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Research Article

Barriers to English Learning for Adult Immigrants in Urban America

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Abstract

The primary aim of this study was to investigate barriers to English learning for adult immigrants residing in urban America. A secondary aim was to study the effect of baseline reading levels on immigrants' participation in English class. The study design was a survey study of a convenience sample of 1,254 immigrants living in Indianapolis, Indiana, from 2018 to 2019. Among immigrants surveyed, 31% were emergent readers of English and 23% had 5 years or less of formal education. Both interrupted education and limited literacy are factors for classroom enrollment. Common barriers of work, family, health, transportation, and weather were mentioned; emergent English readers mentioned "can't learn" and "too hard" at higher rates than all participants as reasons to never enroll or disenroll.

Keywords: immigrant research, limited literacy, barriers to English learning, reading level

Capturing immigrant voices in research has never been more crucial than now, as the United States stands on a precipice of an immigration crisis. In 2020, the United States had more immigrants than any other country in the world, with more than forty million foreign-born people living in the United States at that time (Geiger, 2024). Based on an identified knowledge gap revealed in previous national and local research, our research investigated the barriers to learning English faced by immigrants and the effect of limited literacy on their enrollment in adult education English classes.

Literature Review

Large-scale immigrant research is challenging to conduct, and largely dependent on federal organizations such as the U.S. Census Bureau, New American Economy/American Immigration Council, Migration Policy Institute and Pew Research Center to provide data (Brown, 2023; Geiger, 2024; Greenwood, 2024; New American Economy, 2019, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). We suspect that a significant amount of data collected by organizations that work with immigrants and refugees excludes those who lack print and digital literacy skills. Research focusing on barriers adult immigrants face to learning English used methodology that prohibits participation by adult English language learners (ELLs) with limited literacy skills in English. The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) study (2011-2012) of 5,010 participants included 12% who were adult ELLs, and was conducted by sampling on laptop computers and completing an extensive background questionnaire. The study method may have been an obstacle to those with limited English language and digital literacy skills; notably 112 adults were unable to respond to the questionnaire because of limited literacy (Patterson et al., 2015). Similarly, previous local immigrant research was conducted via surveys and resulted in many skipped questions, likely due to lack of understanding (IWC, 2017). Another study on barriers to participation in adult education required a written survey before attending interviews (Patterson & Song, 2018).

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Previous research does, however, point to the preponderance of limited literacy among adult ELLs. The 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), a national effort to measure literacy among the adult population in the United States included 13,600 participants; 22% of whom were adult ELLs, and placed 35% of its participants in the lowest literacy category (Kirsch et al., 2002). The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy included 2,807 adult ELLs, most of whom had Below Basic or Basic literacy (Jin et al., 2009). More recently, the PIAAC conducted studies in 2011-2012, and 2013-2014, and found that non-U.S.-born adults constituted 34% of the population with low literacy skills, compared to 15% of the total population (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

The Immigrant Welcome Center (IWC) in Indianapolis, Indiana, conducted a cross-sectional questionnaire study from September 2018 to June 2019, funded with a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. The research project was entitled Adult ELL (English Language Learner) Research Project. Our overarching goal was to use a method that served to lower hurdles for obtaining data; namely by conducting the research orally and in the native language of the immigrants. We felt that this approach to immigrant research would maximize data capture and provide a more accurate representation of the local immigrant communities, and the learning obstacles they faced. Research that aims to better understand these impediments to English learning for the immigrant population will serve to inform programs and policy.

Theoretical Framework

The aim of our research was to answer the following questions:

Research Question: What are the main barriers to learning English for the immigrant population of Indianapolis?

Sub Questions: What are the main factors which cause them to miss class, to stop attending, or never enroll? What role does reading level (in native language and English) have on enrollment?

Barriers to class participation can be categorized as situational, dispositional and organizational; situational being when adults attempt to balance many roles in their lives or face challenges such as increasing age, parental education, low income, and work and family responsibilities; dispositional are when learners lack confidence in their skills or lack awareness of career options, and may relate to health or disability challenges or low social trust. Institutional barriers result from educational or employment policies which prevent participation, such as cost of education and lack of flexibility in work schedule (Bairamova & Dixson, 2019a; Patterson, 2018). Our research questions considered these types of roadblocks from the outset.

We aimed to investigate the association between reading ability in native language and English on English class attendance. We hypothesized that common situational barriers, such as work and family obligations, would exist, and that limited literacy due to interrupted formal education would also be a significant obstacle for immigrant English learners. Our hypothesis would be tested by large-scale data collection using a questionnaire study design, oral surveys and a reading diagnostic tool to measure native language and English decoding ability.

Study Design

The research study took place in three phases.

Phase I of the project (September – October 2018) included advisory board and data collection team creation, research design, and training of the data collectors. The advisory board included representatives from Indy Reads, Exodus Refugee Immigration, Indiana University, Marian University, and the IWC.

The data collection team was comprised of three native English speakers who are teachers of speakers of other languages (TESOL) professionals and instructors, as well as 16 multilingual immigrants representing over 10 countries and 18 languages. The multi-lingual immigrant data collectors were compensated for their time, and were chosen based on the following characteristics:

- High level of fluency (both oral and written) in English and their native language
- Ability to use a smartphone to conduct the survey
- Strong connection to their immigrant community
- Recommendation from a known source

Using multi-lingual immigrant data collectors to conduct surveys allowed for the voices of those who are sometimes unintentionally excluded in immigrant research to be heard. The majority (69%) of surveys were conducted by multilingual data collectors.

Phase I also included two pilot surveys – sent to small groups to test usability, accessibility, understandability, and survey time, and changes were made accordingly. Once the final survey was ready, the data collection team received training at an initial meeting, which included practicing administering the reading diagnostic with fellow data collectors.

Phase II (October 2018 – March 2019) was the data collection phase, which took place over a 6-month time frame. Our aim was to conduct 1,000 surveys, which is approximately 1% of the immigrant population in Indianapolis. The multilingual data collectors (69%) conducted surveys in their communities, including apartments and houses, places of worship, medical clinics, community centers, and grocery stores (Figure A1). The English-speaking data collectors (31%) visited 48 different class sites throughout the city.

Phase III (April 2019 - June 2019) included data analysis, which was conducted by three TESOL professionals (including the lead researcher), and an intern with Indiana University's Public Policy Institute. The data was exported from SurveyMonkey into a spreadsheet on Google Drive, and all data points were compiled and examined by the TESOL professionals and intern, after which the initial findings were analyzed by three PhD researchers from Marian and Indiana University.

We classified comments into barriers that caused the immigrants to miss or never attend class (i.e., work, family, health, etc.) and motivations for attending class (work, integration, daily life, future study, etc.). Quotations that were most often expressed or best represented the classification criteria are reported here. Furthermore, we compared the literacy level data for those attending classes versus those not attending, and recorded differences in responses from surveys which were conducted at class sites versus surveys conducted in the community.

Methods

The materials for our study included a survey delivered using the smartphone application of the global software SurveyMonkey and laminated paper reading diagnostic cards. The survey included initial screening questions, followed by the main survey questions, after which the reading diagnostic was administered.

The diagnostic tool, aligned with Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) standards, was developed by TESOL professionals as an alternative assessment to measure decoding ability (CASAS RDG 1.6) in their native language and English by having them "demonstrate understanding of and apply phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words" (CASAS, 2016, n.p.). At the time of the study, there were only a few tools to assess native language literacy among adult learners. The University of Minnesota and Minneapolis Public Schools developed the widely used Native Language Literacy Assessment (King & Bigelow, 2016), while the Florida Department of Education created a Native Language Literacy Screening (2014-2015). For our research, we created a portable tool based on CASAS standards and connected to K-12 U.S. grade levels, which solely focused on decoding. It measures fluency in native language and English on a scale of 0 to 10, resembling an eye test that gradually increases in difficulty. Fluency factors included speed, pauses, omitting or adding sounds and comprehensibility. Translation for the tool was provided by our team and a language company, and it is available in 32 languages besides English (Pathway to Literacy, 2018).

Demographic data collected included country of origin, native language, year of arrival to the U.S., and level of schooling in their home country. Questions varied based on whether immigrants were enrolled in classes (Appendix D). After completing the survey questions, the data collector administered the reading diagnostic to measure decoding skills (Pathway to Literacy, 2018). The results were inputted into SurveyMonkey.

Study Participants

The study participants consisted of a convenience sample of immigrants. The inclusion criteria for the study were: 18 years of age or greater, living in Marion County or surrounding area, and foreign-born (i.e., an immigrant to

the United States). Verbal consent was obtained at the time of the interview, prior to administering the survey. Research assistants and data collectors used smartphones to access the survey. Multiple surveys were conducted from the same device, and at various locations. Research assistants and data collectors asked the survey questions orally and recorded the answers immediately. They also documented where the interview took place and the location of adult education class.

Results

Demographic Data

Demographic and decoding data from 1,254 adult immigrants was collected and analyzed, which represented > 1% of the immigrant population at the time of the study. Although the data results reflect the composition of the data collection team, and there are inherent limitations to convenience sampling, the critical demographic characteristics of the sample align well with the target population.

The respondents were 60% female, 40% male, ranging in age from 18-70+ years, with the majority in the 30-39 age group. Most respondents arrived in the U.S. before 2007, but there was a spike in arrivals in 2016, which corresponds to the increase in refugees to the United States from Syria under the Obama Administration (Connor, 2024).

The top three countries represented were Mexico, Burma (Myanmar), and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Figure B1). This data corresponds with the top origin countries of refugees in 2016, which were the DRC, Syria, and Burma (Myanmar) (Greenwood, 2024). Refugees from those three nations represented nearly half (49%) of all refugees admitted to the United States in 2016 (Connor, 2024). In addition to the top 10 countries shown in Figure B2, over 60 other countries were represented. The most common languages spoken by the participants were Spanish, languages of Burma, Arabic, and Kiswahili, as well as over 60 other languages represented by our participants.

Twenty-five percent of the respondents said they had completed a postsecondary degree of some kind (Figure B2). This statistic corroborates the New American Economy 2016 data, which showed 27% of Indianapolis's foreign-born residents (ages 25+) held at least a bachelor's degree (New American Economy, 2018). Fifty-two percent had completed Grades 6-12, and 23% had only completed Grade 5 or below.

Class Enrollment

Fifty-seven percent of the immigrants surveyed were not enrolled in English class, whereas 43% were enrolled in an English class at the time of the study. However, 31% of the surveys were conducted by the researchers at English class sites which automatically implied class enrollment. If the surveys conducted at class sites were removed from the sample, the results showed that only 20% of those surveyed in the community were enrolled in English class. The top three countries of non-attendees in our study were Mexico, Burma (Myanmar), and DRC. The comparative educational levels of attendees and non-attendees can be seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Comparative Highest Schooling Level Completed

Highest Schooling Level Completed	Attendees	Non-Attendees
Grades 5 and Below	15.2%	30%
Grades 6-12	52.3%	51%
Postsecondary	32.5%	19%

The top three motivations for enrolling in English class were work, integration, and daily life (Figure C1). Reasons classified as "work" included responses such as, *"...to be a nurse...to improve myself as a hotel worker... open business here because of war in Syria...to speak with customers at my restaurant job... to defend myself at work when they say bad things about me to the supervisor."* The definition of integration in this study was the desire to feel included

and become part of the fabric of society here, and could be characterized by comments such as, "*to understand my children's future boyfriends/girlfriends, English is the key to life here; it is indispensable; I want this country; in this country I need English; to understand people's jokes; to understand the TV, to open other doors, to be independent from children, to speak with my grandbaby.*" Feelings of frustration permeated the comments, as seen in "*I feel stuck in house; I feel sometimes really blocked; if you don't speak English, you can't be high.*"

For those who were attending classes, the top three reasons they missed classes were work, health, and family, followed by weather and transportation (Figure C2). The work-related reasons for missing class often involved schedule and fatigue. Thirty percent of the responses involved overtime at work, and 24% of the responses were related to fatigue from work schedule, such as working 12-hour night shifts. For those who disenrolled from a class, work and family were the top reasons, followed by finished my goal and class ended.

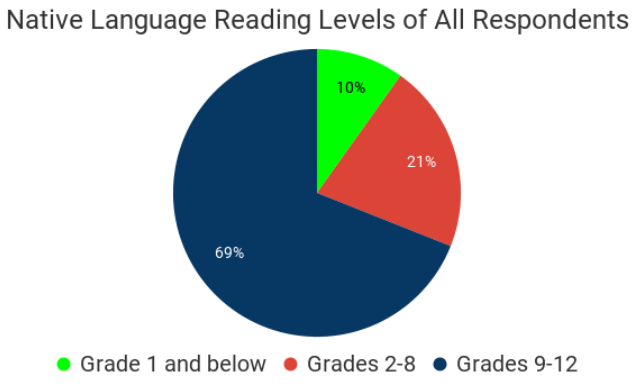
As mentioned, 80% of people surveyed in the community were not enrolled in English classes at the time of the study, and 67% of all respondents had never enrolled in English classes, citing work, family, and transportation as the main reasons (Figure C3).

Reading Levels

Native Language Decoding

Most survey respondents (69%) read at a high school level in their native language (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Native Language Reading Levels of All Respondents

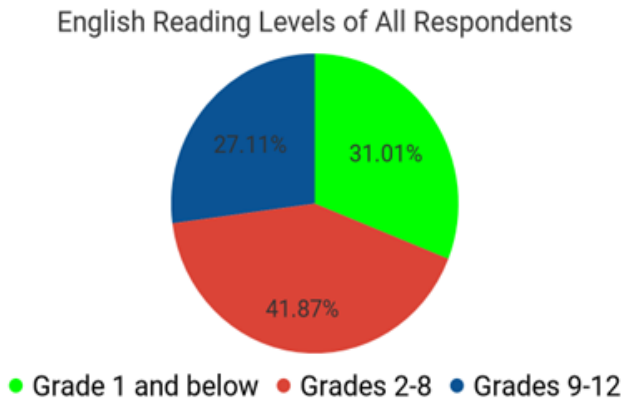


Ten percent of the respondents scored Grade 1 and below in their native language. We will refer to these learners as pre-literate. Eighty percent of pre-literate learners were currently not taking classes, and 70% had never gone to class. The three main reasons for never attending class were work, family, and can't learn. If they attended and then stopped, the top three reasons they gave were family, work, and too hard.

English Language Decoding

Reading levels in English, based on the reading diagnostics, are shown below (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: English Reading Levels of All Respondents



Thirty-one percent of all immigrants surveyed, totaling 389 people, had decoding ability of Grade 1 and below in English. The top three countries reflected in this group were Mexico, DRC, and Burma (Myanmar), and the main languages of this group were Spanish, Kiswahili, Arabic, and Karenni. We will refer to this 31% as emergent readers of English.

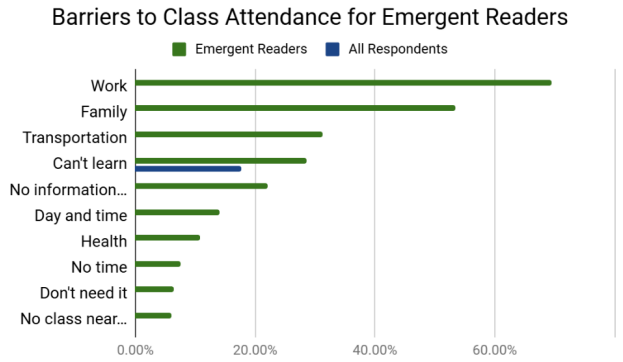
At the time of the study, 79% of emergent English readers were not currently enrolled in classes - comparable to all respondents (80%). The results of our research showed, however, the effect of literacy on past enrollment tendencies. Specifically, 81% of emergent readers had never enrolled, compared with 67% of all respondents (Table 2).

TABLE 2: Comparative Enrollment Tendencies

Respondents	Not Currently Attending	Never Attended
All Respondents	80%	67%
Emergent Readers of English	79%	81%

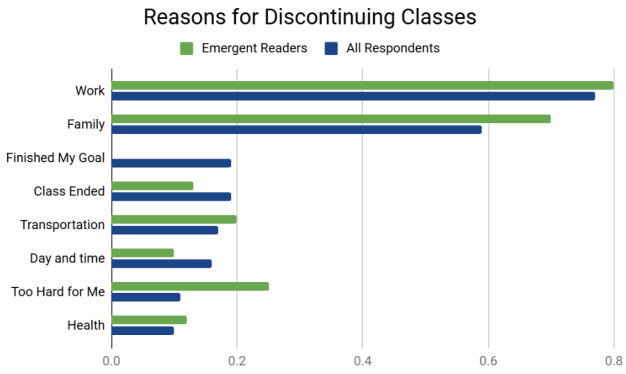
The main reasons for emergent readers never enrolling in English class were work, family, and transportation, followed by can't learn. Twenty-nine percent said, "can't learn," compared to 18% of all respondents (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: Barriers to Class Attendance for Emergent Readers of English



For the emergent readers, too hard was a much more common reason for disenrolling from classes. In comparing the reasons why emergent readers of English stopped attending classes, too hard moved up from seventh position (all respondents) to third position, after work and family.

FIGURE 4: Comparative Reasons for Discontinuing Classes



Additionally, when asked their opinion about class level, 62% of emergent readers expressed that the class level was "too hard," compared with 28% of all respondents (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: Comparative Opinions of Class Level

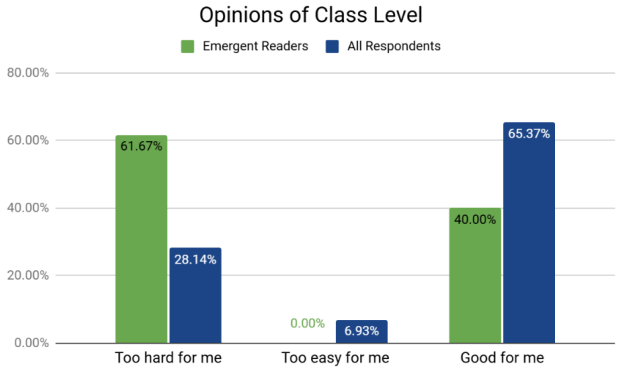
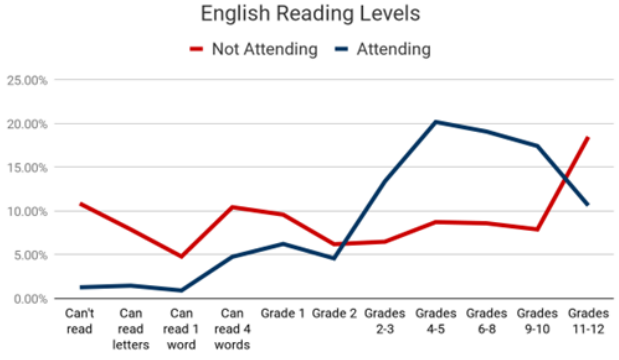


Figure 6 depicts the comparative reading diagnostic scores of those attending and not attending English classes at the time of the study.

FIGURE 6: English Reading Levels and Attendance



The majority of immigrants attending class had decoding levels in English between Grades 2-10 (Figure 6). For those not attending, the highest points on the line graph were at either end, representing those who "can't read" and those who decode English quite fluently.

Discussion

Educational Background

One of the main findings from our research was that emergent readers with minimal levels of education from their home countries exist in immigrant communities, possibly at a much higher rate than traditional immigrant data can show. Nearly one-third of immigrants (31%) surveyed were emergent readers of English, and nearly one-fourth (23%) had limited formal education (Grade 5 or less). Regarding collecting educational background data, the lowest educational attainment in immigrant research is often designated as less than high school (New American Economy, 2024). U.S. Census data does not include educational background, and in the PIAAC study, the educational level designations were less than high school, high school diploma, or postsecondary (Patterson & Paulson, 2015). An important aspect of our research was to show more differentiation in educational levels for the immigrant English learner population. We found that 23% (288) had educational levels of Grade 5 and below. Because this group may be overlooked in traditional immigrant survey methods, their existence in the immigrant communities can be hidden. If immigrants complete traditional surveys, less than high school does not adequately portray their educational backgrounds and needs. There is a significant difference in the educational needs reflected by someone with 10 years of education, and someone with none.

Reading Levels

As previously mentioned, nearly one-third of immigrants (31%) surveyed were emergent readers of English, and while this data may not be captured in traditional research methods such as written surveys, these findings do correlate with other national research (Kirsch et al., 2002; Wiley, 1996); the NALS findings placed 35% in the lowest literacy category for English. Our findings showed 31% of all participants (389) had decoding skills of Grade 1 or below in English, a subset of which (122 respondents) were preliterate learners with limited decoding ability in their native language. Literacy in one language aids literacy development in another language (Condelli et al., 2003); many of these students face the challenge of developing basic literacy skills—including decoding, comprehending, and producing print—along with proficiency in English (Condelli et al., 2010). Although there is minimal research on adults who are learning English while simultaneously acquiring basic literacy for the first time (Bigelow & Schwartz, 2010), if someone has not had the opportunity to gain literacy skills in their first language, the challenge is even greater in a second language.

Barriers to Learning English

The study set out to discover the main hurdles for English learning in our urban setting, and the results showed that while 80% of people surveyed in the community were not currently enrolled in English classes, 67% had never enrolled, citing work, family, and transportation as the main barriers. The chief reasons for missing classes were work, health, and family, followed by weather and transportation. For those who disenrolled from a class, work and family were cited most. Family needs are a common situational barrier for English learning in that children's activities, family events and household responsibilities are often prioritized over attending English class. In our study, some of the reasons given for missing or not attending classes were children's school or sports schedule, family health or pregnancy, or no time due to family responsibilities, such as a single mother or widow caring for children. Those with babies or preschool children were unable to find local classes which provided childcare. These barriers of work, family, health, weather, and transportation correlate to findings from other studies, such as the CAPE study, which showed work, family, and transportation as most often cited (Patterson & Song, 2018), and were therefore unsurprising.

In examining the barrier of work more closely, we noticed it presented more often as an institutional barrier because it related to policies which prevented English class participation, such as mandatory overtime or inflexible work schedules. In our study, 30% of the work-related responses involved mandatory overtime, and 24% of the responses were related to fatigue from working long shifts. Improving work situations was the main motivation for learning English, but work policies stood as an impediment.

The study revealed that dispositional barriers were more prevalent among those with emerging English literacy skills (decoding of Grade 1 or below in English). For both lack of enrollment and disenrollment, emergent readers of English mentioned can't learn and too hard

at higher rates than all other participants. For emergent readers, can't learn was a stronger reason to never enroll (Figure 3), and too hard was a more prominent cause for disenrollment (Figure 4). Furthermore, when asked their opinion about class level, 62% of emergent readers chose too hard, compared with 28% of total respondents (Figure 5). These persistent reasons given for why emergent readers never enroll, or disenroll are dispositional deterrents because they are internal to the learners, and include "lack of motivation, anxiety or fear, or loss of confidence in themselves" (Patterson & Song, 2018, p. 1-2; Bairamova & Dixson, 2019b). Can't learn reveals lack of confidence in their ability as a language learner, and was given as a reason why not to enroll; too hard implies an insurmountable obstacle based on their skills, and was given as a reason to disenroll. These dispositional deterrents add nuance to the barriers faced by immigrants in our urban setting.

Effects on Enrollment

To answer the research question of the effect of literacy levels on classroom enrollment, our study revealed some predictable albeit previously speculative findings. The effect of limited or interrupted formal education on enrollment was evident in that respondents with 5 years or less of formal education were much less likely to attend class than respondents with higher education levels, and twice as likely not to attend than to attend (see Table 1). Similarly, we found that enrollment tendencies decrease as limited literacy increases; 81% of emergent readers had never enrolled, compared to 67% of all respondents. The English diagnostic decoding levels for non-attendees compared with attendees revealed that the lower the decoding level, the higher the non-enrollment (Figure 6). For participants with decoding levels between Grades 2 and 10, enrollment in classes increased, after which it tapered off. This implies that the adult education programs are geared for and serve well those learners with English decoding skills between Grades 2–10. Meanwhile, those with decoding skills of Grades 0-1.9 (i.e., National Reporting System Level 1) were less likely to attend.

Implications of Research

Obstacles to learning exist - many are predictable and unavoidable; others are actionable. Barriers of family, health, transportation, and weather are inherent to the human immigrant experience; institutional barriers related to work, such as mandatory overtime, are prevalent but actionable if employers recognize the value of investing in English learning at workplaces. Advocating for incentivizing businesses to support immigrant employees' English language needs could lead to work, the main motivation and the main roadblock, becoming the main vehicle for growth. Dispositional barriers related to lack of confidence in skills or ability to learn can be altered with more targeted classroom offerings, better teacher training, and funding to support programming.

Lack of native language and English decoding abilities influence enrollment tendencies; the barrier of limited literacy is consequential in immigrants accessing English learning opportunities. Our research supports the need to create learning environments tailored to the unique needs of adult ELL emergent readers, such as building foundational skills and fostering confidence, so they will feel supported and set up for success.

Furthermore, our study brings to light the need for more teacher training to work with emergent readers. In the citywide and adult education professional development gatherings following the research, teachers consistently expressed the need for more training because they generally felt ill-equipped to work with adult ELL emergent readers, as many higher education TESOL certificate and degree programs do not provide specific training in that area. Research shows that the chances of success of migrant adult learners significantly increase when they are taught by well-trained and knowledgeable teachers (Condelli et al., 2010). Teacher training programs should include skills for working with adult ELL emergent readers, to better equip TESOL professionals. Moreover, there is a national trend of a steady increase of students entering adult education English classes at the beginning level. According to 2008 program year statistics from the U.S. Department of Education, 8% of the students in federally funded adult education programs entered at the lowest ESL level, beginning literacy (Condelli et al., 2003). More recent data (Indiana Department of Workforce Development, 2023) shows the percentage of learners entering adult education at National Reporting System Level 1 rose to 15% in 2021-2022 program year. Given the high percentage of adult immigrants with limited literacy at the time of our study, as well as the increasing numbers

of learners at National Reporting System Level 1 entering adult education programs, more priority should be given to teacher training in this area.

The preliterate learners, i.e., the 10% of respondents with limited decoding ability in their native language, face difficulties and present unique challenges for classroom teachers. Although in this study we don't have comparative disenrollment percentages, other research shows that "adults with no print literacy did poorly in beginning ESL classes that stressed literacy, and they dropped out in much larger numbers than did more literate students," (LaLyre, 1996, n.p.). They need focused instruction on foundational literacy skills as they navigate the text-heavy world they live in. Some of them may feel intimidated by the classroom setting and their lack of native language literacy. If they are grouped with learners who have literacy skills in their native language, they often fall behind and get discouraged (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010). Their starting places should be considered in educational offerings.

Limitations

One limitation of our study was that the data collection team was not a complete representation of the immigrant population of Indianapolis. There was no one on the team who spoke Urdu, Hindi, Portuguese, or Farsi, although these language groups are represented in our local urban area. The data results reflect the composition of the data collection team, and not the full immigrant population of our city.

The research was a convenience sampling with defined parameters for inclusion criteria. Convenience sampling has inherent potential biases, such as sampling and observer bias. Participants were chosen based on proximity and convenience, after which they were required to meet the inclusion criteria. To limit bias, we attempted to diversify our data collection team by including a variety of languages and cultural backgrounds on the team and collecting data on as many participants as possible within the time frame allotted. Furthermore, surveys were conducted on different days and times, and in various locations.

Additionally, this research was limited to an urban setting—a mid-size city in the midwest United States; results of convenience sampling in a more rural setting may differ significantly.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our study found an important gap in English language learning services for immigrants with emerging English literacy. About one third of the immigrant cohort had limited literacy in English. To ensure equitable access to those referred to as the highest of high-risk students (DeCapua et al., 2007), funding to increase classes, curriculum and teacher training is critical. These students are often overlooked in educational offerings because they are hidden in traditional immigrant data. Our findings highlight the need for states, municipalities, and local programs to work together to expand opportunities for holistic support and English language and literacy programming (Vanek et al., 2020). Those with 5 years or less of formal education often do not receive the support they need from employers, educational institutions, governmental agencies, health providers and community partners to help them navigate the complicated bureaucratic systems. Support from employers seems to be lacking for adults who need it most—those at the lowest education levels (Patterson, 2018). They have lacked opportunities for schooling in their home countries; their needs should be considered in citywide services.

Due to the research project's findings, concrete steps have been taken to make our city more welcoming and equitable. Among those steps: the IWC developed two programs focused on addressing the gaps revealed in the research—the need for more classroom instruction, curriculum and teacher training for adult ELL emergent readers, and a focus on raising awareness about the return on investment for employers in their immigrant employees' learning opportunities.

Future research should strive to increase the number of languages represented on the data collection team and the number of study participants, which would lessen potential research bias inherent in convenience sampling studies. Future research could also replicate this study in other mid-size urban areas in the U.S. who desire to gain deeper insight into the constituency of their immigration populations to ensure resources are aimed at meeting gaps in services.

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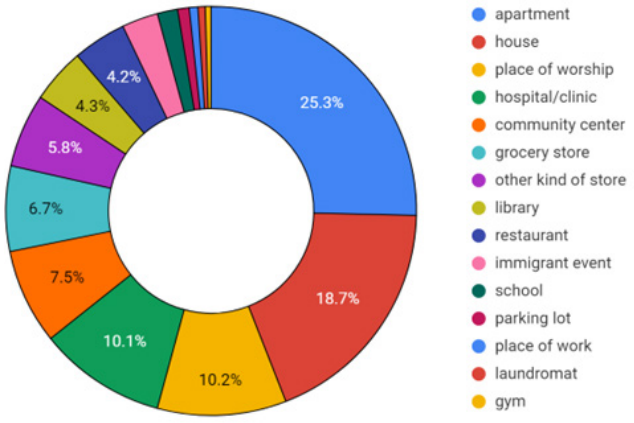
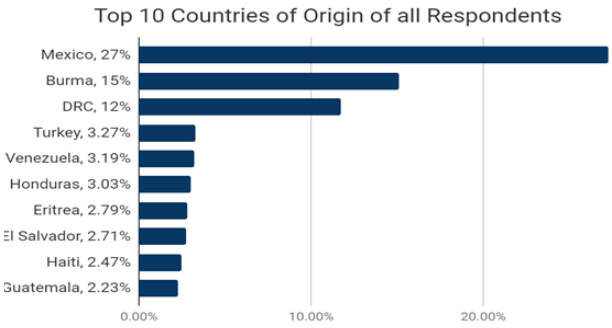
Appendix A

FIGURE A1: Sites of Surveys around City



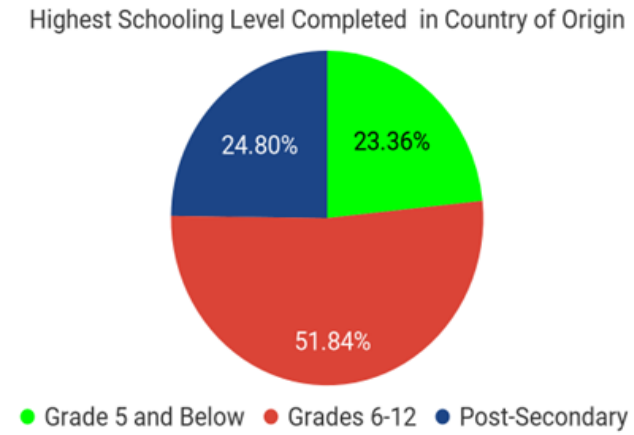
Appendix B

FIGURE B1: Countries of Origin



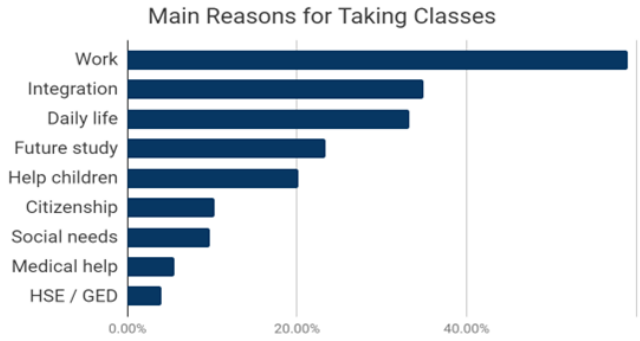
Note. Percentages will not add up to 100% because of omitted data. (Burma = Myanmar)

FIGURE B2: Highest Schooling Levels Completed of All Participants



Appendix C

FIGURE C1: Motivation for Classes

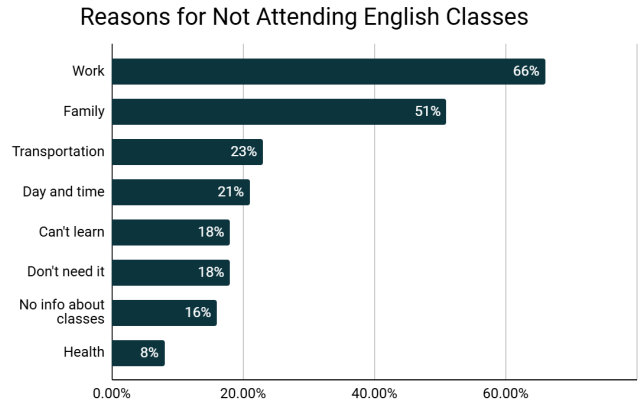


Note. Percentages are more than 100% because respondents chose two answers.

FIGURE C2: Reasons for Missing Classes

Note. Percentages are more than 100% because respondents chose two answers.

FIGURE C3: Reasons for Not Attending English Classes



Note. Percentages are more than 100% because respondents chose two answers.

Appendix D

Survey Questions

Demographic data collected included country of origin, native language, year of arrival to the U.S., and level of schooling in their home country.

If they were currently taking classes, the questions were about how they found out about class, their main reasons for taking class, how they got to class, reasons why they missed class, opinions about size, level, testing, classroom activities, and what they felt they needed to learn more.

If they weren't currently enrolled in classes, they were asked if they had ever enrolled. If yes, the follow-up questions asked were centered around reasons for discontinuing, their opinions about size, level, testing, classroom activities, needs, and how they felt about learning English.

If they had never enrolled in an English class, the questions focused on reasons why, their perceived learning needs, and how they felt about learning English.

http://doi.org/10.35847/MPatterson.JLee.LSoricone.FGerdeman.7.3.17

Research Article

"What We Came For": Adult Learner Perspectives on Goals and Outcomes of Adult Foundational Education

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Abstract

Do U.S. adult learners really "get what they came for" in adult foundational education programs – and how do we measure the value of what they get? A pressing need exists to conduct return-on-investment research to make clear the benefits of learner investments in adult foundational education to funders and prospective partners. As U.S. researchers in the Evidence-Based Adult Education System, we conceptualized return-on-investment research to center on perspectives of adult learners who seek to meet their needs in adult foundational education programs (learner return-on-investment). To lay a foundation for learner return-on-investment analyses, in 2022 we conducted a survey of 793 adult learners to identify their goals and outcomes. This paper shares major survey results and offers four quantifiable priority areas that may be considered as topics for further study of learner return-on-investment. Priority areas include making a positive difference in the community, family support, learning outcomes, and career outcomes.

Note: The authors sincerely thank Dr. Alisa Belzer of Rutgers University for her helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

Keywords: adult learner, outcomes, return on investment, adult foundational education, E-BAES

Adult foundational education (AFE) is an emergent term that describes the U.S. adult education system providing participants with opportunities to learn English, improve literacy and numeracy skills, prepare to take a high school equivalency exam or seek a high school diploma, or gain workplace skills. The term was coined by Open Door Collective; see Rosen and Kennedy's (2022) explanation at https://nationalcoalitionforliteracy.org/2022/05/adult-foundational-education. AFE programs may receive funds from the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Title II, state, local, and philanthropic sources, or from a mixture of resources. They offer services to meet a range of critically important adult learning needs.

Nearly all AFE programs work with community partners to help adults gain access to employment opportunities, social services, healthcare, housing, family services, and further education. AFE program staff may also work to promote AFE's value to prospective adult learners and in their local communities.

Expanding outreach to and collaboration with prospective partners is a major goal of AFE nationally. It is a key strategy of the Open Door Collective, a national program of Literacy Minnesota (https://www.literacymn.org/OpenDoorCollective), in making the case that working together to meet learner needs holistically is more effective than working separately. In 2019, the Open Door Collective

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organized the Evidence-Based Adult Education System (E-BAES) Taskforce to bring together researchers to plan and conduct research benefiting the AFE field. More than 30 U.S. AFE researchers, government officials, and practitioners in E-BAES share a vision to conduct research about AFE's value as a key mechanism for reducing poverty and increasing social and economic justice.

As part of fulfilling E-BAES' research agenda, members have been working to develop and conduct a national return-on-investment (ROI) study. Rigorous ROI studies are lacking in AFE, partly because of a chronic lack of research resources and because of the complexity of conducting ROI in this field (Kim & Belzer, 2021). Therefore, E-BAES undertook foundational work to prepare for a thorough and comprehensive ROI study that takes a different approach. Initially, the ROI workgroup began by looking broadly at what is already known about ROI in AFE to establish an ROI research design that meaningfully assesses its costs and benefits. However, rather than take a traditional economic approach, we have conceptualized ROI research to center on perspectives of adult learners who seek to meet their needs in AFE programs ("learner ROI") without sacrificing the rigor expected in traditional ROI research that informs national policy and practice.

We acknowledge that what funders (e.g., WIOA, state, and local programs) require is what AFE programs measure; however, those measures may not fully reflect what adult learners actually want/need when they decide to seek foundational skills. Nor do program measures consider costs that learners incur or returns they find meaningful. Centering an ROI study around adult learners' actual goals and outcomes offers an alternative approach to understanding AFE's value. Instead of starting with the usual ROI relationship between investment (i.e., what is costs to provide AFE programs) and measurable economic outputs (i.e., what individuals and society each gain economically from AFE), our research starts with a learner-centered focusby identifying what "returns" matter most to adult learners and employing their perspectives to inform the design of E-BAES' future learner ROI study.

To lay a foundation for learner ROI analyses, we conducted a survey aimed at identifying priorities and outcomes of adult learners who were enrolled in AFE programs. The purpose of this paper is to share major results from the survey in the context of ROI. The survey asked learners why they attend AFE along with their priorities for participation, and the outcomes of doing so. Equipped for the Future (Stein, 1999) and Teaching Skills that Matter (American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2021) frameworks informed the survey design. We chose these frameworks because they prompted us to think about purposes for participation more broadly than WIOA's focus on workforce development and postsecondary outcomes. We developed four research questions to guide our thinking; these questions addressed learner representativeness, learner priorities for participation, learner outcomes, and variability in learner responses, as detailed in the Methods section.

Literature Review

This foundational research builds on a growing interest in evaluating the ROI of AFE. Federal initiatives supporting AFE programs were introduced as early as the 1960s, primarily focusing on providing basic skills and high school equivalency programs for disadvantaged adults. Over the years, federal investments, complemented by state support, have persisted through various legislative acts and programs, most recently the 2014 *A*dult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) as part of WIOA (Roumell et al., 2019). However, federal funding for AFE has gradually but significantly declined in adjusted dollars, and enrollment in AFE, especially for low-level learners, has decreased (Patterson, 2025). Consequently, there is a pressing need to investigate the efficacy and value of AFE programs using ROI and make the benefits of learner investments in AFE clear to funders and prospective partners.

By definition, ROI traditionally calculates the ratio of costs to benefits associated with a specific program. Prior major ROI studies in AFE include Hollenbeck and Huang's (2014) findings that adult basic education (ABE) was associated with modest increases in participants' average quarterly earnings and reduced reliance on unemployment benefits. Sum and colleagues (2012) found that adults completing a GED credential had 18% higher weekly earnings and were more likely to work more weeks and hours compared with those not completing high school, with combined earnings impacts close to 30%. McLendon and colleagues (2011) cited cost/benefit ratios of adult education in ten states

and noted benefits to the workforce and to learners' self-esteem, health, civic engagement, and families. Morgan and colleagues (2017) pointed to benefits for AFE participants, drawing from Reder's (2014a) experimental longitudinal study, which highlighted increases in income over time.

Extant literature has consistently emphasized diverse benefits associated with AFE participation, including economic gains and educational advancements. For example, engaging in AFE equips individuals with skills, knowledge, and certifications, which subsequently contribute to increased human capital via greater employment opportunities and earnings (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020; Hollenbeck & Huang, 2014; Morgan et al., 2017; Parker & Spangenberg, 2013; Reder, 2014; Sum et al., 2012).

Additionally, research demonstrates that adults participating in AFE programs experience improvements in foundational skills, including literacy and numeracy (Bingman et al., 1999; Kruidenier et al., 2010; Reder, 2014b, 2014c; Soliman, 2018). AFE programs also create opportunities for individuals to pursue valuable postsecondary education credentials (Reder, 2014c).

However, AFE's value is not only in building human capital. AFE programming is positively associated with personal, family, and social domains, fostering self-esteem, social inclusion, and improved health outcomes (Feinstein & Hammond, 2004; Panitsides, 2013; Soliman, 2018). Furthermore, AFE participation is related to developing social and political confidence, increasing cultural participation, and enhancing overall well-being (Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2020; Motschilnig, 2012).

Despite these benefits, conducting ROI research in AFE has its challenges (Kim & Belzer, 2021). A lack of long-term evaluations showing positive program impacts and a potential mismatch between program goals and offerings may hinder documenting, much less achieving, learners' desired outcomes. A second challenge is wide variation in AFE implementation; no one national approach to AFE exists (Kim & Belzer, 2021). Similarly, the many mechanisms of AFE programs to support learners in attaining outcomes cannot easily be accounted for in a national study of ROI. These challenges underline the diversity within AFE, encompassing a wide array of programs, formats, and variations in implementation and quality. Thus, understanding learners' goals and outcomes is pivotal for aligning program offerings effectively with learner goals – and key for redefining learner ROI.

To develop a structure for investigating learner goals and outcomes, we drew on two learner-centered frameworks used to inform the design of AFE programming. First, Equipped for the Future (Stein, 1999), developed by the National Institute for Literacy and other partners, offers a broad-based perspective on skills adults need. Equipped for the Future serves as an inclusive skill framework that considers diverse adult learner roles as worker, parent, and citizen. Second, Teaching Skills That Matter (AIR, 2021) offers a recent framework identifying nine high-impact skills that can be transferred across five key topic areas of health, financial, and digital literacy as well as civic engagement and workforce preparation. TSTM notes the importance of integrating digital skills into learning and teaching transferable skills. Together, both frameworks account for varied domains in which adults operate and develop skills. The frameworks serve as a valuable starting point for guiding questions about learners' self-identified needs for and benefits of participation in AFE programs.

Both are critical in studying learner ROI as it focuses on learner-identified investments and returns. While this paper reports on survey results to inform ROI, a complete learner ROI study design has not yet been finalized. The final design will need to consider the challenges noted in Kim and Belzer (2021) and determine how learner goals and outcomes, as well as AFE program offerings and impacts, may be incorporated.

Methods

Research Questions

In conducting the Adult Learner Survey (ALS), we developed four research questions (RQ). The first RQ compares characteristics of survey respondents for representativeness of adult learners in federally funded programs that are required to report learner outcomes to the U.S. National Reporting System (NRS). The second and third RQs encompass adult learner participation priorities and outcomes. To help us better understand the context of adult learner reasons for and outcomes of participation, RQ4 considers responses among learners in various AFE program classifications.

1. How do demographic and background characteristics of adult learners responding to the survey compare with characteristics of U.S. adult learners in NRS-accountable programs overall?
2. What reasons do adult learners report for participating in AFE programs and how do they prioritize those reasons?
3. What learning, work, personal, family, and community outcomes do learners report as a result of participation in AFE programs?
4. How do learner reasons for participation and outcomes differ among five AFE program classifications?

Survey Instrument and Sample

The ROI workgroup conducted the ALS to address adult learners' AFE participation priorities and outcomes, along with their characteristics and background. The survey instrument, adapted from topics in Equipped for the Future (Stein, 1999) and TSTM (AIR, 2021), explored learners' AFE participation priorities and outcomes in learning, work, personal, family, and community domains. Sample questions included:

1. What did you hope to learn in adult education ... which of these reasons did you go for, and which did you actually get? (response options included: to strengthen my skills [such as reading, writing, or math], to learn to speak and understand English as a new language, to earn a high school diploma (HSD) or take a GED or HiSET test, to know how to get online and use what is online for learning.)
2. How did you hope adult education would help prepare you for work...which of these reasons did you go for, and which did you actually get? (response options included: to learn skills to keep the job I have, to figure out how to get along even better with others on a team, to prepare to take on new challenges at work, to learn skills for a new job, to learn skills to get a work certificate or license.)
3. What did you hope to get from adult education... which of these reasons did you go for, and which did you actually get? (Response options included: to gain confidence in what I know, for myself, to keep myself healthy, to make my life even more satisfying.)
4. How did you hope adult education could help you in your family life...which of these reasons did you go for, and which did you actually get? (response options included: to help me support my child(ren) to learn at home or in school, to make my parenting skills even better, to keep my family safe and healthy, to help meet my family's financial needs.)
5. How did you hope adult education could help you as a community member...which of these reasons did you go for, and which did you actually get? (Response options included: to become a U.S. citizen, to get informed and stay informed, to get ready to vote, to make a positive difference in my community.)
6. Which of these reasons (in each section) is *most* important to you?

The survey also asked whether the respondent was enrolled in an AFE program currently and, if so, the type of AFE program. Demographic and background items collected data on education attainment, gender, age, U.S. state of residence, children under 18, health, disabilities, and employment status.

We developed the survey in August and September 2022 and field tested it with several adults, including English learners, in California, Massachusetts, and Virginia. To ensure those without internet access (e.g., adults in prisons or jails or adults in remote areas) could take the survey, we developed a paper-based survey and an electronic survey. We mailed paper surveys to adult learners and/or AFE program staff on request and included self-addressed, stamped envelopes to boost response. To include a wider audience of adult learners with limited English skills, the survey was translated into Spanish by a bilingual Spanish-English speaker from New York and reviewed for accuracy and clarity by two bilingual speakers from California. Translating into other languages was considered yet not pursued due to resource limitations.

Drawing on connections among E-BAES taskforce members, including multiple national and statewide organizations and urban and rural programs, we employed a snowball sampling method (Emerson, 2015) to recruit 871 adult learners who were participating or had participated in various AFE programs throughout the United States. Of 871 adult learners taking the survey, 793 were participating in AFE at the time; results are based on

these 793 adult learners. We administered the survey in October and November 2022. Those providing informed consent and completing the survey were entered into a drawing for one of two $100 gift cards. We downloaded and cleaned survey data and conducted analyses.

Analyses

We employed descriptive analyses to address the first three RQs. For RQ1, we compared demographic and background characteristics of ALS respondents descriptively with adults in the NRS to gauge the extent to which the survey sample represented a recent population of U.S. adult learners in AFE programs. RQ2 and RQ3 data were compiled from frequencies and percentages representing 793 adults participating in AFE. For RQ4, we conducted a latent class analysis (LCA; Sinha et al., 2021). LCA is a type of structural equation modeling that can be used to identify latent, or hidden, classifications from continuous and categorical data. Next, we determined the best-fitting model based on learning- and work-related goals of 793 survey respondents as determined through Akaike and Bayesian model fit statistics (i.e., AIC, BIC). Once the best fitting model was selected, we analyzed learning and work-related goals as well as outcomes for each class. We determined outcomes learners in each class made that were expected (i.e., they came in with an expressed goal in an area and had an outcome in that area) and unexpected (i.e., they did not originally express a goal in an area but had an outcome in that area anyway) from program participation.

Results

Adult Learner Survey Demographics and Comparisons with National Reporting System Data

We begin by presenting demographic descriptives of ALS survey respondents according to the program in which they participated, as displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Descriptive Statistics of Survey Respondents by Program Type

ALS Demographics by Program Type									
		Overall	Basic Skills	Career Training	HSD/ HSE	English Learning	College Prep	Family Literacy	Sig.
Overall	N	793	117	147	174	305	32	18	
	%	100	14.8	18.5	21.9	38.5	4.0	2.3	
Gender (n=774)	Female	64.1	50.4	45.1	67.1	77.8	62.5	47.1	**
	Male	35.9	49.6	54.9	32.9	22.2	37.5	52.9	
Median age (n=788) (Range)	34 (16-100)	34 (17-88)	32 (18-100)	30 (16-99)	39 (18-100)	29 (19-60)	34 (23-78)		
Years in school (n=793)	1-5 years of school	6.9	10.3	9.5	6.3	4.9	0.0	16.7	**
	6-8 years of school	10.3	15.4	6.1	14.9	8.2	6.3	11.1	
	9-11 years of school	22.5	18.0	12.2	47.7	13.8	37.5	11.1	
	HSD/HSE	24.2	29.1	32.0	19.0	22.3	25.0	11.1	
	Work certificate	10.6	12.0	23.1	5.8	7.5	3.1	11.1	
	College or university	25.5	15.4	17.0	6.3	43.3	28.1	38.9	

ALS Demographics by Program Type

		Overall	Basic Skills	Career Training	HSD/ HSE	English Learning	College Prep	Family Literacy	Sig.
Employment (n=783)	Unemployed	21.0	17.2	31.7	26.0	16.3	12.9	0.0	**
	Employed P/T	32.7	43.1	46.2	28.3	21.3	48.4	61.1	
	Employed F/T	10.2	11.2	9.7	7.5	10.7	16.1	16.7	
	Employed more than F/T	29.5	23.3	11.7	30.6	42.3	16.1	11.1	
	Retired	6.6	5.2	0.7	7.5	9.3	6.5	11.1	
Health (n=785)	Fair or Poor	18.1	15.8	20.4	30.2	12.2	9.7	11.1	**
	Excellent or Good	81.9	84.2	79.6	69.8	87.8	90.3	88.9	
Child (n=773)	Children under 18	60.2	55.7	61.3	51.8	63.3	70.0	88.9	*
	No children under 18	39.8	44.4	38.7	48.2	36.7	30.0	11.1	
Disability (n=763)	Diagnosed with disability (any)	22.9	21.1	36.1	38.4	8.4	26.7	22.2	**
	No disability	77.1	78.9	63.9	61.6	91.6	73.3	77.8	

Note. * p<0.05, **p<0.001

RQ1 considered how survey respondent demographic characteristics compared with NRS data—that is, in 2022 were survey respondents representative of AFE learner demographics in the United States, by program type, gender, age, education attainment, and employment? The corresponding demographic data available on the NRS website (nrs.ed.gov) represents the 2021-22 fiscal year (*N*=899,692 participants). ALS respondents and NRS participants were similar in program type, age distribution, and gender, yet survey respondents were more often employed or in career training and were educationally more widely distributed than adults reported in NRS.

Overall, three-fifths of ALS respondents have children under 18, indicating many parents of school-aged children in AFE. A sizable proportion (18.1%) of survey respondents indicated fair or poor health. Reported disabilities of any kind was 22.9%. The rates of disabilities were highest among those in high school diploma/high school equivalency (HSD/HSE) programs (38.4%) and lowest among those in English learning programs (8.4%). The survey did not differentiate among disability types.

ALS respondents in program types defined under NRS indicated the following rates of participation: 14.8% in basic skills programs, 21.9% in HSD/HSE programs, and 38.5% in ESL programs; 18.5% of 793 survey respondents participated in career training programs, which are not measured under NRS. Although ALS respondents had less basic skills participation, the overall program type balance was similar for NRS adult learners, with half in ESL and half in ABE/ASE; 41.5% were in ABE, 9.0% were in ASE, and 49.5% were in ESL programs. Across these NRS program types, 49,572 adults (5.5%) participated in integrated education and training (IET). In the NRS 1.3% participated in family literacy programs; a similarly small proportion (2.3%) of ALS respondents did so.

By gender, more women participated in both ALS and NRS. ALS respondents were 35.9% men and 64.1% women; corresponding NRS percentages were 39.8% men and 60.2% women. In the ALS, median age was 34 years (range 16 to 100 years). The largest age group for both ALS and NRS was ages 25-44 years (60.1% for ALS and 51.1% for NRS); however, ALS had proportionately fewer adults under 25 (20.5%) than did the NRS (26.7%) as well as proportionately fewer adults 45 years and above (19.4%) compared with the NRS (22.2%).

Concerning education attainment, although most adult learner respondents completed at least some secondary education, survey respondents tended to report more widely distributed education levels - that is, lower or higher levels of education - than adults in NRS data. For example, as shown in Table 2, the rate of survey respondents finishing grades 1 to 5 (6.9%) is two and a half times the NRS rate (2.8%), and college attainment is higher for survey respondents (25.5%) than adult learners in the NRS (19.3%). Because survey respondents also came from community-based literacy programs or career training programs for English learners, this polarization was expected. The Other row in Table 2 designates adults with unknown or no schooling in NRS and workplace certificates in ALS.

TABLE 2: Education Attainment of Survey Respondents and National Reporting System Adult Learners

	NRS		ALS	
Education Attainment	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
Grades 1-5	25,254	2.8	55	6.9
Grades 6-8	76,040	8.5	82	10.3
Grades 9-12 (9-11 ALS)	384,116	42.7	178	22.5
HSD/HSE	165,641	18.4	192	24.2
College	173,498	19.3	202	25.5
Other	75,143	8.4	84	10.6

The employment rate of survey respondents, 72.4%, was much higher than the 42.0% reported in the NRS, likely because survey respondents tended to be somewhat older than adults in NRS-accountable programs. It is noteworthy, however, that most employed adults taking the survey indicated being employed either part time (32.7%) or more than full-time (29.2%), rather than in a regular full-time position (10.5%; see Table 1). These responses may indicate work in low-paying part-time jobs—especially noticeable in those entering career training programs—or cobbling together multiple jobs to try to make ends meet. Part of the significant employment difference may also be attributed to NRS data being collected as early as July of 2021, in contrast to the survey being administered in late 2022, when more adults had returned to the workforce post-pandemic.

Adult Learner Goals for Participation and Priorities

RQ2 addressed goals adult learners reported as reasons for participating in AFE programs. Adults selected from as many goals as they wanted in five domains: learning goals, work goals, personal goals, family goals, and community goals. We ordered the goals they selected most often across these five domains. Table 3 displays individual goals, ranked from most respondents selecting to least selecting, by domain. Goals most often selected were in four of the domains (all except community goals). The most frequent response among adults taking the ALS survey (51.7%) was participating to strengthen skills, such as reading, writing, and math (see Figure 1). Additional frequently selected reasons for entering AFE programs were gaining confidence in what they know (48.3%), learning skills to keep the job they have (48.1%), making life even more satisfying (47.9%), helping to support their child(ren) to learn (46.7%), and being able to plan and go after career goals (45.2%). Interestingly, the most important personal and work goals were also ranked highly (2nd and 6th, respectively): gaining confidence and being able to plan and go after career goals. Across all five domains, frequently selected reasons indicate that adults have multiple goals for entering AFE.

TABLE 3: Goals for and Outcomes of Participation in AFE: Adult Learner Survey

Reason	Adults Reporting Goal (%)	Adults Reporting Outcome (%)
Learning goals		
To strengthen my skills	51.7	37.3
To prepare to enter career training	42.9	35.8
To learn to speak / understand English as a new language	42.6	43.0
To be able to find out things and learn on my own	41.2	38.1
To earn an HSD or take a GED or HiSET test	37.5	39.0
To know how to get online and use for learning	35.1	39.6
To learn how to find services in my community	33.8	31.7
To prepare to enter college	33.3	38.6
None of these reasons is applicable*	19.3	17.8
Work goals		
To learn skills to keep the job I have	48.1	30.3
To be able to plan and go after career goals	45.2	38.0
To prepare to take on new challenges at work	44.6	33.8
To learn skills to get a work certificate	43.3	30.6
To find an even better balance between work and life	42.8	33.5
To get skills before starting a business	41.9	29.6
To figure out how to get along even better with a team	41.7	34.7
To learn skills for a new job	40.4	34.7
To know how to get online and use for work	38.7	31.4
None of these reasons is applicable*	19	25.5
Personal goals		
To gain confidence in what I know, for myself	48.3	42.1
To make my life even more satisfying	47.9	42.5
To learn how to better understand / manage money	36.8	36.6
To keep myself healthy	34.7	36.2
To learn about getting accommodations for a disability	33.4	30.9
To do things in everyday life	32.9	44.6
None of these reasons is applicable*	25.7	21.9
Family goals		
To help me support my child(ren) to learn	46.7	34.7
To help meet my family's financial needs	43.4	38.5
To keep my family safe and healthy	39.3	37.3

Reason	Adults Reporting Goal (%)	Adults Reporting Outcome (%)
To make my parenting skills better	35.7	38.7
None of these reasons is applicable*	30.3	31.4
Community goals		
To express my opinions and ideas to others	42	40.7
To get informed and stay informed	40.6	37.3
To make a positive difference in my community	40.6	39.0
To volunteer in my community	38.1	30.5
To become a US citizen	37.7	34.4
To get ready to vote	32.8	32.2
To get ready to re-enter my community after serving time	31.9	29.9
None of these reasons is applicable*	27.9	27.9

* Designates that none of the reasons in the list of items for each domain was a goal for the learner.

TABLE 4: Frequences of program type and years in schooling

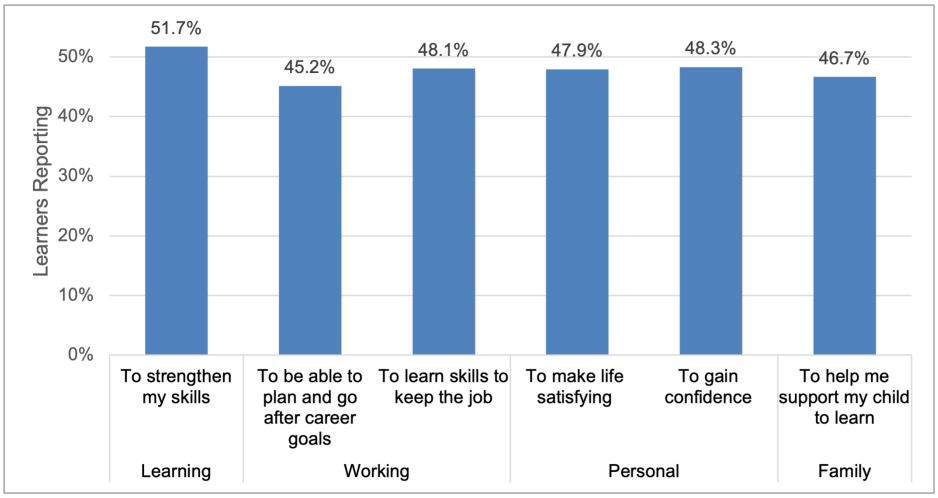
	CLASS 1	CLASS 2	CLASS 3	CLASS 4	CLASS 5		
	High Achiever	Ambitious Learners	Quiet Success	Steady Achievers	Low-engaging Learners	Total	X^2 (df)
	(n=46) 5.8%	(n=64) 8.1%	(n=73) 9.2%	(n=329) 41.5%	(n=281) 35.4%	(n=793) 100%	
Program type							
Basic Skills	6.5	15.6	17.8	13.4	16.7	14.8	24.9 (20)
Career Training	26.1	17.2	16.4	15.8	21.4	18.5	
HSD/HSE	23.9	17.2	13.7	21.9	24.9	21.9	
English Learning	37.0	42.2	43.8	42.0	32.4	38.5	
College Prep	4.4	3.1	6.9	3.7	3.9	4.0	
Family Literacy	2.2	4.7	1.4	3.3	0.7	2.3	
Years in schooling							
8 grades or fewer	8.7	21.9	23.3	17.0	16.4	17.3	30.1*
9-11 grades	15.2	14.1	21.9	25.5	22.1	22.5	(16)
HSD/HSE	32.6[a]	29.7	26.0	17.9	28.5[a]	24.2	
Work certificate	19.6	6.3	11.0	9.4	11.4	10.6	
College or above	23.9	28.1	17.8[b]	30.1	21.7[b]	25.5	

*p<0.05

[a] Pairwise comparisons indicate Class1> Class 4 and Class5>Class 4

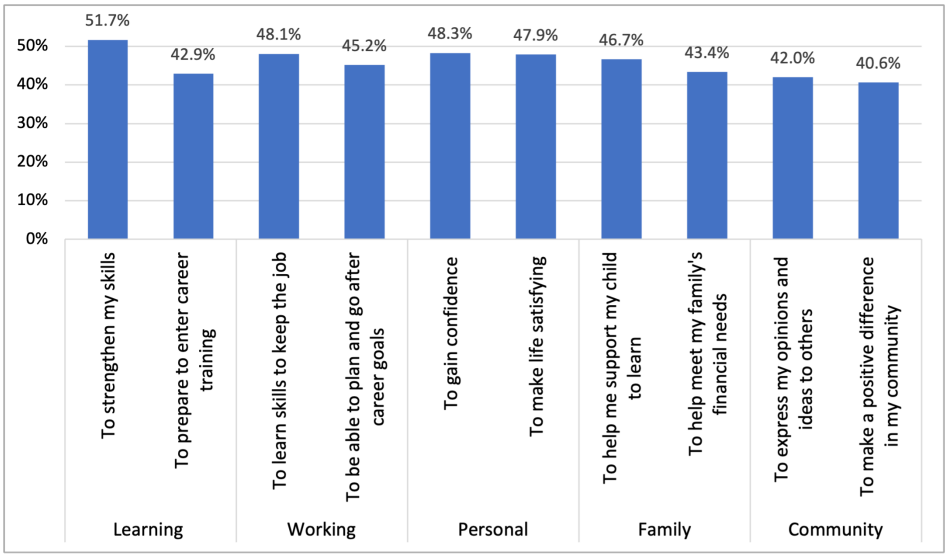
[b] Pairwise comparisons indicate Class 4>Class 3 and Class4>Class 5

FIGURE 1: Learners' Six Most Frequent Goals for Participation in AFE: Adult Learner Survey



Adult learners also could prioritize, in a separate question, the "most important" reason for participating in AFE in each of the five domains (see Figure 2). In the personal goals domain, gaining confidence (28.5%) was selected as most important. Among community goals, making a positive difference in the community was chosen as most important (26.7%). The top priority in family goals was keeping the family safe and healthy (25.2%). Among learning goals, adults selected speaking and understanding English as a new language as most important (22.0%). The top priority in work goals was being able to plan and go after career goals (20.9%).

FIGURE 2: Learners' Most Important Goals for Participation in AFE by Domain: Adult Learner Survey

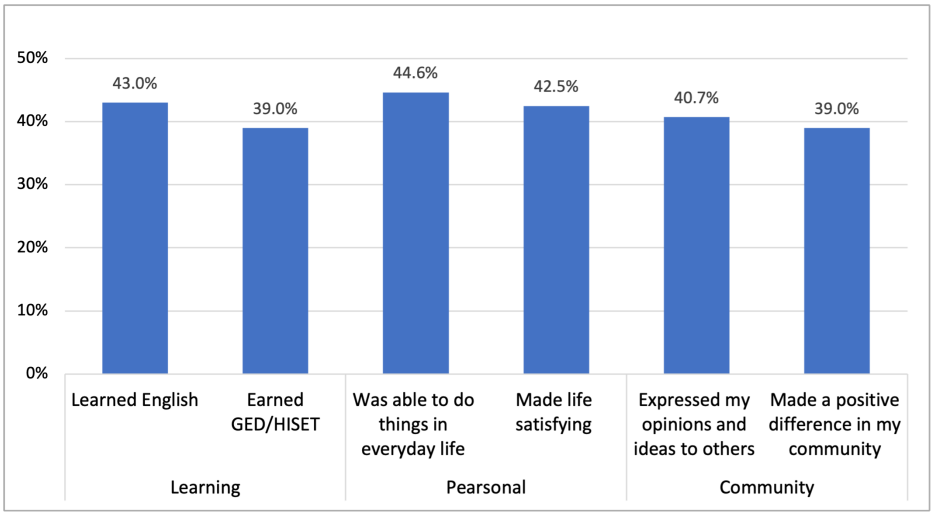


Adult Learner Outcomes from Participation in AFE

Adult learners' learning, work, personal, family, and community outcomes from AFE program participation were analyzed to address RQ3. We again ordered outcomes they selected most often across these five domains. Table 3 also includes reported outcomes in the same five domains; percentages for goals and for outcomes are aggregated separately rather than matched by individual learners. The most reported outcome

overall was in the personal domain: learning to do things in everyday life, selected by 44.6% of adult learner respondents (see Figure 3). The learning outcome of speaking/understanding English was second (43.0%), followed by two more personal outcomes, making life even more satisfying (42.5%) and gaining confidence (42.1%). The learning outcome of earning an HSD, GED, or HiSET credential and the community outcome of making a positive difference in the community came next, in number of responses (both had 39.0%).

FIGURE 3: Six Highest Outcomes from Participation in AFE: Adult Learner Survey



In most cases, overall, adult learners reported progress toward meeting goals (expected outcomes), and some learners reported progress in areas they had not selected (unexpected outcomes). However, a notable exception to this positive pattern was the goal of strengthening skills. Regardless of AFE program type, desiring to strengthen reading, writing, or math skills was the top reason they enrolled, thus affirming the importance of skills. Even though 51.7% of learners had goals to strengthen foundational skills, only 37.3% reported getting these skills from participation.

Adult Learner Classifications

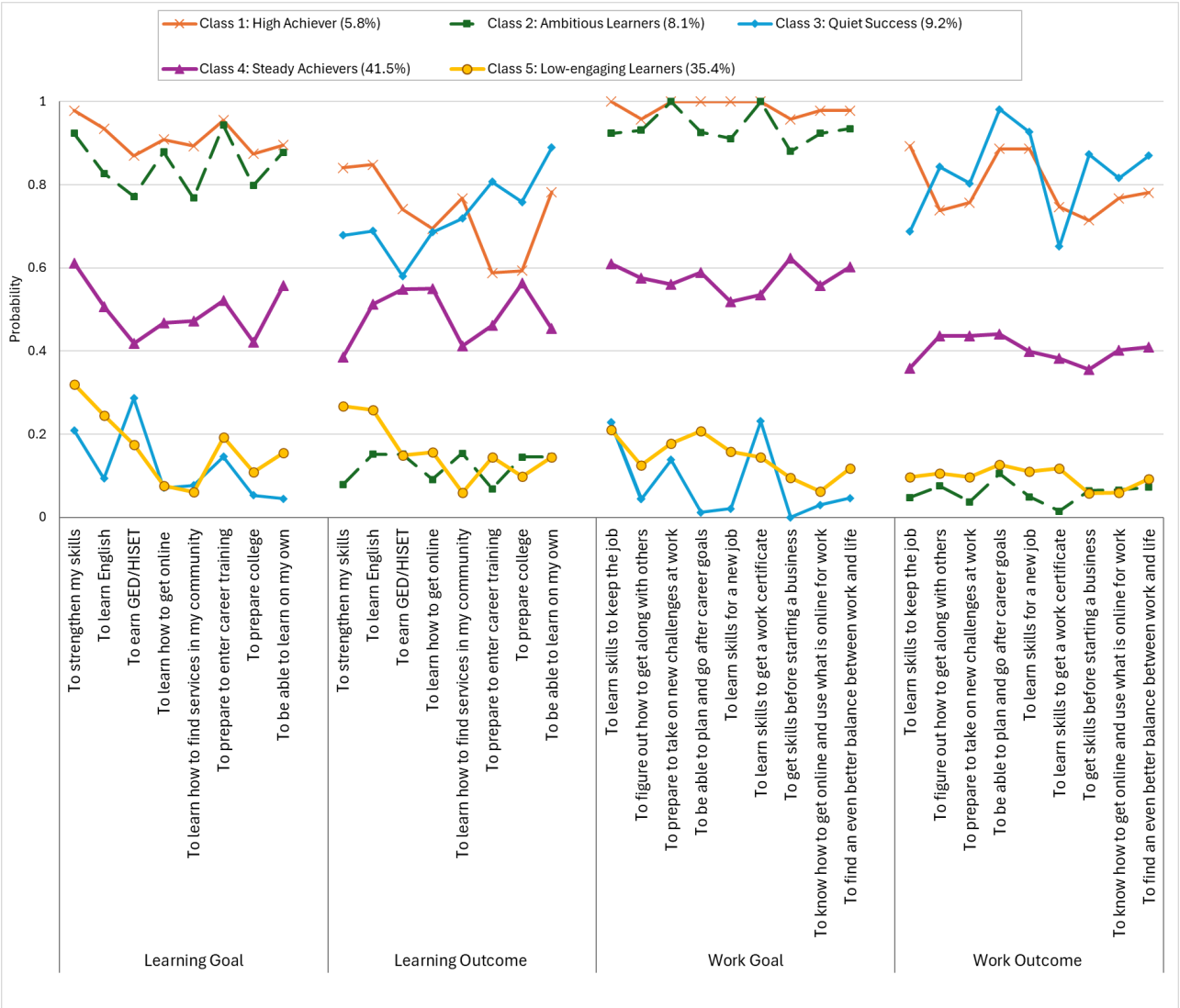
Our final analysis addressed RQ4 by classifying adult learners based on their learning and work goals and outcomes. We employed LCA, a method to statistically determine the heterogeneity of individuals who had similar response patterns to a set of items. We used 34 goals and outcomes in learning and work areas—the two most prevalent areas—as class indicators. A five-class model was selected as the best-fitting model after examining multiple fit indices such as Akaike Information Criteria (AIC), Bayesian Information Criteria (BIC), and entropy, as well as the model's interpretability. AIC was 29,326.0, BIC was 30,139.6, entropy was .0957, and the parametric Bootstrap Likelihood Ratio Test was significant. Each class had more than 5% of observation, indicating that the five-class solution provided a statistically significantly better fit. Adult learners were assigned to their most likely class based on model-generated probabilities of class membership as examined in frequencies of demographic variables among classes. We used chi-square tests of independence to determine whether latent classes differed on demographic frequencies and conducted pairwise chi-square tests. Among demographic characteristics, only the highest educational level showed statistically significant differences across the five classes.

Five profiles of adult learners based on probabilities of learning and work goals and outcomes are presented in Figure 4. The first LCA class (n_1=46, 5.8%) was characterized as "High Achievers." This class showed high learning goals and particularly high work goals, and they also achieved strong work outcomes such as being able to plan and go after career goals and learning skills for a new job. They also had a high proportion (23.9%) of adult learners with an HSD/HSE and a notable share (26.1%) was in job training programs. A second class consisted of 8.1% of adult learners

(n_2= 64), who reported relatively high learning and work goals, for example, preparing for career training and new challenges at work. However, their achievements were very low, so this group was labeled "Ambitious Learners." Seventy-three adult learners (9.2%) exhibited membership in Class 3. Though this class showed relatively low learning and work goals overall, they had a somewhat higher probability of specific goals like earning an HSD/GED/HISET or learning skills to get a work certificate. Despite their low goal probability, this class showed surprisingly high probability of achieving outcomes both in learning and work. Thus, Class 3 was labeled as "Quiet Success." They also had notably higher proportions in basic skills (17.8%) and ESL (43.8%) programs relative to other classes.

The fourth and largest class consisted of 41.5% of adult learners (n_4=329). This class was labeled "Steady Achievers" who set moderate learning and work goals and achieved moderate success. About 42% of Steady Achievers participated in ESL programs and 30.1% of this class already had a college or higher degree, the highest proportion across classes. The last class was "Low-Engaging Learners" (35.4%, n_5=281) who had low goal setting and outcomes in both learning and work; 21.4% of Low-engaging Learners enrolled in Career Training programs, and 25% in HSD/HSE programs, both somewhat higher than some other classes. Additionally, they represented a larger share (28.5%) of adult learners with an HSD/HSE compared to Steady Achievers.

FIGURE 4: Profile of Adult Learner Learning and Work Goals and Outcomes: Adult Learner Survey



Discussion

The ALS's purpose was to measure priorities and outcomes of adult learners who enter AFE programs, to inform a future comprehensive study of learner ROI. Respondents' major priorities for participation tended to hover in affective and unquantifiable areas—difficult to calculate in traditional ROI—and were consistent across participants in all program types. When asked about the "most important" reasons for enrolling in AFE, respondents chose, in order:

1. Gain confidence;
2. Make a positive difference in the community;
3. Keep my family safe and healthy;
4. Speak and understand English as a new language; and,
5. Plan and go after career goals.

Within this list of five reasons, quantifiable goals such as learning English and planning and pursuing career goals were less of a priority. However, learner priorities varied by program type. Gaining confidence was most important for three of four program types but only ranked fifth for those in HSD/HSE programs; in contrast, the number one priority for those in HSD/HSE programs was making life even more satisfying.

Also, ranked priorities of what was most important often differed from overall goals respondents tended to select most frequently, such as strengthen my skills (reading, writing, and math), learn skills to keep the job I have, and support my children to learn. These three goals are quantifiable and could also be considered for ROI study.

What funders (e.g., WIOA and state programs) measure drives what programs do, but that programming may not fully reflect what learners actually want/need. In learning and workforce goals, ALS survey respondents tended to experience positive yet varied outcomes. In the learning domain, for instance, even though half of survey respondents expressed strengthening skills (reading, writing, and math) as a goal, slightly more than a third reported the outcome. This gap of 15 percentage points indicates that many learners did not meet their goals—or did not recognize meeting them. This finding is not an indictment of AFE but does point to the need for comprehensive learner ROI study.

For surveyed learners with workforce preparation goals, AFE in general is not as successful as it could be. The most common goal was learning skills to keep their job (48.1%), but only 30.3% reported that as an outcome. For every work-related goal there was unmet need. That is, more people had the goal than reported an outcome in that area. The gap was anywhere from nearly 18% (for learning skills to keep their job) to just over 6% (knowing how to get online and use it for work).

Data in this area point to the continued importance of a focus on workforce development despite high employment rates among respondents. Although most respondents are employed, the majority are not in regular full-time positions. Rather, they work part-time or work multiple jobs to accumulate full-time (or more than full-time) work. Many jobs are likely low paying (the survey did not ask about income).

At the same time, some adult learners came without specific goals as measured in our survey. The extensive mismatch between adult learners' goals and outcomes was noticeable. Some learners did not make gains in areas they initially hoped to make, while others reported gains in areas where they did not set goals. In the five LCA classes, this pattern is reflected in "Quiet Success" with low-goal/high-outcome and "Ambitious Learners" with high goal/low-outcome patterns.

This mismatch may be interpreted both positively and negatively. On one hand, learners may perceive gaining skills or growth opportunities in unanticipated areas as a bonus. In addition to what they came for, they are made aware of learning opportunities that they might not have recognized or did not see as of immediate importance. Similarly, some learners may enter AFE with vague or unrealistic goals or little knowledge of what AFE offers—and clarify or adjust goals in the learning process. In making unexpected outcomes, learners accrue skills and experiences that can benefit their lives and open further possibilities in unexpected and positive ways.

On the other hand, learners may feel they invested time in a program that did not provide what they came for, thus making that investment questionable. Unexpectedness implies mismatches between what attracts adults to an AFE program and what the program actually offers, which may be driven by rigid funder requirements or inattention to learner goals. AFE programs may need to better

communicate their offerings—as well as what they do *not* offer—and help incoming learners discern what kind of a match is possible from the outset.

ROI has potential to make a case for the value of AFE; partners and policy makers need this information to make critical decisions about AFE's role in efforts to address poverty and improve wellbeing of U.S. adults. Survey findings offer some quantifiable priority areas that may be considered for further study of learner ROI. These priority areas include the following:

1. Making a positive difference in the community
2. Family support (child's learning and family health / safety)
3. Learning outcomes (English learning, foundational skills, and HSD/HSE credentials)
4. Career outcomes (planning career and gaining skills for a new job)

While these topic areas may be difficult to measure employing traditional ROI calculations of costs and benefits (that is, in dollars and cents), pursuing learner ROI remains an option for study. They help make the case for a broader understanding of potential benefits of AFE participation in comparisons of costs and benefits in an ROI analysis.

Limitations and Future Research

We acknowledge several limitations to our survey and findings. To begin with, survey respondents represented not only participants enrolled in programs that report NRS data but also adults in community-based literacy programs, career training for English learners, and other AFE programming. ALS survey respondents and participants enrolled in NRS-accountable programs were similar in program type, age distribution, and gender, yet survey respondents were more often employed or in career training and were educationally more varied than adults in NRS-accountable programs. A puzzling finding, however, was demographic differences in gender and age *by* program type. We were surprised to see high proportions of men in basic skills, career training, and family literacy (this last difference is likely an artifact of the small sample). Median ages for HSD/HSE, career training, and especially English learning seemed high given the program intent. These differences point to the wide variety of program types and learners entering them, differences not captured in NRS tables. While we cannot conclude that survey respondents are fully representative of adult learners in NRS-accountable programs—especially given vast differences in sample sizes—we believe that ALS results represent a meaningful sample of U.S. adult learner perceptions and therefore results from this paper are useful for understanding learner ROI.

We also noticed another puzzling finding: among survey participants in English language programs, HSD/HSE preparation, or career training, a surprisingly small proportion stated as goals, respectively, to learn English (42.6%), earn an HSD/HSE (37.5%), or prepare for career training (42.9%). Not having more information from learners to interpret this disconnect is a limitation. Learners may have understood these goals simply as a steppingstone to other, more important goals. For example, respondents in English language programs emphasized their desire to strengthen basic skills and prepare for career training as well. Thus, for some, learning English may have been simply a steppingstone to those goals. Similarly, HSD/HSE participants emphasized interest in strengthening basic skills, learning English as a new language, and learning on their own, so they may have been more focused on steps preceding HSD/HSE. Career training participants emphasized strengthening basic skills, learning English as a new language, learning on their own, and HSD/HSE, so may have focused on these precedents to career training.

Another survey limitation is that it targeted AFE participants with at least intermediate reading comprehension or English language skills. Beyond translating the ALS survey into Spanish, language translations were not feasible. This limitation means that perspectives of AFE learners with low skills were only included where teachers, tutors, or fellow learners helped with reading the survey; missing perspectives need to be included in future learner ROI study.

Finally, survey results indicate that to plan further study, we need to know more about program-level and state-level expectations and constraints in attaining positive learner ROI. As this paper was written, additional qualitative research with AFE practitioners was underway. This qualitative research will allow us to triangulate survey findings and understand program and state perceptions of traditional and learner ROI to support further planning for a more comprehensive ROI study.

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Viewpoint

The Case for Racial Literacy

Joni Schwartz-Chaney, City University of New York - LaGuardia Community College

Abstract

Racial illiteracy is widespread in America, and as adult literacy educators our mission is to address illiteracy in all its manifestations. We teach literacies in reading and writing, numeracy, computer, speaking, listening, visual, health, and media, each vital to making sense of our world and functioning effectively in it. Racial literacy is just as vital and should be taught as well. I argue that racial literacy is critical to a meaningful civic and community life. Some scholars believe it is critical to the perseverance of democracy. At the very least, many adult learners do not possess an understanding of what race is, how it operates in our personal lives and institutions, the history that impacts the present, and how to communicate effectively about it. Whether in writing or speaking about race and racism, many of us lack confidence. As adult literacy professionals it is incumbent upon us to teach racial literacy skills.

Keywords: racial literacy, sociological imagination, race, racism, historical literacy, critical race theory, interruption

Racial illiteracy is widespread in the United States (DiAngelo, 2018), and as adult literacy educators, our mission is to address illiteracy in all its manifestations. We teach literacies in reading, writing, numeracy, computer, speaking, listening, visual, health, and media, each vital to making sense of our world and functioning effectively. Racial literacy is just as vital and should be taught as well. Racial literacy is critical to a meaningful civic and community life, and some scholars believe it is critical to the perseverance of democracy (West, 2004). At the very least, many adult learners and adult literacy educators do not possess an understanding of what race is, how it operates in our personal lives and institutions, the history that impacts the present, and how to communicate effectively about it. Notwithstanding, I do recognize the profound experiential knowledge of so many students of color when it comes to both individual and institutional racism.

In general adult Americans writing or speaking about race and racism demonstrate either resistance or ignorance. This is evidenced by polarized and volatile communication on social media, avoidance of the topic in personal conversation, ongoing and renewed efforts to suppress America's racial history (attacks on critical race theory [CRT]), banning of books on race, and the erasure of critical American history including 200 years of slavery (rejection of the 1619 Project); these are a few overt examples of racial illiteracy (Schwartz-Chaney, 2024). The goal of this paper is to define racial literacy in the context of adult education, suggest a model and theory that support racial literacy, and make the case that as adult literacy professionals it is incumbent upon us to develop racial literacy skills and teach them to our students.

Defining Racial Literacy

The National Council of Teachers of English defines racial literacy as "the ability to read, discuss, and write about situations that involve race and racism" (Sealy-Ruiz, 2021, p. 2). Race scholars define it as practices and skill in interrogating the effects of systemic racism on personal experiences and societal representations (Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Skerrett, 2011).

In addition, being racially literate is the ability to comprehend how America's unique history impacts current events or phenomena like the killing of George Floyd and Trayvon Martin, affirmative action, poverty, mass incarceration, and disparities in health care during COVID. Racial literacy engages the sociological imagination

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(Mills, 1959) placing personal experiences within larger social and historical contexts. A well-developed sociological imagination makes one aware of the working of history within one's present condition. Examples are how an individual's White privilege, educational or health care options, or odds of being incarcerated are connected to racial history.

The ability to discuss hard issues like the banning of books, CRT, and our own racial biases without defensiveness of behavior and polarization of thinking demonstrates racial literacy. It includes skills of civil discourse, whether face-to-face or online. Adults who are racially literate are able to define race as a social construct. They understand that science supports race as a social construct rather than a biological one (National Human Genome Research Institute, 2024). Racial literacy encompasses the comprehension that race is not scientifically identifiable so therefore not "real", while at the same time recognizing that it is "real" as it operates within society and institutions through racism (Dyson, 2021). Being racially literate includes understanding intersectionality and that race operates in conjunction with gender, class, caste, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and colorism (Crenshaw, 1989). Race and ethnicity intersect but are different. Race is a social construction primarily based on physical features, skin color, and hair texture. Ethnicity includes language, national origin, traditions, and ancestry. Racial literacy encompasses an understanding and sensitivity to all marginalized communities, while recognizing the United States' unique relationship with race.

Racial literacy is different yet shares similarities with anti-racist pedagogy, cultural literacy, and democratic education. With anti-racist pedagogy, it shares the tenets of improving vocabulary (bias, discrimination, institutional racism, etc.) and developing self-awareness (reflexivity—a core component of adult education) (Brookfield, 2014). Cultural literacy is broader than racial literacy, acknowledging the intersectionality of culture, ethnicity, and gender, rather than a narrower focus on race. Being racially literate could result from democratic education where students manage their own learning and participate in governance but, while not necessarily. Racial literacy is a skill that enables one to read, write, converse, and act with an awareness and understanding of race and racism (Bowman et al., 2014). To be clear, to be clear, people are not merely racially literate or illiterate but like other literacies are on a continuum of literacy development (Chavez-Moreno, 2022).

Racial literacy like media literacy examines author or speaker positionality, bias, propaganda, and social context. Central to the U.S. experience is racism; therefore, the history of race is central. The United States is quickly becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, and adult learners need the information and skills to communicate civilly within these changing communities. For immigrant students, racial literacy instruction from a U.S. historical perspective is required. Students' lived experience around race in other countries may differ from what they encounter in the United States. Although racism is a global phenomenon, the United States has its unique legacy in part because of 258 years of slavery on its land and its continued manifestation in its institutions (Crenshaw, 2011).

Race and Adult Education

Adult educators have long engaged and spoken to racial justice and literacy. Juanita Johnson-Bailey's extensive work is at the intersection of gender, race and adult education with a particular emphasis on Black women in graduate school; Talmadge Guy's work on Black men in adult education and culturally relevant pedagogy is most notable; Lisa Merriweather as one of the founding editors of *Dialogues in Social Justice* has focused on the intersection of race, social justice and adult education while in her own research examines diversity and mentoring in higher education. CRT and experiences of White students in predominantly Black universities has been the focus of Rosemary Closson's research. Dianne Ramdeholl's early work was in adult literacy and democratic spaces; her more recent work is with decentering the academy, looking at diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education. Edith Gnanadass has published much on race and South Asian students with an emphasis on family literacy and women. These adult education scholars and more have contributed to the wider field of adult education in which adult literacy is a crucial component and contributed to the discussion of race in the field to which we are all indebted. With this said, the focus of this paper is adult literacy educators and racial literacy within this larger context of adult education.

One Model for Developing Racial Literacy

How does one become racially literate? One instructional design is the Racial Literacy Development Model theorized by Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (https://www.yolandasealeyruiz.com/). This model includes three tenets and six steps to racial fluency. Sealey-Ruiz's work is with teacher education, and she believes that before engaging students, educators must perform "the archaeology of the self"—the deep work of excavating how race and racist ideas impact their own lives and behavior. Especially for White educators, this self-examination of their encounters with race, White supremacy, White privilege, and interest convergence must be unearthed in order not to further traumatize students (Sealey-Ruiz, 2020). While the terms White privilege and supremacy may be familiar, interest convergence is the concept that Whites engage in work for social change when the change aligns with benefit to themselves (Bell, 1980).

Sealey-Ruiz's (2021) three tenets of racial literacy development are to question assumptions, dialogue critically, and practice reflexivity. Based on these tenets, Sealey-Ruiz outlines six development steps: interruption, archeology of self, historical literacy, critical reflection, critical humility, and critical love. These steps echo Paulo Freire's praxis, Brookfield's critically reflective practice (1998), and adult transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Sealey-Ruiz's participatory education style—learner-centered, open questioning, learning by doing, small-groups, writing-intensive, and critical reflection—is well suited to adult learners in all settings and reflects the work that adult educators already do but not necessarily race-focused.

Interruption and Historical Literacy

While all six steps of this model are useful, two steps are crucial in the climate of banning books on race, resisting critical race theory (CRT), and challenging diversity, equity and inclusion practice (DEI). The two steps are interruption and historical literacy. Except for people of color and anti-racist scholars who are committed to the role of adult literacy and historical race research, many adult literacy educators lack these two skill sets (Ramdeholl, 2023).

Interruption is one's intellectual and spiritual commitment to embrace racial literacy and an anti-racist stance to combat inequality at personal and systemic levels. It includes understanding the impact of institutionalized racism upon students of color who often attended segregated, under-funded and poorly resourced schools where their physical and emotional safety was compromised. Beyond educational disparities, educators need to do the deep work that recognizes that institutional racism in the form of substandard healthcare, poverty, and over-policing may have impacted our students of color's ability to secure a sound education. Interruption is the intentionality and commitment to disrupt the status quo by examining our prejudices and assumptions and by studying our collective racism. White people need to admit to white privilege and that societal White supremacy impacts values, beliefs, and interactions with students. For educators of color, colorism, ethnicity and parental upbringing may have impacted values, beliefs, and expectations of students and should be examined.

Through the writing of our life stories as they engage race; journaling about experiences of racism, engaging in critical conversations with others with divergent life experiences; listening to others' racial pain; telling our advocacy stories; exploring how each of us came to recognize race; and identifying our racial identity, both educators and students become racially aware. This is a method of using writing and conversations in ways that matter and have potential to heal. This is a way toward interruption. Brookfield (2014) speaks of how Instructors often incorporate their own personal narratives of Whiteness into anti-racist practice and how they need to interrupt this pattern of ingrained racism throughbrave dialogue across difference. Of course, this kind of writing and conversation comes with risk. There is risk of further harm. Healing is not easy. That is why the next stage of Sealey-Ruiz's (2021) model is so crucial. It is the concept that engages the sociological imagination mentioned earlier, moving beyond the personal narrative and personal experiences of race and connecting them to a larger social, historical context. This is a metacognitive process that gives one the self-awareness to see race not only from the micro-personal but also from the macro-social and historical lens. This objectifies our own feelings, giving us a larger perspective on race in the United States and decreasing the likelihood that individuals will be further harmed.

CRT as a Tool to Develop Historical Literacy

Historical literacy is deep knowledge of historical facts and forces that shape communities and society (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). One strong theory that supports historical literacy development is CRT; its application in adult education has been promoted in the literature (Closson, 2010) while being one of the most contentious and misunderstood legal, social science, and education theories of our day. Near hysteria has erupted in the media, legislatures, and in community and school boards around CRT. Faulty arguments demonizing CRT claim that White children will feel guilt for racism and that Black children will be victimized (Schwartz-Chaney, 2024). Opponents assert that CRT is a rewriting of American history and is anti-democratic. These are erroneous arguments fueled in large measure by fear and racial illiteracy. In brief, CRT is predominantly an American theoretical framework on how race and racism systematically and institutionally operate in legislation, criminal justice, education, healthcare, housing, etc., explaining the prevalence of racism and the benefit to Whites of racism (interest convergence); the value of storytelling from the marginalized (counternarratives); and its intersection with gender, class and sexual orientation (intersectionality) (Delgado et al., 2017). For adult literacy educators, CRT can be an effective tool for conceptualizing how race functions in the United States and developing racial literacy for themselves and their students.

Derrick Bell, a law professor at Harvard and New York University School of Law, is considered the originator of CRT (Cobb, 2021). Bell used participatory methods in his law school classrooms encouraging students to examine their own assumptions, interrupt racism, and become anti-racist (Schwartz-Chaney, 2024). Current assaults on CRT are not only attacks on academic freedom but also work to eliminate opportunities for all learners to understand how race is shaping America's past and present. CRT frames conversations on racism from a systemic, institutional, and historic lens, opening opportunities for overdue, intelligent, and civil discussions about race and its impact on everyone. CRT could be introduced to literacy educators and students, then combined with the Racial Development Literacy Model with its steps of interruption and historical literacy; we do not need to "reinvent the wheel."

Banned Books, Sociological Imagination, and Racial Literacy

Reading books and works by writers that interrupt racism and support historical literacy is crucial to racial literacy. Unfortunately, many are banned in some school districts, especially in the South (Pen America, 2023). They include books like *The 1619 Project* by Nikole Hannah-Jones, *Stamped from the Beginning* by Ibram Kendi, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, and *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent* by Isabel Wilkerson. These books challenge White traditional narratives and tell the complicated history that include enslaving of Africans and genocide of Native Americans; the Reconstruction era and the emergence of Jim Crow; the Civil Rights Movement; mass incarceration; the re-emergence of Asian-American racism during COVID; and the Black Lives Matter movement. Racial literacy includes an understanding of why certain books are banned and an understanding of academic freedom. Black authors are racial literacy guides—W.E.B Dubois, bell hooks, Malcolm X, Howard Stevenson, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Thurgood Marshall, Cornel West, Ibram Kendi, Nikole Hannah-Jones, and Isabel Wilkerson, just to name a few.

These books and authors can guide learners in navigating the divided America in which we now live, both philosophically and physically. The United States is now more segregated than at the time of Brown vs. Board of Education, and the backlash against racial progress after our first Black president is palatable (Wedderburn, 2023). Literacy educators and learners need to be able to define race and racism, understand America's racial history, and be equipped to engage in civil discourse that embraces their own stories within larger historical narratives connecting the racialized past with the present sociological imagination.

Finally, discussing censorship and the banning of books; addressing misinformation and identifying fallacy; critically reflecting on racism within their own lives and communities; acquiring a working knowledge of CRT with a commitment to interrupt past patterns of thinking and knowing all are skills of racial literacy. It is incumbent upon adult literary educators, first for themselves and then for their students, to interrupt racism by deliberately and concertedly teaching racial literacy skills in response to the conflicted and polarized climate that presently exists within the United States.

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Forum: Creating a Better Future

Introduction to the Forum

Alisa Belzer on behalf of the Editors of ALE

These are not normal times for the field. As of July 1, 2025, federal funding for adult education that was due to be released has been held back pending review. Administration of that funding may move from the U.S. Department of Education, a department whose very existence can no longer be taken for granted, to the U.S. Department of Labor. This change would further tighten the focus on education for work and continue to squeeze out the potential to study for the wide array of other reasons that adults may seek lifelong learning and educational opportunities. Immigrant learners rightfully fear deportation by masked ICE officials. Program activities that explicitly value diversity and inclusion are being called discriminatory by the administration. This issue's Forum authors refer to our current times as "an emergency," "terrifying," "chaotic," and "cruel." Harrison says simply, we're in "a moment."

How should teachers, program administrators, researchers, advocates, and others with a deep commitment to adults who want to improve their literacy, language and number skills respond? We asked our three authors to address this question. Their answers suggest the importance of staying true to commitments, core principles, and values related to equity and social justice by finding ways to continue to enact them regardless of what we call them. Their suggested strategies include implementing democratic problem solving, collective action, and developing pragmatic support strategies for learners. The importance of including and responding to diverse voices, experiences, knowledge, and visions for a better future for the field is threaded throughout all three pieces. Not only do we need to "keep on keeping on" to sustain what we do best, we also need to work toward a better future with courage and creativity by doing our work more effectively through community and collaboration.

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Forum: Creating a Better Future

(Part 1 of 3)

Rescuing and Rebuilding U.S. Adult Foundational Education: We Can and Must Do Both

Paul Jurmo, Researcher and Writer

About 4 years ago, with the help of 10 colleagues and ProLiteracy, I published *A Different Way*: *Reorienting Adult Education Toward Democracy and Social Justice*. The writing occurred when many aspects of U.S. life were in turmoil: "an out-of-control pandemic, a troubled presidential and congressional election, growing hunger and poverty, shuttered educational institutions, and—on January 6, 2021—a violent attack on the U.S. Congress and our democratic system" (Jurmo, April 2021, p. 5). Though we might wish otherwise, here we are 4 years later, again facing a number of very serious challenges, not only as a nation but now also as an adult foundational education (AFE) field. In a nutshell: a new federal administration has been dismantling AFE and other supports that the learners and communities we serve have relied on.

This article proposes strategies that we—as AFE advocates—can use to both respond to our current situation and support what I believe is an overdue transition to more effective ways of doing AFE. These strategies draw on ideas and models developed over decades. They are offered with a "can-do" spirit, grounded in both an informed understanding of AFE's strengths and limitations and a vision for a better future.

Strategies to Adapt

A Different Way identified strategies adult educators have used to help learners better manage social, economic, and other challenges and opportunities they encounter. Learners are helped to mitigate and navigate around challenges and possibly eliminate those challenges and create alternative ways of participating in life roles. In subsequent publications (Jurmo, 2023a, 2023b, 2025a, 2025b), I expanded the concept of "learners as problem-solvers" to propose a community-oriented approach to AFE. This model would equip not only learners but other community stakeholders and AFE providers to more effectively manage opportunities and challenges they face. This article now adapts democratic problem-solving strategies from the above documents to propose actions that AFE advocates and partners can now take to achieve two goals: respond to current damages and threats to AFE and lay the groundwork for a transition to an AFE for our future as a field and nation.

Five considerations:

1. It is natural to assume that we now—in 2025—need to focus primarily on responding to current damages and threats to AFE resulting from changed federal policies. However, I strongly believe we also need to simultaneously be planning how to transition to more effective and better sustained models of AFE. Doing the latter will give us a vision, resources, and focus to use when doing the former. This dual approach will require flexibility and efficiency, with work groups focusing on particular tasks within a larger, coordinated effort.
2. We should recognize that not everyone will want to use this dual-focus, team-based approach. Those who do should go ahead and develop their own version of this process at whatever level (national, state, local, program) or segment of AFE they work in. This will require diplomacy in locations accustomed to top-down decision-making as their modus operandi. Those doing this work should welcome others to join their efforts as appropriate.
3. We need to be realistic about how much of this can be done without funding for staff or other

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expenses. Previous similar collaborative planning and advocacy efforts were often funded by private-sector (e.g., foundations) and government sources (e.g., federal agencies, governors' and mayors' offices). It might be necessary for groups to start with limited resources and then, as their plans and proposals gel, reach out to relevant sources for financial and political support to put their ideas to work.

4. The strategies and activities below need not be invented from scratch or in isolation. There already exist a number of resources (e.g., advocacy groups and materials) that can be learned from and worked with. In particular, we should learn from how our field previously responded to the September 11, 2001, attacks (Literacy Assistance Center, Fall 2002) and COVID-19 (Belzer et al., 2022).
5. Those doing this work should be guided by their own version of the guidelines outlined in this article's final section.

Goal 1: Respond to Current Damages and Threats

Strategy 1.a: Assemble SAFE Teams

In May 2025, the National Coalition for Literacy initiated a strategic planning process when federal supports for AFE and other opportunities for the populations served by AFE were being dismantled. Other national-level AFE-related networks (e.g., COABE, TESOL, Migration Policy Institute, ALL IN, National Skills Coalition) were likewise developing resources (updates, advocacy materials, activities) related to federal policy shifts. It will be important for those and other national-level organizations to individually and collectively continue such "emergency response" work. Similar strategizing is already underway—or might now be considered—by (a) state- and local-level AFE organizations and coalitions; (b) segments of the field, such as researchers, professional developers, and programs serving particular learner populations (e.g., individuals who are immigrants, refugees, or U.S.-born; currently- or formerly-incarcerated; parents; job-seekers or incumbent workers); (c) other stakeholder groups with active or potential interest in working with AFE, such as employers and labor unions; K-12 schools and family services; public libraries; providers of services related to public health, corrections and public safety, digital access, disabilities, housing, environmental sustainability.

At whatever level, these AFE emergency response groups (which we will here refer to as save adult foundational education [SAFE] teams) might invite current or potential AFE supporters to get involved as planners, "worker-bees" (carrying out particular tasks), information-providers (responding to surveys, tracking down documents), or providers of financial and/or in-kind resources. Members should be individuals or organizations who recognize AFE's importance, understand the significant threats to federal supports for AFE and other opportunities for adult learners, and want to strengthen AFE in the short and longer terms.

Strategy 1.b: Assess Current Challenges and Strengths

Each SAFE team should move quickly to assess (a) immediate challenges to existing AFE and other supports for the adult learners they serve and (b) strengths (assets) that AFE can now adapt to respond to such challenges. This assessment might adapt procedures already being used by other AFE groups. (The National Coalition for Literacy conducted a SWOT analysis of the AFE field in its May 2025 meeting.)

While conditions will have evolved by the time this article is published in later 2025, here are some examples of AFE challenges and strengths as of May 2025:

Challenges. Options include (a) federal supports for AFE are being dismantled: U.S. Department of Education adult education staff have been reduced, its LINCS online resource center curtailed, and research and professional development contracts (e.g., the Teaching Skills that Matter in Adult Education and PIAAC projects) ended and (b) other federally-funded services used by adult learners and their communities have also been reduced or are at risk. These include public libraries, AmeriCorps, and supports for refugees and immigrants, public health, employment, disabilities, environmental protections, among others.

Strengths. The AFE field has experienced professionals, networks, stakeholder partners, funders, and resource materials (e.g., advocacy messages, program evaluations). AFE advocates can tap into those resources when carrying out the strategies below.

Strategy 1.c.: Mitigate and Avoid Challenges.

For each challenge, the SAFE Team should identify actions that might be taken to mitigate or avoid that challenge's impacts. Those actions might be performed by individual AFE programs or networks; community stakeholders (e.g., employers, health care providers, libraries, or foundations) which have partnered with AFE; and/or individuals (adult educators, learners, or other community members) who understand AFE's importance. For example,

- a state- or local-level AFE coalition might make it a priority to learn from, join, and support existing national-level AFE advocacy efforts and encourage their members to do the same;
- a state- or local-level AFE coalition might undertake advocacy activities to preserve existing state and local supports for AFE while also generating new funding for programs or special AFE initiatives. Multi-partner projects would develop AFE models customized to selected learner populations and social and economic needs (e.g., workplace AFE for incumbent workers, health or family literacy, correctional education, democratic participation, or environmental education);
- state- and local-level AFE coalitions might provide guidance to help local AFE providers deal with actual and potential resource reductions by seeking alternative financial or in-kind supports; creating new fee-for-service models for workers in local companies or unions; or reducing costs by paring or streamlining direct, in-person services to learners, shifting to online instruction, or using volunteers to assist paid staff. (The Urban Alliance for Adult Literacy website profiles urban AFE networks exploring alternative funding sources); or
- to respond to actual or potential closing of online collections of AFE resources, researchers and university-based libraries might create new archives that preserve and make those materials accessible (Adult Foundational Education Digital Library Group, 2023).

Strategy 1.d: Eliminate Challenges

Where appropriate and feasible, a SAFE Team might support efforts to reduce or eliminate challenges identified in Strategy 1.b. For example, if a revised policy or a funding reduction is undermining AFE capacities, can that policy or reduction be changed or reversed altogether? Might administrators, policy makers, or legislators who have influence over those negative changes be shown how AFE can support important policy goals and guided to reverse those changes? Or might those responsible be replaced, if necessary?

Goal 2: Facilitate Transition to a Better Future

Strategy 2.a: Assemble AFE Renewal Task Forces

To achieve Goal 2, adapt a process similar to that used for Strategy 1.a. to create what we will here call AFE renewal task forces. These too could be organized at national, state, local, and program levels and within various AFE field segments and stakeholder groups. As their name implies, these task Forces would develop information and recommendations to strengthen AFE as a resource for the future of local communities, states, and the nation (Jurmo, 2025b). They would operate parallel to and possibly overlap with the more-immediately-focused SAFE teams.

Strategy 2.b.: Become Familiar with Previous AFE Improvement Initiatives

These future-focused task forces can benefit significantly from lessons learned in previous efforts to reform AFE overall and various aspects thereof (e.g., workplace and health literacy, technologies, public awareness, partnership-building). (See Chisman, 2002; Jurmo, 2023b; 2025a; National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008; Stein, 2000).

Strategy 2.c: Assess AFE's Longer-Term Strengths and Limitations

AFE renewal task forces should begin by assessing the AFE field's longer-term strengths and limitations, building on Strategy 1.b.'s more-immediate assessment. This longer-term assessment would—objectively and frankly—help AFE advocates better understand the current status of key AFE components, including:

1. Who AFE serves or might serve (both learners and other community stakeholders);
2. Intended and actual outcomes/benefits of AFE for learners and communities;
3. Other stakeholders who can benefit from and collaborate with AFE;

4. Relevance and efficiency of services AFE provides on its own and with other partners;
5. Availability of AFE providers and the supports they need (e.g., professional training, mentoring, equipment, research, opportunities for family-sustaining employment);
6. Quantity, accessibility, and efficiency of financial and other supports AFE receives from various sources;
7. Improvements that existing AFE services need;
8. Potential supporters of new efforts to strengthen AFE.

Strategy 2.d.: Envision AFE that Better Serves More Individuals and Communities

Based on this broader assessment, task forces might now develop a vision for community-level AFE service systems that more effectively serve more learners and community stakeholders. Task forces should pay special attention to social and economic concerns of governmental and non-governmental policy makers and funders they currently or might work with by identifying: Who are the learner populations and other community stakeholders who might benefit from and contribute to AFE?

What should be the goals of AFE for those learners and stakeholders? More specifically, how might AFE help learners manage particular challenges and opportunities in their work, family, and civic roles? How might AFE also help other important stakeholders (e.g., employers, unions, health care providers, K-12 schools and family services, libraries, correctional and public safety agencies) perform their roles in building stronger communities?

What needs to be in place for AFE—sometimes in partnership with other stakeholders—to provide relevant, high-quality services to more learners and other community stakeholders? What instructional and administrative staff, procedures, and material infrastructure are needed? And what financial and in-kind supports do those components require?

What public- and private-sector sources (e.g., federal agencies, governors' or mayors' offices, foundations, other stakeholders) might support one or more AFE improvement initiatives?

Strategy 2.e.: Identify Actions to Transition to More Effective AFE

AFE renewal task forces can now identify actions that might be taken—over time—to create AFE models aligned with the above vision and with local community needs and strengths. A state or municipality might, for example, support local-level demonstration projects focused on particular needs (e.g., family, health, or financial literacy; preparation for jobs in relevant industries) of selected learner populations (e.g., parents of school-age children, people with disabilities, currently- and/or formerly-incarcerated individuals, young people without secondary credentials, older job changers, people seeking employment in key industry clusters).

Such customized demonstration projects would be supported by partnerships with relevant stakeholders, special funding, and professional development (training, resource collections, community-of-practice networks). Projects would be continuously evaluated and improved—perhaps by existing or new AFE Resource Centers—producing documentation to guide further projects and investments.

Strategy 2.f.: Secure Supports for AFE Improvement Initiatives

AFE Renewal Task Forces should also work with relevant stakeholder groups and public and private funders to advocate for and secure supports for the above improvement initiatives. Again, the aim would be to build more effective AFE system models that better equip more individuals and community partners to manage opportunities and challenges ahead.

Guidelines to Keep Us on Track

The above overview is admittedly brief. A more-detailed guidebook (and related webinars, other professional development, and demonstration projects) could help individuals and organizations implement these ideas in ways relevant to their contexts.

Regardless of the particulars of the teams, task forces, and contexts involved, such efforts require guidelines to keep them on track. Each group should define guidelines that work for them. Options include: being prepared (with an understanding of how AFE previously developed new

models and responded to emergencies, an openness to new ideas and information, realistic expectations, and systematic work plans); a willingness to humbly, respectfully, and diplomatically work with others (which can sometimes be difficult); and courage, a thick skin, and perseverance.

AFE has faced major challenges in the past. Now we can and must do so again.

Note: Thanks to David J. Rosen for his input on this and many of the other documents cited here.

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Forum: Creating a Better Future

(*Part 2 of 3*)

The Power of the Collective: Considerations for the Field of Adult Education

Daquanna Harrison, Elevation Educational Consulting Group

My cultural heritage is Gullah-Geechee. People who were enslaved and scattered across the various islands from NC to FL (Ghahramani et al., 2020; Gullah Museum of Georgetown, n.d.). Despite this intentional shearing of connection and isolation, on the islands a collective culture was created (Opala, 1993; Tibbetts, 2014).

The Gullah-Geechee people did not stand in their lot as enslaved people and give up. They used their boating skills to connect the island people creating the only American-based creole, weaving their multilingual tongues and that of their enslavers (S.C. Sea Grant Consortium, 2014; Tibbetts, 2014). They wielded their agricultural knowledge sowing rice, okra, beans, etc., on seized lands seen only as soil for cash crops like rice (Carney, 2009; Tibbetts, 2014). Yielding plants carrying cultural DNA fragments from Africa's Rice Coast (Carney, 2009; Opala, 1993) and when combined, as red rice (jollof's descendant), hoppin john, or rice perloo, gave the Gullah people long-term sustenance to survive (Carney, 2009; Gullah Museum of Georgetown, n.d.; S.C. Sea Grant Consortium, 2014) while connecting to home (Opala, 1993) and establishing collective resilience and power. They used their different cultural gifts and knowledge (Opala, 1993; Robinson, 2022) to create metalworks, weave baskets, braid hair, sew fishing nets, design tools, ward off disease and so much more—not for a charismatic leader, not because they needed a hobby but for the community, people they only knew existed because they were told so by those permitted to travel. They learned from the collective and drew strength, hope, love, and survival, with no government to help and few sympathizers, they created the beautiful entangled culture and language of the Gullah-Geechee people (Tibbetts, 2014).

Generations later, the language and culture has been muted and revived, the food has evolved, and fewer people know the geometric intricacies of basket and net weaving, yet what still stands and what I see as our, America's, inheritance is the importance and power of the collective, bonding across distances for a greater good.

I note this inheritance with hope that the history of enslaved people, across hundreds of miles of islands coming together to bring forth steadfast, free, community-centric descendants can be models of resisting, overcoming, striving, and thriving—collectively.

Adult education (AE) is in a moment where we need to use the lessons of this inheritance; we need the power of the collective more than ever. In my nearly 20 years as an adult educator and leader, the changes to outcomes, testing, learner needs, teacher expectations, etc., has been disorienting, energizing, tiring, hopeful, and now we seem to be at disheartening, traumatizing, and wading into uncharted waters of questioning our field's mere existence! Yet, I welcome you to take a breath, acknowledge that our work, learners, and selves are worthy, and remember that you are not alone. It will be in our ability to reach across our "islands" to our colleagues, collaborators, and confidants and share not just our fears but our resources, research, and remedies to continue to build our collective knowledge and fortify ourselves to move towards a thriving AE field.

In an era of lower federal investment in AE, many programs are operating in isolation, competing for resources, and duplicating efforts. This fragmentation limits our collective impact and leaves programs vulnerable. However, by intentionally breaking down silos and embracing collective power, AE leaders can unlock new avenues to build resource hubs, conduct collective research, and secure collaborative funding. Using this

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collective framing, I connected with several leaders in our field to discuss their experiences with the power of the collective. Their experiences demonstrated that when adult educators band together, we innovate and thrive.

Robust Resource Hubs

As a field, we should ensure that every AE program, no matter its size or budget, has access to high-quality, relevant resources. While platforms like LINCS (lincs.ed.gov) and OER Commons (oercommons.org) show promise, they can be overwhelming, and LINCS has recently seen deletions of needed resources. To combat this scarcity and fragmentation, we must actively consolidate our best practices, curricula, and professional development materials. A robust hub, curated by multiple programs and educators, would significantly reduce the drain on educators' time and energy.

As stated by an administrator in Patterson and Harrison (2023), "I often wish there were a location of high-quality, research-based PD that I could have all staff members complete during onboarding and throughout their tenure" (p. 10). Examples of effective collective resource sharing include the Open Door Collective in Minnesota, Literacy Works in Illinois, Our Helpers in Ohio, and VALRC of VCU in Virginia. VALRC leaders Kate Rolander and Katherine Hansen have heard throughout Virginia a deep need for shared, vetted resources, and meaningful teaching and program practices. VALRC has intentionally embraced its role as a hub for Virginia programs. This is about elevating the entire field. If every instructor, regardless of program size, could tap into a rich library of specialized content—from RLA to STEM to MLL to ASE instruction—our collective instructional strength would skyrocket.

VALRC's experience highlights how a state-focused hub can, as Katie put it, "amplify what is really needed and what is helpful" by acting as a "bridge to standardize good work" (K. Rolander, personal communication, April, 2025). VALRC focuses on identifying and sharing what is *already working* at the local level, not mandates. Fostering a community of practice, providing structure and guidance for sharing field-based successes. The collective entity serves as a conduit for information, a safe space to "ask critical questions of the field that individual programs might hesitate to ask their funders directly" (K. Hansen & K. Rolander, personal communication, April, 2025). Within collective resource sharing technology democratizes access; as noted by VALRC, online platforms enable broader and quicker responses to the community, while ensuring quality training, independent of program budgets based on a shared AE community commitment.

Action: Creating Shared Language of Practice

- **Form Collaboratives:** Establish networks of programs, regionally- or learner-focused, committed to sharing.
- **Prioritize Practitioner-Led Content:** Disseminate successful program practices.
- **Leverage Accessible Technology:** Leverage accessible online platforms for resources, including interactive modules and virtual learning communities.
- **Champion Contributions:** Celebrate those who foster a culture of shared ownership.
- **Advocate for Funding:** Seek specific grants and state support for creating and maintaining resource hubs.

Collective Research

The Gullah people advanced farming and fishing by combining skills, recognizing collective experience surpassed individual efforts. Similarly, adult educators should leverage shared realities to push AE forward. Research is our compass, but in a field often operating in isolation, our compass has had a limited view. Collective research expands that view, pooling our insights, data, and questions to show a comprehensive landscape.

The necessity of collective research is illustrated by initiatives that respond to urgent field-wide needs. In 2023, professional development (PD) research by Elevation Educational Consulting Group and Research Allies for Lifelong Learning showed that collaborative field-wide studies produce more comprehensive data than program or state-level efforts, better guiding future PD to meet industry needs. This kind of collective data illuminates systemic issues that individual programs often experience in isolation, providing the evidence needed to advocate for change. When considering collective research of teacher practices, Teddy Edouard of Coaching for Better Learning,

notes, "Our team uses a collaborative book-building framework, which harnesses the collective expertise of multiple educators, leveraging evidence-based practices... Furthermore, specific collective members are responsible for ensuring the requisite depth of knowledge...to prioritize student practice, learning and reflection..." (T. Edouard, personal communication, May, 2025)

The research collective, Evidence-Based Adult Education System (E-BAES), demonstrates the power of the collective. E-BAES brings together national researchers with the aim to strengthen the field through a collective scientific and evidence-driven approach to AE. The power of collective research is highlighted by Rutgers and E-BAES researcher, Alisa Belzer, who spoke to the critical value of regional researchers looking at AE's response to COVID-19. To have a national view, regional researchers with specific ties to AE were needed to find collective insights readily available, many of which were included in the "COVID-19 Rapid Response Report From The Field" (A. Belzer, personal communication, May, 2025). This document demonstrated the value of quickly gathering collective insights during such an unprecedented time, allowing the field to adapt and respond more effectively. Margaret Patterson of Research Allies for Lifelong Learning, an E-BAES leader and researcher for the COVID-19 study, noted "that readers appreciated knowing what was going on around the country and that they were not alone in their efforts to keep adult foundational education (AFE[1]) going" (M. Patterson, personal communication, June, 2025). Importantly, collective research helps us understand the impact of our work on diverse populations, Margret Patterson emphasized this point in saying that "Researching an AFE topic collectively not only expands the reach of AFE research in an era drenched with political ill will and limited research funding but also gathers multiple rich perspectives...to ensure the AFE topic is covered as broadly and incisively as possible."

In a time where our immigrant and LGBTQIA+ students and colleagues face increased targeting, collective research can specifically uplift their unique offerings and attributes. As Ethan Trinh put it, "AE needs to be learning from refugee communities. Immigrants are giving us new knowledge... but if we stay in a bubble we cannot respect, listen, and understand.... This can only happen within communities" (E. Trinh, personal communication, May, 2025). Trinh et al.'s (2024) *Multilingual Leadership in TESOL*, with so much wisdom, would not exist without three multilingual, multicultural educators bringing together national and international authors, to collectively share about multilingual leadership. Initiatives like E-BAES and books like *Multilingual Leadership in TESOL* underscore that collective research strengthens our entire system, allowing us to build more evidence for improved outcomes across the board.

Action: Harvesting Collective Wisdom

- **Establish Research Networks:** Connect with colleagues with similar program models, learner demographics, or research questions.
- **Prioritize Shared Research:** Identify 2–3 critical questions for collective benefit.
- **Leverage Existing Data:** Ethically pool and analyze de-identified program data.
- **Seek Academic Partnerships:** Collaborate with universities for expertise and funding access.

Investing in the Collective

In a landscape where federal investment oscillates and competition for scarce resources intensifies, acting in isolation is a recipe for exhaustion and limited impact. Collaborative funding demonstrates a unified vision, a broader reach, and a more efficient use of resources that appeals to funders seeking systemic, sustainable change.

Funders are increasingly drawn to initiatives that demonstrate collective impact, scalability, and a commitment to shared learning across programs. There is much to gain for a collective of AE providers—perhaps a regional network focused on digital literacy skills, or a statewide alliance dedicated to supporting immigrant learners—applying for a grant together. Such a proposal doesn't just represent one program; it represents a comprehensive, coordinated effort, showcasing how a single investment can yield widespread, synergistic benefits across multiple communities. This unified

1 Adult Foundational Education (AFE) shares a similar meaning with Adult Education (AE). AFE is utilized both directly as a quote and as a descriptive term, depending on individual preference.

approach strengthens our case for investment, making us more attractive to philanthropic foundations and even different tiers of government funding.

While braiding of funding and collaborating with workforce or community organizations has been both mandated and shown promise, this idea asks AE programs to partner. This might include programs acknowledging strengths and weaknesses, maybe that other school does better with younger or lower literacy students, there comes a point when outcomes must outweigh egos and make way for innovation. United programs can demonstrate how combined efforts are vital to the national economy and social fabric, reinforcing AE's worth and validity in a way that individual programs often cannot. This collective advocacy can push for more balanced funding streams that recognize the full breadth of adult learner needs, rather than solely focusing on workforce outcomes. As Literacy Works (2022) notes, the AE field's low wages and high turnover are directly linked to funding priorities. By securing collective funding, we can advocate for living wages and full-time positions, ensuring a sustainable and thriving workforce for our field.

Action: Weaving Financial Safety Nets

- **Identify Aligned Funders:** Research funders interested in collaborative, regional, or specific learner population initiatives.
- **Build a Unified Case:** Develop joint grant proposals with shared vision, objectives, and impact plans, highlighting amplified results.
- **Design Scalable Projects:** Propose replicable projects for broader change.
- **Share Grant-Writing Expertise:** Leverage collective skills; experienced writers mentor others for high-quality proposals.

Conclusion

While the collaborative models explored are important and needed, there are possibilities that extend far beyond these areas.

- **Shared Staffing Models:** Programs collectively hiring and sharing specialized staff (e.g., career counselors, digital literacy experts, grant writers) to maximize expertise across a network.
- **Unified Advocacy Campaigns:** State, regional, and national AE organizations consistently coordinating their messaging and lobbying efforts for maximum legislative impact.
- **Mentorship Networks:** Experienced educators and administrators providing formalized support to newer colleagues, slowing the revolving door of professionals that has plagued our field (Literacy Works, 2022).
- **Learner-Led Collective Action:** Empowering our adult learners to form their own networks and advocate for their needs, drawing strength from their shared experiences.

For more innovative ideas consider, "What We Can Do to Build More Relevant, More Effective Adult Foundational Education Systems" (2025) and other writings of AFE advocate Paul Jurmo, who asks us to co-create a future where the transformative power of AE is fully realized. An initiative to watch is The Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network (ALL IN), stemming from The National Plan for Adult Literacy by the Barbara Bush Foundation (2021), which is driving collaborative opportunities with national AE organizations.

The story of the Gullah-Geechee people is not just a testament of survival, but to the creation of a rich and enduring culture out of limited resources and fragmentation. As adult educators, navigating diminishing resources and increasing threats to our most vulnerable learners and colleagues, the inheritance of collective power is a vital tool. As a field, AE has passion, expertise, and an inherent community-centric drive. These are fragments of cultural DNA that defines this field, yet without sustained collective efforts that pull these fragments together through uplifting the voices, skills, needs, and experiences of the many, we will continue to speak in ways that separate rather than bind us, will harvest only enough for the strongest of us to survive, and will cast our nets of knowledge with holes so big that only the most easy to gather will learn, dwindling our bounty of inspired learners as the need for AE continues to grow exponentially. Instead, let us use the power of the collective and channel that into a powerful, unified force, building a tapestry of resilience that will sustain us, our learners, and our mission for generations to come.

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Forum: Creating a Better Future

(*Part 3 of 3*)

Social Justice Teaching in Hard Times: Lessons My Students Have Taught Me

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> . . . I am one more immigrant in this country who faces fear every day because of what is happening lately with the raids . . . this situation affects me personally, since my husband leaves every day to go to work, and the fear that he will not return keeps me thinking all day long: "Will the *migra* go to his work? Will everything be all right?" I am thankful for the two hours I have in our writing class. I can take my mind off my worries and I can express myself freely. For just a few hours, I feel like myself. (*Daily Fear,* anonymous student writer, Chicago, 2008.)
>
> . . . Sometimes it is hard for me to concentrate in class, because of all the things that are going on for my family here, and for my family back home. But I try to come to class every day because it is a good distraction from these problems. Beyond that, it is interesting! You are always asking us if what we are studying is interesting. For me, personally, it is all interesting: grammars, history, sciences, maths [sic]. Especially when it is not about my country. That is too sad. (*from a conversation with GED student, Chicago, 2025)*

It's Always Hard Times for Immigrants and Refugees

For the past 25 years I have worked with adult learners in a range of settings: community writing workshops, university classrooms, immigrant worker institutes, bilingual adult high schools, and, most recently, the GED classroom at a community center (hereafter "the Center").[1] As someone who is committed to the principles and practices of social justice education (Nelson & Witte, 2017), I have been fortunate because each of these settings has actively embraced a social justice approach to the education of adults and to serving oppressed communities more generally. This means that the injustices surrounding our students and the educational spaces we occupy are always front and center. Those injustices are always changing, but they are not new.

Certainly, the policies and practices of the current federal administration are challenging and often terrifying for the adults we work with, particularly immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers. And yet, as the passages I opened with illustrate, these challenges are not unique; they are just the most recent—and the most theatrical—assault by government on immigrant and other oppressed communities this country has experienced in recent years.

At the Center, as soon as the federal administration began threatening aggressive, hostile action towards immigrant communities, our program and organizational leadership were quick to convene informational meetings and to confer with staff about policies and practices that would be implemented to regularly educate and protect both staff and clients. Because we serve a predominantly immigrant community, we recognized our vulnerabilities and prepared for the worst, even as we took measures to maintain a sense of normalcy and routine.

At the same time, we faced the challenge of how to engage in programmatic efforts to support such social justice values as equity and inclusion in a veiled way so as to not draw attention to the organization and potentially put federal funding streams at risk. Over the course of several discussions among administrative and program staff, we concurred that as an organization we would continue to base the practices of our programs on those values, whether or not we explicitly named them as such. This means that we recognize and celebrate the diversity

1 Given current governmental attacks on immigrant-serving organizations, I do not provide the name of the community organization where I teach but simply refer to it as "the Center."

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of our staff and clients; we offer the supports necessary so that staff and clients can participate equally in both delivering and receiving the programs and services the organization offers; and we emphasize the contributions staff and clients make to families, community, and the wider society, never reducing them to their struggles even as we aim to mitigate those struggles. In other words, the Center would simply continue to be the social justice organization it has always been.

Which begs the question: what exactly should those practices be, in these times of hostile, cruel, and chaotic assaults on immigrants and refugees? I propose that, for those of us grounded in principles of social justice education (Adams & Bell, 2016; Ayers, 2004), it is necessary but not sufficient to educate ourselves and our students about this current reality; it is at least as important for us to learn from the adult learners we work with about what they want and need to learn and *how* they want to be learning . . . in these continuously dire times.

In this reflective essay, I share three lessons the students in my GED class have taught me that are relevant to, but also extend beyond, the current national context. These include lessons about the kind of content students prefer to study, lessons about balancing the teaching of students' civil and human rights with a consideration of current realities, and lessons about how to create a learning space that is not only safe but also joyful and supportive. Before embarking on that discussion, however, I want to note that while my narrative focuses on my experiences working primarily with immigrants and refugees, these lessons are applicable to any and all adult learners who occupy marginalized positions in our society.

Whose Stories Do We Teach, Which Versions Do We Learn?

> Why is Black History Month all about slavery and Jim Crow? I already know about the suffering of my people; I want to learn more about all we have achieved! (Comment of an African American GED student during Black History Month)
>
> Some of my family came here as *braceros* [seasonal farm workers], and all we heard about was how they were treated so badly, but how they just put up with it. Like this idea of the weak and humble Mexican. I never knew that they really kept farming going in this country during WWII.... that they were war heroes in a way . . .. (Comment of a GED student of Mexican origin who came to the United States as a teenager)

As some of you may be aware, the revised GED test (as of 2014) not only aligns with national college and career standards; it also focuses heavily on close and critical reading skills. This, it turns out, is a real advantage for social justice-oriented educators like myself, because it means we can introduce a wide range of content into our classrooms as long as we engage students in close reading tasks that foster nuanced and critical understanding of texts and images, including a consideration of underlying assumptions and power dynamics inherent in or communicated through the text. This means it is even possible to prepare students for the GED test while raising critical questions about the history and content of the GED test itself.

Even as we emphasize critical reading skills, it is all too easy for social justice educators to believe that, as advocates for our students, we should focus primarily on readings that explore the systemic injustices our students and their communities have faced or currently face (Cochran-Smith, 2009). However, as adult learners from a wide range of backgrounds have taught me, having students read about the experiences of oppression and suffering they, their communities, and their ancestors have faced can be reductive and demoralizing if it is not balanced with readings about their people's strengths and achievements. This is as true for teaching about African American history during Black History Month as it is for teaching about the history of immigrant farm labor, or the current wave of brutalities faced by immigrants and refugees in our classrooms. In my own teaching, it was because of the lessons I learned from the African American student who longed to learn more about her people's brilliance and resilience that I later found readings during a unit on migrants and migrations in the 20th century United States on the contributions of migrant workers to the country's economic and cultural development.

It perhaps goes without saying that one of the most meaningful ways to engage with students in their own histories and current stories is through reading and writing personal narrative. Giving students the opportunity to see themselves reflected in what they read is validating; giving students the opportunity to share their experiences with each other is humanizing. Drawing from my experiences teaching community writing workshops over the past 25 years, when I

incorporate writing into GED class, I provide writing prompts that are fairly open-ended so that students have the freedom to describe and reflect on their realities as they choose—always with the possibility of emphasizing their strengths and successes, their dreams and determination, and not just their pain and suffering, as significant as that certainly is. Here are a few writing prompts that students have found to be meaningful, while also building a strong sense of community as students shared their writings with each other:

- Something I would like you to know about me.
- My journey to this country OR My journey to GED class.
- How I overcame a challenge in my life.
- A time I stood up for myself or for someone else.
- My goals for this class OR My goals for my future.

These kinds of writing prompts also allow students to decide how they want to engage with the hardships they face. Much like readings that highlight struggles and victories in the face of injustices, these prompts allow students to write about their lives in a way that redeems them as subjects of their experiences.

If I Stand Up for My Rights, Will I Get Deported?

Since the current federal administration began deploying ICE officers to carry out raids in immigrant communities, teaching staff at the Center have been sharing information about federal, state, and local policies, including "Know Your Rights" brochures prepared by immigrant advocacy organizations, that we can share with our students. In my classroom, we explore the notion of rights at the beginning of each 10-week session as we study the principles of the U.S. Constitution, the rights and responsibilities of citizens and residents, and the centrality of those rights and responsibilities to a democracy—a topic that, it turns out, appears regularly in the GED social studies test! We then create our classroom's "Bill of Rights and Responsibilities." We also study civil rights, worker rights, and human rights, in the process learning about those individuals, groups, and movements that have fought for and defended people's rights in this country *and* in students' countries-of-origin. Because many students in my class are not only informed about, but have themselves participated in such struggles in their home countries, giving students the opportunity to read, write, and talk about these topics[1] helps to create a classroom environment in which we are all teacher and learners—a core principle of social justice education. (Hurtig & Adams, 2010; Freire, 2005).

The students I teach often come from countries where civilians' rights are *not* protected; therefore, many students approach the study of civil rights and worker rights with a critical skepticism that they apply to the current situation in the United States. On the one hand, students know that the Center has put in place measures to protect staff and clients, and each of our classrooms is labeled as a "private space." On the other hand, most students are aware of instances in which individuals who asserted their rights have nonetheless been detained by ICE agents. They have thus asked whether, indeed, they are protected by their "First Amendment rights"—whether it is indeed safe to assert one's rights if approached by an officer or an ICE official. Because I teach a class that is hybrid (in-person and online), some students have shifted to online participation, even though they would rather learn in person. These students know that we support them, and that we will always encourage them to put their safety and well-being first. Indeed, one of the "rights" the students wrote into their GED Class Bill of Rights and Responsibilities is "to put their health and well-being and that of their families first."

One of the premises of a democratic and socially just classroom is not simply that the teacher takes responsibility to ensure the curriculum is relevant (that, after all, is a basic principle of adult learning theories), but that they explicitly ask students what they would like to study. On a few occasions I have been approached by students who have found discussion of the current dynamics facing immigrants and refugees to be very stressful, even triggering past trauma. Other students would like the material we study to provide them with a critical and historical understanding of current events. And then there are those learners who are, as one put it, "neutral," finding anything and everything

1 A great resource for teaching more advanced adult learners about social justice issues across subject areas in the online magazine The Change Agent.

interesting. How to navigate these diverging dispositions as we explore injustices while practicing justice is a form of "differentiating instruction" rarely discussed in professional development forums, and a practice I continue to negotiate.

Beyond a Safe Space: Classrooms as Spaces of Empathy and Joy

> I would like to turn on my Zoom video, Teacher, but my computer isn't working right now. (Feedback from a student who participates in class on Zoom.)
>
> Yes, I am here in class, Teacher. I am just too tired to participate more because I am working the night shift now. (Feedback from a student who participates in class on Zoom.)
>
> I am sorry I am leaving my cellphone on, Teacher, but I have family emergencies back home. (Comment from a student after their cell phone rang during class.)

Like so many organizations that provide ESL, ABE, and HSE classes to adults, the Center's educational program is expected to meet certain benchmarks in order to maintain its state and federal funding. As a result, even in the most supportive of environments, there is an undercurrent of standardized achievement pressure that can seep into instructional practices. At the same time, we all want the adult learners we work with to accomplish their learning goals, and sometimes we can confuse encouragement with pressure. And yet, we all recognize that adult learners, even in the best of times, have complicated lives filled with multiple responsibilities and challenges that can disrupt their routines and impede their learning. Under current circumstances, these challenges are tremendous.

Over my years of working with adult learners, my tendency has been towards flexibility and accommodation in matters of attendance, participation, cell phone use, and the like. It was while writing this essay that I realized how, ironically, I had let the official culture of the current federal administration of disciplining and punishing that has become so pervasive, so incessant, to seep into my own instructional practice. Rather than push back against that inhumanity, I had begun to internalize a disciplinary sensibility, focusing my attention on students' punctuality, Zoom habits, cellphone use. . . precisely at a time in their lives when the classroom needed to be a space of acceptance, support, appreciation, and humanization. None of my students complained about this shift in my disposition; I wish they had! Instead, many of them have gently reminded me of the incessant pressures they are under, of the uncertainties of their lives and trajectories, and of how hard they work, day in and day out, just to survive another day.

It took my writing this essay—and my conversations with colleagues in the process—to recognize how the power of dominant discourses, imagery, and practices had begun to seep into my consciousness—even though I actively oppose everything those practices stand for. Writing this essay has reminded me of my responsibility, as an adult educator committed to social justice, of the importance of engaging in regular self-reflection (Thompson & Thompson, 2023), over and against the pervasive forces of discipline, denigration, and dehumanization—to maintain our "moral compass"[2] as teachers/learners. It is the least we can do.

2 Thanks to my colleague, May Dartez, for reminding me that, as she put it in a conversation about the current political regime, "they can take away everything, but they can never take away our moral compass."

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Research Digest

Learning and Teaching Behind Bars

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Education in prison[1] has a long history. From the early days of the institution in the late 1700s, it has evolved from moral education and spiritual guidance to diverse approaches and practices today. As the modern prison spread, so did the numbers it housed. Currently, there are more than 11 million people in penal institutions worldwide (Fair & Walmsley, 2024). While mass incarceration raises profound ethical questions, in the educational context, the unique environment of the prison creates a range of challenges. This research digest begins with considering how the objectives of the early iteration of the prison allowed for a conception of education to meet these aims. It examines how educators have tried to carve out the space for pedagogy as the prison expanded, policy developed, and the context in which education operated changed. It provides an overview of some recent developments in education behind bars, and concludes that a holistic approach to education is essential in order to meet the needs of the learner group.

The Evolution of Education in Prison

Early forms of incarceration held prisoners in congregate settings. These were considered schools for vice where young and first-time prisoners could be trained in unlawful activity by more seasoned criminals. To avoid this, it was argued that prisoners should be housed separately in cells. The solution was the penitentiary, a place of repentance and solitude. In the early days of the penitentiary, education of prisoners was a moral undertaking. Educators were mainly inspired by religious faith and motivated by charitable and philanthropic endeavours. They believed that participating in criminal activity was not only breaking the law but was also committing a sin. Therefore, moral education was necessary to divert prisoners from their criminal activity. For some, prison as an instrument of punishment was the ultimate educational technique. Opened in 1829, the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia was designed with individual cells, as "[t]otal solitude before God was supposed to effect a conversion of the criminal's moral sensibilities" (Schmid, 2003, p. 554).

The earliest provision of education in prison in North America was through the Sabbath Schools. Chaplains attended on Sundays to read the Bible through the cell door. Being the only reading material allowed, the Bible served "as a spelling book and grammar, in addition to its religious purpose" (Gehring & Rennie, 2008, p. 176). Elizabeth Fry (1780–1845), a middle-class and well-connected English Quaker began organizing educational activities at London's Newgate Prison in 1817. These included scripture readings to prisoners, and such were their popularity, tickets were issued to visitors to observe (Cooper, 1981). James Patrick Organ (1825–1869), teacher and Inspector of Discharged Convicts in Ireland pioneered a humanistic approach to education. He believed that his teaching would help prisoners in the "development of their minds, and to give them matter for thought," and "to arrive at the mind, by exciting the curiosity; to arrive at the heart, by showing the men that we all feel a desire in common to receive those who have erred from the path of rectitude." In keeping with many of the policymakers and educationalists in the Western World at the time, Organ thought that religion was an "all-powerful agent" and "should form the basis of reformation" (Organ, as cited in McNally, 2019, pp. 49–50).

1 For the purposes of this article, prison is used as a generic term for prisons, jails, and correctional institutions.

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Policy and Pedagogy

As the prison began to be used more widely, its failings became apparent. Reform movements emerged, which encouraged and nurtured the provision of education (Muth, 2008). By the early 21st century, practically every jurisdiction in the world had integrated some form of education into its prisons. Policy statements and new approaches followed. International and regional declarations and conventions in the 20th and 21st centuries dealt specifically with education for prisoners, or pledged to provide universal education for all. The 2016 iteration of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (originally adopted in 1955 and now referred to as the Nelson Mandela Rules) state that:

> Provision shall be made for the further education of all prisoners capable of profiting thereby, including religious instruction in the countries where this is possible. The education of illiterate prisoners and of young prisoners shall be compulsory and special attention shall be paid to it by the prison administration.
>
> So far as practicable, the education of prisoners shall be integrated with the educational system of the country so that after their release they may continue their education without difficulty.
>
> Recreational and cultural activities shall be provided in all prisons for the benefit of the mental and physical health of prisoners. (Rules 104-5)

Various regional declarations such as the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man (1948), the African Union's Charter on Human and People's Rights (1981) and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (2013) pledge to provide education for all. The transnational organization to address education in prison most comprehensively is the 46-member Council of Europe. Going further than the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules, their policy document *Education in Prison* (1990) promotes a holistic approach to education:

> All prisoners shall have access to education, which is envisaged as consisting of classroom subjects, vocational education, creative and cultural activities, physical education and sports, social education and library facilities.
>
> Education for prisoners should be like the education provided for similar age-groups in the outside world, and the range of learning opportunities for prisoners should be as wide as possible. (Council of Europe, 1990, p.4)

These policies aim for a wide and comprehensive program of education. However, recent research has identified a divergence between the commitments professed in international and regional declarations and policy conventions, and the ways in which these obligations have (or have not) translated into the provision of education in prison (Behan, 2021). With a few notable exceptions, the recommendations and minimum standards have not been fully embraced by state, provincial, or national policy makers, which in turn can impact negatively on local practice. This can be due to a lack of resources, challenges in overcoming the rules and regulations governing penal institutions, absence of political commitment, and debates about what constitutes education.

Place, People and Politics

As with all forms of pedagogy, education in prison is not a neutral activity that is independent of the context in which it operates. The type of education offered is influenced by historical, social, political, economic and cultural contexts. Teaching and learning behind bars encounters many of the issues associated with education outside. However, being located in a coercive environment exacerbates the challenges learners and educators face in engaging in pedagogy. First and foremost is the nature of prison itself, with rules, regulations and its disciplinary function, which can work to complicate, and at times hinder, the provision of education in prison.

As with all educational practice, educators in prison take into consideration the characteristics of their student population. Many have specific needs due to their educational history, life course and personal issues. It is widely recognized that throughout the world certain demographics are over-represented in prisons. A disproportionate number of people from working class areas, ethnic minorities, indigenous populations and marginalized communities are arrested for wrong doing, prosecuted, tried and subsequently imprisoned (Behan, 2018). Further, many of those who end up within the criminal justice system have significantly lower levels of traditional educational attainment in the form of accredited examinations. Many prisoners left school early, or had their learning disrupted, and continue to have difficulties engaging in a literate (both written and digital) world.

There are a number of issues that need consideration in order to meet the needs of students in prison. A comprehensive analysis is not possible due to the

limitations of space, so what follows are some of the more recent developments.

The levels of literacy (both written and numerical) among prisoners have been a cause for concern for a long time in the United States and internationally, with diverse strategies devised to meet the needs of students (Harlow, 2003; Muth, 2007). While these should not be neglected, digital literacy is perhaps one of the most challenging issues facing educators and learners today. Restricted access to the internet is the norm in most prisons around the world and has become a significant impediment to learning and teaching behind bars. Reisdorf and Jewkes (2016) concluded that prisoners constitute "one of the most impoverished groups in the digital age" (p.771). Digital skills are not only vital in education, but they are also an essential part of participation in modern society. Prisoners are at the sharp end of the digital divide, with students having little or no internet access, limited computer hardware, and restricted access to academic library materials (Dent, 2022). Farley and Hopkins (2017) have studied incarcerated students' attempts to complete post-secondary distance courses without internet access. They highlight what they see as the contrast between offering prisoners educational opportunities while denying them the materials, resources and access that they need in order to participate fully. This dichotomy, Farley and Hopkins (2017) argue, "encourages rehabilitation through education, while effectively cutting prisoners off from the wider digital world" (p. 391). While prisons by their nature restrict freedom of movement, prisoners who want to fully embrace educational opportunities are curtailed by lack of independent access to online resources that are an essential part of the modern learning process.

Along with the acute need to develop strategies to provide adult basic education to many people who end up in prison, at the other end of the learning continuum there has been a burgeoning of interest in the provision of university education. In the United States with the availability, suspension and reintroduction of Pell Grants for students in prison (Turner, 2023), many universities took the initiative while they were not available and established Inside-Out programs. Initiated in 1997, these programs bring college students and incarcerated learners together for semester-long modules. Inside-Out now has more than 1,500 trained instructors in the United States and worldwide, with prison and higher education institution collaboration already creating opportunities for more than 65,000 inside and outside learners (Inside-Out Center, 2025). The optimism that college education inspires should not be underestimated. It was summed up by a student in the Emerson Prison Initiative—a partnership between Emerson College in Boston and the Massachusetts Department of Corrections:

> A prison sentence can feel like walking down a tunnel. Life is constricted, and for many, the light at the end appears to be out of reach. At the very least, a college education provides light within that tunnel, a sense of direction. For me, college has made the tunnel into a hallway, lined with the doors of opportunities that college presents. (Alexander X. as cited in Gellman, 2022, p.185)

In 2015 similar programs were introduced in the United Kingdom and elsewhere under the banner of the Learning Together initiative. They bring learners in prison and probation settings together with students in higher education institutions. The objective of studying together is to learn with, and from each other, through dialogue and the sharing of experience (Ludlow et al., 2019). These collaborative programs have an added element. They challenge perceptions among different categories of students and promote engagement and dialogue between inside and outside learners.

Another challenge facing the provision of education in prison is on the political front. Some politicians and policymakers oppose the provision of holistic education to prisoners for monetary and political reasons. Others on ideological grounds. In some jurisdictions education provision can focus on training and skills-based subjects in the hope of preparing prisoners for employment after they are released. This perspective, in essence, views education in prison, not as a right, but as a means to an end. Training is reframed as education. However, this approach leads to a narrower skills-focussed curriculum, with the success or otherwise determined by measures such as the rate of job placement, and level of recidivism among students. It neglects or downplays the structural impediments to achieving these objectives and fails to appreciate the impact of imprisonment on a student's life chances, regardless of the level of education achieved in prison. Gehring and Rennie (2008) argue that "correctional educators and others should be discouraged from using recidivism as a measure of program success" and remind practitioners that "[i]nstead of focussing on recidivism measures, correctional educators should define

student-orientated effectiveness measures. If we do not do this, someone else will continue to write the rules" (pp.170-171). If educators do not write the rules, others might redefine education to suit political and economic agendas and subsequently undermine the provision of a holistic program of education in prison.

Conclusion

With so many people imprisoned worldwide, the impact of incarceration ripples far beyond prison walls. While the rates of imprisonment vary widely between countries and across jurisdictions, the education of prisoners needs to be analysed in wider contexts than what goes on in the classroom. This includes examining who is imprisoned, the conditions of confinement for students, and how penal policies impact on the provision of education. Essentially, we need to consider the role of punishment and the use of prison in modern society. Further, we need to examine the type of education that is offered to students in prison.

Education is about liberation, which in essence is contrary to the objectives of confinement. In punitive, coercive regimes that dominate in the modern prison, educators remain conscious of the damage that prison does to people. Education in prison can lessen some of that damage, and as outlined by the student from the Emerson Prison Initiative there are positive examples of learners who have successfully overcome obstacles to eke out the space for pedagogy. Teaching and learning in prison will always be a challenge. However, as with teaching outside, educators focus on the positives, endeavour to build communities of learning, and strive to enable inclusion in the hope of a better future for their students.

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Book Review

Review of *Writing Instruction for Success in College and in the Workplace*

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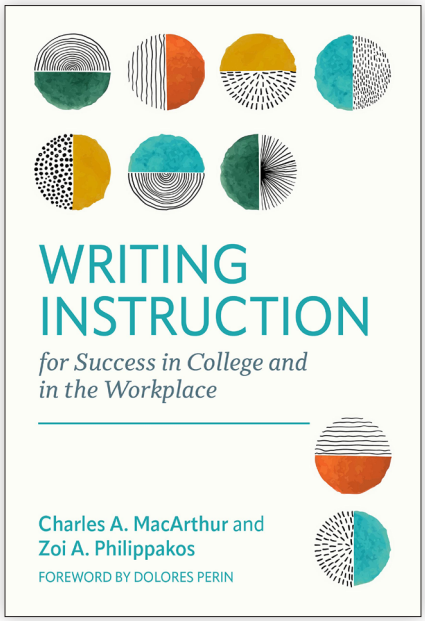
In *Writing Instruction for Success in College and in the Workplace*, Charles A. MacArthur and Zoi A. Philippakos present a research-based resource aimed at addressing the challenges of writing instruction for those who need help with writing. The book introduces the Supporting Strategic Writers (SSW) curriculum, a framework designed to bridge academic and professional writing demands by equipping educators with evidence-based strategies. By combining theory with practical tools, the book contributes meaningfully to adult literacy and education.



The SSW curriculum provides a structured, evidence-based approach to teaching writing. Grounded in research that demonstrates success across skill levels, it emphasizes key skills such as planning, drafting, revising, and integrating sources. Strategy instruction forms the core of the curriculum, enabling students to improve their motivation, critical thinking, and overall writing proficiency. The authors enhance the curriculum's practical value by integrating resources such as visual-graphic organizers, rubrics, and instructional sequences, ensuring its relevance in various settings. This dual emphasis on theory and practice empowers educators to deliver effective instruction while fostering student confidence and skill development.

The book's logical and accessible structure further supports its utility for educators. Divided into three well-defined sections, the book begins by introducing the SSW curriculum, outlining its research foundation and addressing literacy challenges. The second section provides step-by-step strategies for teaching writing, progressing from simple essay tasks to assignments requiring the integration of multiple sources. The final section explores the curriculum's adaptability, offering solutions for various genres and challenges.

A standout feature of the book is its emphasis on modeling the think-aloud process, which is thoroughly detailed in each chapter. This technique allows educators to verbalize their thought patterns while planning, evaluating, and revising writing tasks, providing students with a clear example of the cognitive and metacognitive strategies involved. Modeling these practices helps students internalize effective approaches to writing, fostering independence and critical thinking. This focus on modeling not only enhances student comprehension but also builds educators' confidence in teaching these strategies effectively. The accessible and adaptable tools provided further support for instructors in scaffolding the writing process, ensuring that students receive structured, hands-on guidance at every stage.

MacArthur, C. A., & Philippakos, Z. A. (2023). *Writing Instruction for Success in College and in the Workplace. Teachers College Press.* 240 pages. $34.95 (paperback). ISBN: 9780807768808

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Although this book was written for educators in community colleges and 4-year institutions, it is equally valuable for adult literacy instructors. The tools, such as brainstorming charts and graphic organizers, can help students transition from writing complete sentences to preparing essays for high school equivalency exams, including specific high school equivalency writing prompts. Students preparing for answering a prompt on a high-school equivalency assessment would benefit greatly from these tools as they tackle challenges like organizing thoughts, forming clear arguments, and using evidence effectively within time constraints. For example, crafting persuasive or expository essays requires learners to structure ideas coherently, a skill brainstorming charts can refine. Graphic organizers further support this process by helping students logically arrange their essays and focus on key points. These strategies not only build confidence but also lay a strong foundation for tackling diverse writing tasks in both academic and workplace contexts.

The book's practicality is enhanced by its candid acknowledgment of the challenges inherent in teaching writing. MacArthur and Philippakos identify common obstacles, such as students skipping the planning phase or instructors struggling to effectively implement the think-aloud process. To address these, the authors offer actionable solutions, including explaining the importance of strategies rather than just modeling them, selecting topics that engage students, and modeling writing that aligns with students' expected skill levels. They also highlight the importance of addressing technology-related barriers by teaching basic skills like creating, naming, and saving documents as part of the writing process. Openly addressing these hurdles and providing realistic solutions for classroom practice equips educators with a practical roadmap for successful implementation.

It is commendable that the authors constructed a curriculum that teaches the necessary skills and provides adaptable tools for workplace writing; however, the book could have been further enhanced by including specific examples of vocational applications, such as healthcare documentation or business reports, to make it even more relevant to adult literacy contexts. These examples would have helped instructors better connect workplace writing tasks to the real-world needs of adult learners, strengthening the curriculum's practicality for career-focused education. For instance, career pathway instructors could leverage these tools to guide students through specific tasks, such as writing project proposals, documenting technical processes, or preparing instructional guides tailored to workplace scenarios. Specifically, brainstorming worksheets could help students document technical steps in a process, while graphic organizers could be used to outline the structure of a workplace proposal or instructional guide. These strategies ensure students are equipped to meet both academic and professional demands effectively. By embedding these strategies into structured, multi-step assignments that include planning, drafting, and revising, educators can effectively scaffold learning and build students' confidence in tackling a variety of writing challenges.

Impressively, the book significantly contributes to the field of adult literacy and education by demonstrating how research can be effectively integrated into professional development initiatives. It provides detailed guidance for embedding evidence-based strategies into curricula, emphasizing the importance of equipping educators with practical tools for real classrooms. The authors' fieldwork with instructors illustrates how these strategies can be scaled effectively, addressing both individual classroom needs and broader institutional contexts. This focus on fostering educator growth alongside student achievement ensures a systemic and sustainable impact, extending beyond the immediate classroom environment. As a result, the book offers a valuable resource for instructors across community colleges, 4-year institutions, and diverse adult literacy settings.

In summary, *Writing Instruction for Success in College and in the Workplace* is a highly effective resource that delivers on its promises. It equips educators with the tools and strategies needed to improve writing outcomes while addressing the practical challenges of implementation. By bridging academic and professional writing, the book ensures that students are prepared for the demands of both contexts. Its integration of research-based strategies, practical tools, and thoughtful insights makes it an indispensable guide for anyone involved in writing instruction.

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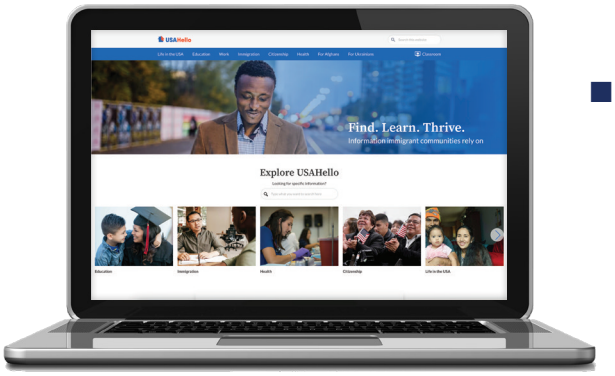
Resource Review

USAHello

Susan Finn Miller



https://usahello.org/

USAHello is a website that offers many relevant resources that practitioners in adult education programs can learn from and share with the adult learners they serve. As the header on the site proclaims, the website is "an online center for information and education for refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and welcoming communities." This well-designed, comprehensive website is organized in six sections entitled Life in the USA, Education, Work, Immigration, Citizenship, and Health. There are separate sections specifically for individuals from Afghanistan and Ukraine. Information about current and expected changes to immigration policies has been added recently and is regularly updated.

Life in the USA

Immigrants and refugees in the United States often seek out the kinds of information featured on the USAHello site. In fact, much of what is featured in the Life in the USA section would make valuable topics in an adult ESOL class. Users will find short readings related to various aspects of daily life in the United States. For instance, the section focused on money offers information about banking, budgeting and paying taxes. The daily life section provides helpful advice regarding shopping, housing, and public transportation. This section also features guidance on getting a driver's license and some helpful tips for driving in the United States. Information about services for individuals with disabilities is also available. Relevant details about American laws, including laws related to housing, immigration, driving, and individual civil rights among others can be found here, too. Anyone who may need to find an attorney can use the search tool provided on the site.

Work

In the webpages on Work, readers can find many valuable resources for those who have permission to work in the United States. Many new arrivals need to find a job right away. The site connects users to a wide range of job-related resources, including details for how to apply for jobs and prepare for interviews. Users who are interested in career exploration will find links to useful resources including government websites such as career one-stops and the O*NET career interest survey. Adult education teachers may even want to have adult learners complete the O*NET survey as a worthwhile classroom

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activity. There is even a section here on becoming an entrepreneur by starting a business.

Education

It is common for immigrant parents to have questions about education for their children as well as for themselves. Many adults want to know where they can study English or how to prepare for U.S. citizenship. Some individuals are interested in obtaining a high school equivalency diploma. Others want to enroll in career training programs or college classes. Anyone interested can find up-to-date information on these inquiries, including the ability to search for adult education programs and career training opportunities in users' local areas. In addition to these search features, the site also lists a number of free online resources for studying English independently.

Many users will find the classroom section of USAHello valuable. The site features two freely available online courses, one designed to support individuals who want to study for a high school equivalency diploma and another designed to prepare individuals for U.S. citizenship. The self-paced high school equivalency course prepares a student in the four required subject areas: math, social studies, language arts and science. Interested students can also take a GED® practice test on the site to determine their readiness for the official test. Individuals who are interested in becoming U.S. citizens will find an online course designed to prepare them for the U.S. citizenship experience. The citizenship course is also self-paced and free. All the steps to prepare for U.S. citizenship are clearly spelled out on the site.

Health

Not surprisingly, it is common for newcomers to have a lot of questions about health care in the United States. The USAHello site explains, in clear, easy to understand English, how to find a doctor, make an appointment, and prepare for a medical appointment. Information about how to request an interpreter if needed during a visit is also provided. In addition, the site discusses health insurance and provides details about programs individuals may be eligible for, e.g., the Affordable Care Act and Children's Health Insurance Program. The site also features a section related to mental health care, which addresses sensitive topics such as culture shock, trauma, and depression. There is a convenient search feature to locate health care providers and clinics in local areas.

Immigration

The immigration section explains immigration rights and processes related to U.S. visas and asylum as well as the steps for obtaining a green card. One can find updates here related to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. This section also offers guidance on ways to legally prepare for immigration enforcement in the event that is necessary. The downloadable immigration guide is chock full of helpful information for adult education practitioners and adult immigrants.

Citizenship

The Citizenship section of the site discusses the responsibilities and the benefits of becoming a U.S. citizen. This section includes a number of short, inspirational videos featuring the stories of newly naturalized U.S. citizens. Adult education teachers might consider sharing one or more of these videos as part of a citizenship class.

Final Thoughts

USAHello is a beautifully designed and easy to navigate website. The language on the site is written in accessible English; however, the entire website has been translated into 23 languages enabling visitors to read in their language of choice. USAHello is a one-stop (online) shop enabling adult educators to locate helpful information on the many topics of interest to the immigrants and refugees who attend their programs. Adult education practitioners can share this great resource with learners in their programs, and teachers may even opt to include information from the site as part of instruction. The freely available online courses would surely be of interest to many adult learners. There is also a handy app called FindHello that was developed in collaboration with the United Nations.

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Technology and Adult Learning

Empowering Educators, Transforming Classrooms: MagicSchool AI in Adult Learning

Vi Hawes, VH Ed Tech Consulting, LLC & Pima Community College

MagicSchool AI has emerged as a transformative force in education, offering a comprehensive suite of AI-powered tools that are reshaping how educators teach and students learn. This column explores MagicSchool AI's capabilities, applications, and implications specifically for adult education contexts, examining both its potential benefits and challenges.

What is MagicSchool AI?

MagicSchool AI is a leading generative AI platform designed for educators, schools, and students. Developed by educators for educators, the platform aims to help teachers reclaim valuable time, combat burnout, and elevate the art of teaching through AI-powered assistance. Currently used in nearly every U.S. school district and across 160 countries, MagicSchool AI provides a suite of over 80 AI-powered tools that assist with tasks ranging from lesson planning and assessment creation to individualized education plans and communication with students and families (MagicSchool, n.d.).

The platform distinguishes itself through its education-specific focus, having earned recognition for its privacy practices with a 93% privacy rating from Common Sense Privacy. MagicSchool AI operates as both a web-based platform and a Chrome extension, allowing educators to access its tools seamlessly within their existing digital workflows. Beyond supporting teachers, the platform has expanded to include MagicSchool for Students, designed to build AI literacy and bring responsible AI experiences directly to learners (MagicSchool, n.d.).

Features

MagicSchool AI offers an extensive array of features designed to streamline educational workflows and enhance teaching effectiveness. At its core, the platform provides over 80 AI teacher tools that generate standards-aligned instructional content within minutes (MagicSchool, n.d.). These tools span the full spectrum of educational needs, organized into categories addressing different aspects of teaching:

Curriculum and Instruction Tools: The platform enables educators to generate standards-aligned lesson plans, create academic content, and develop comprehensive assessments for all subjects and grade levels. Specialized tools like the 5E Model Science Lesson Plan Generator and Choice Board Generator support diverse instructional approaches (Figure 1).

Differentiation and Support Tools: MagicSchool AI offers an Assignment Scaffolder, Accommodation Suggestion Generator, and tools for creating individualized education programs, allowing educators to tailor instruction to diverse learner needs.

Assessment and Feedback Tools: The platform includes rubric creators, assessment generators, and feedback tools that help educators evaluate student work efficiently while providing meaningful feedback (Figure 2).

Communication and Professional Development: Tools for drafting newsletters, parent communications, and recommendation letters streamline administrative tasks.

"Student Rooms" for flexible learning environments: MagicSchool AI's "student rooms" feature is designed to create interactive, flexible learning environments where adult learners can engage with a variety of AI-powered tools at their own pace, including custom chatbots, while educators monitor participation and progress in real time

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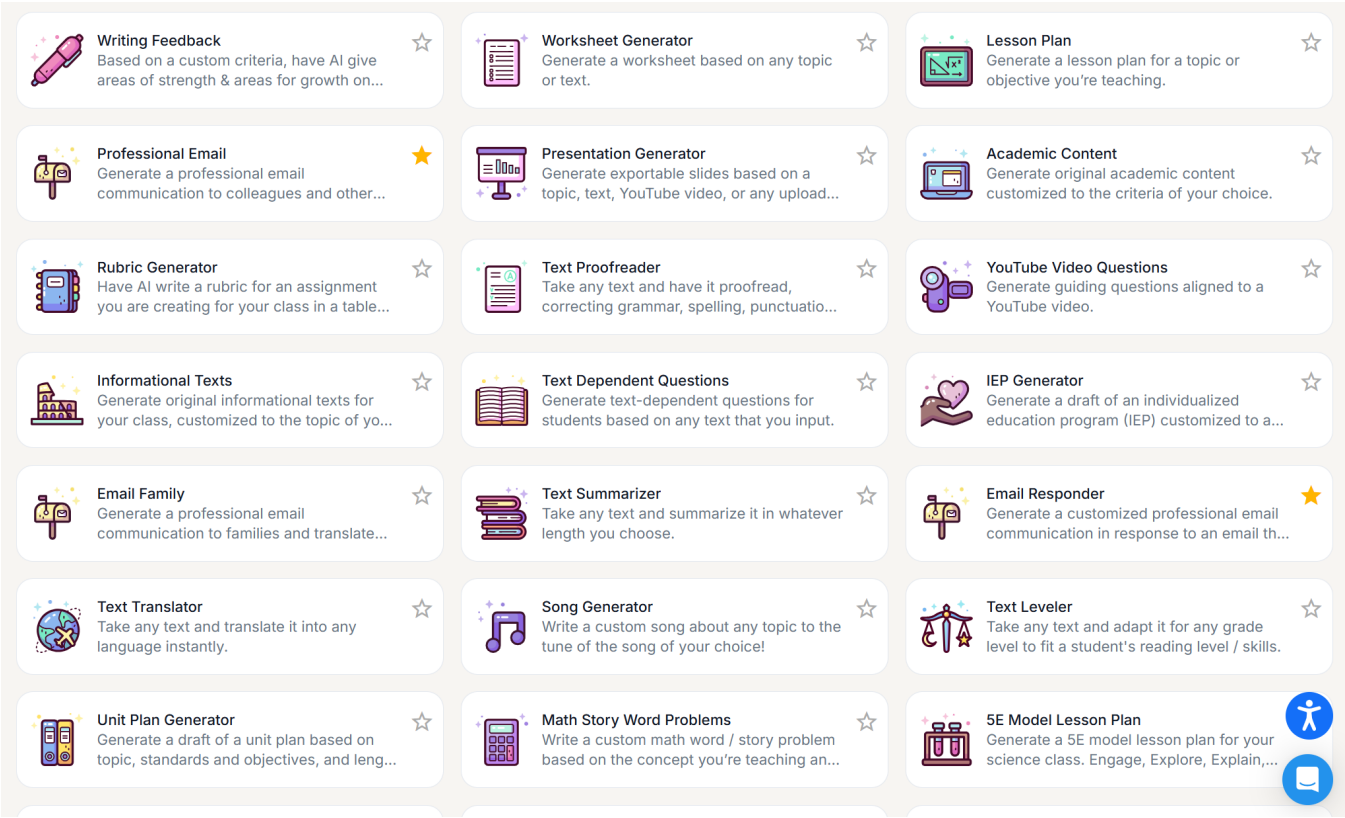
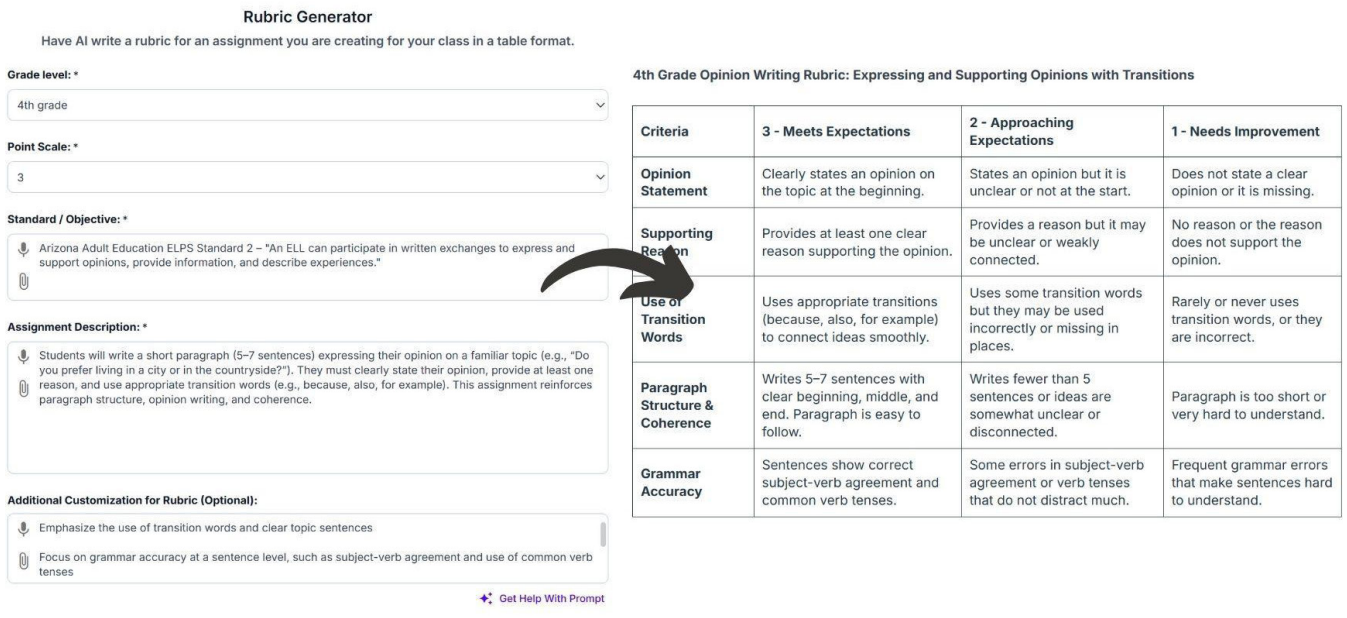
FIGURE 1



(MagicSchool AI, n.d.)

FIGURE 2



Rubric Generator

Have AI write a rubric for an assignment you are creating for your class in a table format.

Grade level: *
4th grade

Point Scale: *
3

Standard / Objective: *
Arizona Adult Education ELPS Standard 2 – "An ELL can participate in written exchanges to express and support opinions, provide information, and describe experiences."

Assignment Description: *
Students will write a short paragraph (5–7 sentences) expressing their opinion on a familiar topic (e.g., "Do you prefer living in a city or in the countryside?"). They must clearly state their opinion, provide at least one reason, and use appropriate transition words (e.g., because, also, for example). This assignment reinforces paragraph structure, opinion writing, and coherence.

Additional Customization for Rubric (Optional):
Emphasize the use of transition words and clear topic sentences
Focus on grammar accuracy at a sentence level, such as subject-verb agreement and use of common verb tenses

Get Help With Prompt

4th Grade Opinion Writing Rubric: Expressing and Supporting Opinions with Transitions

Criteria	3 - Meets Expectations	2 - Approaching Expectations	1 - Needs Improvement
Opinion Statement	Clearly states an opinion on the topic at the beginning.	States an opinion but it is unclear or not at the start.	Does not state a clear opinion or it is missing.
Supporting Reason	Provides at least one clear reason supporting the opinion.	Provides a reason but it may be unclear or weakly connected.	No reason or the reason does not support the opinion.
Use of Transition Words	Uses appropriate transitions (because, also, for example) to connect ideas smoothly.	Uses some transition words but they may be used incorrectly or missing in places.	Rarely or never uses transition words, or they are incorrect.
Paragraph Structure & Coherence	Writes 5–7 sentences with clear beginning, middle, and end. Paragraph is easy to follow.	Writes fewer than 5 sentences or ideas are somewhat unclear or disconnected.	Paragraph is too short or very hard to understand.
Grammar Accuracy	Sentences show correct subject-verb agreement and common verb tenses.	Some errors in subject-verb agreement or verb tenses that do not distract much.	Frequent grammar errors that make sentences hard to understand.

(Figure 3). When an instructor sets up a student room, they can select from a broad array of pre-configured AI tools or create a customized experience tailored to specific course objectives:

- **Raina for Students:** A safe, responsible AI chatbot that guides learners through questions, explanations, and practice exercises, helping them review and master course content.
- **AI Resource Bot:** Allows students to ask questions and receive instant, contextually relevant answers, drawing from uploaded documents or course materials.
- **Character Chatbot:** Enables learners to "chat" with historical figures, authors, or fictional characters, making lessons more engaging and memorable.
- **Writing Feedback:** Gives students actionable feedback on their written work, helping them improve clarity, argumentation, and structure.
- **Quiz Me! and Study Bot:** Tools for self-assessment and review, generating practice questions and study guides based on current topics.

FIGURE 3

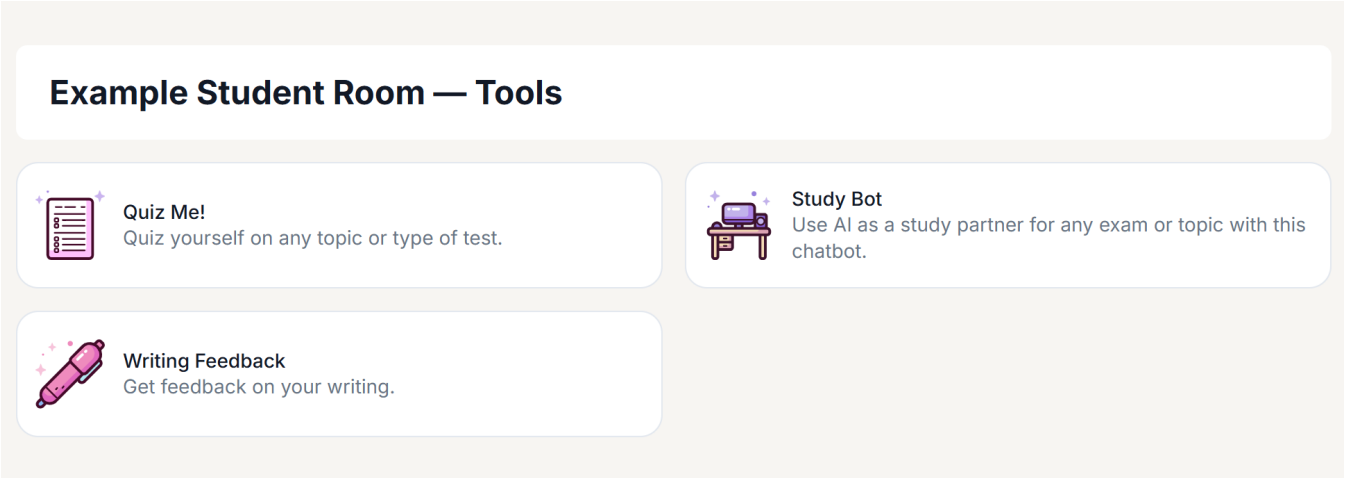
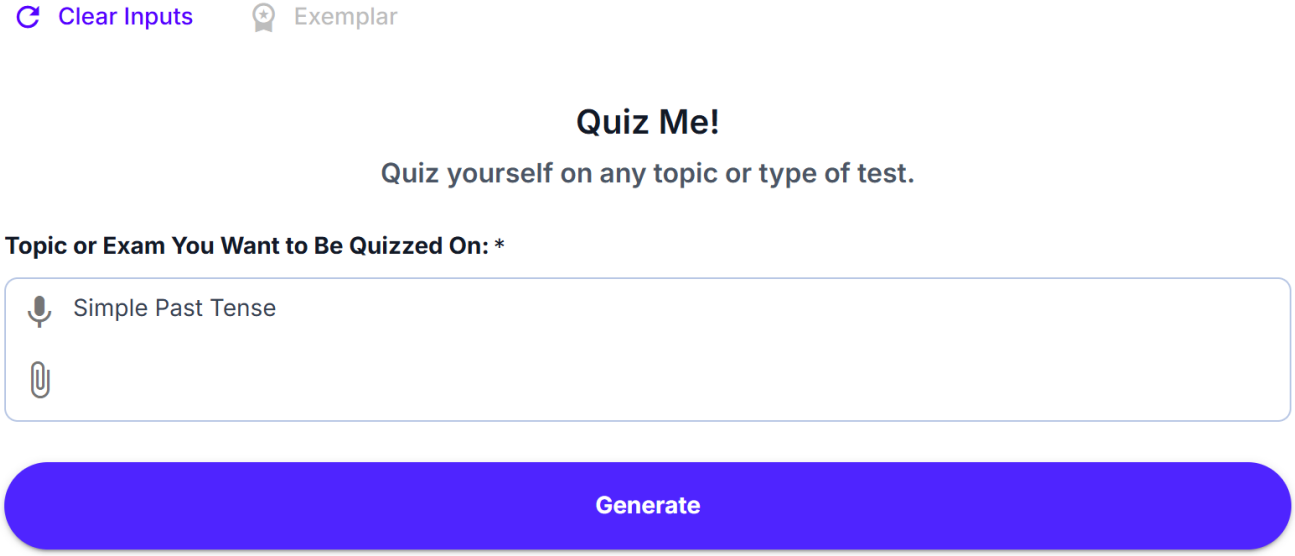
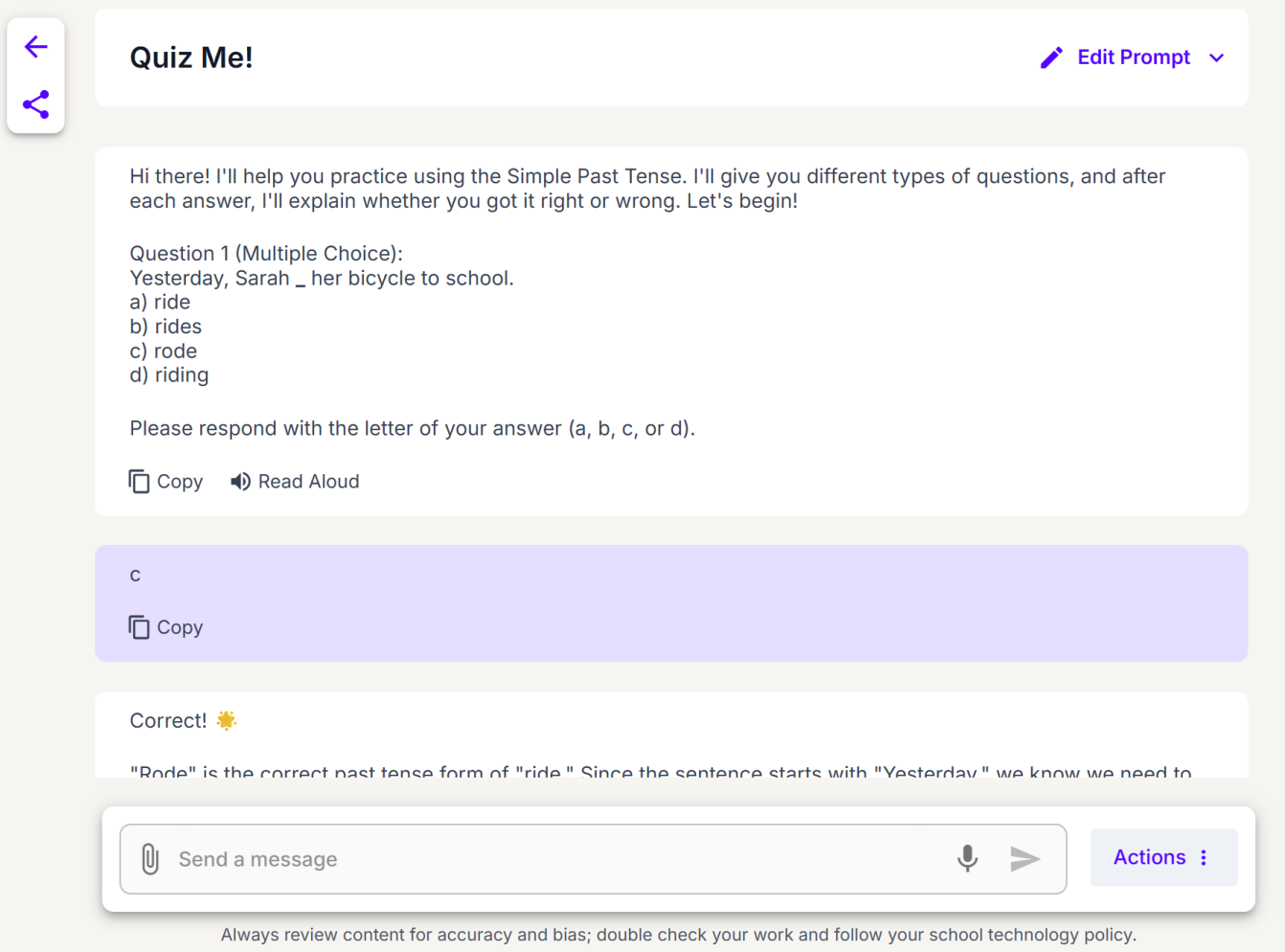


FIGURE 4: "Quiz Me!" tool





Integration capabilities are another key feature, with MagicSchool AI connecting seamlessly to learning management systems like Google Classroom, Canvas, and Schoology (MagicSchool, n.d.). The platform also prioritizes security through built-in safeguards, which highlight potential bias, emphasize factual accuracy, and protect personally identifiable information (MagicSchool, n.d.).

How MagicSchool AI Addresses Teaching Challenges in Adult Education

AI technologies, including MagicSchool AI, are increasingly recognized as vital for transforming adult education by enabling personalized learning, adaptive content, and efficient instructional support (Kang, 2023; Storey & Wagner, 2024). Adult learners often face time constraints, diverse educational backgrounds, and specific career-related learning goals. MagicSchool AI's adaptive tools and content generation capabilities allow educators to tailor instruction to these unique needs, supporting the self-directed and experiential nature of adult learning (Storey & Wagner, 2024).

In China, for instance, AI has helped actualize personalized learning and precision education, transforming adult learning resources and environments into open, intelligent systems (Kang, 2023). MagicSchool AI's tools can similarly help adult educators create relevant, real-world learning experiences and facilitate the shift in educator roles from content deliverers to learning facilitators.

Furthermore, the integration of AI in adult education requires continuous professional development for educators to adapt to new technologies and pedagogical models (Osolase et al., 2024; Storey & Wagner, 2024). Human resource development perspectives emphasize the importance of upskilling both educators and learners

to maximize the benefits of AI and ensure a smooth transition to technology-enhanced adult education (Osolase et al., 2024).

While MagicSchool AI was not explicitly designed for adult education, its features align well with the unique challenges faced in this educational context. Adult learners often have distinct needs and challenges compared to K-12 students, including time constraints due to work and family commitments, diverse educational backgrounds, and specific learning goals tied to career advancement or personal development (Rosa et al., 2022).

The platform's emphasis on personalized learning experiences directly addresses a fundamental principle of andragogy, the theory and practice of adult education. As Storey and Wagner (2024) suggest, effective technologies for adult learners must align with andragogical principles that emphasize self-direction and experiential learning. MagicSchool AI's adaptive tools allow educators to tailor content and approaches to individual learner needs and goals, supporting the self-directed nature of adult learning (Storey & Wagner, 2024).

For adult educators facing time constraints and high student-to-teacher ratios, MagicSchool AI's efficiency tools offer significant advantages. By automating routine tasks like assessment creation and feedback generation, the platform enables instructors to allocate more time to direct engagement with learners, addressing the need for meaningful instructor-student interaction in adult education settings (Oyebamiji & Ezeala, 2024).

Additionally, adult education often requires contextualized learning that connects directly to real-world applications. As outlined in research on adult edtech effectiveness, applicable edtech must be designed with the users in mind and align with career pathways and credentials (Storey & Wagner, 2024). MagicSchool AI's content generation tools can create materials contextualized to specific industries, career paths, or practical applications, making learning more relevant for adult learners.

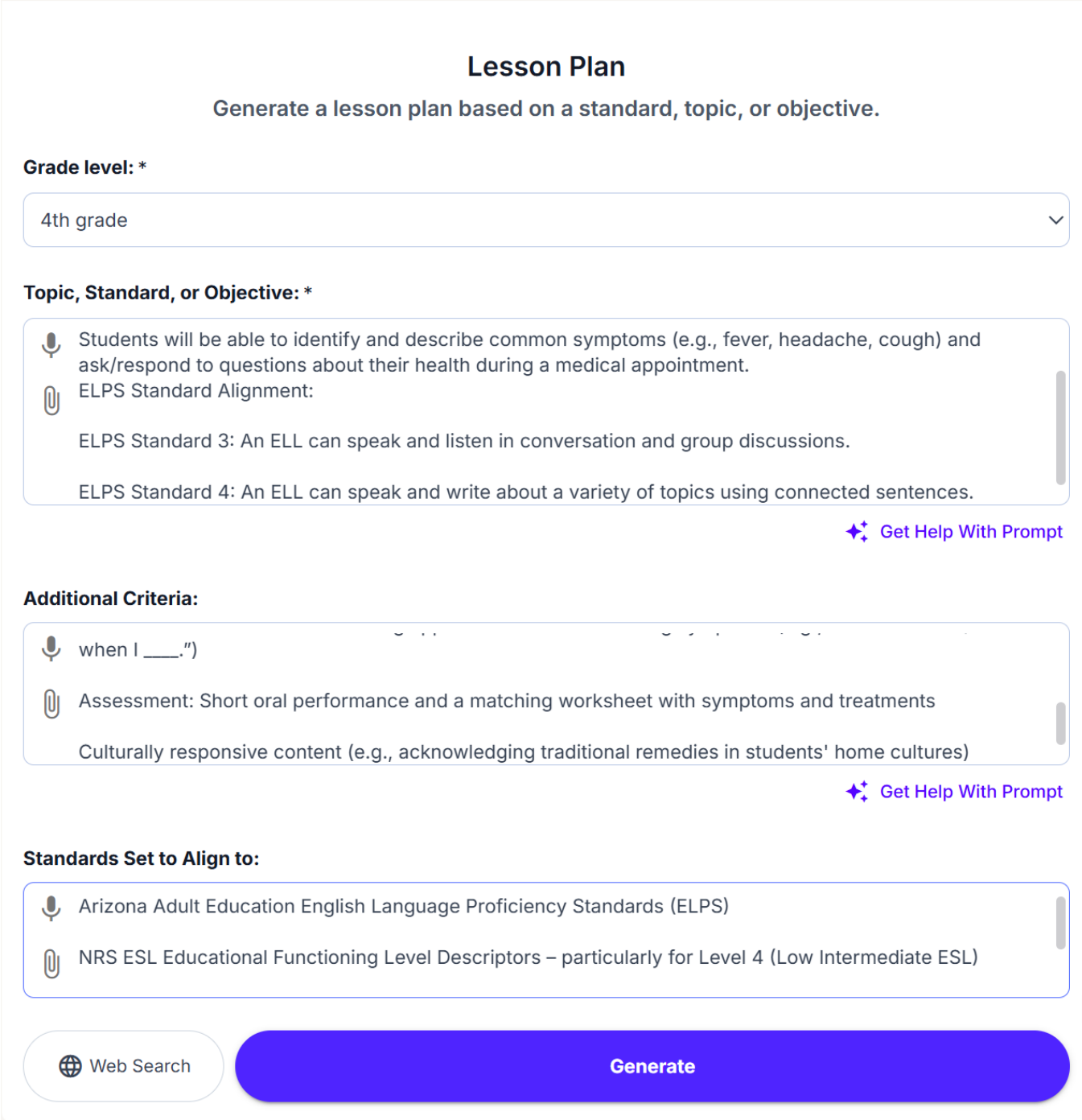
The platform also addresses the increasing need for digital literacy in adult education programs. As Oyebamiji and Ezeala (2024) emphasize, digital literacy and its implications for sustainable adult education in the 21st century require tools that not only teach content but also build technological fluency. By integrating AI literacy into the learning experience, MagicSchool AI helps prepare adult learners for technology-driven workplaces.

Real-Life Applications of MagicSchool AI

MagicSchool AI offers adult educators a flexible toolkit to address a range of classroom scenarios and learner needs. Here are several tangible examples of how adult educators can leverage their features for impactful instruction:

1. **Personalized Lesson Planning for Workforce Skills**
   An adult educator teaching a workforce development course can use MagicSchool AI's lesson plan generator to quickly create lessons tailored to specific industries, such as healthcare, manufacturing, or customer service (Figure 5). By inputting relevant job scenarios or required competencies, the educator can generate standards-aligned lesson plans that focus on practical skills, such as resume writing, workplace communication, or safety protocols. This ensures instruction is directly relevant to learners' career goals and can be easily adapted for different class levels or backgrounds.

FIGURE 5: Lesson Plan Generator Lesson Example



Lesson Generated by MagicSchool AI:

Understanding and Describing Common Health Problems

LEARNING OBJECTIVE:
Students will be able to identify and describe common symptoms (e.g., fever, headache, cough) and ask/respond to questions about their health during a medical appointment.

ASSESSMENTS:
Short oral performance and a matching worksheet with symptoms and treatments.

KEY POINTS:

- Common health problems and their symptoms (fever, headache, cough).
- Vocabulary related to medical appointments.
- Sentence frames for describing symptoms (e.g., "I have a _." / "It hurts when I _.").
- Importance of communicating health concerns clearly.
- Cultural acknowledgment of traditional remedies.

OPENING:

- Begin with a question: "What do you say when you feel sick?"
- Show images of common symptoms (e.g., a person with a headache).
- Engage students in a brief discussion about their experiences with health problems.

INTRODUCTION TO NEW MATERIAL:

- Introduce vocabulary using flashcards for symptoms and treatments.
- Play an audio recording of a patient-doctor dialogue; students listen for key symptoms mentioned.
- Discuss the importance of expressing health concerns clearly and respect for cultural remedies.
- Anticipate the misconception that all symptoms can be described with one word.

GUIDED PRACTICE:

- Conduct a role-play activity where students practice asking and responding about symptoms using sentence frames.
- Provide examples of questions and responses, such as "What hurts?" and "I have a cough."
- Monitor student performance by listening to their dialogues and providing feedback.

INDEPENDENT PRACTICE:

- Distribute a matching worksheet with symptoms and treatments for students to complete individually.
- Set expectations for quiet work time, encouraging students to refer to vocabulary flashcards as needed.

CLOSING:

- Review the key vocabulary and concepts learned during the lesson.
- Ask students to share one thing they learned about communicating health issues.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

- For students who finish early, create a health problems poster where they illustrate and label symptoms and treatments.

HOMEWORK:

- Ask students to interview a family member about a common health problem and report back on the symptoms and any traditional remedies mentioned.

STANDARDS ALIGNED:

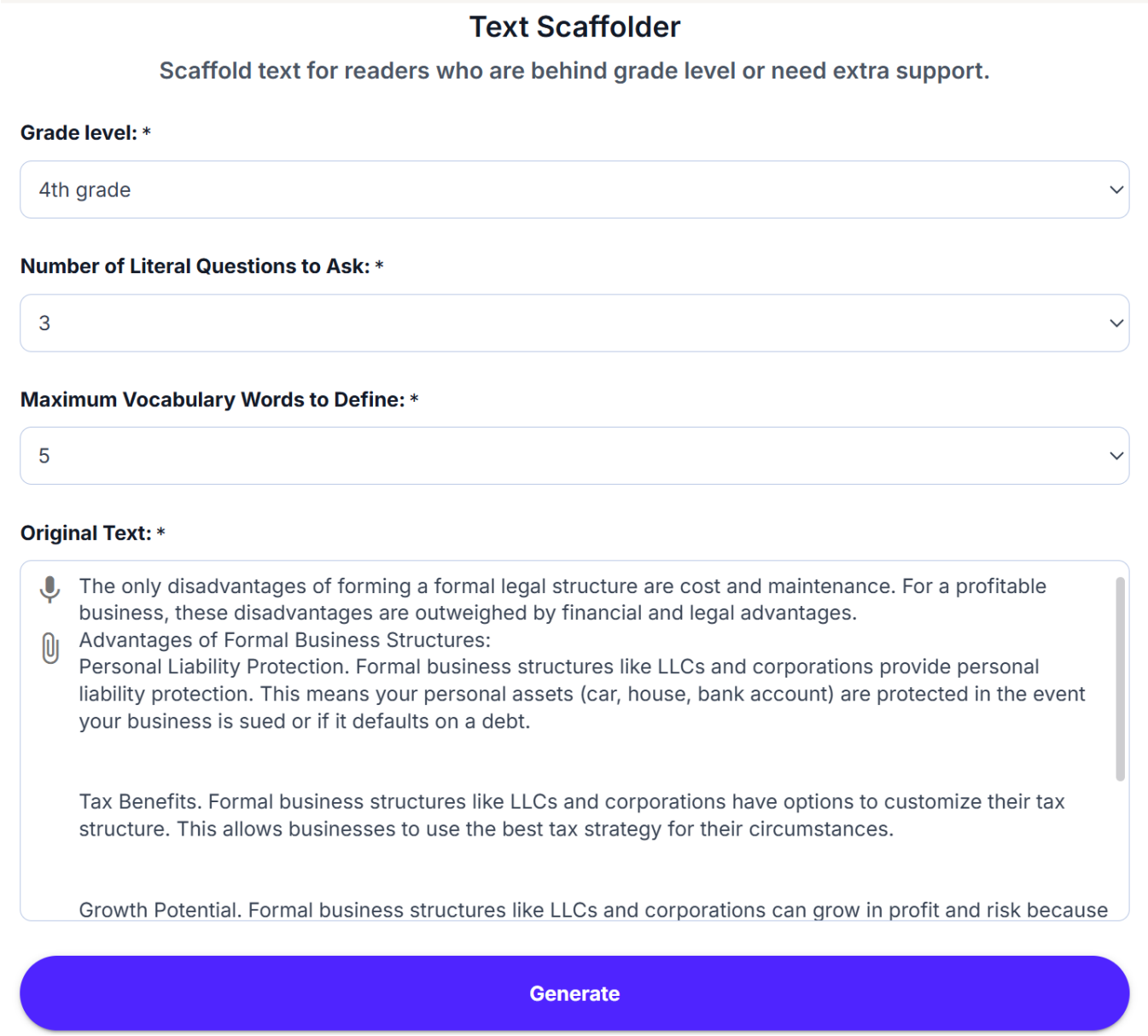
- Arizona Adult Education English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) Standard 3: An ELL can speak and listen in conversation and group discussions.
- NRS ESL Educational Functioning Level Descriptors – Level 4 (Low Intermediate ESL).
- College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) – ELA Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening

(MagicSchool AI, n.d.).

2. Differentiated Assignments for Multilevel Literacy

In a basic literacy or ESL class, adult educators often face a wide range of reading abilities. MagicSchool AI's text leveling and scaffolding tools allow the instructor to take a workplace memo, news article, or safety manual and instantly generate versions at multiple reading levels (Figure 6). The educator can then assign the appropriate version to each learner, ensuring that everyone can access the same core content while working at a comfortable challenge level. This supports differentiated instruction and helps all learners make progress, regardless of their starting point.

FIGURE 6: Text Scaffolder Example



Scaffolded Text Generated by MagicSchool AI:

Vocabulary:

1. Disadvantages: Things that are not helpful or beneficial; negative aspects.
2. Liability: Legal responsibility for something, usually involving financial obligation.
3. Protection: Keeping something safe from harm or danger.
4. Credibility: The quality of being trusted and believed in; reliability.
5. Marketability: How easy it is to sell something or how appealing it is to consumers.

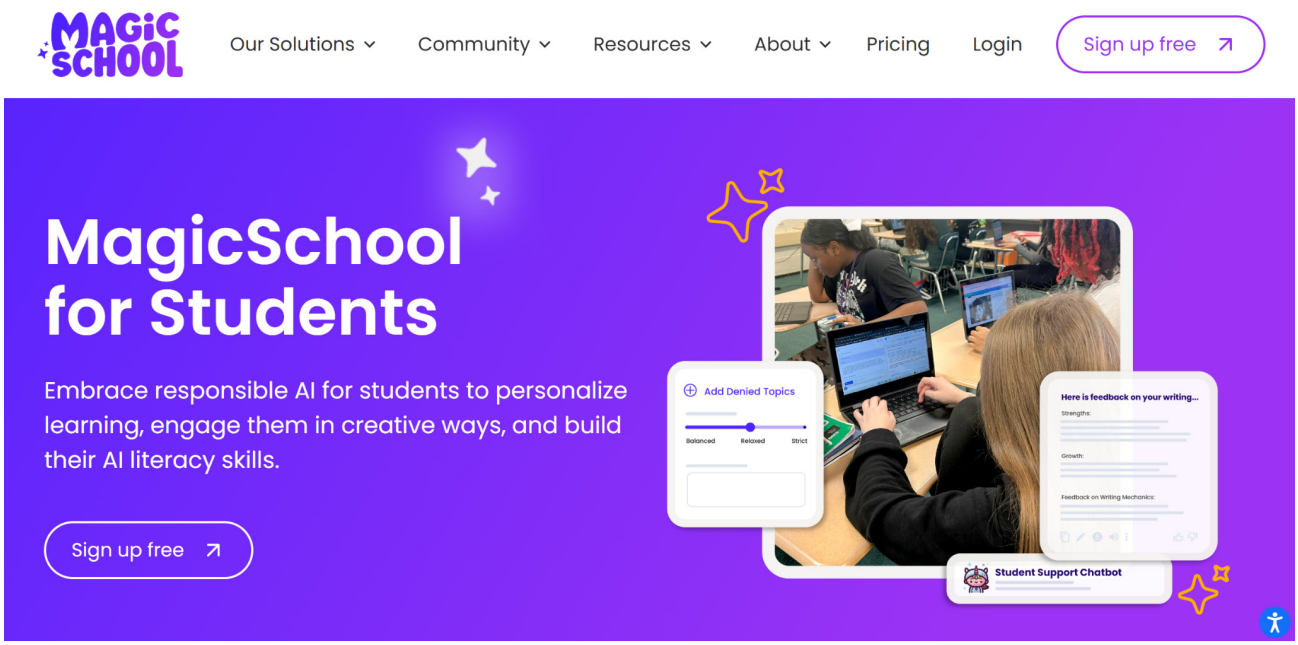
Questions:

1. What are the two disadvantages mentioned in the text about forming a formal legal structure for a business?
2. How does a formal business structure provide personal liability protection?
3. Why might having a formal business structure help a business earn more consumer trust?

(MagicSchool AI, n.d.).

3. **Automated Assessment and Feedback**
   Assessment is crucial in adult education, especially for programs tied to certifications or measurable outcomes. An instructor preparing learners for the GED or a workplace credential can use MagicSchool AI to generate quizzes, comprehension questions, and rubrics aligned with specific learning objectives. After learners complete assignments, the platform's feedback tools can provide individualized, actionable feedback, saving the educator hours of grading time and ensuring learners receive timely guidance on their strengths and areas for improvement.
4. **Translation and Multilingual Support**
   In classes with multilingual learners, MagicSchool AI's translation tools can quickly convert instructional materials, handouts, or assessments into multiple languages. This ensures equitable access for English language learners and supports inclusive classroom environments, particularly in community-based or immigrant education programs.
5. **Real-Time Adaptation During Class**
   Suppose an educator notices that a lesson isn't resonating or a concept needs reinforcement. In that case, they can use MagicSchool AI during class to instantly generate additional examples, analogies, or practice exercises. For instance, in a financial literacy class, the instructor might ask the AI to create new budgeting scenarios or role-play scripts based on learner feedback or questions that arise during discussion.
6. **Building Digital and AI Literacy**
   MagicSchool for Students can be used to introduce adult learners to responsible AI use, critical thinking about digital information, and foundational technology skills (Figure 7). For example, the educator might set up an AI-powered virtual field trip or a choose-your-own adventure scenario to build engagement and digital confidence, helping learners navigate technology-rich workplaces and communities.

FIGURE 7



By integrating MagicSchool AI in these concrete ways, adult educators can save time, personalize instruction, foster learner autonomy, and better prepare students for real-world challenges. These applications demonstrate how AI can serve as a practical partner in meeting the diverse and evolving needs of adult learners.

Benefits of Using MagicSchool AI

Time Efficiency: MagicSchool AI's primary advantage lies in its ability to save educators significant time by automating routine tasks such as lesson planning, assessment creation, and administrative communications. This efficiency is especially valuable in adult education, where instructors often juggle multiple courses or part-time roles, allowing them to focus more on meaningful learner engagement and support (Storey & Wagner, 2024).

Personalized Learning: Another key benefit is the platform's capacity for personalized learning at scale. MagicSchool AI's differentiation tools enable educators to tailor instruction for diverse groups of adult learners, accommodating variations in background, skill level, and learning goals. This aligns with global trends in adult education, where precision education and individualized pathways are increasingly prioritized (Kang, 2023; Storey & Wagner, 2024).

Enhanced Accessibility: This is enhanced through MagicSchool AI's ability to generate materials in multiple formats and reading levels. This supports learners with disabilities, English language learners, and those with varying literacy skills, populations often represented in adult education programs.

Promoting Digital Literacy: The platform also promotes digital literacy, not just for students but for educators as well. By integrating AI into instructional practice, MagicSchool AI helps both groups build essential technological fluency, preparing them for the demands of a digital workplace and society (Osolase et al., 2024).

Continuous Improvement: MagicSchool AI's analytics and data-driven insights allow educators to monitor learner progress and target support where it is most needed. This evidence-based approach supports continuous improvement and accountability, which are critical in adult education.

Flexible Integration: The platform's seamless integration with widely used learning management systems minimizes the barriers to adoption, making it easier for adult education programs to incorporate AI without overhauling existing workflows.

Challenges of Using MagicSchool AI

Despite these strengths, several challenges complicate the effective use of MagicSchool AI in adult education:

- **Digital Divide:**
  A significant concern for technology implementation in adult education is uneven access to devices and internet connectivity. As Kumar Nigam (2024) notes, financially marginalized communities often face barriers to technology access that can exacerbate educational inequities. Some potential solutions include partnering with local libraries, community centers, and nonprofits to provide loaner devices and offer free or low-cost internet access. Offer blended learning options that combine online and in-person instruction, and advocate for digital equity initiatives to ensure all learners have the necessary tools and resources.
- **Adapting Content for Adult-Specific Contexts:**
  MagicSchool AI is primarily designed for K-12, so materials may not always be relevant or engaging for adult learners. Instructors must often modify or supplement AI-generated content to ensure it aligns with adult interests, NRS levels, and career goals. As emphasized in research on adult edtech, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for adult education and tools should be adaptable to fit particular curricular needs and contexts (Rosa et al., 2022). A potential solution to this is to review and adapt AI-generated materials to fit adult contexts better. Involve adult learners in co-creating or providing feedback on content to increase relevance and engagement.
- **Professional Development Needs:**
  While effective integration of MagicSchool AI into adult education may benefit from targeted professional development, it's worth noting that the platform is designed to be accessible to educators of all levels of tech comfort. Educators can begin by informally exploring the tool, experimenting with features, browsing templates, and trying out use cases. For those looking to deepen their practice, professional learning opportunities such as hands-on workshops, peer mentoring, or self-paced online courses can further enhance implementation. Building communities of practice around AI integration can also support sustained learning and collaboration (Tare & Shell, 2019). This flexible approach allows both cautious explorers and early adopters to benefit from the platform, whether dabbling or diving in.
- **Maintaining Human Connection:**
  A critical consideration in adult education is maintaining meaningful instructor-student relationships that support adult learners' motivational needs. As education becomes increasingly technology-mediated, educators must be intentional about preserving the human elements of teaching that foster engagement and persistence among adult learners (Storey & Wagner, 2024). Balance AI use with regular face-to-face or virtual interactions, group discussions, and mentoring. Use AI for routine tasks, but reserve important relational and motivational activities for human educators.
- **Subscription for Advanced Features:**
  While MagicSchool AI offers a robust free plan with access to many essential tools, some advanced features such as unlimited generations, full access to Raina's prompts, unlimited student rooms, and seamless LMS integrations, require a paid subscription. For individual educators, MagicSchool Plus costs $12.99 per month or $99.96 per year (MagicSchool, n.d.). Although this is significantly less than many competing AI platforms, it may still be a barrier for educators or institutions with limited budgets, especially in adult education settings where funding can be constrained. Educators and institutions can maximize the use of the free plan for core needs and advocate for institutional or district-level adoption to access group pricing and additional support. Many schools and districts are eligible for volume-based discounts or customized enterprise plans, which may include professional development and dedicated support (MagicSchool, n.d.). Additionally, sharing resources and pooling subscriptions among colleagues can help reduce individual costs, while open communication with administrators about the platform's benefits can encourage broader investment in AI tools for adult education.
- **Ethical and Privacy Considerations:**
  Although MagicSchool AI emphasizes privacy protection with its 93% privacy rating, adult education programs must carefully consider data handling practices and ensure compliance with institutional policies and learner expectations regarding personal

information (Storey & Wagner, 2024). Implement robust data governance policies, ensure transparency and informed consent, and regularly audit AI tools for bias and data security. Provide learners with options to opt out of data sharing where possible.

- **Environmental Impact:** Another important consideration in adopting AI tools, including MagicSchool AI, is their environmental impact. AI models require substantial computational resources, contributing to high energy consumption and associated carbon emissions. While this is not unique to MagicSchool Ai, it is a broader concern in the field of educational technology. To mitigate this impact, educators can take simple steps like batching AI tasks into a single session or using lighter features such as pre-built templates and quick-edit tools. These small adjustments can make a meaningful difference.

Conclusion

MagicSchool AI exemplifies the opportunities and complexities of integrating AI into adult education. Its comprehensive toolset can transform instructional practices, foster personalized learning, and reduce administrative burdens. However, successful adoption depends on addressing challenges related to access, content relevance, educator training, and ethical considerations.

The future of adult education lies in strategic collaboration, continuous upskilling, and thoughtful adaptation of AI tools to local contexts (Kang, 2023; Osolase et al., 2024; Storey & Wagner, 2024). MagicSchool AI, when implemented with these principles in mind, has the potential to empower educators and learners alike: preparing them for the demands of a rapidly evolving, technology-driven world.

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