



# Supporting Effective Research in Adult Foundational Education

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More than one quarter (28%) of Americans aged 16-65 have literacy skills at the lowest level, meaning they can only understand short, simple sentences, while a third (34%) have numeracy skills at the lowest level, meaning they can only solve simple single-step problems.<sup>1</sup> These skill needs can have implications for multiple dimensions of life and work<sup>2</sup>, including earnings<sup>3</sup>, children’s learning,<sup>4</sup> and family access to healthcare.<sup>5</sup> Ensuring the quality and effectiveness of adult foundational education (AFE) programs to develop these skills can have multiple benefits for society.

Research can help strengthen AFE programs to maximize resources and help adults achieve their learning and life goals, and the field is ripe with opportunities to address unanswered questions. Research in AFE can contribute to improving practice and outcomes for the adult students who attend programs to build their literacy, numeracy, and English language skills; attain a high school equivalency diploma; and/or prepare for work or further education. But, if researchers are to contribute most meaningfully to AFE, they must first understand its unique context and the potential opportunities and challenges of conducting research with its learners, practitioners, and programs.

This article is intended to share insights on doing research in the context of AFE. It can serve as a starting point for conversations within research teams and with AFE program staff and students. As a product of the [CREATE Adult Skills Network](#) (funded by the Institute of Education Sciences), we put together this resource based on inputs gathered through a survey and interviews with CREATE research teams regarding their approaches to research, as well as structured stakeholder reflection sessions that surfaced practitioner and learner perspectives on research in AFE.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education (2024).

<sup>2</sup> Cacicio, Cote, & Bigger (2023).

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Sticht (2011).

<sup>5</sup> Vernon, Trujillo, Rosenbaum, & DeBuono (2007).

The CREATE Network has identified three essential components of impactful AFE research: 1) a deep understanding of the AFE **context**, 2) **collaboration** with programs and practitioners that highlights learners and their perspectives, and 3) **communication** that reaches beyond academic audiences to practitioners and learners.

We illustrate these essential components through insights and examples, shared below. Our hope in offering these collective insights is to ground researchers in the

realities and opportunities of the AFE field to improve the effectiveness of their research. We believe that researchers can be most effective when they can position themselves as valuable partners in collaborative research, producing relevant insights and supporting meaningful improvements in practice that advance adults in their learning and life goals. Since its inception, the CREATE Network has sought to build on collaboration to provide valuable learning and rigorous evidence regarding the use of technology-supported interventions for adult learning.

*CREATE facilitates the development, adoption, and evaluation of technology-supported interventions to build adult foundational skills and academic attainment. The Network brings together six research projects focused on a variety of approaches to using technology to improve or measure adult skills development, joined by experienced practitioners and other adult education leaders who help to inform the Network's field-building efforts.*

## 1. Understanding the Context of Adult Foundational Education

The context of adult foundational education is varied in terms of learners, teachers, settings, and resources. Researchers should explore the contexts of their research to ensure feasibility, relevance and appropriateness of research questions and processes.

**Learners.** AFE learners come from a wide range of backgrounds in work, education, and life experiences. Their purposes for pursuing adult education range from better communicating with children's teachers to preparing to enter postsecondary education or training. Adults' learning preferences and abilities can vary substantially. In the United States, "adult learners" include those with less than a high school degree, those who graduated from high school without adequate foundational skills, and English language learners, whose education ranges from primary school to college degrees from other countries. Learning disabilities are common among adult learners and can affect adults' ability to fully benefit from learning materials and experiences. Researchers must consider the accessibility of tools employed in the research

process and be aware of how both skill levels and disability issues may affect learners' experience and the outcomes under study.

**Teachers.** The professional background and preparation of AFE educators is varied. States have different certification requirements.<sup>6</sup> Teachers may or may not hold certification in adult education, and the field still relies on many part-time instructors and unpaid volunteers (68% and 12% of teachers, respectively, in program year 2023-2024).<sup>7</sup> Staff are also often required to serve multiple roles, including instructor, program administrator or coordinator, and counselor.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, at a time when technology is increasingly used in education, adult educators differ in their experience and ability to employ technology tools in their daily lives and for learning and teaching.<sup>9</sup> These conditions can affect the capacity of practitioners to participate in program-level research, so researchers must approach any request in a thoughtful manner.

**Settings.** AFE takes place in a wide range of settings, including learners' homes, public school buildings, community-based organizations, community colleges, church basements, public libraries, workplaces, and prisons. Adults learn through in-person, hybrid, and fully remote models, as well as hybrid-flexible ("HyFlex") instruction that allows learners to attend in-person class sessions or to engage in synchronous or asynchronous online learning.<sup>10</sup> This range of settings and instructional modality makes AFE services accessible to learners in their communities but can have implications for supporting learning—including ensuring reliable digital access and the necessary technology tools, which might affect the feasibility of integrating and testing digital learning resources through research studies.

As researchers increasingly examine the use, potential, and implications of technology in teaching and learning, they should be cognizant of the fact that AFE programs vary in their technology resources, while both learners and instructors possess a diverse range of digital literacy skills and resilience.<sup>11</sup> Even with access to technology tools and connections, learners

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<sup>6</sup> Chimere Akwuole & Cacicio (2024); Cronen, Yin & Condelli (2015).

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education (2023-2024).

<sup>8</sup> Hauber-Özer, Sansone, & Edwards, K. (2024)

<sup>9</sup> Jobs for the Future, World Education, & Safal Partners. (2022)

<sup>10</sup> Beatty (2019).

<sup>11</sup> "Digital resilience" is the "awareness, skills, agility, and confidence to be empowered users of new technologies and adapt to changing digital skill demands" (Digital US Coalition, 2020).

and instructors require initial orientation and ongoing support for applying these tools for the purposes of research.<sup>12</sup>

Given the wide variation in settings, staffing, resources, and learner characteristics across AFE programs, researchers must approach their work with sensitivity and adaptability. These contextual factors not only influence how research can be conducted and what might be researched but also underscore the importance of intentionally engaging those most directly affected by adult education systems - not just to navigate logistical and contextual challenges, but to co-create knowledge that reflects and responds to the realities of widely varied learning environments.

Researchers can ask the following reflection questions to learn about AFE contexts:

- What aspect of adult foundational teaching and learnings am I most interested in studying? How might learner, practitioner and/or setting variability affect my approach or the questions pursued? What should I know about learner backgrounds that might affect interactions with researchers and study materials? How might learner skill levels impact how they engage in research activities?
- What are the most critical resources needed in a program for my research (e.g., internet access) - including resources required to implement an intervention to be studied? What is needed to implement what I want to study? How might a program's resources affect its capacity to support my research processes? How can I adjust for variation in resources?

## 2. Collaborating with Practitioners and Adult Learners

Including practitioners and adult learners as collaborative partners in adult education research processes presents a powerful opportunity to deepen the relevance and impact of research in the field. They can offer insights into the realities of program contexts and resources, as well as an understanding of learner skill levels, and can help target research questions to be relevant to improving practice. Involving practitioners and learners as co-researchers, advisors, or other types of collaborators can enrich study design and implementation, generate more meaningful

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<sup>12</sup> Vanek et al. (2024)

research questions, and yield findings that are better aligned with the lives of varied learner populations.

**Engaging Practitioners.** When surveyed, nearly all CREATE research teams reported involving practitioners, particularly to help design the intervention under study and to provide ongoing feedback to the research team, especially around usability and feasibility. In one case, a research team integrated educators into their work as a project coordinator and a team of curriculum writers.

In another project, over 100 practitioners participated in an Ed Tech Maker Space to “curate, create and elevate OER,” (open educational resources) that were integrated into the platform being studied). A smaller group of 20 offered “feedback in the iterative educational design research process that will lead to the creation of features that will be the focus of the pilot testing.” As primary users of the technology, practitioners offered critical insights to technology refinement.

CREATE research teams’ and network partners’ experience suggest that practitioners can contribute to adult education research in multiple ways. Researchers should explore potential practitioner roles including the following:

- **Research co-design:** Practitioners can help to shape and sharpen research questions to ensure relevance to improving practice. They can inform the feasibility of the timing and approach of research processes.
- **Intervention design:** Practitioners can contribute to the creation of content for interventions under study, whether by surfacing relevant existing tools and materials or creating new curricula and materials.
- **Program Liaison:** Practitioners can provide background knowledge on student skills and backgrounds. They can facilitate communication around study purpose and process to gain staff support and help engage students.
- **Advisor:** Practitioners can give insight into how an intervention being studied can be integrated into current program practices. They can offer ongoing feedback on study tools and plans.
- **Research team members:** Practitioners can be embedded, paid members of research teams, fulfilling roles based on their skills and experience. They can serve as study coordinators, translators and as noted, content creators.

**Engaging Learners.** Complementing the perspectives of practitioners, adult learners bring particularly valuable insights to research through their firsthand experience with educational systems, institutional barriers, and teaching practices and materials. Learner participation helps shift the research paradigm from studying *about* learners to studying *with* them—enhancing the quality and relevance of the knowledge produced.

At the time of our Network survey, research teams had started to engage learners as contributors to their studies. Half of the research teams surveyed engaged learners to provide ongoing feedback on research activities. As one team described,

*“After we complete the modules in the four classrooms, we will have focus groups with the students to discuss the curriculum. We are also observing the classrooms intensely and collecting sample student work to guide our curriculum revision... we prioritize transparent, accessible communication about our research approach and findings.”*

Involving learners can help to elevate awareness of barriers that can then be addressed to facilitate their participation in research activities, and researchers should be responsive to learner needs, as this team described:

*“One program did not have a computer lab because they lost funding. We identified students who did not have access to computers outside the classroom, and provided them laptops. In our curriculum, first we considered using Microsoft word but then realized that some students did not have Microsoft but could access Google for free outside the classroom, so we changed our platform to Google. We provided jet packs to some of our participating programs that did not have good Wi-Fi access.”*

Adults bring important insights into how they learn best and can identify barriers that might interfere with their, or others,' ability to use tools or clearly understand instructions. Such information can focus researchers' attention and improve the quality of data collection instruments, findings, and communications with learner research participants.

Researchers can ask the following questions to help build a collaborative relationship with practitioners and learners:

- *What aspects of my study would benefit most from practitioner and/or learner input?*

- *What might learners need to understand in terms of study purpose/background/processes to be well positioned to be a partner in research?*
- *How can I establish a safe environment for them to share reactions and insights freely?*

### 3. Communicating with Practitioners and Learners

When it comes to sharing findings, researchers should plan for communicating with the people engaged in the research from the early stages of design to anticipate tailoring resources and communications. Taking steps to use clear, accessible language when discussing study goals and processes can mean adjusting academic or technical language to be easily understood by non-researchers. Using alternative formats—such as visual aids, infographics, videos, or translated materials—may also help reach AFE audiences. Inviting input from teachers and learners in communicating about the study may help to get their input on the most relevant findings and messaging.

Researchers should also consider where to share results. Rather than focusing on academic journals or conferences, researchers should consider presenting results in professional learning communities, newsletters, webinars, or community events. Summaries or takeaways written specifically for educators or learners can make findings more meaningful, and providing opportunities for two-way conversation about the research validates the reactions and inputs of AFE learners and educators. Ultimately, sharing research with clarity and transparency, centered on the knowledge and priorities of adult education practitioners and learners, will increase application of findings and ensure these research studies bring the most value to the field.

As researchers plan their studies, consider asking:

- *Beyond researchers, who are the key audiences - such as learners, instructors, program administrators, policymakers - who will be interested in my study?*
- *How can I learn about how my research fits into their ongoing concerns?*
- *How can I learn about ways to reach them effectively?*
- *Who can be resources to support development of effective communication to these audiences?*

## In Summary

By approaching research with an understanding of the varied settings, backgrounds, and resources within AFE and an openness to engaging practitioners and learners, researchers can design more effective studies, gather richer data, and ensure the utility of their findings. The insights generated from CREATE Network members suggest that adaptability, strong practitioner and learner partnerships, and thoughtful dissemination strategies can contribute to research that not only advances knowledge but helps support adult learners in achieving their personal and academic goals.

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