

## **An Evaluation of the Elements of Diversity in Teaching and Learning in Adult Basic Education and Training Centers**

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### **Abstract**

*The aim of the research was to evaluate the elements of diversity in teaching and learning in Adult Basic Education and Training centres. This study was underpinned by critical theory. This is because most of the curricula facing most teachers in the developing countries are handed down for implementation without any room for critiquing. A qualitative research approach was chosen for this research so that the conclusions drawn from the data reflected the interpretation of reality by adult education facilitators. An interview guide approach gave freedom to the researchers to ask follow-up questions, even if they do not follow the documented sequence. The researchers used conceptual analysis to find out if adult education facilitators understand different meanings associated with adult education and use concepts appropriately. It was established, through the findings that most Adult Basic Education centres consist of learners who vary in language, age group, gender, culturalized traditions and rituals, religious orientations, level or speed of understanding, and nationality. Adult education facilitators should look for solutions to challenges of diversity by conducting one-to-one dialogue with learners and with fellow adult education facilitators.*

**Keywords:** Critical outcomes, diversity, culturalized traditions, communication

### ***1. Introduction and Context of the Study***

According to Gultig, Hoadley and Jansen (2004:89), one of the critical cross-field outcomes of Curriculum 2005, as introduced in South Africa, is to work effectively with others as members of a team, group, organization and community. Critical outcomes are not confined to one learning area or subject. All teachers, including adult education facilitators, in different learning areas or subjects are expected to help learners to become citizens as described by these critical cross-field outcomes.

Most communities, especially in urban areas are constituted by people who differ according to racial background, customary practices, religion, culture and sexual orientation, among others. It is not always easy to understand and provide for their needs. Adult Education and Training (AET) classes, as community structures, are faced with certain challenges caused by diversity.

The establishment of an adult learning centre is determined by need. The number of centres within a community is dependent on the number of potential learners, not on other factors, such as learners' racial or ethnic background, religion, marital or employment status. A centre in a community is expected to render a service of teaching and learning to all community members from diverse backgrounds. This means that an adult learning centre will always be constituted by learners from diverse backgrounds.

Crous, Kamper and Van Rooy (2002:72) indicate that adults can be described in biological, legal, social and psychological dimensions or the combination of all/some of these dimensions. The biological dimension refers to a person's physical maturity and the ability to reproduce. The legal dimension refers to the stage when a person is old enough to enter into legally monitored and/or binding transactions without their parent's/guardian's consent. At this stage, a person can receive an identity document, drivers' license or marry. The social dimension occurs when people begin to fulfil adult roles such as full-time work, marriage, parenting and voting. The psychological dimension is when they reach a stage of accountability and responsibility for their actions. These dimensions illustrate different angles on diversity. This research focuses on investigating how diversity in various dimensions can impact on the effectiveness of adult education and learning.

The Adult Education and Training Act no. 52 of 2000 as amended (South Africa 2000) pegs the minimum age of an adult learner at sixteen years. This implies that an AET class can be constituted by learners ranging from sixteen to sixty or more years. School-going children who are classified as 'over-age' for their grades are referred to AET centres to continue and complete their studies. This demonstrates that age is another element of diversity in AET centres.

When the former Department of Education was divided into two departments, namely, Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) was moved to the DHET and is no longer referred to as ABET but as AET. The intention was that AET centres would forge a linkage with Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges. This research therefore refers to adult learning centres as AET centres.

South Africa is a multiracial, multicultural and multi-faith society. All people, regardless of their racialized grouping, culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation, social status, health, age, and disability, expect to be treated equally. According to the Constitution of South Africa, section 29 (Chapter 2 of the Bill of Rights), everyone has the right to basic education, including adult basic education. The State has the responsibility to provide basic education to all its citizens regardless of their diversity. The Constitution of South Africa, Section 29 (Chapter 2 of the Bill of Rights) also addresses one of the most visible elements of diversity, language, by stipulating that everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practical. It means that learners should not be denied admission to a learning institution on the basis of language.

The study aims to contribute towards creating an environment in AET classes that will promote peaceful coexistence of people with different cultures, religion, sex or gender, sexual orientation, social class, age, health and disability. This research seeks to reverse the impact of apartheid policy of separate development in homelands that were demarcated on the basis of language and ethnicity.

## **2. Theoretical Frameworks**

This study was underpinned by critical theory. Booyse (2008:12) states that the key focus areas in the philosophy of critical theory are the 'change and emancipation' of societies from being indoctrinated towards being critical and questioning. As for Paulo Freire (cited in Lemmer 2000:57), the essence of education about society is that social reality is made by people and can be changed by people. It is imperative that teachers see that social and political reality is not fixed, but that it can be changed and transformed. This is because most of the curricula facing most teachers in the developing countries are handed down for implementation without any room for critiquing. The aim of this study was to evaluate the elements of diversity in teaching and learning in Adult Basic Education and Training centres.

## **3. Research Design and Methods**

Researchers used a qualitative research approach in order to understand social phenomenon from the participant's point of view. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006: 315), qualitative research is inquiry in which researchers collect data in face-to-face situations by interacting with selected persons in their settings. The research methods and processes of a qualitative approach are flexible. It gives the researcher the freedom to utilize different methods of data collection. A qualitative research approach was chosen for this research so that the conclusions drawn from the data reflected the interpretation of reality by adult education facilitators. Qualitative research allowed for the in-depth investigation of participants' experiences of their challenges and enabled the researchers to interact with the participants in exploring their understanding of the challenges.

The researchers used purposeful sampling in conjunction with maximum variation sampling techniques. With the assistance of officials from Tshwane West district office, the researchers selected four centres which are constituted by learners of different ethnicity, customs, languages, religious and sexual orientation. AET centres are constituted on four levels: level 1, 2, 3 and 4. From each centre, four adult education facilitators who represented one of the four levels respectively were included. The researchers interviewed all sixteen sampled adult education facilitators. Thereafter, four out of the sixteen (sampled) adult education facilitators, that is, one from each centre, were selected for lesson observation and follow-up interviews. Onwuegbuzie (2007:113) states that purposeful sampling adds credibility to a sample when the potential sample is too large.

#### **4. Data Collection**

We sought to encourage adult education facilitators to relate their experience and define its meaning and effects. Such information was collected through in-depth interviews. McMillan and Schumacher (2006: 350) describe in-depth interviews as “open ended questions” to obtain data which indicates how individuals conceive of their world and how they explain or make sense of the important events in their lives.

We used an interview guide approach. Questions were planned in advance but the sequence of questioning was guided by the manner in which participants responded. An interview guide approach gives freedom to the researcher to ask follow-up questions, even if they do not follow the documented sequence. McMillan and Schumacher (2006: 351) maintain that in the interview guide approach, topics are selected in advance, but the researcher decides the sequence and wording of the questions during the interview.

Observation was conducted during lesson presentations made by four adult education facilitators who had been selected. A rubric that consisted of four level-descriptors and assessment criteria was drawn. The assessment criteria included, amongst others, the profile of the class, preparedness of the adult education facilitator, competency of the adult education facilitator to embrace/accommodate all learners, the rate of learners’ participation, rate of lesson stoppages due to challenges caused by diversity, elements of diversity that cause lesson stoppages, competency of the adult learning facilitator to address the challenges, and learners’ attitude towards addressing challenges caused by their diverse backgrounds.

#### **5. Data Analysis and Interpretation**

We used conceptual analysis to find out if adult education facilitators understand different meanings associated with adult education and use concepts appropriately. The interviewing instrument consisted of questions which required participants to reflect on their understanding of andragogy, characteristics of adult learners, diversity and elements of diversity. We also wanted to establish if adult education facilitators consciously/unconsciously employed dimensions of the intercultural and multicultural models of education and the objectives of the anti-racist educational model discussed by Gou and Jamal (2011:18–30).

#### **6. Research Findings and Discussions**

The researchers prepared the interview questions in advance as guidelines. We gave room for follow-up questions and deviation from the interview guide to get more relevant information.

##### **6.1 Elements of Diversity**

All participating adult education facilitators pointed out that the noticeable elements of diversity in their centres were differences in age, language, culturalized traditions, religion and gender. In one of the participants’ class there was also a difference of nationality. Some participants pointed out differences in level of understanding or cognitive level, which is mostly affected by age difference. Senior adults’ pace of understanding may be slower than that of young adults. Vigour or energy to participate in class differs between senior and young adults and between male and female learners. Differences in social status and learners’ goals were also highlighted. One participant commented that there is a possibility of differences in sexual orientation but no learner has visibly behaved or declared that he or she is a homosexual or bisexual.

##### **6.2 Primary Elements of Diversity**

The above paragraph identified eleven elements of diversity, but the existence of these elements in AET centres differ from one centre to the next. For example, Queen’s class consists of five elements of diversity, which are: different age groups, language groups, gender, religion and nationality. Rosina’s class is also constituted by five elements but they differ from those that constitute Queen’s class.

They are: different age groups, language groups, gender, social status and level or pace of understanding. There are elements of diversity which are general in all the centres, i.e. language difference, age difference and gender. They can be referred to as primary elements of diversity. The other motivation of signifying these language, age and gender as primary elements of diversity is that other elements of diversity, like level of understanding, vigour, traditional practices and others, can be dependent on them.

Elizabeth implies how level of vigour (which can be defined as energy or the activeness that the learner displays during the discussions) is dependent on age. “It is not a feeling of hopelessness, but reluctance to work harder and an attitude of giving the young ones sort of an open space to learn. I maintain this because senior adults always remind the class that they came to the centre to address their immediate needs like reading, counting and using basic technological gadgets like ATMs; therefore difficult questions should be directed to the young ones because they are the future leaders”. Patience shows how age influences a pace of understanding. “Senior adults complained of a lot of work which should be completed in a short space of time so they dropped out”. She also said “I think that young adults think that they are better than senior adults because of their speed and good performance”.

Mary pointed out the effect of gender on the level of vigour or energy with which learners participate in class: “Male learners respond well and confidently when they are called to do so. But there are topics which they feel are for them to lead like, leadership of the family, and the role of a man and of a woman etc. I did not consider males’ selective participation as a problem. Our discussion makes me wonder if it means that these other topics don’t attract their attention. Maybe that is why we don’t have many male learners in our centres. They think that they are wasting time. Our choice of topics might have suggested that ABET is for women. I think that I should introduce topics which are equally appealing and relevant to both men and women so that I can equally attract men and women’s attention and participation”. Mary has observed that male learners do not always participate in discussions. They participate on topics that affect or relate to men. She maintains that when adult education facilitators prepare a facilitation plan, they should select topics that take recognize the composition of their classes regarding gender.

### **6.3 Communication and Language-use by Adult Learners**

All challenges and achievements that adult education facilitators highlighted were related through communication and language-use. The most effective way of sharing ideas or transferring information is through communication. Pitton et al. (in Lankard (1994:2) reports their observation on some culturally learned tendencies that can negatively influence communication among members of a diverse group. They give examples about groups who find direct eye contact preferable and acceptable, while it is disrespectful and inappropriate in others. That is why language and communication is one of the most important aspects in the facilitation of adult education. All the above were done through verbal and non-verbal communication.

Queen allowed long discussions amongst learners until they deviated from the topic; and this resulted in non-achievement of planned learning outcomes. She stated that she intended to have long discussions on different issues. When we questioned this, she stated “Yes, I agree. But an adult educator should be flexible and allow discussions to take place in the class. Learners might not have achieved the set outcome but they will have shared their opinions”.

King’s class, according to him, was characterized by uncooperative learners. They all wanted to dominate and that resulted into factionalism. He was reluctant to dialogue with learners about their factionalism. Instead he discouraged learners from code switching or expressing themselves in their mother tongue, directing them to use English as the only language of communication. This is how he stated it: “I should be giving learners enough time to freely express themselves and share their experience which is relevant to the topic of the day. The experience would then be used as content for learning to achieve the set outcomes. Unfortunately due to disorder that usually takes place when they freely express themselves, which is in their mother tongue, they are forced to express themselves in English, which becomes a barrier to total expression”. King acknowledged during the interview that his decision negatively affected adult learners’ participation in class and he resolved to remedy the situation. He said: “I intend to consult my colleagues to find out how they handle such classes. I will look for ways of building self confidence in learners and that they don’t need to defend themselves for who and what they are, then plan facilitation processes that will encourage learners to freely express themselves without fear of criticism”.

Another challenge of communication is cultural restrictions and limitations. Diana indicated that African culture has limitations on what senior adults should or should not pronounce in front of young adults. Reciprocally, there are things and topics which young adults are not supposed to discuss in front of senior adults. Should young adults talk about sexual organs in front of senior adults, senior adults would feel offended and not respected. She said: "Almost all African cultural backgrounds somehow dictate a language or vocabulary that should be used by adults in the midst of children and visa verse".

#### **6.4 Language-Use and Communication by Adult Education Facilitators**

Ginsberg et al. (2009:26) expound the role of an adult education facilitator in a culturally diverse class by stating that it is to construct a motivating educational experience with learners. Cushner et al. (2006:100) argue that teachers should become cultural mediators in their classroom and should walk both sides of a double-edged sword. It means that if adult education facilitators succumb to challenges of diversity, especially language differences, effective learning may not take place. To support Cushner et al.'s argument, the researchers maintain that an adult education facilitator is expected to be a source of knowledge and a facilitator of acquiring knowledge. For example, she can be an interpreter of different languages or the facilitator of interpretation. The 21<sup>st</sup> century report to UNESCO by Delors et al., as cited by King et al. (2006:19) states that general education brings a person into contact with other languages and areas of knowledge, and makes communication possible. It means "learning to know", which is the first of the four pillars of learning, is about communication.

Patrick said that he could not express himself in languages of a certain portion of his class. He announced his limitation to learners in a manner that seemed to be discriminating against the affected learners. The affected learners felt humiliated and rejected. Learners who were sharing the same language with Patrick felt as if they are more important and wise. They undermined the other affected learners. That is how he put it: "I could not express myself in some of the learners' languages. Maybe, the manner in which I told them that I don't understand their languages sounded to them as if I am discriminating against them. Other learners, of my language, also understood my statement as discriminating too". He reported during the interview that he did observe learners who were uncomfortable because of his earlier comment and he apologized: "I had to openly apologize to the affected learners for the misconception that I have created that I don't respect them or I am discriminating against them. I explained that my language was not superior or more important than theirs. I also requested those of my same language to stop their negative attitude. The interview session reinforced the lesson that Patrick learned about the need to know different people around him: "I have learned that it is necessary to know your learners: their culture, traditional practices, religion, things that are offensive to their backgrounds and which should not be said or should be said in a particular tone. You should convince your learners that you know about some of those, that you will make sure that they are respected and you are prepared to learn more from them".

Learners who grew up being told that they were failures, whose historical set-up had confirmed that they were 'third class' citizens and could not be compared with others, and whose self-concept is very negative, need motivation. Adult education facilitators are expected to be able to "intrude the cocoon" in which people with low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence and negative self-concept hide themselves. Zhou (2006:17) enlisted the aims of another pillar of learning, learning to live together, as follows: "to discover others, to appreciate diversity of human race, to know oneself, to be receptive to others and to encounter others through dialogue and debate, to care and share, to work towards common objectives in cooperative understandings and to manage and resolve conflicts".

Rose motivated inferior learners from the Christian point of view. She acknowledged during the interview discussion that her approach of utilizing Christianity as the only source of motivation might have caused some learner attrition. The researchers suggest that it is fair for an adult education facilitator to disclose their religious affiliation. The problem with Rose is that she announced it as the only religion and this does not give learners an opportunity to choose their preferred religion. It means that her viewpoint seems to be commanding and does not provide freedom of choice for learners. When this was raised to Rose, she acknowledged that she may have been discriminating against other religious affiliates. She said: "Yes, it is possible that non-Christian learners may think I am not talking to them when I motivate them from the Christian point of view. I did know that there are non-Christians in class but did not accommodate them. Maybe that is why some of them have dropped-out". In concluding the interview Rose said: "This interview drew my attention to the existence of diversity and its accompanying challenges in adult classes. This interview motivated me to think deeply about the positive and negative effects of diversity".

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

It was established, through the findings that most AET centres consist of learners who vary in language, age group, gender, culturalized traditions and rituals, religious orientations, level or speed of understanding, and nationality. There are indications that there may be differences of sexual orientation, but because of homophobia, people may be afraid to declare their sexual orientation. Language and age difference have been identified as primary elements of diversity because they prevail in all centres and other elements of diversity can be dependent on them.

Adult education facilitators should facilitate learning to adult learners in diverse settings. Adult education facilitators should look for solutions to challenges of diversity by conducting one-to-one dialogue with learners and with fellow adult education facilitators. They should implement the recommendations of different models of teaching such as multicultural educational model, which is, empowering learning culture. We are of the opinion that if adult education facilitators knew about the different models of education, they would be better able to turn challenges of diversity into opportunities of development.

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