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

Correspondence: dharrison@elevationed.com

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

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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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