"I COULD'VE BEEN A WHOLE LOT BETTER": MOTIVATIONS AND

PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF BLACK RETIRED ADULT LEARNERS WITH LOW

LITERACY SKILLS PARTICIPATING IN AN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

For the past several decades, federal legislation has used accountability measures and funding eligibility to narrow the focus of adult education on workforce development. While many adult learners benefit from these policies, retired adult learners do not. Retired adult learners do not participate in adult education for career-related reasons. Although there are several studies that document the psychological benefits of retired adults participating in education programs, there are limited studies documenting the self-reported motivations and perceived benefits of retired adults who participate in adult basic education (ABE). This study aimed to close the gap in the literature by investigating the motivations and perceived benefits of Black retired adult learners with low literacy skills who participate in an ABE program in Cleveland, Ohio. After conducting semi-structured interviews with six participants between the ages of 63 and 73, six themes emerged through inductive interpretative phenomenological analysis: negative past educational experiences, resilience, dissatisfaction and rectification, positive changes in mood, socialization, and self-fulfillment. The findings show that retired adult learners with low literacy skills participating in ABE often have social and emotional motivations as well as personal goals that cannot be demonstrated on standardized tests. These findings suggest that ABE programs who have retired adult

learners with low literacy skills would benefit from reevaluating their practices to ensure their programming is inclusive and takes into consideration this population's motivations and goals.

Key terms: adult basic education, adult education, retired adults, motivation

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Adult education is a broad field, encompassing both formal and informal learning environments aimed at adults who are above the traditional school age, typically 18 years and older. Adult education includes formal learning programs, such high school equivalency programs, as well as informal learning activities such as workplace training, self-directed study, workshops, and seminars. Adult education is largely shaped by the needs and changing landscape of society (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p.7). In the United States, adult education first appeared in federal law in the mid-20th century, in an effort to address high illiteracy rates after several wars disrupted the education of millions (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In the decades since, adult education has shifted focus, with recent legislation aimed at creating accountability measures to ensure adult education programs have strong ties to workforce development.

Adult Basic Education (ABE) refers to educational instruction for adults (ages 16 or older) below the high school level (Morgan et al., 2017, p.4). ABE focuses on strengthening reading, writing, and math skills in order to enable learners to have more agency and opportunity in their lives. ABE was first introduced in the United States in 1964 (Tate, 2011) and is used today to help the approximately 43 million Americans with

low literacy levels (*OECD Skills Outlook*, 2013). The prevailing discourse, supported by federal policy, is that the purpose of adult education and ABE is to bolster the workforce by providing education to adults so that they may better succeed in the labor market. Recorded non-economic benefits and motivations of adult learners are rare, which makes advocating for learning spaces that are not career-centric difficult. Retired adults who have permanently left the workforce no longer need to pursue education for career purposes, and their participation in ABE is largely unaccounted for.

There are multiple studies documenting the psychological benefits that older adults experience when they participate in learning activities later in life, including decreased depression and higher quality of life (Noble, et. al, 2012). However, there is a significant gap in the literature that captures the self-reported experiences of retired adult learners. The current study will help lessen the gap by providing learner-reported motivations and benefits of Black retired adult learners with low literacy skills who participate in an ABE program in Cleveland, Ohio in order to shed light on their position within adult education as well as the value of retirees having access to ABE programs.

1.1 Research Questions

RQ1: What motivations do Black retired adult learners with low literacy skills have for participating in an adult basic education program?

RQ2: What connection, if any, is there between Black retired adult learners' past educational experiences and their motivations for participating in adult basic education?

RQ3: What do Black retired adults with low literacy skills perceive as the benefits of participating in an adult basic education program?

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Adult Education and Literacy

Adult education is a highly diverse field. It encompasses many different formal and informal learning environments including but not limited to: workplace education, prison education, family literacy programs, community learning programs, and upskill programs. Adult learners are also diverse, having different ages, education levels, genders, races, classes, and other identities. Adult learners can be described as "any person socially accepted as an adult who is involved in a systematic learning process, whether it is formal education, informal learning, or corporate-sponsored learning as a fulltime or part time learner" (Kapur, 2015). Common characteristics that many adult learners share are: goal-oriented, autonomous, independent, relevancy-oriented, motivated, they have established opinions and values, they may have emotional barriers, and they likely have multiple responsibilities (Kapur, 2015). Adult education, as a field, is centered on "understanding the way adults learn" (Collins, 2021). In an article discussing what the boundaries of adult education are, the co-editors of *Adult Learning* write that adult education is interdisciplinary, and borrows from other fields such as psychology, sociology, business, and neuroscience, to meet the needs of diverse

populations of adults (Hill, et. al, 2023). The authors go on to distinguish adult education from higher education, stating that their differences include location, values, epistemology, students, teaching inclinations, and instructor qualifications. Even with respect to adult education programs that exist at higher education institutions, they argue that "all of higher education is not adult education just because the student is over 18 and the setting is a college or university" (Hill, et. al, 2023). Higher education, they write, tends to have a system wide, administrative focus whereas adult education focuses on individuals' growth and learning experiences.

Adult basic education (ABE) is an element of adult education that includes instruction in basic literacy and numeracy, English-language learning, pre-high school equivalency, and high-school equivalency (Belzer and Kim, 2018). ABE takes place in a variety of locations including churches, non-profits, community programs, community colleges, among others. The reported purposes and goals of ABE programs vary, as it is an unregulated system with little oversight. ABE learners are diverse and have different goals and motivations. In a study conducted on defining success in ABE programs, researchers interviewed 28 students and 14 teachers from different ABE programs in Florida to determine how they measure success (Tighe, et. al, 2013). The researchers found that the students pursued ABE to earn a high school equivalency credential, move on to higher education, improve their position in the labor market, and support their children's education.

Adult literacy is an element of adult basic education. The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) defines literacy as "the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and

written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society" (OECD, 2013). In a research article on trends of adult literacy in the U.S. among cohorts, authors Yamashita, Smith, and Cummins write that adult literacy is a critical element of social and emotional well-being at the individual and societal level (Yamashita, et.al, 2023). They go on to say that increases in adult literacy skills lead to positive outcomes economically, socially, psychologically, and civically.

2.2 A Narrowing Focus

Over the past several decades, adult education has become increasingly entwined with workforce development. A major change in adult education policy came in 1998 with the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). The WIA included the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, which formally subsumed adult education into the federal workforce development system (Rocco et al., 2021, p. 39). Adult education and workforce development have always been connected, but this formal subsumption solidified a narrowing focus in adult education. The WIA created an accountability system that required states to assess and report to the federal education department the return on investment of federal funds in adult education services (Roumell et al., 2018, p. 802). The WIA also removed the phrase "to achieve one's goals and develop one's knowledge and potential" (Roumell et al., 2018, p. 802) from the definition of literacy in federal legislation (Rocco et al., 2021, p. 191). This policy change shows the beginning of a narrowing focus in adult education, wherein economic gain takes center stage.

Adult education was yet again changed under the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. Just as NCLB aimed to make K-12 education more systematically successful through accountability measures, adult education became more systematic as well. The federal government worked to make adult education programs little more than job-readiness programs through centralized national standards, program requirements, and measurements of success (Roumell et al., 2018, p. 807). In 2006, the Carl Perkins Career and Technical Education Act was passed which focused on strengthening career and technical education through competitive funding and the creation of the "Career Pathways" initiative (Roumell et al., 2018, p. 808). The Career Pathways initiative was strengthened through the 2007 Executive Order "Strengthening Adult Education" issued by George W. Bush (Roumell et al., 2018, p. 808). This Executive Order created an Interagency Adult Education Working Group, tasked with evaluating adult education programs on measures of performance, effectiveness, efficiency, and identifying gaps in adult education research about how to best prepare adults for higher education (Roumell et al., 2018, p. 808). The Obama administration followed suit, passing a number of acts that further integrated adult education with workforce development (Roumell et al., 2018, p. 808).

In 2012, the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services formed a federal partnership with the goal of assisting youth and adults in acquiring workforce skills and credentials through alignment between education, training, employment, and social services (Roumell et al., 2018, p. 808). This partnership was formed to promote economic growth through the workforce development system and gave the Department of Labor authority over adult education programs via the Career

Pathways initiative (Roumell et al., 2018, p. 808). In 2014 the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was introduced by the Obama administration. The WIOA aimed to "reform and strengthen the workforce investment system…to put Americans back to work" by consolidating job training programs and requiring adult education programs to record and report how many people obtained new employment after participating in their program (Roumell et al., 2018, p. 808). The WIOA revised the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act from the previous WIA in 1998, by increasing accountability measures and measurable goals and outcomes for participants in adult education programs (Roumell et al., 2018, p. 802). In the Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education, the purposes of the WIOA are outlined:

According to the WIOA, the purposes of ACE policy, embedded in the broader workforce development system, include: (1) To increase, for individuals in the United States, particularly those individuals with barriers to employment, access to and opportunities for the employment, education, training, and support services they need to succeed in the labor market. (2) To support the alignment of workforce investment, education, and economic development systems in support of a comprehensive, accessible, and high-quality workforce development system in the United States (WIOA, 2014, Sec. 2) (Rocco et al., 2021, p. 191). On ABE policy, Belzer & Kim argue:

> In spite of representing less than half of all funding for ABE, federal allocations play a substantial role in influencing practice at the local level. This has been impactful with regard to who gets served, under what circumstances, and what gets counted as effective practice and successful outcomes. Although it has sometimes helpfully focused the field, we argue that current federal policy has narrowed ABE, overall, to primarily serving a workforce development aim. This narrowing undercuts the value of increasing skills that can support improvements related to other important social outcomes (2018, p. 604).

Adult education programs are being created and improved through the lens of workforce development, excluding adult learners who are not pursuing education for a better career. Retired adult learners, especially those engaging in early literacy, are treated as nonexistent in the eyes of policymakers, even though that is sadly far from the truth. Data shows that older adult populations have lower scores in literacy, numeracy, and tech skills compared to younger adults (Rampey et. al, 2016, p. 13), demonstrating the need for retired adult learners to be included in discourse and policy pertaining to adult basic education.

2.3 Retired Adults' Unique Position as Learners

Retired adults are a unique population of learners. They are one of the only learner populations whose education exists outside of capitalist pressure. As mentioned above, adult education is heavily geared toward success in the workforce. K-12 and post-secondary education share these aims, demonstrated by federal policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, Race to the Top in 2009, and Common Core in 2010 which cemented K-12 education as a tool to strengthen the US economy. The Obama White House archives state the aim of Race to the Top as follows:

> The strength of the American economy is inextricably linked to the strength of America's education system. Now more than ever, the American economy needs a workforce that is skilled, adaptable, creative, and equipped for success in the global marketplace. America's ability to compete begins each day, in classrooms across the nation—and President Obama knows we must comprehensively strengthen and reform our education system in order to be successful in a 21st century economy. The case for the link between the strength of American education and the strength of our economy is a simple one—and it is one that all Americans can agree on. Ensuring that every student in our country graduates from high school prepared for college and a successful career is central to rebuilding our economy and securing a brighter economic future for all Americans. (Reform for the future, n.d.).

This policy and others like it work to ensure that K-12 education is centered on capitalist growth, a fact that students and moreover "all Americans" are aware of. Standardized testing and strict accountability measures introduced by legislation are often at odds with educators' knowledge of best practices, forcing them to "teach to the test" (Kempf, 2016). The systems in place have turned K-12 education into a homogenized experience, designed to prepare students for higher education and the workforce.

Higher education revolves around career preparation and employability. A survey of the literature on the purpose of higher education showed that the perceived benefits of higher education fell in two categories: economic and social (Chan, 2016). Undergraduate student ambitions tend to be personal and economically rational, listing reasons to go to college as "higher salaries and work benefits, greater rates of employment, personal and professional mobility, improved working conditions", along with social benefits (Chan, 2016). Higher education institutions and state and federal governments are intertwined, with colleges and universities working to meet the labor demands of the economy (Floyd, et. al, 2022). Higher education is becoming increasingly more necessary to be successful in the labor market, as low-skilled work is being replaced by technology. In 2020, it was estimated that 65 percent of jobs require a credential beyond a high school diploma (Floyd, et. al, 2022).

One of the only populations in the US whose education exists outside of capitalist pressures is retired adults. Retired adult learners have a unique position in education, as their learning is not preparing them for a position in the workforce. What they learn is not constrained or assessed by its applicability or potential monetary pay off. They are free from outside expectations of their knowledge and its perceived value. The value of their

education is uniquely their own to decide. Many working-age adults pursue education after their high school experience to earn their GED, or otherwise strengthen their skills to raise their human capital. Their education is under the same constraints as K-12 and college students: shaped and dictated by their need to earn a wage. Adult education legislation also targets and improves upon the experiences of working-age adult learners, and they reap the benefits of adult education programs being career-centric. As mentioned above, retired adults are uniquely free to decide their own motivations and desired benefits for their education. However, their motivations and desired benefits are largely undocumented. Because retired adults are a unique category of learners, motivations and perceived benefits of other learner populations can not be applied to them.

2.4 Adult Basic Education for Older Adults

Adult education is decentralized in the United States, and the federal government has no obligation to educate adults as they do with children, leaving adult education in the hands of just a handful of organizations and individuals (Findsen and Formosa, 2016). Findsen and Formosa write:

> In the absence of any nationally mandated and funded provision for older adult education, organized learning programmes in the United States will continue to mirror the nations' competitive market system. This means barrier free access to lifelong learning opportunities in the United States is likely to remain far from equitable. Populations such as low-income, disadvantaged minorities, and older adults with less than high school completion will have fewer options than other more educated and affluent seniors (Findsen and Formosa, 2016).

Older adults who are functionally illiterate have very few educational options, and for programs that do exist, those who need them would have a hard time discovering and accessing them due to their low literacy levels. Access to adult basic education, not to

mention quality education or programs that accept functionally illiterate adults, is left up

to chance. "ABE, as a field of practice, is highly diverse. Some of the dimensions of

diversity include the institutional context, the population served, and the political

orientation of the program. In addition, the ABE workforce tends not to share a universal

experience of training or apprenticeship" (Lytle, Belzer, & Reumann, 1992). There are

many factors that have to align for adult learners to access education: geography, funds,

transportation, tech skills, foundational knowledge (in most cases), among others. These

barriers are even more formidable for older adult learners. Compared to working-age

adults, they likely have less physical mobility, less surplus funds, lower tech skills, and as

mentioned above, less foundational knowledge.

Education programs created for older adults are mostly targeted at literate adults

(Findsen and Formosa, 2016), despite the fact that older age groups tend to have lower

literacy proficiency than younger adults (Desjardins, 2003). Findsen writes:

> Those who are in sufficiently good health, are motivated by having enjoyed prior
> years of education and can afford to enroll in programmes such as LLIs (lifelong
> learning institutes), pay for travel-learning excursions, sign up for continuing
> education courses, register for back-to-campus alumni seminars, access Internet
> educational sites, and choose from among a cornucopia of other lifelong learning
> programmes, will reap the benefits of 'successful aging' (Findsen and Formosa,
> 2016, p. 491).

These opportunities exclude older adults with low literacy levels, who are often part of

historically marginalized populations. In the U.S., historically marginalized populations,

including those who are Black, Native American, and Latina/Latino often had

differentiated educational experiences due to their positionality in society. The

experiences of these populations were not homogenous, but often included unequal

access to quality education. This differential treatment is one factor that contributed to

higher illiteracy rates in adult minority populations (Rampey et. al, 2016). The next section will focus specifically on the educational experiences of Black Americans in the 1960's and 1970's, to shed light on the population featured in this study.

2.5 Experiences of Black Students in the Mid-20th Century

The participants in this study are between the ages of 63 and 73. They attended primary school in the 1960's and 1970's. The U.S. was in the midst of the civil rights movement, and schools were in the process of desegregation. In a study on student experiences of desegregated schools in the 1960's and 1970's, authors Wells, Holme, Revilla, and Atanda found that desegregation often included closing Black schools and busing the former students to schools in White neighborhoods (Wells, et. al, 2005). This led to disruption in Black students' education who not only had to leave their school, but then were forced to attend a formerly White only school, and often experienced racism (Wells, et. al, 2005).

The authors write that it was common for "re-segregation" to happen among classes in the same school, as gifted classes were created and admitted almost exclusively White students. In the 1970's, Shaker Heights High School had 5 levels of academic difficulty within their classes, the higher academic levels consisted of mostly White students and the lower academic levels consisted of mostly Black students (Wells, et. al, 2005). Black participants in the study recounted that they often felt they were not accepted by White students and that Black history was not taught in their schools. Although schools were officially segregated, formidable barriers still prevented many Black students from succeeding. The dropout rates of Black students through the 1960's and 1970's were between 10 and 15 percent higher than White students (NCES, 2007).

In a 1971 research paper on America's "New Students of the 70's", K. Patricia Cross writes that "the greatest single barrier to college admission in the 1960s was lack of demonstrated academic ability-as that ability is nurtured and measured in the schools" (Cross, 1971). For Black students who did graduate high school, their ability to continue on to college relied on their demonstrated academic ability that should have been nurtured and measured in their schools, however they were often excluded from opportunities to demonstrate their abilities. Cross also writes "the concern about the lack of academic preparation of ethnic minorities is well justified. Black Americans are very much over-represented among the new student population, with about two-thirds of the Blacks entering two-year colleges falling among the lowest academic third of the entering students" (Cross, 1971). Black students who attended school in the 1960's and 1970's often experienced racism, were not given the same opportunities to excel as White students, and often had their education disrupted by displacement. These factors, among others such as generational illiteracy, made it more difficult for Black students to succeed and graduate high school.

2.6 Motivations of Adult Learners

The motivations of adult learners are complex and highly personal. In an overview of motivation for adult learning, Ginsberg and Wlodkowski write that the cornerstones of motivation for adult learners are responsibility and experience (Rocco, et. al., 2020). The authors explain that many adults are motivated to pursue education to succeed in their responsibility to provide for themselves and their families. Adult learners are also motivated, they explain, by their past experiences in life that drive their curiosity and allow them to measure the relevance of what they are learning. Ginsberg and

Wlodkowski go on to say that theories of intrinsic motivation align closely with adult learners' motivations. They write, "when adults feel respected, care about what they are learning, and know they are becoming more effective at what they value, intrinsic motivation surfaces like a cork rising through water" (Rocco, et.al, 2020).

In a research brief for ProLiteracy, M Cecil Smith and Alisa Belzer outline four dominant theories of motivation in adult learning: goal theory, expectancy-value theory, attribution theory, and self-determination theory (Smith and Belzer, 2022). Goal theory, as described by the authors, "describes motivation as a mix of psychological (e.g., patterns of thinking, emotional responses) and behavioral processes (i.e., actions) that involve a variety of personal and contextual factors." (Smith and Belzer, 2022). The authors go on to write that goals provide purpose, meaning, and give learners something to work towards. They also state that there are two primary reasons for learners' motivations to achieve a task: to demonstrate competency in the performance of a task and to achieve mastery of a skill. The authors give a few examples of goals that adult learners set: to become a better reader, earn a high school equivalency credential, or learn about cryptocurrencies.

Expectancy-value theory "posits that learners' expectations for success (or failure) on learning tasks, and the value that they place on these tasks, are strong predictors of achievement-related behaviors (such as goal setting) and learners' choices about what and how to learn." (Smith and Belzer, 2022). The authors give an example of this theory, stating that some learners who did not perform well in primary school may expect to not perform well in adult education. The authors go on to encourage adult

educators to help learners set positive expectations of themselves by giving learners chances to succeed and help learners find value in what they are studying.

Attribution theory, as described by Smith & Belzer, describes the relationship between learners' successes and failures and their perceptions of what caused those particular outcomes (Smith and Belzer, 2022). The authors write that learners' motivation usually increases if they attribute their successes to their own skill and efforts, factors they have control over. However, if they attribute their outcomes to factors outside of their control, learners usually see decreases in motivation. The authors go on to recommend to adult educators that they should provide "timely and accurate feedback" and "help their learners make accurate attributions" (Smith and Belzer, 2022).

Self-determination theory posits that there are three psychological needs that drive motivation: autonomy, competence, and belonging (Smith & Belzer, 2022). Self-determination theory also centers intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as factors that influence learners' feelings of autonomy and competence. Smith & Belzer recommend that adult educators promote autonomy in learners whenever possible to increase intrinsic motivation. They argue that "Whenever individuals' learning goals are self-determined, they are more likely to feel autonomous and in control of their learning—conditions that are highly motivating and contribute to their feelings of competence."

A paper published in *Educational Gerontology* titled "Education and Learning for the Elderly: Why, How, What", describes a study done in Australia partly on the motivations older adult learners have. The study was not ABE-specific, the participants took classes in several subjects such as art, fitness, languages, and technology. The reported motivations of participants to pursue education later in life were as follows: "to

give back, to teach/use skills, to keep the brain active, to understand the meaning of life, to understand self, become a better person, take responsibility for self, focus on positives not negatives, extend thinking and learning ability, being an active participant in life, stay interested in life, new friendships" (Boulton-Lewis, 2010, p. 219). These motivations reflect participants who have the background knowledge and financial resources to pursue education outside of ABE.

A possible motivation of older adult learners to pursue education is a concept from narrative learning: restorying. Restorying is the process adult learners go through as they change their personal narrative to better fit their self-view and experiences, which can change through several processes, including transformative learning (Clark and Rossiter, 2008). Clark and Rossiter write about a narrative approach to adult development, stating:

> In this view, construction of an acceptable life narrative is the central process of adult development. The life narrative is repeatedly revised and enlarged throughout one's life to accommodate new insights, events, and perspectives. Developmental change is experienced and assessed through this process of storying and restorying one's life.

As older adults gain more life experience, restorying their lives can become an important part of making sense of their personal identity. This urge to restory could be a possible motivation for older adults to pursue education later in life, especially to construct an acceptable life narrative.

Another possible motivation for older adults is socialization, especially to combat isolation. Social isolation in older adults is quite prevalent, with some studies estimating that 77% of older adults experience social isolation (Ejiri, et. al, 2021). Social isolation in older adults is a risk factor for several health conditions including cardiovascular disease,

stroke, dementia, and depression (Ejiri, et. al, 2021). This is especially pertinent to older

adults with low educational attainment, such as the participants of this study, as older

adults with low educational attainment have fewer insulating factors against loneliness

compared to adults with higher educational attainment (Balki, et. al, 2023).

2.7 Benefits of Education for Older Adults

Access to ABE programs is important for older adults, and there is evidence that

suggests it could slow cognitive decline that can happen due to aging. According to

Desjardins (2003), "More frequent and intense engagement in different literacy-related

activities or behaviors throughout the lifespan might offset some of the negative effects

of aging on literacy proficiency" (Dejardins, 2003, p. 212). In a study on lifelong learning

(not ABE-specific) with 145 participants ranging in age from 16-65+, researchers found

that "Respondents' accounts provide consistent evidence that learning can lead to

improved well-being, increased efficacy, protection and recovery from mental health

difficulties, and more effective coping, including coping with physical ill-health."

(Hammond, 2004, p. 555).

Evidence that learning later in life can have a positive impact on participants was

also found in a systematic literature review published in Gerontology and Geriatric

Medicine that aimed to "determine the effect of later-life formal education or learning on

quality of life (QOL), wellbeing, mood, and cognition" (Noble, et. al, 2021) in

participants aged 55 or older. The systematic literature review was not ABE-specific and

included participants of all learning levels. The studies analyzed were conducted in

several different countries, included various study designs, and featured different types of

organized learning including cognitive training, computer courses, health education, and

creative arts. The authors found that several studies have shown "participation in formal education or learning contributed to increased wellbeing, QOL, healthy cognitive function, self-dependency, and a sense of belonging in older adults" (Noble, et. al, 2021). The authors cited studies that found participation in formal learning activities led to an increase in self and life satisfaction, an increase in feelings of community and sociability, reduction in loneliness, and reduction in depression.

A study was published in the Asian Journal of Gerontology & Geriatrics on older adults' choice of courses, perceived benefits, and difficulties encountered while attending structured courses through University for the Third Age or Institutes for Learning in Retirement. The study was cross-cultural and surveyed 560 older adult learners from the U.K., the U.S., China, and Finland. The study found that "Most asserted that they learned for the sake of knowledge, personal satisfaction, and social network building" (Leung, et. al, 2006). The results also showed that most adults were interested in hobby/ interest and knowledge-driven courses and the most prominent difficulties that older adults faced in their learning were lack of time and traveling.

2.8 Conclusions

Decades of federal policy have shown that adult education in the United States is designed and updated to reflect a central goal: strengthen the workforce. Accountability measures and workforce development are required for adult education programs to receive federal funding. Adult learners who are working-age reap the benefits of these policies, as many of them participate in adult education to be more competitive in the labor market. However, retired adult learners participate in adult education for reasons unrelated to the workforce. Although research has shown that participating in literacy-

activities can have positive health-related and psychological effects on older adults, there is a gap in the literature that captures learner-reported motivations and perceived benefits of older adults who participate in adult basic education. Additionally, partly due to racist and disruptive educational practices in the 1960's and 1970's, higher illiteracy rates exist in adult minority populations. This study works to close the gap in the literature and center participant voices by providing learner-reported motivations and perceived benefits of retired Black ABE learners.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This is a qualitative study utilizing narrative inquiry methods. I conducted one-on-one interviews with adults who are enrolled at Seeds of Literacy, are over the age of 60 and are retired or have permanently left the workforce. These interviews were conducted using the framework of narrative inquiry to tell a collaborative story with participants about their experiences and motivations in adult basic education (ABE). I used a semi-structured interview process. The questions consisted of the learner's motivations, experiences in ABE, and past educational experiences. I used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze the data collected from interviews. My analysis produced themes in and across cases to address my research questions.

3.2 Research Questions

RQ1: What motivations do retired adult learners have for participating in adult basic education?

RQ2: What connection, if any, is there between retired adults' past educational experiences and their motivations for participating in adult basic education?

RQ3: What do retired adults perceive as the benefits of participating in adult basic education?

3.3 Site Selection

I conducted my research at a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, Seeds of Literacy, in Cleveland, Ohio. The main reason I chose this site is because the program structure allowed me access to the population I am studying. Seeds of Literacy is a unique ABE program: it is free for learners, there is no deadline to graduate, and it accepts all levels of learners. These factors are instrumental in Seeds having the retired learner population that it does. Retired learners engaging in ABE may not have excess funds to spend on education later in life, as their lack of education may have prevented them from attaining high-paying jobs. A free ABE program with no limit on the length of their attendance allows the population of my study to access education. Retired ABE learners have low literacy levels by definition. Many adult education programs, as explained above, are workforce focused: that is how they are funded. Federal legislation, namely the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA), requires recipients of funding to report how many people obtain new employment after participating in their program (Roumell, 2020). These requirements incentivize adult education programs to only accept learners whose test scores upon entry show they are close to obtaining their GED and moving on to a career. For those who have goals of increasing their literacy levels, the burden of proving their proximity to obtaining a GED can be enough to disqualify them from gaining entry to certain programs. The WIOA can prevent older adults from having access to certain education programs, if the programs rely heavily on WIOA funding and it is in their best interest to exclude learners who have left the workforce. Seeds of Literacy receives very

little state and federal funding, allowing them to serve ABE learners who have low test scores upon entry and are not pursuing education for career-related reasons. Additionally, I chose Seeds of Literacy as the site of my research because I have been employed by Seeds since March of 2022. I had pre-existing relationships with the participants of my study, which is what first ignited my interest in adult education research..

3.4 Seeds of Literacy Overview

Seeds of Literacy's mission is to "Provide free, personalized education to empower adults to thrive in our community" (Seeds of Literacy, 2022). Seeds of Literacy is an adult education program that accepts all levels of learners over the age of 18. Learners have different reasons for coming to Seeds, many come to study for the GED but others come to study for military entrance exams, study for college courses, or to receive Adult Basic Education (ABE). Seeds is a unique program: it is free for learners, they provide 1-to-1 tutoring for every learner, and they accept all levels of adult learners. Many GED programs do not accept learners who score below a certain threshold (Seeds did not either until 2018), so many learners are turned away based on ability.

3.5 Population and Sampling

Seeds of Literacy, at the time of my sampling, had 134 active in-person learners, 34 of which are over the age of 60. I used purposive sampling to identify possible participants. First, I searched active student records using filters to find students who were over the age of 60, attended classes in person, and were enrolled at Seeds of Literacy for at least 5 months with regular attendance. After filtering by those criteria, 27 possible participants remained. From those 27 possible participants, I selected 6 learners who, based on my previous interactions with them, I felt would offer different

perspectives to my study. I took into consideration their work history, family, past adult education experiences, and attendance. I was able to achieve a level of heterogeneity with regard to age, despite all participants being over the age of 60. I interviewed participants from 3 age groups: 60-64, 65-69, and 70+ to ensure no one specific age group was overrepresented, and to see if there were any notable differences between age groups. All 34 learners over the age of 60 identified at intake as Black, therefore my sample was homogenous with regard to race. I interviewed four women and two men. A purposive sampling method and a small sample are reflective of narrative inquiry. In addition, these elements fit IPA analysis "and enable investigators to capture detail on a specific group of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon" (Noon, 2018, p. 76).

3.6 Participant Recruitment

To recruit participants, I created a presentation detailing the background and purpose of my study. I asked desired participants if they would be interested in participating in the study. I met one on one with interested students and read aloud to them the presentation that detailed the purpose, methods, and scope of the study. I explained the interview process and what subjects I intended to ask them about. I informed them that participation in the research was voluntary, and there would be no negative consequences if they chose not to participate. The presentation and explanations of the study were written with participants' literacy levels in mind and I asked if participants had any questions. After answering a few clarifying questions, all six participants that I asked agreed to participate.

3.7 Participants

I interviewed six participants, including four women and two men. Their ages ranged from 63-73. Three participants have attended Seeds of Literacy for over a decade, at times intermittently, and in all three cases, they had taken months or years off in that time period. The other three participants have attended Seeds between one year and four years. According to participants' Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) scores, their reading and math skills vary greatly. When comparing their scores to the U.S. Department of Education's National Reporting System (NRS), the participants' scores range from NRS level one to NRS level four, which correspond to grade levels kindergarten through 8th grade. Only one participant's test scores put them in NRS level four which corresponds to between 6th and 8th grade. The other five participants scored between NRS levels one and two, which corresponds to kindergarten through 3rd grade.

3.8 Data collection

Narrative inquiry informed my study. Interviews were the primary method of data collection. The interviews took place in between or after classes. Interviews lasted between 20-45 minutes, and I interviewed each participant three times. The reason for this interviewing method was to account for the fact that the participants are elderly and could become overwhelmed by sharing personal life experiences for long periods of time. Multiple interview sessions also gave participants time to think about and reflect upon their motivations and experiences in ABE, which is something they may have never been asked before. I recorded interviews via cell phone recording. I then used an automated transcription service to transcribe the interviews, and checked the accuracy manually.

Narrative inquiry is an appropriate methodological approach for this study because my research questions are concerned with the experiences, motivations, and perceived benefits that participants have about their participation in ABE. Narrative inquiry allowed me to center individuals' unique experiences and perspectives, which reflects the goal of my study. Narrative inquiry also allowed participants to have a voice and contribute to the narrative of the purposes and values of ABE. Participants of this study, while having multiple identities, all represent one or more marginalized populations. Giving them the opportunity to contribute to the discourse surrounding ABE, which they are a part of, is important and was achieved through narrative inquiry. Interview questions addressed participants' motivations, past educational experiences, goals, and perceived benefits of participation in ABE. These questions were able to capture what participants value about ABE, unrelated to monetary gain or career mobility, thereby opposing the purported purpose of adult education: workforce development. After I concluded the interviews, I engaged in member checking with participants to gauge accuracy and validity and to increase trustworthiness. After transcribing interviews and noting themes within cases, I met with participants individually and read aloud the quotes of theirs I planned to use, and the themes I produced through my analysis. I asked participants if the quotes and themes were accurate representations of their experiences. After participants asked questions and I clarified and explained certain concepts, all six participants verified that what I had written was an accurate representation of their experiences.

3.9 Data Analysis

This is a qualitative study that utilized the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach as a framework for analysis. IPA is a contemporary qualitative

methodology that focuses on interpretation of individual lived experiences. IPA was developed in 1996 by Jonathan Smith and was primarily developed for psychology research, but has since become a well-established qualitative research analysis approach across disciplines (Nizza et.al, 2021). The process involves reading and rereading the data, connecting the content to themes, and searching for connections between themes. Each participant will be viewed as a single case. After those steps have been completed for the first case, the researcher can then move on to the next case, and repeat that process. The researcher must do their best to recognize each participant as having a unique perspective and their individuality before connecting themes between cases. By centering the individuality of each case, the researcher can "learn from each participant's individual story, and through a deep individualised analysis, a more informative understanding of participants' thoughts, beliefs and behaviours is attainable" (Noon, 2018, p. 76). After searching for patterns and making connections between cases, the researcher can finally import theories to aid in interpretation of results.

IPA is an appropriate analysis method because it reflects the goal of my thesis, which is to better understand the perspectives of retired adult learners to shed light on their position within adult education as well as the value of retirees having access to ABE programs. Presenting detailed accounts of participants' motivations and experiences allows me to share what aspects of ABE participants value. Analyzing the data through IPA also allows me to make connections within and between cases to better understand participants' experiences, motivations, and position in adult education.

3.10 Trustworthiness of Interpretation and Ethical Considerations

I am currently employed by Seeds of Literacy and I have pre-existing professional relationships with the participants of the study. Currently, I am the Volunteer Coordinator and focus on recruiting and retaining volunteer tutors. I have also spent time tutoring students who have literacy skills at or below a fourth-grade level. While I do not have legitimate power over participants, I do not decide their standing or status in the program, I may have perceived power in the eyes of participants. Participants were made aware they are voluntary participants and their participation or non-participation in this study will not affect their status or standing at Seeds of Literacy. Explanations of the study and consent were written with participants' literacy levels in mind, to ensure informed consent was obtained.

To ensure trustworthiness, I was transparent with participants about the purpose of the study and what the process of being involved would look like. Having participants engage in member checking increased trustworthiness, especially considering the possibility that most participants had not been exposed to academic research and did not understand what the result of the research would entail.

3.11 De-Identification Process

To protect participant identities, I de-identified the data by designating each participant a letter and only referring to them by their letter. I also left out personally identifiable information that needed to be obscured, such as locations and names of schools, especially with respect to how small of an organization Seeds of Literacy is. I deleted the audio files of the interviews once they were transcribed and deleted the documents, I created during my analysis that used participants' real names.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, I identified 6 key themes that

emerged from the interviews: negative past educational experiences, resilience,

dissatisfaction and rectification, positive changes in mood, socialization, and self-

fulfillment. These themes were identified inductively, by carefully studying each

participant's comments as a single case, searching for similarities across cases, then

drawing broader conclusions about the data.

4.1 Negative Past Educational Experiences

A majority of participants described negative experiences related to their past

educational experiences. While not all identified these negative experiences as the reason

they left school, they did describe dissatisfaction with their childhood education. Three

participants mentioned that they felt their teachers did not care about their success in

school. Participant A, who grew up and went to school in Cleveland, had this to say of

her compulsory education:

> "Even though I was going to school, elementary, high school, at that time, they
> was just passing Black kids. Just passing them. Even if they didn't learn anything,
> you know, didn't come to school. They went on and just passed us."

Participant B grew up in a small town in a southern state where he attended a one room schoolhouse. After recounting that experience, he went on to describe his experience being passed through school, similar to participant A.

> "...a lot of people don't understand that, we always seen those little one room schools. Right. I actually went to one of those one room schools and the way they taught kids and stuff, well say if I was in the first grade, maybe someone in the fourth grade or fifth grade would be teaching me 'cause we only had the one teacher."

> "...well, it's too late. You can't do anything now. So it was either that we could do, we could hold you back, like, or do no good, or we could pass you on. I think that's really what happened with a lot of us."

All participants identify as Black and were attending school in the 1960's and 70's. As mentioned in the literature review, schools in the US were in the midst of desegregation. Participants' educational experiences and childhoods were influenced by racist policies and practices. Participants C and D recalled that they were told to leave school, for being pregnant and for misbehaving. Participants A, B, and F recounted that they felt they were just pushed through the school system, whether they learned or not. Participant A specified that this happened to Black students. Those practices resulted in Participants A and B graduating high school, the only two participants to receive their high school diploma, while being functionally illiterate.

Additionally, all six participants reported that Seeds of Literacy's 1-to-1 tutoring structure is one of the most important benefits of the program. Participants contrasted their experiences in K-12 school, often mentioning that they got left behind the rest of their classmates, with Seeds' 1-to-1 model. Participant A mentioned that she thinks she would have benefitted from individualized instruction in her compulsory education,

stating "I felt that I needed one-on-one because of the stuff I was not comprehending".

Unfortunately, we often hear from students that our individualized instruction model is hard to find in adult education programs.

4.2 Resilience

After leaving school, participants had few options for employment. They either had no high school diploma, had low literacy levels, or both. All participants took jobs performing manual labor, mainly custodial work or food service. Despite not having a strong educational foundation, in some cases barely being able to read, and in most cases not having a high school diploma, participants found a way to make a living, raise their children, and navigate the world around them. Participant B described having a lack of a support system, especially because his parents were not educated, but persevering by learning carpentry.

> "So I never had anyone to help me in a way. So it was a, it was a struggle. And so I think that I made up in my mind that I was going to get out here and work hard with my hands and still become a successful person. Just do what you could with what you have."

Participant C also had parents who were not well educated. Unlike Participant B, who illustrated generational illiteracy from his point of view as a child, Participant C recounted her experience parenting with literacy struggles, recounting, "I didn't get an education, so I made it through the world with my six kids and what I did know in school, I tried to teach them." Participant A, who performed a variety of manual labor jobs, including cleaning, factory work, and food service, specified that she chose jobs where she would not have to read or write. Her demeanor while recounting her past jobs was reserved. She often frowned and shrugged, indicating feelings of disappointment.

"So I did manual work, hands on, which is okay with me, but I ain't have to write nothing. I ain't have to, you know? Yeah. So I just went that way. Working in the kitchen a little hard. You know, them jobs where I ain't got to write or read too much."

Participant D described methods he devised to successfully keep jobs, despite being functionally illiterate:

"Well, when I went to a job, I had somebody to help me fill the application out. I couldn't read the application. So I had somebody to, you know, help me read it out. But when they helped me fill it out, I always got the job."

"I started driving the cab. It was around 50. I started driving the cab and I learned, learn the streets where I had to go and different things and that. And I started learn how to read a little bit, but not good, but a little bit, you know, back and forth where I was going."

Participants described experiences throughout their lives where they made it through with what little education they had. All participants reported that they took jobs involving manual labor, mainly cleaning and food service. Participant B described how he learned to work well with his hands, doing carpentry and woodworking. He knew from an early age that it would be difficult for him to succeed academically as he fell behind his classmates in his one-room schoolhouse, describing himself as one of the kids who "just didn't get it". Unswayed, he reported that he kept the same job for 40 years, doing woodworking on the side, and diligently contributed to his retirement accounts. He now teaches his children to do the same. Like participant A, many participants recounted their labor experiences with disappointment. Even participant B, who described his labor participation as successful in his eyes, did not convey any pride in the jobs he held.

4.3 Dissatisfaction and Rectification

A majority of participants identified with themes of dissatisfaction and rectification as a motivation for returning to ABE. Participants reported that they were dissatisfied with the level of education they completed and identified their lack of education as a main reason they did not reach their potential, both in their careers and in raising their families. Participant A described how her and children's lives would be better if she had finished school.

> "Oh I'd probably be, might be a president of a company. I probably have my own, having me a house, not living in an apartment building. And my kids probably would've been better off somewhat, you know, so I would've, whew, I might be doing something like this [referring to the interviewer's job], you know, kinda can't imagine. I would've been better off, you know?"

Participants A, B, and C all identified careers they would have liked to pursue if they had received more educational opportunities. They did not report any innate problem barring them from pursuing these careers, although these same participants mentioned they were identified as having dyslexia or other unidentified learning disabilities in school. Instead, they believe they could have overcome learning disabilities and went on to pursue impressive careers, had they been given more educational opportunities during their adolescence. Themes of rectification were reflected in interviews with participants A, B, and E as motivations for why they returned to education later in life. Participant B said this, when asked about why he returned to education: "Why school? Well, I just got to tell you, I could've been a whole lot better. I know I could have." Whether their education was cut short due to external or internal factors, many participants described thoughts of their potential and what careers they could have led if they had gone further in school. Although it is likely too late to realize some of their dreams, which included

becoming the mayor of Cleveland and becoming a judge, coming back to education later in life is a means of rectification. Even though pursuing education at this point in their lives may not lead to the outcome they once dreamed of, returning to education is a step toward rectifying their dissatisfaction with their past circumstances or choices. By claiming and acting on the potential they see in themselves, they can begin to rewrite their personal narrative and improve their self-view.

4.4 Positive Changes in Mood

All participants reported positive changes in mood associated with participating in adult basic education. These positive changes included feeling happy, feeling better, and being optimistic about their lives. Participant C, who found Seeds of Literacy through her church, described her pathway to Seeds and how it improved her mood and outlook on life.

> "I was mostly hurt when I couldn't read in church. That to me was so embarrassing. But then I didn't know that the sister was gonna find something for me. And when she found it [Seeds], I appreciate her. I love her for it. I love God for it. And I'm happy here. Happy, happy, happy, happy…And I am so excited about how my life is going now…I love Seeds."

By taking a negative experience of not being able to read aloud from the Bible in church and turning it into a positive action, pursuing education, participant C found a pathway to happiness and improving her outlook on her future. Participant E described how coming to Seeds of Literacy improves her mood each time she attends, "Because I'm leaving here in a better frame of mind than I came. I can feel better when I leave here. And I feel good knowing I came." Participant C echoed this sentiment, adding that "when I come here, I don't have to think about nothing but this". Interestingly, when talking about improvements in their mood, participants did not mention specifically that they are

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happier because of specific skill gains or increased competencies, but instead that the mere act of coming to Seeds of Literacy and engaging with education makes them feel happier and more hopeful about their futures.

4.5 Socialization

All participants identified benefits related to socialization as elements of Seeds of Literacy that they value. Participants identified socialization with their tutors, their peers, and with the community as benefits of participation. Four participants reported enjoying socializing with tutors. Participants A and C specified that socializing with tutors is a main reason they attend Seeds of Literacy stating, "I know when I come here, there's no judgment, there's no criticizing. It's like what you need. So that right there shows what keep me coming." Participant C also shared the importance of having time to talk with tutors and staff, even if for a short period of time.

> "I feel good that it's somewhere I can go and be respected and somebody there to help you and you could talk to, you know, y'all may not have that much time with us, but y'all do listen, if it ain't be but 15 to 20 minutes. You know, so I like that."

Three participants reported that socializing with their peers is also a benefit of attending Seeds of Literacy and added that they would not socialize to the same degree if they did not attend Seeds. Participant C described her process of making new students feel welcomed.

> "Oh, I tell them it's like, like now it's a couple of ladies they're new here. So I bring 'em a gift. And I says, this is– what word did I use? Appreciation gift. For coming to Seeds. And I tell them that I am an ambassador and I welcome you here to Seeds."

Participants A and C were involved with the Student Ambassador program at Seeds and described how being involved with the program led to more socialization within their community. "I like being an ambassador because like I say, I'm out in public. I'm out

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among people and surrounded by people." Engaging with the community more as a result

of attendance is further reflected in Participant D's testimony, who shared that he talks to

more people as a result of reading more.

> "I can talk more to people. Once, I wasn't talking to people, because I wouldn't
> know how to read, so I wouldn't know what conversation to talk about. Now I'm
> reading, I can talk about all kinds of things. It help me to not say the wrong thing.
> I enjoy that."

Participant A added that coming to Seeds of Literacy encouraged her to leave the house

more and get more involved in her community.

> "I used to stay in the house. I just stay in the house and feel bad. And I always
> say, okay, I'm gonna do this. I'm gonna go there. Never do it. So yeah, I'm getting
> out more, going places. I even go to church. I wasn't going to church, so go to
> church. Yeah."

All participants reported socialization as a key element of the program that they

enjoy. Most of the participants live alone so coming to Seeds of Literacy and talking with

their tutors and peers, both about their classwork and about their lives, is likely some of

the only socializing they do. While not often thought of as a main reason for participating

in adult basic education, socialization is arguably one of the most important benefits that

ABE programs can offer to older adults. As mentioned in the literature review, many

ABE programs receive funding based on their involvement with workforce development

programs. This leaves less tangible, though not less important outcomes, such as

socialization, out of the conversation in adult education.

4.6 Self-Fulfillment

Self-fulfillment is an important aspect of human existence. All participants

described experiences related to self-fulfillment. Themes related to self-fulfillment

included overcoming embarrassment, pursuing education later in life to achieve their

personal goals, and returning to education because they value its importance. A majority of participants described the process of overcoming embarrassment surrounding their lack of education. Participant A recalled her feelings about returning to education:

> "So I just had to look at myself and say, look, I'm going to have to do this. Because I was ashamed. I was embarrassed. I had low self-esteem about myself. And I said, I'm going to do it. You know, I got enough, enough courage to do it."

Participant B shared similar feelings, adding that not knowing how to read was a secret he carried with him his whole life that he has been able to let go of as his reading skills improve, stating, "It makes me feel good because of, I think that, that [not being able to read] was my biggest secret. And I don't have that secret no more." This is further reflected in Participant C's testimony, who shared that improving her reading has given her more agency in her life because she does not need as much help reading her mail or other text.

> "I used to cry. I used to actually cry because like, say if you were my friend and I got some mail, and if I couldn't read it, I would let you read it, then I could comprehend. But for me to read it and understand I couldn't…So now it's to the point I can read and understand what I read. I don't have to have anybody else read it unless it's something that's, you know, got a whole lot of, need help in it."

Participants A, B, C, D, and F recounted feeling embarrassed at their lack of education and carrying that embarrassment and shame with them for decades. Despite, in many cases, their lack of education not being their individual faults, and instead reflective of systemic racism that plagued their childhoods. Pursuing education later in life has allowed them to find confidence and agency in overcoming that embarrassment.

Another element of self-fulfillment that was recorded in all participants' interviews was pursuing personal goals. Among these personal goals were becoming a

writer, earning a high school equivalency credential, and learning how to read and write.

Participant A reported that she would like to become a writer.

> "So I hope that I want to, you know, I mean, I ain't trying to be no big time writer, but I want a voice. My, my feeling, my heart of things that other people can learn, encourage."

Participant C also shared that she would like to be a writer and publish an autobiography.

> "I want to be a writer. To finish reading. To get more knowledge out of reading. I want to complete more reading. If I can get more reading, to the point where I can understand, I would like to write a book. About me coming up as a kid."

Participant C went on to say that the reason she would write an autobiography is so others could relate to her story. She recalled that when she learned Oprah Winfrey had been raped, Participant C felt a sense of relatedness and strength from Winfrey sharing her story. Participant C related this to her goal, and said she would like to inspire others how Winfrey had inspired her. Participants B and D shared that one of their goals is to improve their reading skills. Participant B detailed specific actions he aspires to use his reading skills for.

> "I think my goal is to be, I guess I said is that one day and stuff, you know, that I will be able to sit down and write a letter just like you. Yeah. And then getting better with like, texting and like emailing and things like that."

All participants had individual goals for their education that did not have any relation to the workforce. Despite adult education shifting toward workforce development, older adults have goals unrelated to monetary gain and upward mobility. Only one participant identified receiving their high school equivalency as a goal, and his reason was "so I could put that certificate on the wall." His goal to achieve a high school credential is rooted in the idea that it is symbolic to him, not to use it for upward mobility in the workforce. Other goals related to connection with others, such as writing about

their life experiences and reading to kindergarteners. These goals are personal, related to

their self-fulfillment and represent values that participants wish to center in the last years

of their lives.

A majority of participants reflected in their testimony that education is important

to them. Participant A expressed that she hopes to pursue education for the rest of her

life.

> "Education, as long as you live, you're going to, you know, learn something and
> to better yourself. Because I know reading is like a tool. It's like a, it's like avenue
> or something to get you where you gotta go. So learning, education, I think I'll do
> that until I leave this earth."

Participant B recalled that a few weeks before he retired, he started calling Seeds of

Literacy to start the process of enrollment. He started classes within a month of retiring.

He said that he was thinking about returning to school for many years, and as soon as he

got the opportunity to, he did. Participant D, after testifying that he did not have an

interest in education when he was in elementary school, reported a transformation in his

educational journey. "No. I would never feel like that [not coming to Seeds anymore]. No

no no, I feel like coming. I got to the point where I like to learn."

All participants said that they would never stop pursuing education in some form.

Participants A, C, E, and F said if they reached their goals in reading and writing, they

would move on to learning something new like computer skills or science. Participant A

said she would like to pursue education as a means of bettering herself for the rest of her

life. All participants identified education as being something they personally value and

enjoy pursuing.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

To address my research questions, I asked participants questions about their prior experiences in school, what motivations they had to pursue education later in life, and what elements of Seeds of Literacy they find beneficial. Participants' responses to these questions lead to my identification of six shared themes present in their testimonies: negative past educational experiences, resilience, dissatisfaction and rectification, positive changes in mood, socialization, and self-fulfillment. My findings reflected much of what I found in the literature review, but also broke new ground on learner-reported experiences of motivation, rectification, and personal goals. The specific population of this study has not been investigated before with regard to their motivations and experiences in adult basic education. Therefore, many of my findings are unique to this study and one of the only studies that reflect the Black retired adult learner population in ABE.

A majority of participants reported that they had negative past experiences in school, including feeling like their teachers did not care about their success, getting pushed through to higher grades regardless of their academic progress, and getting pushed out of school. Two participants specified that they had negative experiences in

part due to their race. This aligns with previous literature that many Black students had negative experiences in school in the 1960's and 1970's including not being given opportunities to excel, experiencing racism, and being treated differently by their teachers in comparison with White students (Wells, et. al, 2005). Three participants of my study mentioned that at least one of the schools they attended as a child was closed and they were then bused to a different school, which had previously been an all White school. The existing literature on Black student experiences in the 1960's and 1970's reflects these same experiences, that Black students often carried the burden of desegregation and were more likely to be bused to a different school after their previous school closed (Wells, et. al, 2005).

All participants reported positive changes in mood as a result of participation in ABE programming. This supports what was found in previous research, that participation in lifelong learning can lead to "improved well-being, increased efficacy, protection and recovery from mental health difficulties, and more effective coping, including coping with physical ill-health" (Hammond, 2004, p. 555). All participants also cited socialization as a primary benefit of participation in ABE programming, supporting prior research that some older adults pursue education to make "new friendships" (Boulton-Lewis, 2010). These findings on socialization as a motivating factor also reflect the possible motivation to combat isolation, and the negative health effects associated with isolation in older adults (Ejiri, et. al, 2023).

Participants reported a variety of motivations for pursuing ABE. Some of their motivations align with existing motivational theories, including goal theory and self-determination theory. As described by Smith and Belzer, goal theory posits that many

people are motivated by cultural and personal goals (Smith and Belzer, 2022). The most common types of goals that adult learners set, according to Smith and Belzer, are "to demonstrate competency in the performance of a task and to achieve mastery of a skill". Many participants' motivations closely align with goal theory, such as writing a letter, earning a high school credential, and being able to read their own mail. Self-determination theory posits that there are three psychological needs that drive motivation: autonomy, competence, and belonging (Smith & Belzer, 2022). Certain motivations of this study's participants align with this theory, such as feeling a sense of belonging when socializing with others at Seeds of Literacy. Another sense of belonging is seen in participants' testimony about feeling more connected to others now that they also know how to read and can abandon their lifelong secret. They feel a sense of belonging to the larger community of readers now that they demonstrate a level of competence in reading. Competence was also seen in participant testimonies as a motivation, including increasing reading comprehension and overall reading ability.

Elements of self-fulfillment as a motivation for retired adults to pursue education was found in one study of older adults pursuing extracurricular courses, who reported motivations that included "to understand self" and "become a better person" (Boulton-Lewis, 2010). However, other elements of self-fulfillment that were reported by my participants including overcoming embarrassment, pursuing education later in life to accomplish personal goals, and returning to education because they value its importance do not exist in the current literature.

My findings also extend beyond the review of existing literature. The idea of dissatisfaction and rectification as a motivator for retired adults pursuing education later

in life is not found in the existing literature. Dissatisfaction, either with their level of education, skills, or career, was a motivating factor for all of this study's participants to pursue education. Participants recounted that they could have done better in their lives had they gone further in their educational journeys when they were school-aged, and although it may be too late to achieve certain dreams they once had, pursuing education later in life is a step toward rectifying their self-view. This act of not only recognizing their potential but taking action to claim and build upon their potential can be a powerful tool in restorying. Rectification can be viewed as a product of transformative learning and the restorying of participants' life story and self-view. By pursuing education later in life, participants took a step toward changing their internal narrative and rectifying past choices or circumstances in a way that brings them a sense of accomplishment and purpose.

Learner-reported goals from retired adults specifically participating in ABE were also not found in the literature review. Learner-reported goals were found for other populations, such as older adults participating in extracurricular courses and higher-level knowledge-based courses (Boulton-Lewis, 2010; Leung et. al, 2006). My findings in some ways align with the results of those two studies, as my participants similarly expressed that some of their goals were to gain more knowledge and extend their learning. However, my results differed from these studies as my participants also expressed specific, basic literacy goals including: writing a letter, increasing comprehension, being able to read their mail, being able to read and compose texts and emails, and being able to read picture books to kindergarten students.

This study adds to the existing literature by documenting experiences of resilience shown by Black retired adults with low literacy, which was not found in the literature review. Participants of this study described the ways in which they navigated employment, raised their children, and prepared for retirement while having low literacy levels. In many cases, this involved receiving help from family members or coworkers with filling out applications and paperwork. One participant described memorizing street names that he could not read while working as a cab driver. Another participant recalled telling someone at his work that he could not read, and asked for help understanding retirement accounts. These experiences of participants having to show resilience in their lives demonstrate some of the negative effects experienced by individuals throughout their lifetime who were subjected to racist practices in schools in the 1960's and 1970's that contributed to them not attaining reading skills and/or a high school diploma.

5.1 Implications

With these findings in mind, adult basic education programs that have retired learner populations should reevaluate the goals and measures of success of the program to ensure they are inclusive of retired adult learners. Retired adult learners are a unique population who do not have workforce related goals which is at odds with the dominating goals and structures of most adult education programs. Participants of this study reported that their motivations and perceived benefits were often intangible, social and emotional outcomes that did not solely rely on academic progress. Participants reported that the elements of the program that are most beneficial to them are socialization, 1-to-1 tutoring, working on their basic skills, and working toward their personal goals. Adult basic education programs that have a fixed time limit (i.e., semester-long programs),

require students to show progress through testing, deliver curriculum through an online application, use a traditional classroom structure with one teacher and many learners, and/or have inflexible curriculum would all be missing key elements that participants of this study identify as being important to them. Additionally, many participants reported goals that cannot be measured through standardized testing such as writing a letter, composing an email, or reading a text. ABE programs should reconsider their measurements of success to include non-traditional goals in order to capture and celebrate retired adult learners' successes.

If participants feel that an adult education program does not serve their needs, they likely will stop attending and not receive the psychological, social, and emotional benefits associated with continuing education. It is important for adult basic education programs with retired learner populations to have inclusive programming that takes retired students' motivations and goals into consideration. Programs should consider differentiating instruction, success tracking, and curriculum for older adults based on their personal goals and motivations. Additionally, ABE programs who have retired adult learner populations could look to diversify their funding sources by searching for funders that have goals of improving the wellness of older adults, such as agencies focused on successful aging.

My findings also have implications on adult education policy. Many adult education programs rely on federal funding to serve their learners. Federal funding opportunities require programs to report how many of their learners have gained new employment as a result of participation. This can serve as a deterrent for programs to enroll retired adult learners who will not contribute to their reported new employment

data. Psychological, social, and emotional benefits have been proven by this study and others. In light of this, federal policymakers should allocate funding specifically for retired adult learners to incentivize adult education programs to not only enroll retired adults, but to create new programs and initiatives with retired adult learners in mind. These programs could include targeted literacy instruction for retired adult learners with low literacy, in areas such as reading comprehension, digital literacy, financial literacy, and health literacy. Programs targeted at older adult learners should have more flexible curriculum and be guided by learner-reported goals to be more reflective of a population that does not pursue education for the workforce, but rather for highly personal motivations.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

As with all research, this study has limitations. I used a small sample size of six participants. I had pre-existing relationships with participants, which may have contributed to potential biases. All participants attend the same adult education program, and thus have shared experiences that contributed to their testimony. All participants live in the same city, Cleveland, and many are from Cleveland. All participants identify as Black, so this study does not capture the experiences of any other race. My data was collected through interviews, so there is a chance that participants did not remember details correctly, especially when asked about experiences that happened several decades ago. No identifiable differences were noted between participants with regard to their age, gender, or NRS level, which may have been due to the small sample size. To address these limitations, future researchers may find it beneficial to study a larger, more diverse sample with regard to race, gender, geographical location, and the programs participants

attend. To address the possible limitation of inaccurate memory, a longitudinal study would be appropriate.

Future researchers may also find it beneficial to investigate the relationship between retired adults' academic progress in adult basic education and their experiences. This study did not take into consideration participants' academic progress, it only required that they participate in ABE. This could shed light on how engaged or successful learners must be within an ABE program to experience benefits.

5.3 Conclusions

Adult education in the U.S. is becoming increasingly intertwined with workforce development. Federal funding requirements and accountability measures have centered career readiness in the field of adult education. However, retired adult learners do not pursue adult education to improve their position in the workforce, and their self-reported experiences are largely undocumented. The goal of this study was to center the voices of Black retired adult learners with low literacy skills and let them speak to their own personal motivations and perceived benefits of participating in adult basic education. My findings show that participants were motivated to pursue and continue to engage in adult basic education in order to improve their basic skills to achieve their personal goals and for social and emotional reasons such as socialization, rectification, and positive mood changes. The implications of these findings are that adult basic education programs who serve older adults should reconsider their measures of progress and success, and reevaluate elements of their program that may be antithetical to retired adult learners' motivations and goals for participating in ABE.

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APPENDIX

Questions for participants

Interview #1 - Demographics, past educational experiences, and work history

1. Would you tell me a bit about yourself? This might include your racial or ethnic background, age, work history, family.

2. Would you tell me about your prior experiences in K-12 school?

> Prompt – what level(s) of school did you attend? Where did you attend school? If you did, why did you choose to leave school? What elements of K-12 education worked for you? What elements of K-12 education stopped your completion?

3. How did your experiences in K-12 education shape how you view yourself as a student?

> Prompt – Did you like school? Were there certain subjects you liked or disliked? How did you get along with your teachers?

4. When you were a child or teenager, what did you want to do for a career? Did you want to go to college?

5. How do you think your experiences in K-12 education and literacy levels influenced the trajectory of your life?

> Prompt: If you had finished high school or gone to college, do you think your life would be much different? How?

6. What are some of your educational experiences after you left or finished school? Did you participate in GED classes, ABE, community college, trades, or work-based learning?

> Prompt: Do you view those experiences as successful or unsuccessful? Did you complete those experiences, if not, why did you leave them?

Interview #2 - Motivations and goals for ABE

7. What motivated you to come to Seeds? What continues to motivate you to come so often to class?

8. Where do you think that motivation came from, inside yourself, or from other people?

    Prompt: Did people in your life encourage you to come to Seeds? How did that affect you?

9. What are your goals for your education?

    Prompt: What do you want to accomplish at Seeds?

10. Is there a point where you would feel complete with your education?

11. If you stopped coming to Seeds for a while, but eventually came back, what made you come back?

12. What elements of the program do you think are beneficial?

    Prompt: What part(s) of Seeds do you like or dislike?

Interview #3 - Perceived benefits of participation in ABE

13. How has your involvement in Seeds affected how you feel about yourself?

14. How do your family and friends feel about you coming to Seeds?

    Prompt: Are they supportive or unsupportive? Do they ask you about class?

15. Is there anything you do now that you did not do before coming to Seeds?

    Prompt: Do you have any new hobbies? Do you try new things or talk to new people?

16. If you were talking to a new student, or someone who was interested in starting at Seeds, what would you tell them about the program?

17. Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't discussed?