkowankowa Adult Learning Centre

The Nkowankowa Adult Learning Centre is offering, for the most part, vocational and technical training programs such as Plumbing, Electrical, Carpentry, Welding, Automotive, and Computer Literacy. The programs are designed to cover several progressive stages so that learners can start with the basic and then move to more advanced skills levels and ultimately be awarded trade diplomas. According to the principal, these programs are in line with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) standards and, thus, ensure accreditation and employability outcomes. Moreover, educators supported the principal's statement, indicating that the phased structure enables learners to gradually gain skills, trust, and practical knowledge. The instructor and the workshop sessions' observation revealed that students were not only theoretically involved but also actively participated in the hands-on portion of the work, thereby, the Centre's dedication to experiential learning, which is the core of Knowles' Andragogy, was highly evident. The principle states that adults learn best when they can see the relevance of the instruction in real life situations (Knowles, 1984; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Even though the skills acquisition methods have been well planned out, there were times when a lack of resources, such as the sharing of old equipment, limited the effectiveness of the learners' skills. According to the learners, when machinery is faulty, or outdoor activities must be cancelled due to rain, the learning process is affected. This point is in line with a few previous studies that have shown that inadequate infrastructure in education centres located in remote areas and geared towards adults hampers the progress of learners (LEDA, 2021; Blanchard, 2023).

#### 5.3 Barriers to Learning

##### 5.3.1 Family Responsibilities and Environmental Factors

Household duties were the most frequently cited reason for the lack of attendance at Nkowankowa. Adult learners shared that they had to combine caregiving, work, and other domestic duties, which, in some cases, caused them to miss their classes. For instance, one of the learners said,

*"I am the only one who takes my aunt to the hospital, so on that day I don't attend,"*

while another explained,

*"My night shifts make it hard to attend morning classes, so I watch the recordings."*

Moreover, different environmental factors, including rainy weather, have led to the cancellation of practical sessions, and, therefore, attendance has also been affected. The results of this study are consistent with those reported in the studies, which point out that adult learners, especially those living in rural areas, are often faced with the challenge of managing multiple responsibilities that limit the time they can engage in education (Breen et al., 2021; Chakraborty & Mushtaq, 2020). The effects of caregiving and weather on attendance also signify the readiness concept in Andragogy, which supports the view that adult learners are more motivated if the learning is in line with their life situations (Knowles, 1984).

**5.3.2 Financial Barriers** Most of the rural adult education related issues that have been financially constrained are only talked about, but the reality is that money problems have not been a major factor for most learners in this research. Learners have reported that parents and institutions play a role in making fee payments easier. One of the participants pointed out,

*"My family takes care of the payment for all the phases at the beginning of the year."*

While there were instances of late payments, the education process was not seriously interrupted. The statement is a contrast to the findings of the extensive studies which have identified that financial problems are the leading reasons for the dropouts in adult education programs (World Bank, 2022; DHET, 2024). The Nkowankowa setting indicates that the presence of local support

networks and affordable fee structures can sufficiently eliminate financial barriers, thus, the importance of context specific interventions in adult literacy programs is reinforced.

### 5.3.3 Language and Communication Barriers

Language barrier was the issue to a minor extent for most of the learners as they were all conversant with Sepedi. However, the Tsonga speaking students they sometimes encountered difficulties when the teacher spoke only in Sepedi. This indicates that the requirement for language inclusion in the rural adult education centres cannot be overemphasized (UNESCO, 2017). The incorporation of the learners' mother tongues into the teaching process is in line with Andragogy which focuses on utilizing the prior experiences and the existing knowledge as the base for the new ones (Knowles, 1984).

### 5.3.4 Psychological and Emotional Barriers

The returning learners to school talked about the different emotions they experienced. A few of them recalled the very first time they felt anxious, had low self-confidence, and regretted the missed educational opportunities, while others were excited by career goals and employability objectives. For example, one learner said,

*"At first I was very nervous because it has been a long time since I was at school, but I really wanted to learn a skill that would make my getting a job easier."*

Such points hereby correspond to the research materials emphasizing the role of psychological factors in adult learning persistence. Motivation, self-efficacy, and prior learning experiences are the main factors that determine engagement and outcomes (Brookfield, 2013; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Adult learning programs which acknowledge and cater for learners' emotional needs stand a better chance of facilitating learners' continuous participation and achievement.

### 5.3.5 Teaching Methods and Resource Constraints

Learners pinpointed issues related to teaching methods, materials, and amenities. They noted that the obsolete equipment, the insufficiency of the workshop materials, and the interruption of the practical sessions limited the successful implementation of the learning process. Students also reported that when they had to share machines, they could not progress fast enough, especially during crowded practical sessions. Educators were also aware of these limitations and, therefore, responded by highlighting the continuous works being done to bring in new methods, including technology use and improving interaction techniques. For instance, the Centre was implementing such measures as video demonstrations, simulation exercises, and equipment upgrading to promote experiential learning further. These initiatives exemplify a move toward learner centred and outcome-based pedagogy, which, as research suggests, lead to higher engagement, retention, and proficiency in adult learning (Coombe et al., 2018; Pratt, 2014).

### 5.3.6 Community Support and Institutional Engagement

The extent to which the community and families were supportive of the learners varied. There were some people who reported that they got a lot of support and encouragement from their relatives and friends, and, as a result, they became more enthusiastic and regular in their attendance. The rest had only limited institutional responsiveness to their complaints and concerns, and, thus, they felt dissatisfied and occasionally disengaged. According to the literature, social support networks play an important role in the adult learners' engagement and persistence (Blanchard, 2023; Brookfield, 2013). The programs that actively involve communities, recognize learners' achievements, and promote alumni role modelling have higher chances of success in rural areas.

### 5.3.7 Intersectionality of Barriers

Research findings indicate that one cannot simply identify one main factor that is responsible for adult illiteracy in Nkowankowa. Quite the contrary, the barriers for illiteracy are overlapping in a different kind of ways. For example, learners that are looking after other people may be struggling psychologically, may have low literacy, and may be lacking resources. The idea of intersectionality in this regard agrees with the large body of research that states that rural adult learners are at a stage where they can encounter several problems simultaneously and these issues should be dealt with a holistic, context sensitive way (Crenshaw, 1989; UNESCO, 2023).

## 5.4 Best Future Practices for Adult Learning Programs at Nkowankowa

The members' opinions, especially those of the principal and facilitators, revealed a lot of interlinked strategies that could be used to increase the effectiveness of adult education programs at the Nkowankowa Adult Community Learning Centre. The principal focused on the need for the curriculum to be in line with today's industry requirements through outcome-based education (OBE). This method arranges learning into clearly outlined modules, each with skills that the learners must acquire to be able to move forward. By using this system, the Centre will be able to demonstrate that learners get the necessary measurable skills; they will also get formal recognition for every single module completed and will be in a better position to face trade tests and get jobs afterward. The idea of such a system progression fits well with the Theory of Andragogy which states that adult learners get motivated when learning is purposeful, relevant, and can be easily transferred to real life situations (Knowles, 1984; Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Another essential resource that was mentioned for the learner's convenience was the use of technology. The principal elaborated on the incorporation of state of the art machines in the practical workshops and the picking of the computer labs for videos-based demonstrations, which, in turn, facilitate learners to see and then imitate the tech procedures before they do it themselves. These innovations not only broaden the scope of experiential learning but can also be of different learning styles, hence, a theoretical

practical instruction gap is bridged. Facilitators noted that technology facilitates flexible, blended learning, enabling learners who face challenges such as childcare responsibilities or work commitments to engage with content asynchronously.

Motivation and engagement of learners were, among other things, brought up as a most important factor for retention and success. The principal explained the means that were used to motivate learners such as recognizing learner achievements, calling alumni to tell their career stories, and organizing site visits to workplaces where learners could watch professionals doing their jobs. These sorts of activities help to develop a feeling of success, being part of a group, and ambition, thus, they are being reinforced in vocational training and there is the likelihood of continued participation.

Another important factor that was singled out as being instrumental in the success of adult education programs was the community context alignment of such programs. Learners' participation in voluntary community service works like fixing plumbing in clinics or helping some families with technical issues not only makes them more skilled but also more socially responsible and linked to the community. These activities show that embedding education in the realities of learners' daily lives makes it more useful and hence more motivating.

Lastly, the importance given to the role of strategic partnerships by the part of the principal and facilitators was at the base of program stability and quality. Besides giving access to funding, learning materials, and learner stipends, registration with the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations also facilitates learning because it makes possible the collaborations with local businesses that are needed for internships and the opportunities of employment that come after the training. The existence of such collaborations ensures that programs are always aligned with the requirements of the labour market and are of good standard, which in the end leads to the increase of learners' employability and economic empowerment.

In short, the accounts of the principal and facilitators emphasize that successful adult learning programs at Nkowankowa are those that can combine structured, outcome driven curricula, use of modern technology, learner centred pedagogies, community involvement and strategic partnerships. These measures, when put together, create a favourable environment that not only meets the educational needs of the adult learners but also their socio-economic ones, thus leading to an improvement of literacy and vocational skills in a contextually appropriate way.

## **5.5 Discussion**

The findings from this research point to the fact that adult illiteracy in Nkowankowa is a multi-layered issue that is largely influenced by socio economic, cultural, psychological, and institutional factors. On one hand, the family responsibilities, environmental constraints, and low foundational literacy all contribute to severely limiting participation and progression. On the other hand, the effectiveness of methods of teaching, the use of technology, and the community's support stands out as the main factors that enable learning.

According to Knowles' Andragogy, the findings are in line with the theory that adult learners get motivated when learning is relevant, experiential, and linked to their real-life needs (Knowles, 1984). The emphasis on practical, vocationally aligned programs at Nkowankowa is, therefore, a reflection of the preference of adult learners for the applied knowledge which will make them more employable and economically active.

This research dwells upon the fact that the fight against adult illiteracy involves the implementation of holistic, context responsive policies that combine socio economic support, flexible scheduling, learner centred pedagogy, provision of technological resources, and community participation. The above-mentioned strategies are in line with the best international practices and still, they are very sensitive to the socio cultural and historical factors of rural Limpopo.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This research's findings indicate that adult illiteracy at Nkowankowa Adult Community Learning Centre is a complex occurrence that results from the combination of socio-economic, psychological, cultural, and institutional factors. Learners are challenged with issues of family responsibilities, environment manifestations like bad weather, low base literacy, and scarce prior exposure to formal education, all of which slow down their regular attendance and skill acquisition. Even though financial obstacles are to some extent eased through the support of the family and the institutional setting, there are still other impediments for instance, the use of the old fashioned equipment, the scarcity of teaching materials, as well as the occasional absence of the institution's help which, being there, deepen the problem of learning continuity and quality. In addition, motivation, community engagement, and culturally relevant, experiential learning play a vital role in adult learners' participation, as the research also suggests. If we consider the application of Knowles' Theory of Andragogy, it becomes evident that adult learners get involved in the process of learning the most when they discover that it is self-directed, it satisfies their immediate needs and comes from experience, thus confirming that the Centre's vocational programs comply well with these principles but also highlighting the need for further development for overcoming resource and infrastructure related constraints. In addition to this, the Centre's ability to offer effective, context sensitive adult education using technology, outcome-based pedagogies, and strategic partnerships, is being hindered by absenteeism, low literacy, and infrastructural limitations leaving more holistic, learner centred interventions necessary to comprehensively tackle adult illiteracy. In brief, this research agrees with the view that adult illiteracy in this area cannot be conceived as a single problem and,

therefore, it must be approached through a comprehensive intervention that includes socio economic support, pedagogical innovation, and community-oriented strategies.

## **7. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the results, it would be the priority for the Nkowankowa Adult Learning Centre to implement diverse strategies aiming at enhancing adult learning outcomes. The revision of the curriculum would imply a better fit with modern industry requirements through the introduction of the outcome-based modules that not only develop learners' technical skills in a stepwise manner but also prepare them for acquiring literacy and numeracy by embedding these in vocational training. The facilitators should be given opportunities for continuous professional development, focusing on pedagogy of adult education, implementation of inclusive teaching methods, and skilful use of technology; the latter being a means of a blended learning approach that caters the varied responsibilities and preferences of learners in learning. The Centre would also benefit from investing in the renewal of workshop infrastructure to be able to provide the required equipment and resources for the implementation of the experiential learning method even when there are adverse conditions. The Centre would benefit much from creating well-structured systems that, apart from addressing learners' academic guidance needs, also consider their emotional counselling, mentorship, and motivational intervention e.g. the acknowledgement of achievement and alumni engagement. They are necessary to not only get hold of their participation and establish a feedback system but also foster the learners' self-belief. On the other hand, promoting community engagement by such ways as service-learning projects and extending partnerships with regulatory bodies, local businesses, and NGOs, can enhance program legitimacy, offer practical exposure, and improve job opportunities.

Integrating these measures in a coordinated and context sensitive manner, the Centre would be able not only to deal with the root causes of adult illiteracy that are complex but also to raise learner retention and performance and, furthermore, grant the learners socio economic empowerment while perpetuating lifelong learning and the development of the community.

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