

“When you are pushing, you’re going to want somebody’s help”:  
Support Systems for Adult Learners

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### **Abstract**

Adults encounter multiple barriers when considering adult education and completing educational goals. This paper considers support needs of adults outside adult education, who took part in root cause analysis in small groups, with respect to missing support from their inner circle, and for childcare, community, and financial needs. We also interpret solutions adults recommended, including external initiatives and personal initiative. We propose that adult education programs and learners, in partnership with organizations, collaborate to offer support systems. Meeting support needs – in-house, through fellow adult learners, or via a partner - can encourage adult learners to stay to completion.

Keywords: adult learners, participation, barriers, support system, expectations, community pressure, root cause analysis

## Introduction

Although adult education opens a door for adults to gain basic skills that can enhance their role in the family, community, and workplace, 90% of adults eligible for adult education do not step through that door (Patterson, 2018). Why? Doing so is not a simple matter. Adults considering adult education encounter multiple barriers (Goto & Martin, 2009; Patterson & Song, 2018; Wonacott, 2001). Adults may wonder, can they really “make it happen” (Wulfert, 2018, p. 2) - can they complete goals despite barriers and setbacks (Duckworth & Gross, 2014)? Potential adult learners may also need support from important people in their lives (Goto & Martin, 2009) or from adult education’s network of partner organizations (Crowther et al., 2010) to overcome barriers. The aim of this paper is to investigate specific support needs adults perceive as barring them from adult education participation, as well as root causes and major effects related to support systems. The paper also analyzes support-related solutions nonparticipants proposed to remove barriers to participation.

## Literature Review

What constitutes a support system? Pearson defined support as a “continuing interpersonal resource” that adults depend on to develop and maintain effectiveness (1983, p. 362). Support system is defined for this paper as presence or lack of supportive people or services that help adults begin and stay in adult education through completion. A support system encompasses other people – family, friends, and significant others – but also organizations and services they provide.

### Inner Circle

To begin with, important people in adults’ lives may exercise decided influence on adults’ educational decisions. According to Goto and Martin (2009, p. 16), these are “people in their lives who influenced them strongly,” who form a longtime social circle, a “select cadre of friends and family members.” With time, those in the circle “influenced each other’s views in a variety of areas, including education” (p. 16). An adult’s inner circle might exert a positive or negative influence on furthering education (Comings, 2007; Crowther et al., 2010; Goto & Martin, 2009). The inner circle may include parents, siblings, children, or peers. Stuart (2006) found that peers played a positive role in encouraging first-generation students to pursue higher education, even when parents were not supportive.

Black and colleagues (2006) suggest also considering benefits of social capital. They define social capital as networks people “relate with, and the qualities of those relations, including levels of trust, and how people support one another” (Black et al., 2006, p. 321). Field (2005, p. 5) contends that by “treating social relationships as a form of capital, it proposes that they are a resource, which people can then draw on to achieve their goals.” In some networks, obtaining education is considered a disavowal of one’s history or heritage (Strawn, 2003). Indeed, “some people consciously decide not to pursue learning opportunities in case it might jeopardize their social ties” (Field, 2009, p. 3).

### Barriers

Additionally, potential adult learners face barriers. Barriers impacting adult learners’ involvement in adult education programs are divided into three categories: situational, dispositional, and institutional (Cross, 1981). Patterson and Song (2018, p. 4) define the categories as follows:

- Situational barriers “occur as adults deal with situations outside their control or balance multiple roles”. Examples include low income, family needs, and age.
- Dispositional barriers involve “learners’ self-perceptions and attitudes”. Examples are self-esteem, influence from past educational experiences, and anxiety.
- Institutional barriers “occur when educational, employment, or criminal justice procedures, policies, or practices prevent participation.” Examples include convenient scheduling, providing sufficient information to adults, and accessible program locations.

Barriers deter adults before and while they complete education. Educational programs need to inform adults of available support services for individual needs (Wonacott, 2001).

### **Setting Goals and Achievement**

Goto and Martin (2009) employed Bandura’s theory of behavioral change and social cognitive theory (1977; 1986; 2001) to inform their analysis of how goal setting, motivation, and self-efficacy influence ways adults approach barriers. Social cognitive theory explains that people are “not free agents nor passive reactors to external pressures” (Wulfert, 2018, p. 1). People can have some control over actions and decisions through self-regulatory actions: “by setting goals, arranging environmental inducements, generating strategies, [and] evaluating goals attainment” (2018, p. 1).

Bandura (1977) explained that outcome expectancies are what people believe will happen because of certain actions, and self-efficacy is what they believe they can accomplish (Goto & Martin, 2009). People may believe something is possible, but “whether they embark on a course of action depends on their perceived ability to make it happen” (Wulfert, 2018, p. 2). Despite challenges to learning, when adults pursue goals, they will show progress (Comings, 2007; Goto & Martin, 2009). Studies have shown that grit can be associated with completion of goals while enduring obstacles and setbacks (Duckworth & Gross, 2014).

### **Partnerships**

Individuals are not the only source of support for adult learners. Community partnerships with adult education are widely recognized as supporting beneficial outcomes (Bryan, 2005; Wickert & McGuirk, 2005; Cowan, 2006; Crowther et al., 2010). Wickert and McGuirk (2005) and Cowan (2006) advocate for broad-based partnerships: that is, organizations of stakeholders representing government, business, educational, community, and/or faith-based interests. Partnerships can build community capacity (Wickert & McGuirk, 2005). A cooperative relationship may reach many adults needing adult education as other fundamental needs are met. Examples include local programs integrating literacy with women’s health, services for adults with disabilities, and addiction recovery (Wickert & McGuirk, 2005; Crowther et al., 2010). These holistic approaches may lead to increased persistence in educational and other goals (Crowther et al., 2010).

### **Research Questions**

The literature on inner circles, barriers, goal setting, and partnerships informs our first research question (RQ1). Because our qualitative approach to CAPE involved conducting root cause analysis in small groups of interviewees, we also summarize root causes and effects that adult interviewees identified (RQ2) and interpret solutions they recommended (RQ3).

1. What specific support needs do nonparticipant interviewees perceive that keep them from participating in adult education?
2. What are root causes and major effects related to needing support systems in adult education, as explained by interviewees?
3. What support-related solutions did nonparticipants propose to remove barriers to participation in adult education?

## **Methods**

### **CAPE Overview**

Data employed in this paper were collected in a larger study, Critiquing Adult Participation in Education (CAPE), conducted in 2017-18 by VALUEUSA. A previous paper (Patterson & Song, 2018) provided an overview of CAPE, its participants, and major findings. This paper's first author was lead researcher for CAPE; in-depth analyses presented here, including analyses of barriers, solutions, and root causes, are new.

The purpose of CAPE was to identify barriers adults faced to pursuing adult education and solutions they recommended to participate. The CAPE research team conducted 25 group interviews with 125 adults in Florida, Kansas, Louisiana, Ohio, and Virginia. In this convenience sample of southern and midwestern states, six interview sites (n = 75), were urban, and 11 sites (n = 50) rural. Interview sites included employment agencies and community service non-profits. No interviewees participated in adult education when interviewed.

Interviewees included parents, seniors, and formerly incarcerated adults. They were 18 to 75 years, with a median age of 35; 57% were female. Nearly all were native English speakers – 75% were African-American, 22% European-American, and 3% Latino-American.

After introducing CAPE and gaining informed consent, researchers began a group “fishbone” activity (root cause analysis; McComb, 2015, p. 1), in which adults identified, prioritized, and posted barriers to adult education participation on a wallchart with a fishbone structure. A researcher encouraged interviewees to explain why they selected deterrents and probed on reasons until saturation was reached. Once prioritized barriers were explained, a researcher briefly recapped reasons and asked for solutions. Adults were asked, “if you were King or Queen of [Town Name] or could wave a magic wand, what would you do?” to remove barriers. They offered numerous actionable, low-cost solutions and recommended changes and services that would enable participation. Once solutions were identified, the interview concluded, and adults were offered \$25 gift card incentives. When permitted, audio recordings were collected, from which summaries of interviews were later developed.

Qualitative interview data were organized and coded in Dedoose 8 online software. The first author and another researcher coded and reviewed interview data, employing 84 distinct codes for 1,917 excerpts. An excerpt is a portion of text coded to represent a potential theme – an excerpt could be a phrase or sentence(s). Inter-rater agreement for excerpts was high (90%).

## Analysis of Barriers and Solutions

To analyze data, we first reviewed coded barriers and solutions. This process yielded 104 interview excerpts on support-related barriers and 71 excerpts on solutions. We reviewed interviewee demographics and backgrounds in the 104 excerpts and described excerpts' context before interpreting RQ1 findings. We next identified specific support-related barriers, as well as solutions interviewees thought would allow them to participate. In interpreting support themes, we added quotes from interviewees to provide further context and honor interviewees' experiences and explanations.

## Analyses of Root Causes

Analyses of root causes began with drawing a combined fishbone to summarize all support-related needs and reasons from separate groups. We combined 104 coded excerpts into 28 subthemes and identified six major themes: unmet adult expectations, family, loss of purpose, trust, costs of support, and faith. The first author employed an Excel template, Cause Mapping<sup>(R)</sup> (Cross, 2000), to organize logically and display root causes, subcauses, and major effects from this combined fishbone. All authors reviewed causal mapping for accuracy and logical flow. In the final cause map, 20 tan boxes represent root causes, such as adult survival, family dynamics, anti-education community pressure, and social mistrust, that lead via unidirectional arrows through multiple subcauses to six pink boxes representing major effects (Figures 1-4).

## Findings

Concepts relating to support systems were mentioned consistently across states, in proportion to the full sample being interviewed (N = 125). All interviewees speaking of support-related barriers finished at least some high school, with the largest proportion completing grade 11 (38%). Furthermore, 24% of interviewees talking about support-related barriers had even attempted postsecondary education coursework, higher than the 7% doing so in the full sample. Males addressing support systems did so at a higher rate (61%) than their representation in the full sample (43%). In employment and income, interviewees speaking about support systems were representative of the full sample. Remarkably, 90% of these interviewees participated previously in adult education, a much higher rate than for the sample overall (25%).

## Research Question 1

From interview excerpts relating to support systems, we identified four specific types of supports that interviewed nonparticipants associate with barriers to learning: inner circle support; childcare support; community support systems; and financial support for and while learning.

**Inner circle support.** Interviewees appeared to crave support from their inner circles - such as verbal support for pursuing adult education or encouragement when studying was difficult. They spoke of family, friends, and neighbors trying to "keep them down" or "hold them back" from pursuing further education. Negative attitudes toward education were common in interviewees' communities and families. While some simply discouraged education in favor of work, others professed to be supportive ("They talk a good game"), but their verbal support was disingenuous, and actions reflected otherwise ("Like a snake in the grass"). Others' negativity was more overt. One man explained, "If you haven't got a good support system, when you out here trying to do the positive thing.... people are telling you 'Aw, you ain't going to do

nothing. You're just wasting your time.” He elaborated that the same people would be right by his side if he engaged in destructive behaviors.

Interviewees also spoke of being talked about behind their back, being the target of jealousy, and even concealing pursuit of education from loved ones to avoid disparaging remarks. A woman recalled a couple she knew where the man threatened the woman's safety when she tried to pursue education. “I'm not even sure relationships [with significant others] are safe,” she remarked. “Sometimes it is not that easy to walk away.”

Negativity from inner circles was particularly salient for previously incarcerated adults. One reentering man indicated that his parole officer thought it best to return to his previous community. The man recognized the community's poor influence, stating, “You put me back in an environment I was struggling to get out of, to help better myself. You put me right back into the jungle.” When interviewed, he was “trying to keep his focus” to avoid “the same pithole”. Another adult thought prior incarceration would taint his family's view of him pursuing education. He anticipated them saying, “You are not going to learn much and will just go back to your same old ways.”

Whether previously incarcerated or not, interviewees found family support important to moving on in life. A group of men agreed that family could hold them back from making accomplishments. “That's part of why people break down in moving on,” said one man, “They don't have that family support.”

**Support in childcare.** For many interviewees, lack of childcare was an insurmountable barrier. With limited income, childcare costs were often prohibitive. One group observed that it is hard to attend adult education without low- or no-cost childcare onsite. Beyond financial burden, some parents expressed apprehension about leaving their children in the care of others. Interviewees shared concerns about lack of supervision from some babysitters and daycare facilities, predatory behavior, and the like. One woman stated, “I don't trust anyone with my kids.”

Interviewees saw assistance with childcare as a tangible way for family and friends to provide them support in learning. While some interviewees indicated receiving help with childcare, help tended to be short-term or sporadic. Multiple parents complained that relatives and friends were not willing to provide childcare for the “long haul” that education requires. One interviewee spoke of family initially agreeing to provide support, but by “the second class [date], they say ‘I can't babysit’ or ‘I need some money’. You don't have a job because you are trying to go to school, so you can't get the money.” According to one man, “If they [family] say, ‘Oh, he ain't giving me nothing [to watch the child]’ but they aren't looking at, ‘Oh, he is doing something good with his life, he is trying to make something better, like he is going to school, he is doing this, he ain't out here on the streets’ but you don't want to watch his child, it's just because he's not giving you 50 cents. Where the love come from there?”

Others resisted beginning adult education, knowing the likelihood of having to quit from childcare needs was high. A young mother lamented, “Dang, my Mama won't even keep my kids so I can do this positive. So why would I even do it anyway? If I ain't got that support... you get discouraged with no support.”

**Community support systems.** Interviewees also spoke of unavailable or inconsistent community support. One adult stated he could not afford educational testing. He noted that “everybody is saying what

you need to do but there is no help.” When asked why, he replied that regional government provided little support. Others in his group explained that government supports had recently diminished. Why? Group members thought not enough adults accessed them and some who did reportedly abused supports, so supports were cut back.

In another group, a woman expected government to support adult education but did not know what kind of programs provide support. She believed no money was available for testing costs.

**Financial supports for and while learning.** Nearly all adults in CAPE earned less than \$18,000 annually. Without help for food or rent, and earning little income, adults were simply trying to survive and could not afford to pursue adult education. Three of six adults in a group talked about experiencing many challenges while homeless. One adult said, “I didn’t know what going home felt like.” Another perceived being very stressed, that “odds are against you” [for survival]. One woman considered herself “in crisis.” She “met a lady to help get on my feet” again. She stated, “It’s not what you know but who you know.” Talking to people around her helped her plan to end homelessness.

A woman recalled that she couldn’t rely on family to help with basics like rent and food so she could study. As one man put it, “Your family ain’t going to let you and your five kids come stay with them!” Another man described having “a hard knock life”. He didn’t have a father. Just growing up “not having” brought him to the point of making sure that he “had”: money for food and life necessities.

## Research Question 2

**Loss of purpose for education.** RQ2 considers root causes and major effects as identified by interviewees in CAPE. A first major effect adults described was a loss of purpose to begin adult education. Loss of purpose was associated with stress, loneliness, and resignation. Interviewees identified three root causes: little or no income, teen parenthood, and isolation from nuclear family (i.e., parents and siblings; see Figure 1). One of three young mothers in a group related how “discouragement causes stress. If you start getting discouraged, like ... ‘I ain’t going to get my GED because I don’t have no support, I don’t have no help’, you’re going to get discouraged to the point where it is stressing you out. It makes you feel like you don’t even have a purpose to be here.” In another group a woman perceived that teen parenthood led to loss of purpose. “Some people have kids and they give up all hope” of education, she said.



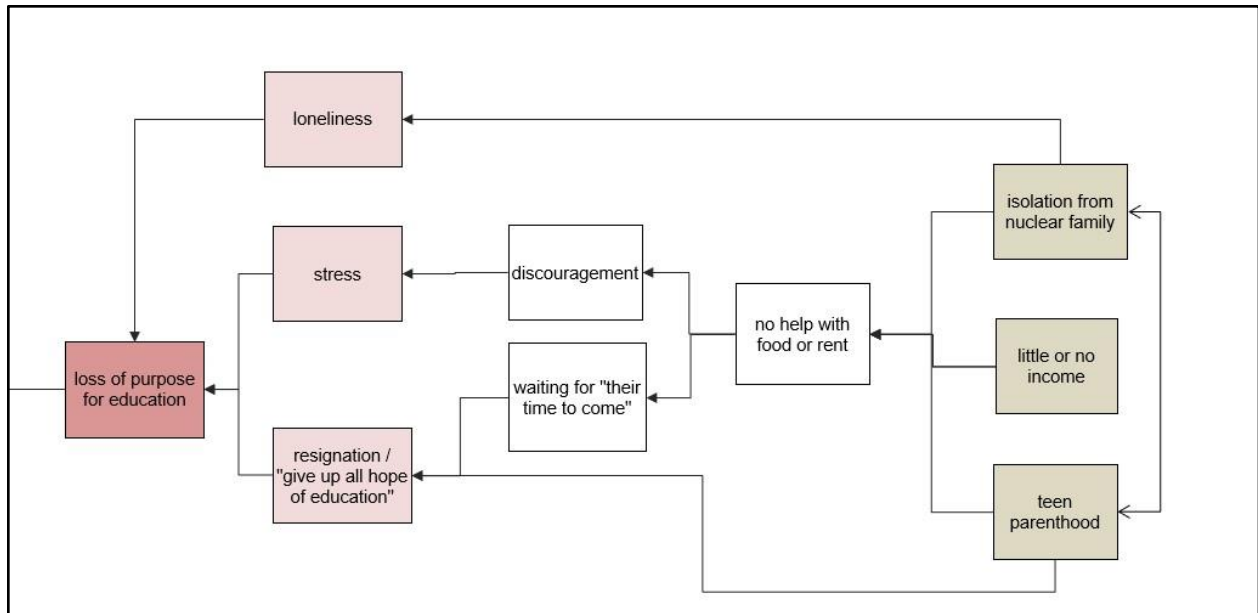


Figure 1. Root causes of loss of purpose for education among adult interviewees

When a researcher asked how it felt to depend solely on herself for support, a woman bowed her head and replied, “Sad. Lonely.” Losing her foster parents in a house fire devastated another woman: “It was really hard for me. I was the only one there [after the fire]. Everyone was gone, and I was the one responsible for everything.” Another woman was raised by a grandmother because her parents were young and were “not doing what they are supposed to do as parents.”

**Disappointment and stress.** Figure 2 displays root causes that interviewees related to major effects of family dynamics and frequently unmet adult expectations, which explain much disappointment and stress they experience. Multiple adult interviewees expected that families should support them in pursuing adult education. Like adult interviewees themselves, nuclear families of interviewees tend to have limited resources, whether financially, with time, or through advanced age. With limited resources, family life becomes uncertain, and unreliability of family members leads to a disconnect between what adults expect and what nuclear family can actually provide.



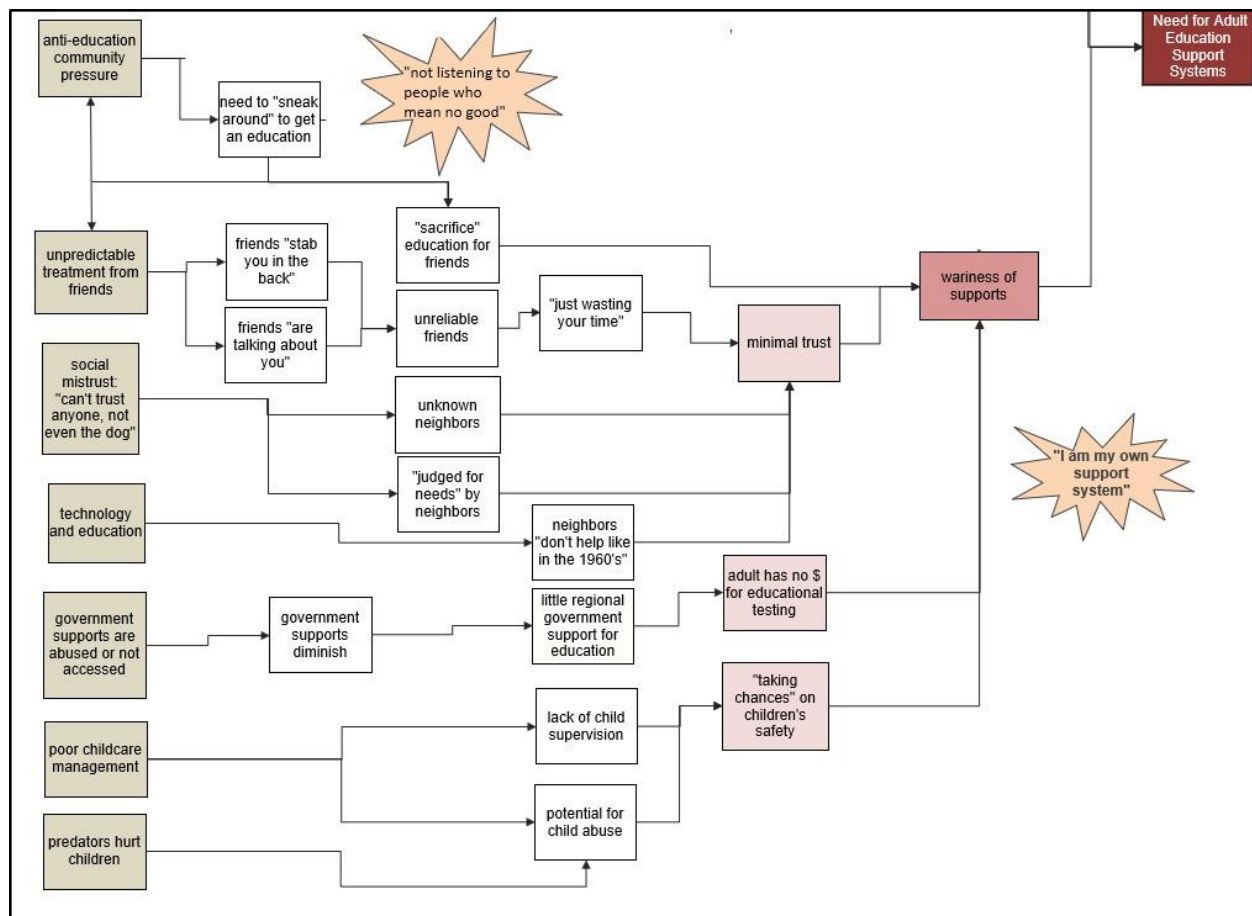


Figure 3. Root causes for adult interviewee wariness of supports

Other interviewees found friends' treatment unpredictable. A woman said, "You can't depend on nobody. I got to depend on myself" rather than "so-called friends". In another group, a woman stated about friends, "There's no support. They are talking about you." A man in her group added: "Some people... aren't there for you. They say, 'You don't need to go to school to get a raise.' Or they say, 'You ain't going to make it.' A lot of things to discourage you." A man in that group explained,

"Sometimes, ... you may get up and want to have a change, saying, 'I need to better myself.' But then you hang around friends or family, and they say, 'You [are] 25 years old, what do you want with school?' ...So, you sneak around, tell them you got a job on the side, then you just get to the point where you feel like you 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. Now all your boys are doing their gang banging stuff and you know they don't want you to better yourself."

Some friends of interviewees put down education, asking, "What are you going to school for? You think you are better than us? We're from the gutter," said a man. He continued, "That takes a lot of strength [to stand up to] when you are used to looking up to these folks."

A man in another group advised, "Listening is a powerful thing. You have to be careful who you listen to. Listening is the number one priority.... That's why ears are on the head by the brain." He said, "So, if you listen to the people ...who don't mean no good, you go straight down." He paused. "You don't see it coming. It's from a person who you really think a lot of, [as] being in your corner. That's why it's so vicious and it cuts so deep, because you don't expect it. So, they got a lot of power."

Even institutional supports, such as childcare, can lead to wariness. Interviewees talked about childcare staff "not really supervising the children." Getting safe childcare meant "taking chances." Group members worried that children would get injured or shot accidentally. Another group discussed predators. "You always have to keep [children] with you because you can't trust anyone," said one woman. "You have to watch who you let watch your kids because there is a lot of child abuse going around."

**Trust in supports and minimal need for supports.** Two positive major effects related to support systems are trust in and minimal need for supports (see Figure 4). When faced with circumstances of little or no income, anti-education community pressures, and isolation from nuclear family, as described earlier, most adults reach a decision point about adult education. An interviewee told a researcher: "Yeah, there are two ways: where you want to be, and where you *don't* want to be. You talk about what's blocking us, the barrier. That's it."

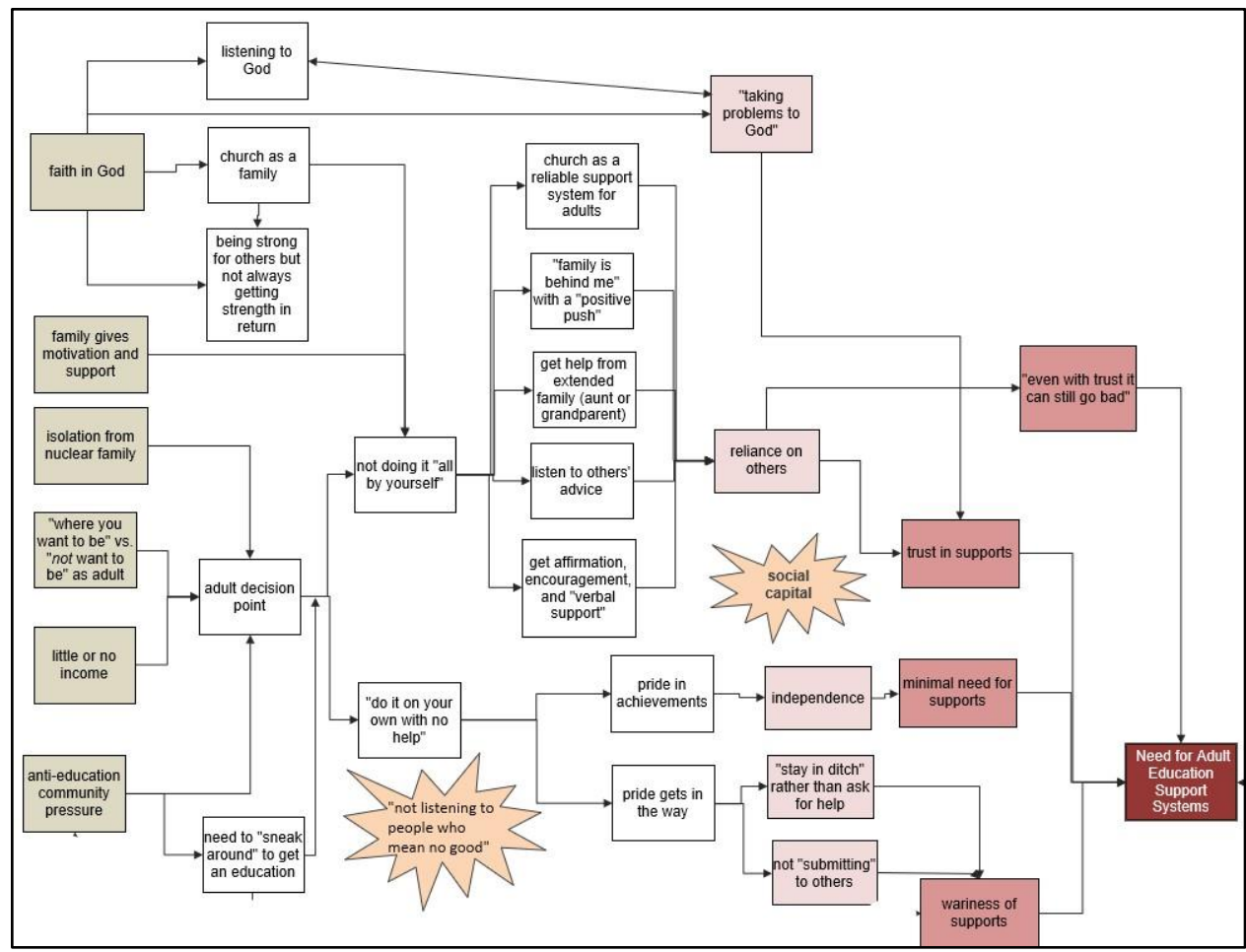


Figure 4. Root causes of trust in and need for supports among adult interviewees

When it comes to pursuing education, adults decide either to “do it on your own with no help” or to not do it “all by yourself.” One man stated outright, “I am my [own] support system.” Some of those who “did it on their own” tended to relish their independence and achievements. A woman said, “Pat yourself on the back. Because you did that on your own. Without no help.” They experienced minimal need for support. For others going it alone, pride gets in the way. “If you are overly proud, you would rather stay in the ditch,” explained an interviewee, than ask for help. A woman in his group needed help but refused to “submit to them [her family]” to ask for it. “The feeling is, “I got this, I can do this by myself,”” she explained. Unwillingness to submit from pride led to wariness of supports.

Adults deciding not to do it “all by yourself” are often able to listen to others’ advice, accept help from partners or extended family, and get affirmation, encouragement, and “verbal support.” A woman stated vehemently about her partner, “I hold down the pork for my man... It wouldn’t even matter if he was going to school or getting a job. If he was doing something to better himself, I would support him.” A man in a separate group advised, “If you listen to the good guy, it leads you to a good direction... If I’d have listened to my parents, I would be in school and graduated.” Another man in his group added, “When you’re trying to go to school, and the family’s behind you, it makes you just want to go.” In a different group, a man said his family offered to help with “whatever you need, as long as we see you are helping yourself.” Another interviewee perceived her family gave a “positive push” for education. These adults could rely on others and develop trust in supports.

Others saw church as a reliable support system or even as a family. Rooted in Christian faith, numerous adults talked about listening and talking to God. A woman said, “If I have something to tell somebody, I get on my knees and tell it to [Jesus]. I don’t have time anymore to waste [telling family].” Referring to God, she exclaimed, “He’s the support!” A man in her group nodded enthusiastically, “He’s the reason why we talking right now!...He’s the man with the master plan. Ain’t nobody else.”

In a separate group, a woman said, “There’s only one person that’s better than us, and he’s up there [pointing skyward].” Another woman in her group added, “And like I’ve been telling everybody, ‘if you ain’t got you, and nobody’s got you, God’s got you.’” From their faith they, too, developed trust in supports. They learned to be strong for others, even when they did not get strength in return. As one interviewee pointed out, “even with trust it can still go bad.”

### **Research Question 3**

#### **Interviewee solutions related to support systems**

Recommending solutions related to support systems was a universal response among interviewee groups. Of 25 groups interviewed, adults in 23 groups identified specific support-related solutions that they perceived might remove barriers to adult education participation. Support-related solutions fell into two major categories: external initiatives and personal initiative. External initiatives are those offering adult support from organizations representing government, business, educational, community, and/or faith-based interests (Wickert & McGuirk, 2005; Cowan, 2006). External initiatives, according to interviewees, include community services for navigating systems, childcare, tutoring support, and support groups for emotional and mental health issues. Another category of support that interviewees described requires personal initiative from prospective adult learners. Personal initiative involves making connections to find a new personal support system, holding onto faith and spirituality, and participating in support exchanges.

**Solutions requiring external initiatives.** Interviewees were generally aware external initiatives existed but often did not fully understand them or know how to access them. One interviewee remarked vaguely, “The government should be doing stuff to support” adult education. Another suggested finding “some type of service to help.” Adults recommended scholarships to cover testing fees. Peer advocates and volunteers help navigate people through a support system. “People who went through the same thing you did, and they can advocate for you to deal with the system.”

Support also means helping an adult get time to study by watching the adult’s children. Some interviewees advised adults to work with family and friends to get childcare, even if it means relocating closer to extended family who can provide childcare. “You have someone there that is on your side, that is willing to help you babysit,” explained a woman. Others recommended onsite childcare. A woman relayed hearing from her cousin about childcare. A local community college offered childcare for its students, which allowed the cousin to participate in adult education.

A third set of recommendations involved offering tutoring, whether in a group or individually. A woman described how

one-on-one help is awesome. You get the face-to-face and it’s like me and you, but working in a group is a lot better, too, because you get to know other people and see their struggles. And then if it is the same thing you are struggling with and they got a different way of doing things, you all can share your different ideas and maybe that way will be better for you. I feel like working in a group is really cool.

Several interviewees talked about needing math tutoring. They received help in math from stepparents, fiancés, parents of friends, and their own children. Without exception, they thought they “would have failed” without tutoring.

Support groups for emotional and mental health issues were a last type of external initiative interviewees recommended. Support means providing encouragement, agreed one group. A woman explained, “Someone to be there to say, ‘Good job!’ and encourage you.” Another woman recommended having mentors to explain why a person needs to do things and to help the learner continue. “You can encourage somebody. Yeah, encouragement... You can believe in somebody, that they can do it. And you know that they can do it when they make it all the way.” In a separate group, a woman remarked, “You don’t give them confidence, you help them learn, so they can get more confidence. Help them make their own decisions.” Having emotional and mental health support might involve group therapy, where “some people might have more ideas” to solve problems than a single individual would. Another woman observed, “It feels good to know that you have somebody in your life or in your corner to root you on every step of the way. That would definitely help me get through life a whole lot easier.”

**Solutions requiring personal initiative.** An interviewee stated that if she had a support system, she “could go to” education. Doing so would mean finding a network of personal connections (Field, 2005; Black et al., 2006). A first type of personal initiative, an interviewee group advised, is making connections – that is, making friends if there is no family support for the participant to start adult education. “Talk to people around you,” suggested one. A second interviewee added, “It’s not what you know but who you know.” Another agreed, “You need to know somebody.” The “somebody” providing support could be “a new group of friends” - or a godmother, grandmother, cousins, or aunts outside the inner circle of nuclear family. A

man added, “We gotta be strong for ourself. Don’t worry about what the family got going on.” These adults advised not worrying about lack of family support and relying more on support from friends or others who understand the circumstances.

Developing a new support system can help adults gain confidence and persistence. A woman observed, “If I have good people that surround me, that’s doing things that I want to do [in learning], that I am aiming for.” She added, “And once you get that confidence from that person who really care for you, you work on it. You work toward it, you receive it.” A man said, “Keeping the people that I associate with and keeping people around me that just want to learn. The people that I be around, that come around me.” A man stated about persistence, “Sometimes people get stuck. It is like you are in quicksand, you get disgusted.” He advised people to “stay aggressive” and don’t give up. He said, “Pride can be a good thing, or it can hurt you.” He advised adults to “back up and let it go by”, not to have “too much pride” and allow people to help, even “when you don’t want to ask for help”. It means identifying the “right people” to get help from, rather than getting help from manipulative people who would take advantage or be toxic.

Friends, whether new or longtime, can motivate adults and help them move forward. Friends can also be an inspiration. Two women advised adults to find inspirational peers. One talked admiringly about a friend who got a GED credential so she could continue toward a degree. Her friend told her, “You know, we can do it together...” She admitted feeling inspired toward education by her friend’s example.

A second type of personal initiative involves faith and spirituality. As described in RQ2 findings, some adults saw church as a reliable support system or even as family. A woman “takes her problems” to God and relies on spiritual support to get by. Another woman relies on a “church home” which helps her feel closer to God. She joins with fellow parishioners “like a family.” In her “church home,” she added, “we all help one another”, and “we are just one family joined with God.” One group asked, “How much faith and determination does a person have?” At the homeless missions, stated a woman, everyone is different. “I still pray and keep my faith every day,” she said. “You gotta be kind of humble” about people, life, and time. “On the streets it is real,” emphasized another formerly homeless adult. “You can’t let people get to you.”

A final type of personal initiative is participating in support exchanges. Adults advise finding other committed, goal-oriented people. “You apply yourself and when you are pushing, you’re going to want somebody’s help.” Another adult in the same group responded, “Both give and receive.” The group talked about helping out where they could. A man added, “Care about others.” In another group, a woman said,

My grandmother used to tell us, ‘Kindness is free. That’s one of the things we can give to another person.’ Some of the things we are so worried about is what we are giving to somebody and how it is going to benefit us. But... by helping you it is going to help all of us.

In a separate group, a man advocated for supporting each other – that people see that positive support and it supports them. “That has to come from within. You gotta love someone... [in return] somebody can speak up for” you. Adults recommended helping each other by sharing certain complementary skills. “It’s all about helping one other.”

## Discussion

Creating support systems, even with actionable solutions that adults recommend, is far from easy; “if it were easy,” a conference participant told the first author bluntly following a CAPE presentation, “it would have been done by now.” The fact that adults recommended solutions requiring external initiatives *and* personal initiative makes it clear that a single solution, or even one type of solution, will not adequately address the sometimes-overwhelming challenges adults face to walking through the adult education center door.

Which brings us to a critical and highly debatable question, whose responsibility *is* it to provide support systems for new or continuing adult learners? On the basis of what we learned from adults in CAPE, we propose that adult education programs and prospective adult learners, in partnership with government, community services, and other organizations, collaborate closely to create and offer support systems for incoming learners. The active involvement of adult learners assures that support systems will be responsive to what learners need locally.

Initially, adult education’s partners in government, community services, and other organizations can offer resources to help incoming learners learn to navigate systems and secure childcare. The catch, according to interviewees, is that adults need to know about resources and how to access them. This recommendation is critical enough that *WIOA* Section 231(e)(11) requires states to consider it in awarding adult education funding, i.e., whether the program coordinates with “support services (such as child care, mental health services, and career planning) that are necessary to enable individuals, including individuals with disabilities or other special needs, to attend and complete programs.” We join Wickert and McGuirk (2005), Cowan (2006), and Crowther and colleagues (2010) in recommending broad-based partnerships of government, business, educational, community, and/or faith-based interests to build capacity around adult education programs. Such partnerships – whether formalized in coalitions, written into memoranda of understanding, or occurring informally – have the potential to reach a large number of adults in need of basic education as well as other fundamental needs.

While benefits of community partnerships in promoting adult education are recognized, challenges to building and maintaining these relationships remain. To realize lasting gains, long-term commitment from partnering organizations is required. Securing and sustaining funding brings its own set of problems. Although literacy is a community issue (Wickert & McGuirk, 2005), how can support be mobilized from within - especially when many community members do not recognize the extent of its benefits? Outside-the-box approaches may be necessary: for example, Bryan (2005) highlights the importance of faith for historically marginalized communities and suggests involving churches as partners in disseminating educational information and providing mentoring and tutoring services. Solutions for a community may be as unique as the community itself and should take into account the culture and needs of its members, especially prospective learners.

Adult learners also have a choice, as a personal initiative, to recast their identity while pursuing adult education, especially if the inner circle denies support (Field, 2009). In planning for outreach efforts, adult educators need to recognize this potential choice, acknowledge any previous disappointment and stress, and offer the chance to rediscover purpose for education. Branding the adult education center as a



safe and trustworthy place to strengthen a newly emerging identity will send a welcoming message to prospective learners.

Beyond outreach efforts, adult educators need to make existing partner and individual supports explicit (Wonacott, 2001) in orientations and counseling sessions. Prospective and incoming adult learners may not even realize that adult education offers an internal support system, or if they do realize it, how the system works. Support networks, many informal and spontaneous, already exist among many learners in adult education programs. Adult learners should be part of the collaborative process to raise awareness about and formalize internal support networks, with assurance of safeguards to build trust.

Use of support exchanges - similar to a timebank in which an hour of one person's time is worth an hour of another's time - could be developed or expanded as adult learners collaborate and gain trust within adult education programs. An adult with transportation, for example, could offer a ride to a fellow adult learner without it, in exchange for access to childcare which the first adult needs. Adults could also exchange strengths and complementary skills with others in support groups from whom they gain emotional support.

Knowing that support needs can be met through adult education participation – whether in the adult education center, through fellow adult learners, or in a partner's facility - can not only encourage the learner to walk through the center door but stay to completion. As an interviewee advised, "Provide the education for people who want one. Make sure you go all out for them...provide the way so people are able to get it."

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

Our study, while largescale and rigorous, has several limitations. A first limitation is geographic; while it represents large groups of nonparticipating adults (Patterson, 2018), CAPE is not nationally representative in that, by design, it focused on sections of southern and midwestern USA (Patterson & Song, 2018). It is possible that adults in other U.S. regions would identify different causes, effects, and solutions.

We also acknowledge that not all 90% of adult education-eligible adults will pursue adult education. Some may simply not be interested, and others may feel content with their current circumstances. Our goal, as stated in Patterson and Song (2018, p. 14), is "moving the needle" to reduce the 90%. This goal is especially critical in response to major job losses occurring during the corona virus pandemic of 2020, in that many adults may need more skills to get new jobs.

Additionally, CAPE measured adults' backgrounds and motivations generally through a survey but did not assess persistence or self-efficacy. Given the inductive nature of the root cause analysis approach during group interviews, these qualities appeared but were not explicitly probed. A future study could survey adults nationally, including measures of grit, self-efficacy, and social capital. Using findings from this paper, it could also survey adults on need for and experience with support systems.

Another follow-up study could involve examining adult education programs with successful support systems. Do these support systems include features that CAPE interviewees recommended? Do they include additional components or features that retain adults?

Finally, future research needs to identify and test interventions, employing rigorous design, that show promise of meeting adult needs for support. adult education programs could be randomly selected to participate, alongside control programs not receiving intervention, and learner outcomes could be compared statistically. In addition to survey measures described in the preceding paragraph, outcomes such as skill gains, growth in parenting and community participation, entry into postsecondary programs, or changes in employment measures could be compared. Tested interventions found to be effective with adult learners could make a meaningful contribution to the field of adult education as well as its evidence base.

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