



Critiquing Adult Participation in Education, Report 2: Motivation around Adult Education

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Executive Summary

In an era when 36 million U.S. adults need basic skills, 90% of eligible adults do not participate in adult education. VALUEUSA believed adults themselves could best answer questions on why they don't participate. A purpose of the Critiquing Adult Participation in Education (CAPE) was to further understand how adults value education and what motivates them around adult education. CAPE researchers surveyed and conducted 25 group interviews with 125 adults in five U.S. states. While motivation can become a force that drives adults past deterrents toward adult education, often for personal or career goals, adult motivation around adult education is sometimes suppressed. Theories explaining adults' attitudes, expectancy value, past influences, and external regulation may be considered in understanding potential motivation of nonparticipants in adult education.

Both CAPE survey and interviews yielded findings on value of education to non-participants. Overall, most adults indicated generally positive attitudes toward adult education. In CAPE surveys, adults had high rates of agreement with individual value statements. Still, during group interview sessions, adults expressed mixed opinions, leading to lively discussions, on the value of education. At the group level, male, employed, and low-income adults recognized issues associated with the value of education somewhat more frequently than their counterparts.

Also, how adults value adult education, as measured by a composite score of value, did not tend to vary by demographics, excepting a slight difference by gender in which a higher percentage of women placed value on education than did men. This finding is positive and important for those planning policy and programming in that frequently held assumptions such as "older adults don't care about adult education" or "people in poverty don't value adult education" are not supported in this research. The appeal of adult education must be extended to all who are eligible, which is critical to "moving the needle" among the forgotten 90%.

Even as adults place value on adult education, they were *not* currently participating (in that they were selected for CAPE research) and most never had. Why? For a minority, not participating is a matter of high "cost" vs. "benefit" – whether through exhaustion, conflicts with other activities of value, simple lack of motivation, or literal financial cost. For another small subset, career-related external regulation is minimal, and adults consider themselves content as they are – whether in careers, in retirement, or in getting by without credentials. The likelihood is high that these adults will not pursue adult education.

For most adults, however, deterrents from past influences or traumatic experiences inform their motivation around adult education. Adult education policies and outreach efforts need to assure adults that adult education will offer skills that will enable them to reach their goals. They need to expect instructional services delivered in a welcoming social context and accepting learning environment. Implementing recommendations on adult education settings and outreach will further communicate the positive difference adult education can make. While adult educators cannot alter family history, nor can they be expected to diagnose trauma or implement interventions for trauma, they can use techniques addressing emotional issues, make referrals to local mental health providers for diagnosis and intervention, and familiarize themselves with ways to support adult learners. Solutions to situational and dispositional deterrents will further enable adults to start and complete adult education.

Introduction to Motivation

Adults opt to pursue education – or not – for diverse reasons (Patterson & Paulson, 2016). Motivation is a force which drives adults past deterrents toward adult education (Beder, 1991; Comings, 2007). Having a personal or career goal often motivates adults to enter adult education (Comings, 2007). In some circumstances, however, adults' motivation around adult education is suppressed, such as from perceptions of low immediate need or the amount of effort participation would "cost" [Anderman, Jensen, Halem, & Goldstein, 2002; Beder, 1991]. Theories explaining adults' attitudes, expectancy, past influences, and external regulation may be considered in understanding potential motivation of nonparticipants in adult education.

A first type of motivation is attitudinal. Hayes and Darkenwald (1990) discussed how attitudes toward education are multi-dimensional in predicting adult participation. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg define adult motivation to learn as "the tendency to find learning activities meaningful and worthwhile and to benefit from them" (2017, p. 5). Conversely, if people do not value adult education, they will probably not feel motivated to participate. Similarly, if they do not think adult education is important or do not enjoy education, they may not participate (Beder, 1991). Additionally, how adults value education may be influenced by basic needs or social class (Beder, 1991; Quigley, 2017).

In Hayes' and Darkenwald's report on the Adult Attitudes toward Continuing Education Scale (AACES), perception of importance was more highly connected to actual participation than were enjoyment of learning or beliefs about the intrinsic value of adult education (1990). A revised nine-item scale, RAACES (Blunt & Yang, 2002), employed the same three factors with fewer items and good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$). In Blunt and Yang's study, enjoyment, intrinsic value, and importance influenced participation in adult education at similar levels.

Employing components of expectancy theory, Anderman et al. (2002) posited that a motivated adult could potentially perceive adult education as important, appealing, or useful. An additional component represented the amount of time it would "cost" the adult to participate, in terms of time taken from other important activities such as work and family needs (Beder, 1991; Anderman et al., 2002). To begin adult education, prospective adult learners must not only perceive adult education as important, appealing, or useful, but also believe adult education can meet the need (Beder, 1991), or find it beneficial (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017). Adults may thus make ongoing cost-benefit judgments in decisions to participate or not. Anderman et al. found that nonparticipating adults in their Kentucky study highly valued education. However, adults found the cost component to be high; that is, pursuing adult education would need to be worth the time and effort (Anderman et al., 2002).

Other strong motivators include influence of the past and trauma. In the first CAPE report (Patterson & Song, 2018), influence of the past was the most frequently mentioned dispositional deterrent to adult education participation. Blunt and Yang (2002) noted that negative past schooling experiences (Quigley, 1997 and 2006) and negative responses to those experiences, such as low confidence or fear of math, could motivate adults against participation (Zhang, Guison-Dowdy, Patterson, & Song, 2011). Nonparticipants may see their intellectual abilities as fixed rather than as something they can develop (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Do nonparticipants anticipate adult education as "going to school again"—as stigmatizing, irrelevant, or boring (Quigley, 1997, 2017)?

Influence of the past is not limited to negative past schooling experiences. Adults may also suffer traumas, whether as children or adults, that affect their lives, health, and educational

experiences. Traumas may be mild (small “t”) or severe (large “T”; Cvetec, 2008; Werk, n.d.). According to Cvetec (2008, p. 2), “small ‘t’ traumas are any life events that have a lasting negative impact on the mind... and brings forth negative images, feelings, and cognitions” from the original event(s). More severe traumas (large “T”) can have even stronger effects. Bisson et al. (2013) report that after a strong traumatic event, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can – but does not always – occur. Small “t” traumas can become large “T” issues when repeated over lengthy periods of time, such as ongoing bullying (Weisel, 2014).

Effects of trauma are often long lasting. Children experiencing four or more types of adverse experiences – such as physical abuse or exposure to violence or substance abuse – had four to 12 times the risk for substance abuse and depression as adults and twice to four times the risk for poor health in adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998).

Whether small “t” or large “T” traumas, adults reliving traumas tend to become “stuck” in their thinking and cannot access parts of the brain that allow them to process information, verbalize thoughts, think logically, and solve problems (Cvetec, 2008; Werk, n.d.). Interventions such as eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) or trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy have substantial research evidence to support their use with adults who experienced trauma, particularly those diagnosed with PTSD (Bisson et al., 2013; Chemtob, Tolin, Van der Kolk, & Pitman, 2000; Cvetec, 2008, Werk, n.d.).

Another motivator for adult education is external regulation. Motivation to further a career is an example of external regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which occurs when adults’ behavior is motivated by the desire to obtain a reward or to avoid punishment (Ratelle et al., 2007). For adults motivated to seek better jobs, higher salaries, or promotions, learning becomes relevant (Quigley, 2006; Schleicher, 2013). Not recognizing a connection between learning and career prospects hampers participation in adult learning (Kis & Field, 2013) and can contribute to a “vicious cycle” of minimal learning and fewer career opportunities (OECD, 2013, p. 137). Two items adapted for use in the CAPE survey from The Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) represent career-related external regulation: “Why do you go to school? Because I need at least a high school diploma in order to find a high-paying job later on.” And: “In order to have a better salary later on” (Ratelle, et al., 2007). The external regulation subscale of AMS had high reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.90$).

Motivation Findings

Value of Education to Adults

Quantitative findings. Both the CAPE survey results (deductively) and qualitative interviews (inductively) touched on value of education. On the CAPE survey, adults had high rates of agreement, ranging from 60% to 85%, with 11 statements on the value of education¹. More than three-fourths of adults agreed or strongly agreed that continuing in education would make them feel better about themselves (85%), that adult education helps people make better use of their lives (79%), and that they enjoy activities that allow learning with others (77%). High rates of disagreement (83%) also occurred for the statement, adult education is mostly for people with little else to do. Although only 60% of adults agreed or strongly agreed that they need at least a high school equivalence (HSE) diploma to find a high-

¹ Nine of the statements came from *Revised Adult Attitudes Toward Adult Education* instrument by Blunt and Yang (2002), and two statements were modified from Ratelle et al.’s *Academic Motivation Scale* (2007). See Appendix 2.

paying job, a higher agreement rate (73%) occurred with the statement on needing to finish an adult education program in order to have a better salary later on. A moderate correlation ($r = 0.58$) also occurred between those agreeing that continuing in education would make them feel better about themselves and those agreeing adult education helps people make better use of their lives. These responses indicate that a majority of adults interviewed value education.

When the 11 statements on value of education were combined into a composite, with scores ranging from 11 to 55, as with the individual statements, most adults agreed that they value education. The average composite score was 43.7 (SD = 6.1). Composite score means were slightly higher ($d = 0.36$) for women (44.6, SD = 5.7) than for men (42.4, SD = 6.4). Approximately 25% ($n = 31$) of adults had participated in adult education previously, and most who did attend had minimal experience: 63% attended less than one year, 27% attended one to two years, and 10% attended two to five years. Mean composite scores did not differ significantly for adults who had been in adult education previously compared with those who had never attended adult education. Value of education composite scores did not vary significantly by age, income, health status, employment status, geography (urban or rural), or education attainment.

Qualitative findings. In CAPE interviews, 24 of 25 groups made comments about the value of education. After transportation and family needs, value was talked about next most often (and tied with money in ranked coding). During group sessions, adults expressed mixed opinions, leading to lively discussions, on the value of education. At the group level, men (63%) and employed adults (63%), especially those working up to 30 hours per week, talked more frequently about the value of education than their respective counterparts. Those earning \$18,000 or less annually (60%) also talked more frequently about the value of education at the group level than those earning more. These findings indicate that men, employees, and low-income adults recognized issues associated with the value of education somewhat more frequently than their counterparts.

In some groups, discussion of the value of education occurred less frequently. Groups with median “fair” health spoke less about the value of education (28%) than those with “good” health. Adults also spoke less about the value of education when group members worked a median of more than full time (11%) or when the group’s median education attainment was beyond high school (3%).

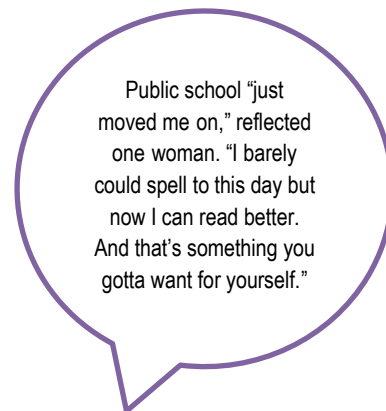
On the positive side, adults described adult education as something many adults want and “try for.” One man stated, “Everybody needs an education.” Adults saw it as a way to “better” themselves and to set an example for their children, whether the children were young, grown up, or unborn. Further education could also provide them more opportunities to help their children. They saw it as necessary to qualify for certain jobs (though not always to have the skills to do the work on that job) and to move a person from a “job” to a “career”. Some adults saw adult education as something they could look forward to later in life and others as something “nobody could take” from them once they had it. A man said, “Education is one of the easiest ways to win in life.” A woman remarked, “Education is the most important thing for me right now... Because there’s a lot of people, they make it to a certain age and they just [think], ‘No, I’m not going back to school. It’s too late.’ ... I feel like right now would be a good time for me to go back to school.”

On the negative side, some adults expressed a lack of patience with or interest in adult education. A man admitted, “I’m making it. I’m 37 years old. I can move forward without it [adult education]. As long as I keep a job and take care of my kids, I’m good.” A few older adults saw adult education as something for young people. Two adults from separate communities, a man and a woman,

spoke about it in the same way: “I have done all I am going to do in life.” Some adults believed they already have the skills they need to work and were only lacking the credentials (or “paperwork”). For many, going to adult education would cost money they cannot spare.

Influence of the Past

Members of 13 interviewed groups and all four individual interviewees discussed with researchers the influence of the past on their motivation around adult education. As one adult put it, influence of the past related to adult education when “the past you have already experienced comes into the present.” Themes included K-12 experiences, lack of family support, stigma, and identity. Influence of the past served largely to motivate many adults against adult education at the same time as some of them indicated enthusiasm for participation. Themes under influence of the past tended to overlap, in descending order of frequency, with themes of community pressure, early school leaver situations, loss of confidence, educational stress, and anxiety or fear.



K-12 experiences. For numerous adults in the study, K-12 school was not a positive experience. A man stated, “Picking up pencil and paper was something I just hated” when he was in public school. Public school “just moved me on,” reflected one woman. “I barely could spell to this day but now I can read better. And that’s something you gotta want for yourself.” Some talked about being bullied, a few to the extent that they could not find words to explain what they went through. In school, a group member noted, the teachers concentrate on the bright kids, the “ones who are easier to deal with because it makes their job easier.”

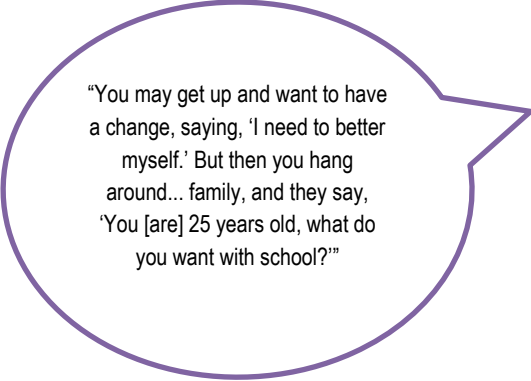
Junior high was particularly challenging for many adults. Several adults left school in junior high, at age 14 or 15, because they had children. Some described large classes with little attention from educators. A man remembered how a teacher threw an eraser at him for talking with somebody and not doing his schoolwork. He ended up writing “words out of a dictionary” in class. A woman thought junior high teachers “just give you busy work.”

Lack of family support. Not having a family influenced adults as deterrents to adult education. Some adults reported having lost their parents to incarceration or death. One woman’s parents were incarcerated. She had no father figure and reported having to be her “own mother, aunt, and sister all in one”. She declared, “It’s a fight every single day.” She talked about “why you shouldn’t give up on your dreams” but wasn’t prepared to pursue adult education totally alone. Another woman left school in the 8th grade because she had no guardian and no way to get to school. A young man with no family admitted, with a tinge of sadness and strength, “It’s been 18 years and look how I got here. I’m 18, had a birthday two months ago. I’ve been out here on my own since I was 12. It ain’t easy and it ain’t fun...”

For those with families, family negativity toward adult education kept numerous adults in a perceived diminished role in the family. A woman stated, “A lot of us don’t have those brains, we haven’t been told that we are worthy, that we are capable. It’s really unfortunate...” A woman related, “We listened to those voices [of family telling you you won’t succeed]. My Mama was like ‘you ain’t going to do this’ and ‘you ain’t going to do that’ and that’s what I became.” Two women talked about family negativity. One said, “Kids are told, ‘You ain’t going to be nothing in your life.’ They have people [in their family] telling them that - doubters.” The other added, “Everybody is down on them.”

Some adults saw themselves as putting on a disguise before their family to cover their wish for

more education. Some family members communicated that the adult would not change no matter what he or she did educationally. One adult reported the family would say, “You are not going to learn much and will just go back to your same old ways.” Another saw a need to go to great lengths to avoid family negativity to participate in adult education. He related, “Sometimes, you get a certain age, where you may get up and want to have a change, saying, ‘I need to better myself.’ But then you hang around... family, and they say, ‘You [are] 25 years old, what do you want with school?’”

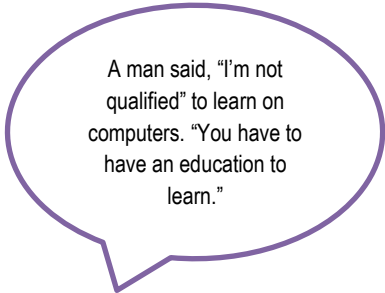


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don’t want to hear the negative comments. Sometimes the embarrassment factor will drive you away from trying to do good, especially if you grew up in a negative environment to start with.”

Stigma and identity. Issues associated with adult identity or stigma stemming from influence of the past was another theme. “Sometimes you get a label in your own mind,” reflected one man. “If you drop out [of high school], or don’t get your diploma, you say, ‘What’s the point of me going back to school? I didn’t get it then. What makes me think I’m gonna get it now?’” A woman in a different group reflected, “As I was growing up, people would tell me, ‘You are going to be just like your momma. You ain’t going to be shit.’ And I did follow the same footsteps as my mother. But even though I am trying to do better, those people try to put me down because I dropped out of school in the 11th grade. Things like that could just mess up a person within themselves. Some people go off the deep end when other people say negative things or put downs. They say things that make you feel, ‘So maybe I won’t amount to much, so what is the point of my being here?’”

Other adults felt unqualified for adult education. One woman said, “I’m saying that it’s me. I never was that good in school. I wasn’t any good. I didn’t have the IQ like some of them.” A man reported having dyslexia and not remembering things well so did not think himself eligible to get an education. He said, “I’m not qualified” to learn on computers. “You have to have an education to learn.”



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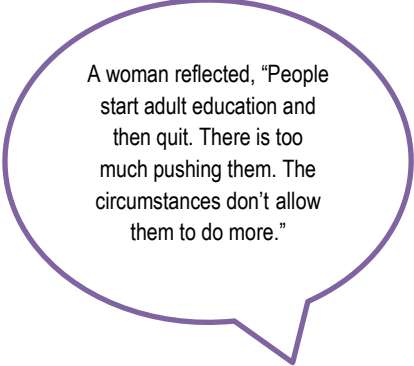
A woman explained the stigma she felt as, “Just not feeling good enough. Just feeling inadequate, that, that...” She struggled for words and her sister encouraged her, murmuring quietly. She continued, “It seems like other people are living out their dreams, doing what they want to do. Why is it not happening for me?” She went on, “When you are younger, you make mistakes, and when you get out of prison, those things still hinder you from being able to progress and move on with your life. And you are constantly told ‘No’ even though you’ve maintained a positive life [since release], you are still being told, “No, no, no, you can’t do this, you can’t do that.’ Why can’t I do this?”

A man balked against the length of time it will take him to finish HSE compared with others, considering it a stigma. “You don’t want to hear about people saying you’re dumb. That’s the label they put on you. ‘What do you gotta do to get out of here [with a diploma]?’ [they ask.]” He continued, “When I was back in school, them was fightin’ words.”

No or Neutral Motivation

Eleven groups talked about having no motivation around – or feeling neutral toward – adult education. This topic overlapped in frequency with adults’ work or job, time for self, and accountability for behaviors. In discussing no or neutral motivation, adults brought up themes of exhaustion, conflicts with other activities, a general lack of motivation, and laziness.

Exhaustion. Most often adults discussing no or neutral motivation reported exhaustion from working. A woman reported working 10 hours per day Wednesday through Saturday, and some Sundays or Tuesdays. “You can be tired [from work]. Sometimes you can’t work, take care of kids, and go to school. And do homework.” One man who reported being tired considers himself a workaholic. He works at a chicken farm, hanging live chickens all day. “That’s a lot of chickens,” he declared. A woman sighed as she talked about there being “no in-between” of work and home. She was working outside the home and then would go home and cook and clean. She added, “You are too tired to keep your eyes open.” Another woman in a different group described feeling very tired by the end of the workday. One day, she said, she had a car wreck on the way home from work because she was tired. According to one woman, “You might have people to take care of when you get home, my children or family members. Or you might not have enough energy when you get home from work.” A man in her group quipped, “They don’t make enough Red Bull for this.”

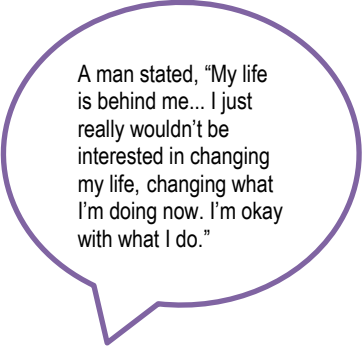


A woman reflected, “People start adult education and then quit. There is too much pushing them. The circumstances don’t allow them to do more.”

Conflicts with other activities. Full schedules brought about conflicts with other activities. One group discussed the pull they felt in multiple directions. A woman expected that something else is more important than education: “something you gotta do, like making money – you put that ahead” of it. “People maybe don’t have a chance to go or don’t want to go.” A man retorted, “I’m not saying I don’t want to [participate in adult education]... I guess what I’m saying is you don’t have a chance to. You got something else you got to do.” Another woman reflected that “people start adult education and then quit. There is too much pushing them. The circumstances don’t allow them to do more.” A woman in a separate group declared, “It’s easy to make an excuse

that you can’t do it. We can make time for everything else [games, sales] – we will be there. But not for adult education.” The body language of others in the room when she said this was negative and there was a moment of stunned silence.

For others, particularly older adults, it was a matter of liking how they spent their days and not seeing a need to change activities to go to adult education. A woman said she is “stable” and “working right now.” Her kids are older, 17 and 21 years, and don’t need as much of her attention. However, she believes that she “has no extra time for school” right now. She thought she “may need education later” in life but she didn’t need it now. In a separate group, a man who liked the activities he did every day stated, “My life is behind me... When I was growing up, I didn’t have these opportunities... I just really wouldn’t be interested in changing my life, changing what I’m doing now. I’m okay with what I do.”



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Lack of motivation. Still other groups discussed a general lack of motivation around *any* types of activities. Many of them were young adults. A young woman who was expecting a child stated she “doesn’t have motivation.” Another woman confessed feeling “not ready to do anything.” She was not motivated for a job, a car, or education. She is not sure of herself, she admitted, not sure she can accomplish it if she starts education. A man who struggles with getting out of bed in the morning described “just not feeling you can go out on that limb... it’s a nonchalant feeling.” Another woman added, “I don’t feel like it [pursuing education].”

Laziness. Three adults in a group talked about laziness as a theme. “If you do work, you can get comfortable with day to day and you keep putting off [adult education]”, thought one man. People might feel lazy, with no motivation, agreed the group members. A woman added, “Procrastination,” and he agreed. “You can say, ‘Life is good right now’ and you might not want it to go to another plateau. “Sometimes people feel “groggy”, not in the mood to do anything, reflected another woman. In a separate group, the young man who had confessed earlier not wanting to get out of bed described “distractions... I wish I was a kid. You want to catch something on TV, just not feeling very involved.”

A woman in a different city commented on why resources for free education were going away from her community. When a researcher asked why people did not take advantage of them, she answered snidely, “because of laziness.” She thought some people have “no motivation.” A man in another group talked about feeling lazy as a result of substance abuse. “Overindulgence of any drug will produce a chemical imbalance of laziness and negativity. And you won’t want to do anything except take drugs. That’s the penalty.” A recovering addict in his group shouted, “Amen!”

Trauma and Motivation


Members of seven interviewed groups and two individual interviewees discussed issues of trauma with researchers². Small “t” traumas were reported in the context of past K-12 schooling experiences. Large “T” traumas that adults described reflected themes of family instability, family abuse, or family loss. Themes associated with trauma tended to overlap often with themes dealing with influence of the past or with violence. An adult who described large “T” trauma stated, “Anything can happen to you in this society. Things can be taken away. That is a fact of life.” A few adults experiencing trauma were able to consider or attempt adult education, but most did not, either because the trauma was too recent, or they were not ready to move past long-held reactions to traumatic event(s).

K-12 schooling trauma. Adults in two rural groups conversed about their experiences as young children in and outside of grade school. In the first rural group, a woman related how, as she grew up, she was a victim of peer pressure. When asked what kind of pressure and where, she described it as bullying, at school and at home. She reported the behavior of others made it hard for her to get an education. Resuming her education as an adult was something she “hated to deal with” until she got older and thought she “could cope with” it.

In a second rural group, several retirees explained what life was like as they grew up in a farming community in the 1950’s. A woman explained, “We mostly had to stay home and work. We didn’t get to go to school. We had to stay home and help them with the crops.” She described how it is against the law now, but “as kids we worked every day.” A work ethic, a sense of “if you don’t farm, you don’t eat,” was instilled in even small children, as a requirement of everyday life. “I was scared to quit [school]. I

² Trauma status as small “t” or large “T” was interpreted from reported history; no diagnoses were available.

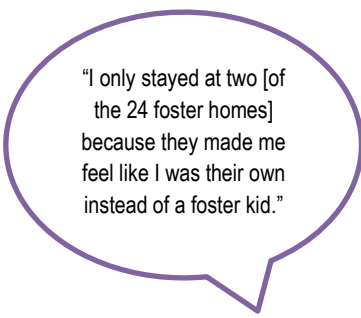
needed somebody to help me. I grew up working,” said a man in the group, “with that slave mentality. I was good at that working.” As a three-year-old boy, he remembered his mother asking him to carry a heavy crate across a field. The field seemed very wide and the load unbearable, but he did not want to disappoint his mother and persisted with his task.



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Young children were required to work the fields, the retirees reported, sometimes for six weeks at a time. A man reflected, “You get behind and you lose confidence. And you feel lost in school. Everyone else is ahead of you, and there you are, you’re not smart enough to catch up.” Another woman exclaimed, “I’m trying to get it [when I was in school], but I just can’t get it because I missed too much [class time]. I was in third grade for about three years!” Another man replied, “You can’t catch that six weeks of school. It’s *gone*.” They regretted being unable to pass tests in class from the missing time and schoolwork. “They are gonna call you out. You’re not smart enough to pass the test.” A man added, “And the kids will make fun of you in school.” Another agreed, “Because you don’t know [the answers].” He “felt embarrassed” by missing school and not being able to keep up. “The teacher would not help you. They didn’t care.” Another man replied that teachers did care but couldn’t take the time to help them catch up from being gone for six weeks. He thought he “would go in [and] have to start all over” in the learning process if he went to adult education and that it would feel like kindergarten, even though the work may be more advanced. “It still would take me a lot.”

Family instability. A first large “T” trauma interviewees described dealt with family instability. One man attributed his preference for work and money rather than education to childhood instability: “Yeah, that’s when you start getting depressed, and discouraged, and talking about committing suicide because you had to move 12 times and Mom ain’t paying the rent... without that green, boy, you [are] SOL [shit out of luck]. Without that money, you are out of luck.” Another man talked about a difficult home life in his youth. “Not everyone has a good home life,” he stated. His parents were involved with alcohol and drugs. He left home at 15, “tired of listening to all of it.” He later admitted suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). With PTSD, he tends to have strong reactions to frustrating situations and “may cuss someone out” in the heat of the moment. Although he tries to control his reactions, he may not be able to do so. He realizes later that he reacted in a way he didn’t want to react, but at the time “in my mind I was not in the wrong.” He doesn’t see his former home life as a barrier to education now, but it has been in the past. “It’s my house now,” he stated. “If anyone has problems, they can take it outside.”



“I only stayed at two [of the 24 foster homes] because they made me feel like I was their own instead of a foster kid.”

In the 24 foster families a woman grew up in from fifth grade to her senior year, she reported not having consistency and not liking the families. “I only stayed at two [of the foster homes] because they made me feel like I was their own instead of a foster kid.” From ninth to tenth grade, even though she and her birth family were from one city, she was placed in foster care in another city 120 miles away. She found it difficult “knowing I couldn’t catch the bus to go see” her birth mother and sisters.

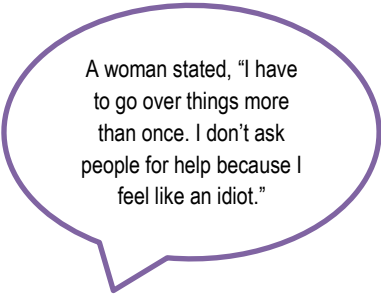
Because of her “personal living situation” in the foster care system, she reported “my life did take a completely different turn” in 10th grade. Tenth-grade biology was the hardest science for her.

She said it “seemed easy” but she couldn’t remember what she learned from “this big biology book which I toted around everywhere.” She couldn’t remember when she sat down to take a test or do a worksheet, and she got the answers mixed up. She also found it difficult to follow along in math. “So, I really couldn’t focus, and when I would look at it, it would be like, ‘What do I do from here? What’s the next step?’, even if he [the teacher] just got done explaining it on the board. It was something I couldn’t get, couldn’t remember, and couldn’t study.” A researcher asked what she thought was happening in 10th grade that led to forgetting and not focusing. She replied, “I had other things going on at home and outside school, with my first family and trying to get back to my biological Mom. So, being in high school, I was more focused on being at home than doing anything else. There wasn’t anything else important to me, other than being with my Mom. You get to see everybody else, when there is stuff going on in school, and their parents come, and I really didn’t have too many people, so...” Her voice trailed off wistfully.

By her senior year, she had moved around so often that her credits didn’t add up for her to graduate. In 12th grade she was 18 but didn’t have proof of credits from previous school placements, and administrators in her new school told her she would have to start over from the 9th grade. “I never went back to school,” she recalled. “I figured, I’m 18 now, and I gotta go back to school with a bunch of kids that’s 14 and 15, and I’m supposed to be graduating this year, so it was just a harsh reality for me.” She concluded, “It was just so much easier for me to give up than to keep trying or to keep going. So, I just didn’t go back.” Several years later, she was hoping to enter adult education after the upcoming birth of her first child.

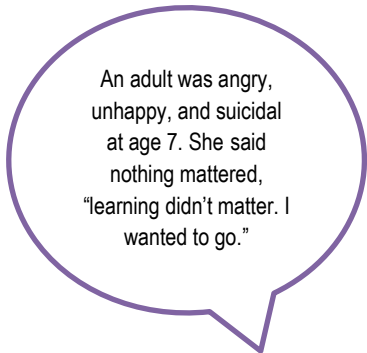
Family abuse. A second type of large “T” trauma had to do with family abuse. Two women described how abuse in their respective families affected their motivation around adult education. The first woman related, “I quit in 9th grade. I didn’t finish the ninth grade. I did okay when I was in school. I always had a problem with math, but I had to quit in ninth grade because I had a child.” Her stepfather raped her, she reported, and she became pregnant. She “couldn’t deal with being around everybody. But I kept that child, which is now 25.” Her decision to keep the child added to her pain. “People in school [children and adults, including other children’s parents and teachers], they were really mean about the whole situation” because she refused to abort. “You could hear them talking behind your back. They would say ‘I can’t believe you’re keeping it.’” She continued, “I don’t believe in abortion, she [her unborn daughter] didn’t ask for me to be raped, so I’m not going to kill her. And I wasn’t giving her away. She deserved a life. So, they just, like, made fun, so I quit [school].” A researcher asked how that experience affected how she thought about education now. “That doesn’t really bother me anymore,” she replied.

Later in the interview, she stated about learning as an adult, “I have to go over things more than once. I don’t ask people for help because I feel like an idiot. I’m almost 41 and I’m having to ask these questions over and over.” She tried to study for an HSE exam on her own. “I try to do work in the HiSET books, and I get aggravated and mad because I can’t get it. I feel like I don’t comprehend some things. I’m not smart enough.” She struggles to comprehend as she recovers from the effects of substance abuse. She has started to notice a “little bit” of difference as time goes on. “I get kind of embarrassed because sometimes ... I really don’t understand what it’s saying [in the book].”



A woman stated, “I have to go over things more than once. I don’t ask people for help because I feel like an idiot.”

In another city, a homeless woman described a life of disability, abuse, violence, and despair, beginning from an early age. She reported being unable to read and write “all her life.” She was labeled “retarded” and was put in special education. She became “like an actor in a movie, I would jump, and I would smile, but that wasn’t how I was feeling.” Although not given a diagnosis, “they treated me as handicapped and I acted as handicapped, so handicapped actually became me.”



An adult was angry, unhappy, and suicidal at age 7. She said nothing mattered, “learning didn’t matter. I wanted to go.”

Her mother, who gave birth to her at age 16, moved her and her sister “from school to school to school. We never stayed in a school.” Her mother worked three jobs and moved her girls around the city repeatedly. Her mother reportedly did not want her. “Whatever you be told, you tear a child down and say [when she pleads with you], ‘Well, Mommy, my dream was to have a nice house.’ [Her mother told her]: ‘You ain’t wanted enough, that’s why you ain’t going to have nothing.’” She went on, “So, when you get told certain things as a child at home, that really causes what you grow up as.” She was angry, unhappy, and suicidal at an early age. She said nothing mattered, “learning didn’t matter. I wanted to go.” She further reported being sexually abused at age 7 by her cousins. She also “saw somebody get murdered when I was 7. Even though I didn’t know that man, I cried. I didn’t know it had a connection to it [the abuse] until I stopped doing drugs”, almost a year before her interview.

As an adult, she related, a tutor helped her learn to read and write. “Because I taught myself how to read, I can teach somebody who is struggling, and it will help me by being the help. Because I know how it is to struggle and what it takes to learn from struggling. I taught myself with the help of a tutor. He tutored me in many different ways.” The tutor taught her keyboarding skills and worked with her on reading and spelling. From him she learned how to tap out the words letter by letter as she read them aloud. She wanted to gain job skills and work toward an HSE credential so that she could get an income, find a home, and parent her son. “Everything happens for a reason,” she said. “The most pain creates the best people sometimes.” She paused again. “I’m just not there yet!” She broke into tearful laughter.

Family loss. Loss of family is a final theme representing large “T” trauma. Two adults in the same city but separate interview groups experienced family loss under destructive circumstances. As an interview group shared experiences about general family loss, a homeless man quietly spoke up. He related how in earlier times the mother of his child had PTSD. Despite his repeated promises to take care of them, she did not believe him. The mother killed the unborn child. As he told his story, he appeared still distraught that she did not accept his promises and continued to grieve the loss of both mother and child.

In the second group, a woman admitted, “I just lost my foster parents.” She felt very close to the parents who had raised her in foster care, who died in a housefire in which the family lost everything and only she survived. She called it “dying on a cross loss”. She said, “Everything changed real quick like at the blink of an eye. It touched me in a way that I know when God, what Jesus was going through when he died on the cross. The same thing was happening to me. It was painful, scary.



A woman admitted, “I just lost my foster parents.” She called it “dying on a cross loss”. She said, “Everything changed real quick like at the blink of an eye.”

Abandonment, everything.” She explained, “Everything went downhill for me. I was struggling, I was crying, I was angry. It was a whole lot of emotion going on in me.”

After the housefire and the loss of her foster parents and belongings, “It was really hard for me. I was the only one there. Everyone was gone, and I was the one responsible for everything [related to surviving]. People don’t understand that because they think it is easy to live their lives. They don’t know what it is like to live my life. My life is pretty rough. They don’t know what I am going through.” She continued to feel scared, nervous, and afraid, she admitted. A researcher asked her how that related to adult education. She replied that, whenever she does something moving forward, she asks, “Is that the purpose of life? Is that what God wanted me to do?”

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, a majority of adults in CAPE research value adult education, indicating generally positive attitudes toward adult education. On the CAPE survey, adults had high rates of agreement with individual statements on the value of education, especially that continuing in education would make them feel better about themselves and that adult education helps people make better use of their lives. Most adults enjoy activities that allow learning with others and disagreed that adult education is mostly for people with little else to do. These key findings about value of education echo Anderman et al.’s (2002) conclusion: “Whereas it may appear... that undereducated adults do not value education, this assumption is strongly contradicted by the data” (p. 204).

It is also important to note that how adults value adult education, as measured by a composite score of value, did not tend to vary by demographics, with the exception of a slight difference by gender favoring women. Whether disaggregated by age, income, health status, employment status, geography (urban or rural), or education attainment, the value adults placed on adult education remained high. This finding is positive and important for those planning policy and programming in that frequently held assumptions such as “older adults don’t care about adult education” or “people in poverty don’t value adult education” are not supported in this research. The appeal – and thus the reach – of adult education can and must be extended to all who are eligible, which is critical to “moving the needle” in reaching the forgotten 90% (Patterson, 2018; Patterson & Song, 2018).

Even as adults place value on adult education, by virtue of being in CAPE research, they were *not* currently participating and most never had. Why? For a minority, not participating is a matter of high “cost” (Beder, 1991; Anderman et al., 2002) – whether through exhaustion, conflicts with other activities of value, simple lack of motivation, or literal financial cost. For another small group of adults, career-related external regulation is minimal, and they consider themselves content where they are – whether in their careers, in retirement, or in getting by without credentials. The likelihood is high that these few groups of adults will not pursue adult education.

For many more adults in CAPE, however, deterrents from past influences or traumatic experiences inform their motivation around adult education. In some instances, negative past schooling experiences shape their willingness to participate in adult education (Anderman et al., 2002; Quigley, 2006 and 2017). Issues of stigma and identity hold adults back from pursuing adult education, especially for those who believe their abilities are fixed and unchangeable (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). As Yeager and Dweck (2012, p. 312) observe, “What students need the most is ... mindsets that represent challenges as things that they can take on and overcome over time with effort, new strategies, learning, help from others, and patience.”

Adult education policies and outreach efforts will need to assure adults that adult education will not be a repeat of negative aspects of “school” and will offer them basic, employment readiness, social capital, and contextualized skills that will enable them to reach their career or personal goals for themselves and their families. They need to expect instructional services delivered in a welcoming social context and accepting learning environment, at a realistic pace and among learners and teachers who acknowledge them as a whole person and offer much-needed support. Adult educators can become familiar with the components of trauma-informed education (e.g., West-Rosenthal, 2017) as they work to further support adult learners. Implementing CAPE interviewee recommendations on adult education settings and outreach will further communicate the positive difference adult education can make (Patterson & Song, 2018).

Many deterrents to adult education find their root causes in family history – lack of or loss of family, family negativity, instability, or abuse. Adult educators cannot alter that history, nor can they be expected to clinically diagnose or implement clinical interventions for family-related (or other) trauma. However, they can use techniques that address emotional issues, make referrals to local mental health service providers for trauma diagnosis and intervention, and familiarize themselves with ways to support adult learners to move forward in learning (Weisel, 2014). Weisel (2014) recommends adult educators teach adults to envision a safe space, which they can think about, feel, smell, hear and see in their minds. Next they can offer a four-step strengths-based process to aid learners in getting “unstuck” and able to move forward toward learning goals by: 1) asking them “what’s going on?” when they appear stuck, 2) asking them “what would you like to have happen?”, 3) helping adult learners make a list of what has helped when a similar situation has come up in the past, and 4) asking “what do you want to do about it and how can I help?” Solutions recommended by CAPE adults to situational and dispositional deterrents (Patterson & Song, 2018) will further enable adults to find the support systems, self-encouragement, confidence, and emotional support they need to start and complete adult education.

What can local mental health providers offer? As noted earlier, adults reliving traumas often are unable to process information or solve problems (Cvetec, 2008; Werk, n.d.). Interventions such as EMDR or trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy may benefit adults who experienced trauma, particularly those diagnosed with PTSD (Bisson et al., 2013; Chemtob et al., 2000; Cvetec, 2008, Werk, n.d.). EMDR involves the adult “focusing on a traumatic image, thought, emotion and a bodily sensation whilst receiving bilateral stimulation, most commonly in the form of eye movements” (Bisson et al, 2013, p. 6). EMDR allows the brain to begin to process trauma-related memories. According to Werk (n.d.), a short number of sessions of EMDR permit 9 in 10 traumatized adults to re-access the parts of the brain needed to process information.

Future CAPE reports will continue focusing on solutions adults offer to help engage them in adult education. A forthcoming report on nonparticipant use of technology will consider how nonparticipants use technology currently, the ways in which they would prefer to learn, and the technology-related solutions they recommend for adult education. Also planned is a set of more explicit materials with solutions CAPE interviewees recommended on outreach, support systems, and adult education settings.

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Appendix 1: Methods

Interview Sites

In keeping with recommendations from *The Forgotten 90%*, 17 interview sites were selected in Southern states (Florida, Louisiana, and Virginia) and Midwestern states (Kansas and Ohio). The author expresses deep gratitude to the many adult educators, employment officials, and non-profit administrators who recognized the importance of CAPE and recruited and hosted adults for the research³. In all they recruited 135 adults. In addition to administering individual surveys, researchers⁴ conducted 25 group interviews and 4 individual interviews. Six interview sites, with 75 adults, were in urban areas. Eleven sites, with 50 adults, were in rural areas.

CAPE Participants

In all, 135 adults were recruited for CAPE research⁵; final sample size was 125 adults. All adults left school early or indicated education outside USA; median education level was between grade 10 and 11 and ranged from “finished grade 6” to “went beyond high school”. Although 1 in 4 had some prior experience with adult education programming, three-fourths (75%) had never participated in adult education. Of those in adult education previously, most (63%) participated less than a year, with 1 in 4 (27%) participating one to two years and 10% two to five years.

The median age was 35 years, with a range from 18 to 75 years. By gender, 43% were male and 57% female. Ethnically, 75% were African-American, 22% European-American, and 3% Latino-American. Nearly all (97%) grew up speaking English in the USA. Adults experienced median “good” health, yet 23% reported fair or poor health. Interviewees included parents, seniors, homeless adults, formerly incarcerated adults, recovering addicts, adults with disabilities, and elder caregivers.

Annual personal income was at poverty levels, with 84% earning \$0 to \$18,000 annually and another 10% earning \$18,001 to \$36,000 annually. Three percent earned more than \$36,000 and 3% did not know their income. A small proportion of adults was employed (27%), with two-thirds (66%) unemployed and 7% out of the workforce. Those who were employed most often worked part time, up to 30 hours weekly (44%), or fulltime (31 to 40 hours; 42%), with only 14% working more than 40 hours weekly.

Interview Research

Interview site visits lasted approximately 90 minutes. During site visits, researchers welcomed adults and introduced the CAPE project. They passed out, explained, and collected informed consent forms.

³ In chronological order, sincere thanks go to Marty Finsterbusch, VALUEUSA, for recruitment design and referrals; to Donnie Spangler in Salem, Virginia, for hosting pilot research; to Liz Lanphear and Nelson Gabriel in the Kansas City metro area for recruitment and hosting; to Patricia Tyler, NAEPDC, Kaye Sharbono, COABE, and Greg Smith, Florida Literacy Coalition, for their referrals to states and programs; to Terri Mitchell, Katie McCarty, Doretha Bennett, and Whitley Parker in Winnsboro and Monroe, Louisiana, for recruitment, numerous arrangements, and hosting; to Bonnie Entler and Bob McFeeley in Cleveland, Ohio, for partner recruitment and hosting; and to Carla Cox in Orlando, Florida, for recruitment and hosting.

⁴ The CAPE project research team included: Margaret Patterson, Wei Song, Cynthia Campbell, Usha Paulson, Laura Weisel, Wyatt Patterson, and Mary Ann Kleintop.

⁵ Under CAPE’s design, 10 adults were ineligible because of current adult education participation.

The consent form explains the purpose and process of this study and allows participants to opt out of being audio recorded to photographed during the group discussion. Each adult was offered a \$25 gift card as incentive. Researchers then administered a 22-item survey that took adults 10-15 minutes to complete. The survey collected information on adult education background, motivation, technology use, and demographics.

After all adults completed surveys, a group fishbone activity occurred. Each adult worked independently to identify deterrents to participating in adult education, prioritized the top three for himself/herself, and posted them on a wallchart. A researcher then gathered the group, probed on reasons, and took notes on the wallchart until all deterrents had been identified and explained. Then a researcher briefly recapped each reason given and asked for solutions. Adults offered an array of actionable solutions to deterrents, both to issues they themselves faced and to issues other group members described. While many proposed solutions would require additional resources, because most interviewees were used to living with very little money, the solutions they recommended generally require relatively little cost. They also recommended systemic changes and comprehensive services that would enable them to participate. When all solutions were identified, the interview concluded and adults received incentives. Fishbone wallcharts were photographed and (when permitted) audio recordings were collected from which summaries of each group interview were later developed.






Data Analyses

Qualitative interview data were organized and coded in Dedoose 8.0 online software. The first researcher summarized interview data from transcribed audio recordings and fishbone wallchart notes. The researchers coded and reviewed all interview data, employing 84 distinct codes. Interview data consisted of 1,917 excerpts and 3,245 code applications. Inter-rater agreement for excerpts was high (90%), and the agreement rate for code applications was also high (93%).

Quantitative survey data were double entered into Excel from paper surveys and reconciled. Data were transferred to SPSS 24 for descriptive analyses. Composite scores were created for value of education by reverse coding four negatively worded items and summing the 11 items. Composite scores ranged from 24 to 55. Means were calculated, with an effect size of Cohen's *d* employed, representing the standardized difference between disaggregated groups.

Appendix 2: CAPE Survey Items on Value of Education

For this section, we will ask you how much you agree with the following statements on education. **In each row, please mark how much you agree or disagree with the statement.** Be mindful that statements may be worded in a positive or negative way.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree
					
Continuing my education would make me feel better about myself.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Successful people do not need adult education.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy education activities that allow me to learn with others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adult education helps people make better use of their lives.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I'm fed up with teachers and classes.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I need at least a high school equivalency diploma to find a high-paying job.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Money employers spend on education/training is well spent.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I dislike studying.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adult education is mostly for people with little else to do.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adult education is an important way to help people cope with changes in their lives.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I need to finish an adult education program in order to have a better salary later on.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Item sources: *Revised Adult Attitudes Toward Adult Education* instrument (Blunt & Yang, 2002), and *Academic Motivation Scale* (Ratelle et al., 2007), as revised.