

“I Want to Prove to Myself That I Can”: Motivations and Challenges of Older Learners in Their First Year of Academic Studies

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Abstract

Adult learners often bring unique challenges and motivations to academic settings, shaped by diverse life experiences and educational backgrounds. Understanding these factors is crucial for designing programs that address their distinct needs. The study explores the perceptions of first-year students in an adult education program at a college of education. Through in-depth interviews with 20 students, three main themes emerged: negative childhood experiences with school, motivation for academic learning, and challenges and supports in current studies. Participants described how negative learning experiences in childhood influenced their self-efficacy and self-image in learning. However, motivation to learn, based on both internal and external factors, was a central factor in their decision to return to school. Additionally, the study highlights the important role of support from family, friends, and lecturers in helping students overcome emotional and academic barriers. The research emphasizes the need for a deep understanding of the unique needs and challenges of adult learners to develop supportive and encouraging learning environments. These findings emphasize the critical importance of adaptive educational approaches that acknowledge and address the diverse backgrounds and support needs of adult learners.

Keywords

Adult Education, Andragogy, Learning Motivation, Learning Support, Self-Efficacy

1. Introduction

Andragogy, defined as the facilitation of knowledge acquisition and learning for

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adult learners (aged 30 and above), serves as the foundation for contemporary adult education methods and principles. The current study extends these principles by focusing on the experiences of adult learners in Israel, exploring how negative educational experiences and varied motivations shape their academic journey and support needs. Malcolm Knowles, a pioneer in the field, argued that andragogy differs from pedagogy and constitutes a distinct educational theory grounded in a deep understanding of the characteristics of adult learners (Knowles et al., 2012). Unlike child learning, where the teacher is central to the learning process, andragogy focuses on the learners themselves and their ability to manage the learning process. Adult learners tend to value their independence and utilize their rich life experiences as a basis for effective and meaningful learning (Machynska & Boiko, 2020).

The andragogical approach is grounded in the concept of “lifelong learning,” where learning is seen as a continuous process that accompanies individuals throughout their lives (Knowles et al., 2012). This perspective emphasizes the importance of ongoing learning, not only for personal and economic development, but also for enhancing an individual’s social engagement and addressing the modern challenges of the information age. This perspective assumes that adult learners come to learning with high motivation, self-direction, and educational needs tailored to their life challenges (Snyder & Wenger, 2010).

A central concept in andragogy is self-efficacy, defined as an individual’s perceived ability to organize and execute actions to achieve their goals (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy directly influences learners’ choices of actions, the amount of effort they invest, and their persistence in learning. Research shows that high self-efficacy is associated with academic success and a greater overall sense of life satisfaction (De-Fatima Goulão, 2014; Savi Çakar, 2012).

Self-regulated learning (SRL) is another critical factor in andragogy. SRL refers to the learner’s ability to take control of their own learning process, involving goal setting, planning, monitoring, and self-assessment (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). This skill is particularly valuable for adult learners who often balance multiple responsibilities. Research consistently demonstrates that learners with strong self-regulation skills are better equipped to navigate the challenges of academic pursuits and achieve higher levels of success (Michalsky, 2014).

Andragogy in Israel is implemented through various programs, both within academic institutions and outside of them. In non-academic settings, adult education primarily focuses on language learning, vocational training, and specialized programs for disadvantaged populations (Tuktally, 2012). Despite the development of tailored learning programs for adult learners, there is still a need for a deeper understanding of the factors influencing their success. The impact of prior learning experiences on the adult learner’s perception of academia is a topic that requires further research. Understanding the connection between prior learning experiences and coping with academic challenges may lead to the development of more tailored approaches and supports for adult learners (Roofe et al., 2023). Moreover, adult learners frequently face a unique set of challenges in higher

education, including balancing multiple responsibilities (Roofe et al., 2023) and addressing potential gaps in their academic preparation (Bok, 2021). Understanding these challenges and their impact on adult learning experience is crucial for designing more effective learning environments. This study aimed to explore the experiences and perspectives of first-year adult students in an “Adult Education” program at a college of education to identify the factors that shape their learning experiences.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The current study is part of a larger study involving 89 first-year undergraduate students in an “Adult Education” program. The distribution of students, according to personal characteristics, in the larger study is presented in **Table 1**. **Table 1** shows that women are the majority of those taking part in the bachelor’s degree in adult education. Most of the study participants are in a partnership, and most of the mothers of the students in the adult education program are not academics, and in fact, most of the program participants are the first generation in their family to pursue higher education. In the current study, we chose to focus on twenty participants who agreed to take part in personal interviews.

Table 1. Background characteristics of students participating in the larger study (N = 89) and the current study (N = 20).

Category	Variables	Current Study (N = 20)	Larger Study (N = 89)
Gender	Male	2	10
	Female	18	79
Family Status	Single	1	7
	Married	18	74
	Divorced	1	6
	Widowed	-	2
Religion	Jewish	19	84
	Muslim	1	1
	Christian	-	3
Family Income	Below 10,000 NIS	6	24
	Around 10,000 NIS	4	26
	Above 10,000 NIS	10	39
Dropped Out of School	Yes	4	8
	No	16	81
Self-Identified as “At-Risk Youth”	Yes	2	8
	No	18	81
Parents with Academic Education	Yes	2	24
	No	18	65

2.2. Instruments

Participants who agreed to participate in the larger study completed an anonymous questionnaire that included demographic information and validated research instruments. Additionally, 20 participants were randomly selected for in-depth interviews. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. The current study focuses on the findings from these interviews. Participants were asked an open-ended question about their decision to enroll in the adult education program and their experiences as adult learners. This approach allowed for a more natural exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences.

2.3. Research Process

Given the qualitative nature of the current study, a qualitative methodology was employed. After receiving approval from the David Yellin College of Education Ethics Committee, a link to a questionnaire was sent to all first-year students enrolled in the "Adult Education" program. Of the 134 first-year students enrolled in the program, 89 agreed to participate in the study and completed the anonymous questionnaire. Twenty of these students provided their contact information to allow researchers to conduct more in-depth personal interviews.

The personal interviews were transcribed, and the anonymous transcripts were provided to the authors of the article for data analysis. The qualitative data were thematically analyzed, presenting the central themes that emerged from the interviews (Shaked, 2003). The main themes that recurred in the questionnaires were examined, and a thematic content analysis was conducted, based on Braun and Clarke's analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The content analysis was conducted in six stages: 1) The data were read several times to become familiar with them; 2) Open coding was performed, in which the responses to each question were divided into short meaning units; 3) The set of codes was assigned to basic theme groups; 4) The themes underwent a processing process until the final data was obtained, while maintaining internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity; 5) In-depth examination was conducted for each theme. To reduce researcher bias and achieve interpretive validity, two of the article's authors formulated the themes, each independently of the other (reaching independent agreement). At the end of this stage, they discussed the definition and presentation of the themes until they reached full agreement; 6) In the findings chapter, the final themes were presented and selected quotes were included.

3. Results

Analysis of the interviews revealed three main themes: 1) Negative childhood experiences; 2) Motivation for academic studies; 3) Challenges and supports in current studies. The findings will be presented in line with these emerging themes.

3.1. Negative Childhood School Experiences

All interviewees reported negative childhood experiences in school. These experiences

encompassed feelings of distrust, low self-efficacy, learning difficulties, and disengagement. Past experiences influenced them in two primary ways: 1) Objective classroom performance, primarily manifested in low academic achievement, avoidance, and escapism; 2) Poor subjective self-perception, expressed through feelings such as fear, failure, and frustration.

“I wasn’t a good student. I hardly ever went to school. I don’t really believe in the education system.” (Dana, first-year student).

The pervasive feeling among some that no one believed in their abilities led them to drop out of school.

“In school, I would escape during breaks and even during classes... No one believed in me.” (Chaim, first-year student).

Avoidance was also evident in a lack of interest: *“It [school/studying] didn’t interest me at all, so I ran away.”* (Chaim, first-year student)

Some interviewees reported feelings of low self-efficacy and negative learning experiences. *“I always went to school with the feeling that I wasn’t good enough.”* (Nira, first-year student).

“My learning experience was negative, simple as that. It was difficult, I hardly understood anything.” (Bilha, first-year student).

“As a child, I didn’t believe I would be capable, because I had not-so-pleasant experiences at school. They probably didn’t know about learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders back then. I fell between the cracks. They would say I was dreamy.” (Rinat, first-year student).

The study participants expressed the scars left by emotional difficulties. The painful experience was etched in their consciousness, and the echoes of laughter from their classmates still haunt them today, many years later.

“If I said something wrong in class, they would laugh at me.” (Shifra, first-year student).

“I was a student who wouldn’t even raise her hand. They would laugh at me, I was afraid to go there.” (Haviba, first-year student).

“I finished school 34 years ago. When I was studying, it was very difficult for me. I couldn’t finish full matriculation. It’s a feeling of failure, there’s no other way to describe it.” (Simcha, first-year student).

Similarly, Simona, who now has grown children studying at university, describes the emotional difficulty that still serves as an obstacle for her.

“The whole technological part is very difficult. I’ve never been good at it. I have severe attention and concentration problems, and reading was also difficult for me, from the beginning. Back then, they didn’t address it, they didn’t understand me. I always felt stupid.” (Simona, first-year student).

Like Simona, others who participated in this study describe the skepticism regarding the very existence of the learning disability they had to cope with, without support, and without environmental awareness or knowledge. They felt alone in the battle.

It can be concluded so far that the motivation and desire to study academically

are puzzling considering the uncomplicated descriptions the students provided during the interviews.

3.2. Motivation for Academic Studies

All interviewees described a long-standing dialogue with the issue of pursuing higher education. The courage to leap back into the chilly and stressful waters of academia often stemmed from internal motivation built over time or was more reliant on external motivation, such as encouragement and push from their environment, be it a family member, friend, or employer.

The decision to study in academia and the challenge of facing studies was described by some of the study participants as the fulfillment of a dream and turning it into reality.

“I decided to prove to myself that I am worth it, that I can [...] I feel like I'm doing something for myself, really for myself. I never dreamed this would happen.” (Haviba, first-year student).

“I started studying here because I want to believe in myself and my abilities.” (Chaim, first-year student).

Some described listening to their “inner voice”, which gave them the strength to believe they were “worth it” and would prove their success to everyone.

“I came because I want to prove to myself that I am capable, after years of feeling not good enough. Even though I was successful at work, there was always a nagging feeling that everyone around me had succeeded and I hadn't. My son was also sick for years and I didn't have time for myself.” (Nira, first-year student).

“People decided after many years to take their lives into their own hands and stop listening to people who tell them ‘You can't or aren't worth it’...” (Mohammed, first-year student).

Some interviewees emphasized that the initial motivation for studying was external. *“A lot of people from work pushed me. I didn't want to register at first.”* (Chaim, first-year student).

Shifra excitedly told how for years she had talked at home about her fear of studying, and last year her eldest daughter (who herself is studying in academia) did something that actually put Shifra's hidden desire into action.

“Last year my daughter said to me: ‘I called all the colleges to check for you.’” (Shifra, first-year student).

For some participants, the external factor that motivated them to study was a family member, while for others, it was work colleagues or even their employer. Nahora is just one of many examples of applying ‘pressure’, until she finally agreed and enrolled in studies.

“I'm a teaching assistant at school, and the school principal and my work colleagues encouraged me to come study. The principal didn't give up on me. Every year he would take me for a talk and say to me: ‘You can! You can! Why not?’” (Nahora, first-year student).

Nahora gives a name and title to the difficulty she experienced in the past,

through her help to her son. She acts with a positive, independent approach and finds answers to her needs. She undergoes a diagnosis, takes Ritalin, and more. The desire to prove herself and her abilities is the beacon that guides her.

“I want to prove to myself, to my children, to my father that I can. Today, before every exam, he gives me a blessing. So far, it’s working.” (Nahora, first-year student).

Another reason that emerged in the interviews relates to the motivation stemming from a desire to expand knowledge and advance personal and professional development. *“I’m studying so I can have knowledge and expand my knowledge. Everything else is a bonus.”* (Rinat, first-year student).

“I came to study just for the experience, to develop.” (Bilha, first-year student).

Experiences of success increase motivation and strengthen feelings of self-efficacy. *“I saw that I am capable and successful. It gave me more motivation.”* (Simcha, first-year student).

“Now I can advance at work upon completion of my degree.” (Chaim, first-year student). In summary, participants’ motivations to pursue academic studies were complex, blending a desire to overcome past educational limitations with encouragement from social and professional networks, which provided crucial support in returning to academia.

3.3. Challenges and Supports Required for Success in Current Studies

Interview participants identified the challenge of balancing academic studies with other major life responsibilities, such as parenting, working, and fulfilling household duties. As a result, they needed to be goal-oriented and dedicate specific time and space to their studies.

“On the one hand, I really looked forward to coming back to school... When I come here to study, I leave everything else behind. For this time, I’m only a student—I’m not at home, I’m not cooking. I tell my family and myself, ‘Mom’s not cooking, Mom’s not doing anything else right now.’” (Haviba, first-year student).

“I have twin babies at home. I just gave birth to them and we just moved.” (Haviba, first-year student).

“I allowed myself to dare and it did me good.” (Shifra, first-year student)

This detachment also created enjoyment and a “clearing of the head” from the daily routine. *“Basically, I made a very big change in everything related to studying, something I didn’t connect with in the past. One day a week you clear your head of the wife, the children, the stress from the kitchen, from the laundry.”* (Chaim, first-year student).

Overcoming challenges and experiencing the subsequent success strengthened their self-confidence and sense of self-efficacy in facing new challenges. *“I love studying today, and it feels good to overcome obstacles, like technology—when you learn about the system and understand where everything is and how it works. Everything becomes more convenient.”* (Nira, first-year student) *“The experience is good and scary, and I still tremble before an exam. I get help from everyone. At*

first, the children helped me, and today, after a semester, I'm more successful and understand more." (Nahora, first-year student).

Another challenge that emerged in the interviews was the technological aspect. *"All the communication issues are very difficult for me. I have to learn them, I understand that this way I will manage better."* (Simona, first-year student)

The analysis of the findings reveals that a variety of support mechanisms help students effectively cope with the challenges they face. Most interviewees stated that intensive support—technical, social, and especially emotional—was crucial to their success. Knowing that someone sees them, listens to them, and “walks with them hand in hand” provided significant reassurance. “There is help at home. I kind of harness everyone to me... my daughters, my husband, everyone.” (Rinat, first-year student). “Support from my husband, friends who are studying, and the feeling that you’re not alone—that everyone is struggling and not just me—it lifted me up. Also, the lecturers, even the head of the program, whom I spoke with, told me: ‘You’re not giving up.’ It calmed me.” (Haviba, first-year student). “This attitude is beyond [being a] student—a lecturer who holds your hand and walks with you all the way.” (Mohammed, first-year student).

Involving close family, friends, and lecturers in the challenges of studying acts as a form of reinforcement for students who invest significant effort in their studies. The students in this study emphasized the importance of their lecturers’ personal relationships in contributing to their success. “The lecturers here understand me very much... I see their patience in explaining to us... They give a feeling of ‘we’re with you.’” (Shifra, first-year student). “The fact that there is a listening ear here helps. The fact that it’s a college, it’s more homey.” (Chaim, first-year student).

As part of their studies, students are required to gain practical experience in the community through social involvement. Within this framework, each student finds a place they connect with and volunteers for 56 hours each year for two years. In addition to practical experience, the study program includes a ‘Workshop for Social Involvement’. This is a course that accompanies social involvement in the community and is taught in a small group of about 40 students in a class, creating intimacy and the opportunity to open and share important topics. *“I started to connect in the workshop for social involvement, which gave us a lot to talk about and to open our hearts. There is a lot of support here, a listening ear that really strengthens me, that someone is behind you.”* (Simcha, first-year student) *“This place is wonderful [...] they accept the other and the different from all sectors.”* (Shifra, first-year student).

The participants in this study repeatedly emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships and the longing for support, personal attention, recognition, and appreciation, which serve as an important basis for correcting the negative school experience and making room for a new, empowering, and positive learning experience. Overall, the study underscores that the balance of familial and academic support significantly impacted participants’ abilities to persevere in their studies and positively shift their academic self-perceptions.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions of first-year students in a 30+ adult education program regarding academic studies. The qualitative findings revealed three central themes: 1) Negative childhood experiences; 2) Motivation for academic studies; 3) Challenges and supports in current studies.

The first theme in the current study highlighted negative learning experiences in school during childhood, which are still present in the lives of the interviewees today. These experiences manifested in negative emotions, low self-efficacy, and a low academic self-image. The interviewees mentioned a lack of appreciation and belief in their abilities by teachers and the education system. Some even reported feeling like outsiders in the educational environment. The severe feeling of some that no one believed in their abilities led to dropping out of school, which served as a kind of disengagement from the difficult experience. This finding aligns with previous research showing that difficulties with persistence and dropout rates among school students were related to the degree of teacher commitment to students and belief in their abilities (Gil et al., 2018; Houtte & Demanet, 2015; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022).

In addition, most reported objective difficulties of academic underachievement during their school years. Some interviewees described emotional difficulties arising from undiagnosed attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and learning disabilities, which created additional barriers to their success. Numerous studies in the field of underachievement demonstrate the strong link between undiagnosed learning disabilities and the accumulation of learning gaps and academic performance that does not reflect the learners' true abilities (Ju et al., 2017; Moriña & Biagiotti, 2021).

Amla (2004) emphasizes in her research the long-term consequences of negative learning experiences in school, which leave a deep emotional mark on the self-esteem of students with learning disabilities. Undoubtedly, the students in the current study also express the scars left by the emotional difficulty of ongoing difficulties and low achievements that did not reflect the learning abilities that were inherent in them.

On the other hand, promoting factors were identified that had a significant impact on the interviewees' self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy. These factors include expectations, encouragement, and even direct intervention from the students' immediate environment to study and/or internal motivation to prove their abilities and worth to themselves and others. Another significant promoting factor noted in the interviews was the support and trust they received from the lecturers at the college, who served as significant corrective educational figures for them. A recent meta-analysis of 71 studies indicated that encouragement and support from lecturers, family, and social networks positively influence the motivation of adult students to study in academia by improving psychological needs, academic self-efficacy, and social engagement (Tao et al., 2022).

The current study demonstrates that sensitive and attentive andragogy can

provide a positive learning experience and overcome learning barriers. In andragogy, the individual moves from a state of dependence to a state where they are able to direct themselves towards achieving their goals at their own pace, through activity, active learning, and readiness to realize their potential (Knowles et al., 2012; Michalsky, 2014). Both internal and external motivation are essential to facilitate the transition from dependence to independence, as shown in our research. The learning experience of the students in the study is described as an experience accompanied by high motivation among learners to succeed and prove to themselves and their environment that they are capable of academic learning. Adult learning based on the concept of “lifelong learning” requires maintaining high motivation over time (Knowles et al., 2012). The motivation component according to Pintrich and de Groot (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Pintrich, 2000) is a very important factor in success.

In conclusion, the results of the study shed light on the importance of understanding the experiences of adult learners and providing support and assistance to overcome entrenched learning barriers. By creating a supportive and nurturing learning environment, academic staff at colleges can help adult learners build their self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy and enable them to achieve their academic goals successfully. The research findings highlight the importance of addressing the unique challenges faced by adult learners, particularly those related to past educational experiences and the need for supportive learning environments. By understanding these factors, educators can more effectively design programs that foster adult learners’ motivation, resilience, and self-efficacy. Ultimately, creating adaptive and inclusive academic environments can significantly enhance adult learners’ self-efficacy and motivation, fostering lifelong learning and personal growth.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

Our study’s sample, which primarily included Jewish students within a single Israeli institution, limits the broader applicability of the findings. The study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the sample size is relatively small. A larger dataset is needed to draw more robust conclusions. It is important to remember that the interviews were conducted with only 20 participants, making it difficult to generalize the findings from the in-depth interviews to the entire population. Additionally, it would be beneficial to expand the research to include other populations, such as adults in Arab society. Another limitation is that the research was conducted by researchers in the field of education. The findings could also be examined from a psychological perspective, which would deepen the socio-emotional exploration. Future research should consider including participants from more diverse cultural and regional backgrounds to capture a fuller spectrum of adult learning experiences and challenges.

First, it is recommended that program administrators develop and implement structured academic toolkits that focus on foundational skills, providing students

with a solid base for academic progress and confidence. Additionally, small group workshops should be organized to foster emotional resilience, offering a supportive environment where students can process their academic experiences together, encouraging mutual support. Second, personalized learning accommodation should be provided for students with undiagnosed learning disabilities, ensuring that individual learning needs are addressed. Lastly, training for faculty members in social-emotional learning (SEL) skills is essential, as it equips educators to effectively support the unique needs of adult learners, thereby enhancing the quality and inclusivity of adult education programs.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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