

Adult Learners' Motivation and Retention in Adult Literacy Programmes. Implications for Counseling

Ajayi Rachael Adejoke¹, OLAOGUN, Ganiyu Olakunle², ADEDOTUN, K.O.³

¹, Department of Adult and Special Education

², Department of Guidance & Counseling, College of Specialized and Professional Education, Lagos State University Of Education, Ijanikin with a Campus @ Odo Noforija, Epe.

³, Department of Guidance & Counseling, Lagos State University of Education, Ijanikin with a Campus @ Odo Noforija, Epe.

Abstract: Despite modest global progress, UNESCO (2025) estimates that 739 million adults worldwide still lack foundational literacy skills, with women constituting nearly two-thirds of this population. Adult literacy programmes offer a critical pathway for remedying this educational disadvantage, yet sustaining learner motivation and ensuring programme retention remains the most persistent challenges. Drawing on Knowles' (1984) Andragogy Theory and Deci and Ryan's (2020) Self-Determination Theory, this paper reviews the empirical literature on the motivational drivers including personal development aspirations, economic opportunity, parenting obligations, and social recognition — that bring adults into literacy programmes, and the structural, relational, and instructional factors that either sustain or undermine their continued participation. The paper further identifies evidence-based strategies for improving retention, with implications for programme design, facilitator training, and educational policy. The paper concludes by advancing a collaborative relationship between adult literacy experts with counselors by advancing that through community counseling services, hinged on advocacy, sensitization and information sharing, a large number of adult learners can be motivated and enrolled into adult literacy programmes and retained to better their lives.

Keywords: adult literacy, counseling, motivation, retention, andragogy, self-determination theory, lifelong learning, dropout, learner-centred instruction

1. Introduction

Adult literacy is fundamental and foundational to human dignity, economic participation, and civic engagement. Despite the global adult literacy rate rising from approximately 67 per cent in 1976 to 87.7 per cent in 2024 (World Bank, 2025), the absolute scale of the problem remains alarming. According to UNESCO (2025), 739 million adults lacked basic literacy skills in 2024, with sub-Saharan Africa (225 million) and Central and Southern Asia (347 million) accounting for approximately 77 per cent of the global total, and women comprising nearly two-thirds of those affected. The OECD's 2023 Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) — which assessed over 1.16 million adults across 31 countries — found that an average of 18 per cent of adults across OECD nations lack basic proficiency in literacy, numeracy, or problem-solving (OECD, 2024). In the United States, 28 per cent of adults scored at or below Level 1 in literacy in 2023, a figure nine percentage points higher than in 2017 (NCES, 2023). These statistics affirm that illiteracy is not a residual, diminishing problem — it is a persistent global educational emergency.

Adult literacy programmes are designed to equip those who missed or inadequately completed formal schooling with the reading, writing, numeracy, and functional life skills needed for meaningful participation in society (Idhalama, Makori, & Oredo, 2025, Idhalama, 2019, Elegbede, et.al 2024). Yet their impact is consistently constrained by two interlocking challenges: motivating adults to enroll and retaining them through programme completion (Adedotun, et. al. 2024). This paper undertakes a comprehensive review of the literature on these twin challenges, guided by the following questions: What motivates adults to enroll in literacy programmes? What factors facilitate or hinder retention? And what evidence-based strategies can improve persistence? What role can counseling services provide to assist adult learners' patronage and retention and completion of adult literacy programmes? The review draws on peer-reviewed research, longitudinal data, and international agency reports published between 2019 and 2026.

2. Theoretical Framework

Andragogy Theory

Malcolm Knowles' principles of andragogy remain the most widely applied theoretical framework in adult education practice. Its six core assumptions — that adults are increasingly self-directed; bring rich prior experience to learning; are ready to learn what is relevant to their social roles; are problem-centred and oriented toward immediate application; are internally motivated; and need to understand why they are learning — have enduring relevance for adult literacy design (Clair, 2024; research.com, 2026). Research in South Africa found that when facilitators failed to apply andragogical principles, curriculum irrelevance and learner disengagement predictably followed, contributing to elevated dropout rates (Ajani, 2021). Clair (2024) affirms that andragogy, despite decades of critical scrutiny, continues to function as a normative and practical framework across diverse adult education contexts.

Self-Determination Theory

Deci and Ryan's (2020) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a complementary motivational framework premised on three universal psychological needs: autonomy (volition and self-endorsement), competence (mastery and effectiveness), and relatedness (belonging and connection). When these needs are satisfied, learners are more likely to internalise extrinsic motivations, sustain engagement, and persist through difficulty. A meta-review of SDT meta-analyses by Ryan et al. (2022) in *Psychological Bulletin* confirmed robust cross-cultural associations between need satisfaction, autonomous motivation, and educational persistence. Howard et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis, involving 344 samples and over 200,000 students, further demonstrated that intrinsic motivation is the strongest predictor of academic success and wellbeing, while identified regulation — endorsing the personal value of learning even when it is not inherently enjoyable — is particularly associated with persistence. Together, andragogy and SDT converge on the same central insight: adult learners persist when they experience learning as self-relevant, meaningful, and conducted within a supportive relational environment.

3. Motivational Factors in Adult Literacy Enrolment

The motivational landscape of adult literacy learners is different layers and context. Unlike the adolescent that is motivated to learn when their views are listened to and respected, the most consistently documented drivers of enrolment into adult literacy programmes include:

(1) personal development and self-efficacy: the desire to overcome the shame of illiteracy, build confidence, and achieve independence (Ajani, 2021);

(2) economic and employment aspirations: adults in low-income contexts are acutely aware of the wage premium associated with literacy; a 2020 Gallup analysis estimated that if all U.S. adults achieved Level 3 literacy proficiency, national economic output could increase by \$2.2 trillion annually, approximately 10 per cent of GDP (ProLiteracy, 2023);

(3) family and parenting responsibilities: the desire to support children's schooling and communicate with teachers is a powerful and emotionally resonant motivator, particularly among mothers (Evans & Yuan, 2022);

(4) religious and cultural motivations: the aspiration to read sacred texts or preserve heritage language and cultural identity mobilises a deep form of intrinsic engagement, particularly in African and South Asian contexts (UNESCO, 2023);

(5) recognition and certification: formal acknowledgement of progress activates the SDT need for competence and relatedness, affirming learners' sense of worth and communicating that their effort is socially valued (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

These motivational drivers are not static; they evolve as learners progress, encounter obstacles, or experience changes in their personal circumstances. Effective programmes attend to shifts in individual motivation over time rather than treating enrolment motivation as a fixed and self-sustaining condition.

4. Factors Affecting Learner Retention

Retention in adult literacy programmes is shaped by the dynamic interaction of instructional, structural, social, and personal factors. Curriculum relevance is perhaps the most powerful single determinant: when learning content addresses learners' immediate practical realities — health management, financial literacy, agricultural practice, civic participation — engagement is sustained; when it does not, disengagement follows rapidly (Ajani, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). Closely related is the quality of facilitation: warm, patient, andragogically skilled facilitators create conditions of psychological safety that are essential for the vulnerability of adult literacy learning; their absence is among the most cited reasons for dropout (Ajani, 2021).

Structural flexibility — the capacity to accommodate learners' competing work, family, and community obligations through varied scheduling and delivery modalities — is consistently identified as a critical retention enabler (Zachry & Rayala, 2022; JFF, 2025). Conversely, financial hardship represents one of the most intractable retention barriers: opportunity costs, transport expenses, and material costs can overwhelm even motivated learners, particularly during periods of economic stress; empirical evidence confirms household socioeconomic status as among the strongest predictors of educational persistence (Evans & Yuan, 2022; Aina et al., 2022). Family and community support buffers against these pressures; research from multiple contexts shows that parental and spousal encouragement significantly reduces dropout risk — one study found frequent parental encouragement reduced dropout probability by up to 16.8 percentage points (Frontiers in Education, 2025).

Gender-specific barriers demand explicit attention. In sub-Saharan Africa, where 72.5 per cent of males but only 59.4 per cent of females were literate as of 2020 (World Bank, 2022), domestic labour burdens, limited mobility, childcare demands, and patriarchal gatekeeping disproportionately constrain women's programme participation. Women constituted nearly two-thirds of the 739 million illiterate adults globally in 2024 (UNESCO, 2025), a reality that demands gender-responsive programme design rather than gender-neutral provision. Additionally, technology-enhanced learning — particularly mobile-based approaches — holds growing promise for extending literacy acquisition beyond the classroom; Moore et al.'s (2023) scoping review identified audio-supported text reading as sufficiently evidenced for scalable implementation, while mobile learning research in sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates meaningful improvements in retention and skill transfer (VoxDev, 2023). However, digital access inequalities women in sub-Saharan Africa are 36 per cent less likely than men to use mobile internet (GSMA, 2023, as cited in IMF, 2024) require that technology integration be paired with deliberate equity measures.

5. Evidence-Based Strategies for Enhancing Motivation and Retention

Learner-Centred Instructional Design

The most robust and cross-culturally consistent evidence in adult literacy research supports the adoption of learner-centred instructional approaches as the foundation of effective motivation and retention strategies. Learner-centred instruction, grounded in both Knowles' andragogy and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, prioritises the identification and incorporation of learners' goals, prior experiences, and immediate practical needs into the programme curriculum. This approach stands in deliberate contrast to supply-driven

models in which standardised content is delivered to passively receptive adults, irrespective of its relevance to their lives. Authentic learner participation in needs assessment, curriculum planning, and programme evaluation while demanding of facilitator skill and institutional flexibility consistently yields higher motivation and lower dropout rates (Clair, 2024; JFF, 2025).

Integrated Vocational and Life Skills Training

The integration of vocational and life skills content into adult literacy curricula has demonstrated strong evidence of positive effects on both motivation and retention. When literacy instruction is embedded within the context of health management, agricultural practice, financial management, or small business development, it acquires the immediacy and practicality that adult learners require. UNESCO's *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality: A Handbook* (2022) specifically advocates for the integration of foundational literacy skills within broader life skills frameworks as a strategy for addressing the 'why' of adult learning — providing learners with compelling, immediate, and personally meaningful reasons to persist. Evidence from multiple African and Asian contexts suggests that this integrated approach not only improves retention but produces more robust and transferable literacy skills, as learners encounter reading and writing in contexts that mirror their actual use outside the classroom.

Community Engagement and Social Support Systems

Effective adult literacy programmes do not treat the learning centre as an isolated institution; they cultivate active partnerships with the families, communities, and local organisations that shape learners' motivational environment. Community engagement strategies — including outreach to household members, collaboration with local religious and community leaders, peer mentoring programmes, and public recognition of learner achievements — serve the dual purpose of reducing social barriers to participation and mobilising the social support systems that sustain individual motivation (Evans & Yuan, 2022; Mulubale, 2022, as cited in AIJSSR, 2025). Peer mentoring, in particular, has demonstrated considerable promise as a retention strategy: when learners who have made progress are supported in mentoring new or struggling peers, both parties benefit — the mentor consolidates skills and acquires a sense of purpose and agency, while the mentee gains a relatable role model whose success is proximate and believable.

Addressing Structural and Financial Barriers

Effective retention cannot be achieved through pedagogical innovation alone if the structural and financial barriers that drive dropout remain unaddressed. Programmes committed to meaningful retention outcomes must actively invest in the material conditions of participation — providing transport subsidies, learning materials, onsite childcare, and flexible scheduling arrangements that make sustained participation possible for learners whose lives are characterised by economic precarity and competing obligations (JFF, 2025; UNESCO, 2025). While these support services require resource commitments that many programmes find challenging, the evidence from comparative programme evaluations consistently shows that the cost of providing material support is substantially less than the cost — in human potential and economic productivity — of dropout and disengagement.

Counselling, Guidance, and Wellbeing Support

Adult literacy learners frequently carry the psychological weight of past educational failure, social stigma, and personal adversity. The provision of professional counselling and guidance services within or alongside adult literacy programmes addresses both the emotional barriers to continued participation and the practical challenges — career guidance, financial planning, health navigation — that can overwhelm learners without support. Evidence from adult education literature suggests that learners who have access to personalised guidance are significantly more likely to articulate and pursue their educational goals, and significantly less likely to disengage when they encounter obstacles (JFF, 2025). While comprehensive counselling services may not be feasible within all programme contexts, even basic orientation workshops — providing learners with information about programme expectations, available supports, and pathways to further learning — have been shown to improve both initial retention and ultimate completion rates (JFF, 2025).

Monitoring and Feedback Mechanisms

Systematic monitoring of learner progress and engagement — combined with prompt, responsive outreach when learners begin to disengage — is an underutilised but evidence-supported retention strategy. Research on dropout consistently shows that the decision to withdraw is rarely made abruptly; it is typically preceded by a period of reduced attendance, declining engagement, and growing ambivalence that, if detected early, can be addressed through targeted outreach and support. Programmes that implement regular attendance monitoring, brief learner satisfaction surveys, and facilitator observation protocols — and that respond to warning signals with prompt, non-judgmental support — are demonstrably more effective at retaining learners through difficult periods than those that lack these early warning systems (JFF, 2025; Evans & Yuan, 2022).

6. Conclusion

Adult literacy programmes stand at a critical intersection of human rights, economic development, and social justice. The ambition of these programmes to equip marginalised adults with the foundational skills they need to participate fully in social, economic, and civic life is one of the most morally important educational undertakings of our time. Yet their impact has been persistently limited by the twin challenges of motivation and retention: too many adults who begin the journey of literacy acquisition do not complete it, and too many others never begin at all.

This paper has reviewed the evidence on motivation and retention in adult literacy programmes, drawing on theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, and international data to construct a comprehensive account of the factors that enable and impede adult learners' educational persistence. The evidence converges on several robust conclusions. First, motivation in adult literacy is complex, multi-layered, and deeply contextual: it is shaped by personal aspirations, economic pressures, family dynamics, cultural identities, and institutional experiences that differ across individuals, communities, and national contexts. Effective programmes recognise and respond to this complexity rather than treating learners as a homogeneous group with uniform motivational profiles.

Second, retention is not a natural by-product of enrolment; it is an achievement that requires deliberate, sustained effort from programme designers, facilitators, institutional managers, community partners, and policymakers. The factors that most powerfully predict retention — curriculum relevance, facilitation quality, structural flexibility, material support, community engagement, and gender-responsive design — are all amenable to intentional intervention. They do not require new theoretical insights; they require institutional will, resource investment, and the disciplined application of what the evidence already tells us.

Third, the theoretical frameworks of Knowles' andragogy and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory offer complementary and mutually reinforcing guides for programme design that remain as relevant and generative today as when they were first formulated. The consistent empirical finding that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fundamental determinants of educational motivation and persistence provides adult literacy practitioners with a principled framework for evaluating their programmes and identifying opportunities for improvement.

The goal of universal adult literacy — as articulated in SDG Target 4.6 and reaffirmed in UNESCO's Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025) — remains distant but achievable. Achieving it will require a fundamental reorientation: not merely of programmes and pedagogies, but of the societal and political valuations that determine how much attention, investment, and respect adult literacy receives. Adults who pursue literacy are not asking for charity; they are exercising a fundamental human right. The responsibility of educators, programme designers, and policymakers is to ensure that when they do, the systems they encounter honour their courage and reward their persistence.

Implications for counseling.

Community counseling services can be used to boost a variety of programmes in communities desiring improvement in identifiable areas including adult literacy programs, (Olaogun et al, 2023). One of the core services provided by counseling is information dissemination and sharing. Through advocacy and sensitization, counseling can help in restructuring adult learners' understanding of the need for adult learning programmes

in ways that go way beyond learning alphabets. The biggest barriers for most adult learners, is how to overcome the emotional stigma associated with overcoming missed opportunities. Counseling can be useful in removing mental blocks through cognitive restructuring. Many adults avoid literacy classes due to shame, past school trauma, or beliefs that they are too old to learn. Counselors can work 1-on-1 or in groups to reshape that mindset. Counseling can help solve barriers limiting adults' class attendance by teaching skills in time management, stress, childcare anxiety, work schedule conflicts, low confidence and anxiety. A literacy program might teach reading, but a counselor helps the adult plan appropriately among the many competing routine in his space such as, balancing study time, work and family responsibilities. Counseling teach goal setting strategies and emphasize respect as motivational strategies in enhancing learning, through individual and group counseling sessions, counseling can motivate adult learners to appreciate the significant leap adult literacy can impact their lives and the community growth.

7. References

1. Adedotun, K. O., Elegbede, C. B., Lapite, A. O., Idhalama, O. U., & Aluede, O. (2024). Assessing the role of social media in shaping career aspirations among lecturers in Nigeria: A quantitative analysis. *Global Journal of Social Sciences Studies*, 10(2), 88–103. <https://doi.org/10.55284/gjss.v10i2.1239>.
2. Aina, C., Baici, E., Casalone, G., & Pastore, F. (2022). The determinants of university dropout: A review of the socio-economic literature. *Socio-Economic Planning Sciences*, 79, 101102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.seps.2021.101102>.
3. Clair, R. S. (2024). Andragogy: Past and present potential. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2024(182), 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20546>.
4. Ajani, O. A. (2021). The andragogical value of content knowledge method: The case of an adult education programme in KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa. *Heliyon*, 7(8), e07912. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07912>.
5. Elegbede, C. B., Adedotun, K. O., Lapite, A. O., Idhalama, O. U., & Aluede, O. (2024). Exploring the use of technology in improving access to education for internally displaced children in Nigeria: A review. *Information Development*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/02666669241268228>.
6. Evans, D. K., & Yuan, F. (2022). How big are the effects of social protection programs on education? World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 10083. World Bank.
7. Frontiers in Education. (2025). Factors at the household and university level that influence student dropout at UNAM. *Frontiers in Education*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1598687>.
8. Guay, F. (2022). Applying Self-Determination Theory to education: Regulations types, psychological needs, and autonomy supporting behaviors. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 37(1), 75–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08295735211055355>.
9. Howard, J. L., Bureau, J., Guay, F., Chong, J. X. Y., & Ryan, R. M. (2021). Student motivation and associated outcomes: A meta-analysis from self-determination theory. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 16(6), 1300–1323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620966789>.
10. Idhalama, O. U. (2019). Provision of Reference and Information Services to the Physically Challenged Persons in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects. *Library Philosophy and Practice*. E-journal 2475 from: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/2475>.
11. Idhalama, O. U., Makori, E. O., & Oredo, J. O. (2025). Analysing the impact of digital literacy practices on the quality of library services and user satisfaction in public university libraries in Nigeria. *Alexandria*, 35(1-2), 74-88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09557490251335951>.
12. International Monetary Fund [IMF]. (2024). Revisiting trends in gender equality. In *Gender equality and economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa*. IMF eLibrary.
13. Jobs for the Future [JFF]. (2025, February). Adult learners: A literature review. JFF. <https://www.jff.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Adult-Learner-Full-Final-Report-2.20.25.pdf>.

13. Moore, S. L., Baca, O., & Ahrens, C. (2023). Learning technologies for adult literacy: A scoping review and analysis of the current state of evidence. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 71, 2195–2219. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-023-10270-9>.
14. National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. (2023). PIAAC highlights of U.S. national results. U.S. Department of Education.
15. Olaogun, G.O, Olagunju, M.K.O, Busari, M.A, Eruobodo, M.O & Adeleke, S.J. (2023). Gatekeepers' Roles in the Delivery of Quality Community Services (Ccs) in Nigeria. Implications for Early Years Counseling. *International Journal of Academic Pedagogical Research (IJAPR)* 7 (4). USA.
16. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]. (2024). Do adults have the skills they need to thrive in a changing world? Survey of Adult Skills 2023. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/4396f1f1-en>.
17. ProLiteracy. (2023). U.S. adult basic education fact sheet 2023. ProLiteracy.
18. Research.com. (2026). The andragogy approach: Knowles' adult learning theory principles for 2026. <https://research.com/education/the-andragogy-approach>.
19. Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2020). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a self-determination theory perspective: Definitions, theory, practices, and future directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 61, 101860. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101860>.
20. Ryan, R. M., Deci, E. L., Vansteenkiste, M., & Soenens, B. (2022). We know this much is (meta-analytically) true: A meta-review of meta-analytic findings evaluating self-determination theory. *Psychological Bulletin*, 147(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000283>.
21. Sustainable Development Goals [SDG] Report. (2025). Goal 4: Quality education. UN Statistics Division.
22. UNESCO. (2022). Making lifelong learning a reality: A handbook. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.
23. UNESCO. (2023). UNESCO strategy for youth and adult literacy and its action plan (2020–2025). UNESCO.
24. UNESCO. (2025). International Literacy Day 2025: Youth and adult literacy fact sheet. UNESCO.
25. VoxDev. (2023). what do we know about literacy learning in adulthood? <https://voxdev.org/topic/education/what-do-we-know-about-literacy-learning-adulthood>.
26. World Bank. (2022). Adult literacy rate in Sub-Saharan Africa from 2000 to 2020, by gender. Statista.
27. World Bank. (2025). the illiteracy rate among all adults (over 15-year-old) in 2024, by world region. Statista.
28. Zachry, C., & Rayala, C. (2022). California's adult education pandemic pivot. *COABE Journal: The Resource for Adult Education*, 11(1), 35–46.

INFO

Corresponding Author: **Ajayi Rachael Adejoke**, Department of Adult and Special Education.

How to cite/reference this article: **Ajayi Rachael Adejoke, OLAOGUN, Ganiyu Olakunle, ADEDOTUN, K.O, Adult Learners' Motivation and Retention in Adult Literacy Programmes. Implications for Counseling, *Asian. Jour. Social. Scie. Mgmt. Tech.* 2026; 8(4): 69-75.**