
EDITORIAL SPECIAL ISSUE

Access, barriers to participation and success for adult learners: Rethinking equity and social justice in post-school education

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This special issue of the *Journal of Vocational, Adult and Continuing Education and Training (JOVACET)* presents a collection of research papers on adult learners' access to learning opportunities in post-school education and training (PSET). It was prompted by a conference entitled, Access, barriers to participation and success for adult learners: Rethinking equity and social justice in post-school education, held in Cape Town on 24–25 November 2018, where early versions of the articles featured were presented.

Adult learners' access to learning opportunities in post-school education is a critical sociopolitical issue worldwide. Structural conditions have rapidly increased learning opportunities for adults over several decades, but exactly who are adult learners, and which adults have access to these opportunities? What are the barriers to access and success in PSET for a wider, more diverse range of adults? What are the contemporary conditions that limit their opportunities for education and training? What are the organisational and pedagogical strategies that can help them to gain access and enjoy the fruits of success? And how should we rethink issues of equity and social justice in PSET?

These are questions that are addressed in this special issue. Inevitably, the answers are only partial. However, the articles do shine a contemporary light on what continue to be pertinent issues relating to broader sociopolitical, socio-economic and environmental contexts; barriers to access and successful completion; enabling institutional cultures; and supportive pedagogical strategies which can enhance opportunities for epistemological access.

Who are adult learners?

The adult education literature is replete with definitions of who ‘adult learners’ are. What makes an adult learner different from any other PSET student? Is there a difference? Does it matter?

The authors in this set of articles do not hold a common view. Some use a legal definition of ‘adult’ which refers to the legal framework in a country that defines someone as ‘adult’: for example, the age at which a person is allowed to vote, a strictly chronological notion. Articles by Zelda Groener, Jacqueline Lück and Akhona Magxaki refer to ‘adult learners’ chronologically, which for them includes anyone from the age of 15 years.

However, articles by Doria Daniels, Cari-Ann Roberts Gotta and Liza Hamman reflect the focus of their research as being ‘mature’ adults, also referred to by some scholars as ‘non-traditional’ students. These are people who may be older than 23 years; frequently work while studying; have had significant time out from study and have had work or community-engagement experience; and often lack formal access requirements. This definition is not as clear-cut as the former: for example, there may be an 18-year-old mother who is head of her household and therefore clearly carries ‘adult responsibilities’.

Depending on the assumptions made about who the ‘adult learners’ are, policy, organisational and pedagogical responses differ, particularly if widening access to and enabling successful participation in PSET are one’s objectives.

Socio-economic, cultural, political and environmental contexts

The articles point to the complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, political and environmental factors at global, national, organisational and personal levels which contribute to adult learners’ access to, and success in, PSET. As the conference on which this special issue is based was held in South Africa and the majority of the participants were from within its borders, it is no surprise that South Africa’s particular colonial and apartheid legacies have shaped several of the articles. These relate to the extreme inequalities based on ‘race’, gender, social class and geography. Crain Soudien, in his keynote address at the conference, described and explored the thwarted aspirations of adult learners in South Africa. He pointed to the rapid growth of the black middle classes, if measured by educational attainment; but he was also at pains to stress how the country’s precarious economic situation has thwarted prospects for graduates of higher education institutions (HEIs) and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges. He described the experiences of the majority of black women and men as ‘a series of traumatic disappointments’.¹

1 Soudien, C. 2018. Finding our way through the morass of adult learning in contemporary South Africa: Thwarted social mobility. Keynote presented at the conference, Access, barriers to participation and success for adult learners: Rethinking equity and social justice in post-school education, Cape Town, 24–25 November 2018.

In response to these conditions, which do not enable black South Africans to move into more stable middle-class positions, Zelda Groener, in her article, sketches the conditions of poverty and inequality which create socio-economic barriers that prevent disadvantaged black adults from accessing adult learning and education opportunities. She draws on theoretical frameworks and secondary data to put forward a distributive justice perspective on access to PSET for disadvantaged black adults. These are based on relationships between interrelated equality rights and socio-economic rights, principles of social and economic justice, and redistributive policies. Her analyses reveal a correlation between declining household income and low levels of education among adult heads of households. She concludes that a radical rethinking of policy related to redistribution and social assistance through a social wage stipend is necessary. The new policy should aim to overcome socio-economic barriers, and, in doing so, offer black adults a 'route out of poverty and inequality' while also achieving socio-economic justice.

In contrast to Groener, Cari-Ann Roberts Gotta, who is based in rural Canada, argues that what is needed to increase participation in adult education is not necessarily greater resources. She identifies many positive strategies that are in place to enable flexible access to learning, but she indicates that these are not proving sufficient to increase participation. She argues that, in addition, there needs to be an ideological shift: from one valuing education solely as a means to employment towards another that values education also for its role in fostering individual and community development. She argues for challenging the hegemony of the economic, labour market orientation of educational provision and replacing it with an approach aimed at broadening interest and participation in adult learning as a means of attaining equality and justice.

Jacqueline Lück and Akhona Magxaki focus on the complexities and contradictions of language in a multilingual environment in which the colonial legacy of English has pride of place, a situation which seriously limits the success of learners. While their research is located in a Life Orientation class at a TVET college in South Africa, it has resonance for many PSET institutions in multilingual contexts. Their case study examines perceptions of student English language proficiency and the impact of English on student participation and success in Life Orientation, a subject that seeks to enhance students' academic and life success and resilience.

Life and academic success and resilience are echoed in the subject of the research conducted by Doria Daniels: the measures adopted by Somali refugee mothers to support their children's educational success. Her article highlights the exceptional struggle of refugees who have to navigate complex cultural, language and political terrains in order to achieve literacy and support their children's education. In her narrative enquiry, she researches four refugee mothers' life experiences and beliefs about education, analysing their testimonies or stories of political agency in order to understand the intersectionality of gender, language, ethnicity and power. She explores their personal empowerment and the community cultural wealth that the women have accumulated on their journeys to becoming literate. The mothers are

adult learners who use intergenerational and peer-to-peer strategies to acquire the confidence and skills to support their children's education. The research vividly demonstrates family literacy at work. It also emphasises the importance of the interactions between home and school to enable access and success. The mothers as adult learners are important role models for their children.

In contrast, and a world away from that situation, the patriarchal institutional contexts that predominate in PSET institutions have led René Bonzet and Liezel Frick to construct a conceptual framework for analysing the gendered experiences of women in TVET college leadership. They argue that gender inequalities hamstringing the leadership structures in TVET colleges in South Africa and result in a dearth of women leaders at the colleges. The article raises gender-related issues that are relevant to the entire TVET college sector, including its current and future leaders, decision-makers and policy developers. They argue for changes in institutional cultures so that they begin to embrace a diversity of women, men and LGBTIQ adult learners.

In the thought piece, Shirley Walters focuses on ways in which environmental factors are increasingly bearing down on and exacerbating the already difficult situations of access and success, particularly for poor, marginalised adult learners. Referring to current climate crises that are occurring daily around the world, she suggests ways in which PSET institutions, their staff and students can respond in order to mitigate these conditions. There is no doubt that socio-economic and political contexts are being reshaped increasingly by climate crises and catastrophes, and these upheavals have the greatest impact on poor and vulnerable people worldwide.² Southern Africa is a 'climate hotspot'; therefore, the impact is anticipated to be even more severe for this region in the coming decades – a trend that may well exacerbate poverty, violence, food insecurity and inequalities generally.

While not comprehensive in their coverage of the conference theme, the articles point to the multiple, interlaced socio-economic, political and environmental conditions that governments, educational institutions and individuals are immersed in and to which they are compelled to respond.

Enhancing equitable access for a diversity of adult learners

As intimated above, for the majority of poor, marginalised adult learners and potential learners there are many structural socio-economic, historical, cultural and political barriers to access and success. There are also epistemological barriers. These are approached through embodied learning as presented in the articles by Ephraim Nuwagaba and Emmy Oreh, and Liza Hamman.

2 Walters, S. 2018. 'The drought is my teacher': Adult learning and education in times of climate crisis. *Journal of Vocational, Adult and Continuing Education and Training*, 1(1).

Ephraim Nuwagaba and Emmy Orech's study is of students with hearing disabilities at Kyambogo University in Uganda. They show how good relationships helped students to learn, to cope with challenges to learning, to access learning materials and academic support, and to embrace diversity. Delayed communication, especially that via interpreters and by teachers who did not entirely accommodate their needs, had a negative influence on their academic relationships. The findings about learning together with and from other learners, they argue, confirm the importance of ubuntu's notion of 'shared collective humanness and responsibility'. They also confirm that the social model of disability can overcome barriers to learning and that sound academic relationships were contributing to these efforts and helping adult learners with hearing disabilities to access education and to succeed.

The importance of inclusive pedagogies is also the focus of Liza Hamman's paper. She points out that the academic literature relating to adult education and learning reveals the dominance of a cognitive, rational approach to how learning takes place in Western culture. A holistic approach to adult learning, which includes the body and the emotions, is often marginalised despite there being growing support for the inclusion of the latter. Her study reports on learning during a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Programme for adults. She analysed her data using transformative learning theory as the lens and found that mindfulness inspires embodied learning, which creates a new awareness of the body and the emotions. The data show that embodied learning often motivates new activities among adult learners, indicating transformation. Her findings suggest that embodied learning through mindfulness should be included in adult learning settings to complement rational, cognitive knowledge acquisition. She proposes that embodied learning be more prominent in theory building as it relates to adult education and learning. This, she holds, will promote a more holistic approach to adult education and learning, which, in turn, will enable and enhance access to knowledge in its many and varied forms.

The need for broadening what counts as 'really useful knowledge' is also emphasised by Walters. With rapid changes in climatic conditions occurring in the form of droughts, floods and fires, which endanger both lives and livelihoods, the people who are most accustomed to 'living on the edge' are poor and vulnerable people. It is their knowledge and expertise, Walters avers, that needs to be affirmed: there are many communities whose indigenous knowledge has been sidelined in curricula and this needs to be reclaimed if mitigation strategies are to succeed. She highlights the pervasiveness of trauma which many in the PSET environment experience. To deal with it requires a shift of emphasis to what she refers to as 'heartfelt pedagogies' that enable diverse learners to feel included and 'at home'.

Rethinking equity and social justice

How do these articles throw light on strategies aimed at 'rethinking equity and social justice'?

The articles of Groener, Lück and Akhona Magxaki, and Gotta put forward ideas about rethinking equity and social justice that are policy-related. Groener identifies socio-economic

barriers that undermine disadvantaged black adults' access to adult learning opportunities. To achieve equity and distributive justice, she proposes redistributive policies that facilitate access to adult learning and education through a social wage stipend. Lück and Akhona Magxaki's findings indicate that limited spoken and written English was a major barrier among students at a TVET college. According to them, rethinking equity and social justice should include a consideration of more inclusive language policies in education. Valuing adult learning solely as a means to employment among adults in small communities is implied by Canadian policies, according to Gotta, who suggests that understandings of the purpose of adult education should be shifted in ways that promote adult learning and education as a vehicle for equity and justice.

Bonzet and Frick's analysis exposes family roles as one of the barriers to the advancement of women's professional careers at TVET colleges. They recommend changes in institutional cultures that advocate all-inclusive approaches which advantage both women and men in TVET college leadership positions, and suggest that a ubuntu-based leadership style emphasising mutual interdependence should be pursued.

In similar vein, changing institutional cultures is promoted by Nuwagaba and Orech through their advocacy of a social model of disability that incorporates the philosophy of ubuntu. This is understood to be a 'shared collective humanness and responsibility' that has been trialled effectively to overcome a hearing-disability barrier among university students.

In Daniels' research, English illiteracy among immigrant parents presents as a barrier to their children learning the language. She therefore suggests a shift towards family literacy pedagogies that could both facilitate adult literacy in the medium of English among immigrants and bring about equity for themselves and their families.

Hamman's research shows that mindfulness can enable adult learners to confront learning barriers that result from negative emotional experiences and various forms of trauma. By incorporating mindfulness and embodied learning into transformative learning pedagogies, different ways of learning and access to different knowledge can be effected.

Finally, accelerated climate change and its consequences for the survival of humanity, according to Walters, require urgent political, organisational and pedagogical responses throughout the PSET system. As Greta Thurnberg, the young Swedish climate justice activist, urges: we must respond as though our house is on fire!

Concluding thoughts

The articles in this special issue suggest that global, regional, national and institutional environments, and our responses to them, will either aid or hinder opportunities for rethinking equity and social justice for adult learners in PSET. Access and success for a diversity of adult learners across social class, 'race', gender, physical ability, geographic location, language and ethnic background require a rethinking of national and institutional

policies and frameworks to challenge the barriers that continue to prevail. Considering the wide range of barriers, including both structural and individual, we in this sector will have to devise and contribute to the integrated strategies that will be required to deal with the conditions responsible for these constraints. These articles also demonstrate that carefully considered organisational and pedagogical interventions can contribute importantly to this endeavour.