

Michael Schemmann (Hg.)

2023 Internationales
Jahrbuch der
ErwachsenenbildungInternational
Yearbook of
Adult Education

Researching Participation in Adult Education



E-Journal Einzelbeitrag
von: Lena Sindermann

Frustration, Care Work, and the Pandemic

Reasons for Drop-Out in Literacy and Adult Basic Education

aus: Internationales Jahrbuch der Erwachsenenbildung /
International Yearbook of Adult Education 2023
(9783763973910)

Erscheinungsjahr: 2023

Seiten: 99 - 114

DOI: 10.3278/173910W006

Dieses Werk ist unter folgender Lizenz veröffentlicht: Creative
Commons Namensnennung 4.0 International

Eines der zentralen Ziele im Bereich der Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung ist die Vermeidung von Kursabbrüchen (Drop-out), da ihre Teilnahme nachweislich gesellschaftliche Partizipation für ihre Zielgruppen fördern kann. (Inter)nationale politische Organisationen haben aus diesem Grund Programme zur Förderung von Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung in Feldern wie Politik, Praxis und Forschung etabliert. Im Fokus der Forschung stehen in diesem Zusammenhang insbesondere Fragen von Zielgruppenakquise und Teilnahme, während teilnahmeverhindernde Faktoren von gering literatisierten Erwachsenen bedeutend wenig erforscht werden. Im Beitrag wird dieses Desiderat zum Anlass genommen, um Ursachen für Kursabbrüche im Feld der Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung herauszuarbeiten. Als Datengrundlage dafür dienen Expert:inneninterviews mit Dozierenden, die im Feld tätig sind (n = 13). Zentrale Ursachen für Drop-out werden so aus Perspektive von Kursleitenden identifiziert und entlang individueller, lebenskontextueller und institutioneller Faktoren charakterisiert.

One of the central goals in literacy and adult basic education is to avoid drop-out. This is because participation in basic education programmes can demonstrably promote social participation for their target groups. Consequently, a number of (inter)national political organisations have launched programmes to strengthen literacy and adult basic education in various fields such as policies, practice and research. Regarding research on literacy and adult basic education, participation behaviour has been increasingly examined. Remarkably little attention has been paid to researching the factors that prevent low-literacy people from completing these programmes once they are in the course. The article takes this as an opportunity to examine the reasons of drop-out in the field. Based on interviews with trainers in literacy and adult basic education

(n = 13), central reasons for drop-out are identified and characterised along individual, life-contextual and institutional factors.

Schlagworte: Drop-out; literacy and adult basic education; reasons for drop-out; Drop-out; Kursabbrüche; Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung; Ursachen für Drop-out

Zitiervorschlag: *Sindermann, Lena (2023). Frustration, Care Work, and the Pandemic: Reasons for Drop-Out in Literacy and Adult Basic Education. In: Internationales Jahrbuch der Erwachsenenbildung 2023. Researching Participation in Adult Education, S. 99-114. Bielefeld: wbv Publikation. <https://doi.org/10.3278/173910W006>*

Frustration, Care Work, and the Pandemic: Reasons for Drop-Out in Literacy and Adult Basic Education

LENA SINDERMANN

Abstract

One of the central goals in literacy and adult basic education is to avoid drop-out. This is because participation in basic education programmes can demonstrably promote social participation for their target groups. Consequently, a number of (inter)national political organisations have launched programmes to strengthen literacy and adult basic education in various fields such as policies, practice and research. Regarding research on literacy and adult basic education, participation behaviour has been increasingly examined. Remarkably little attention has been paid to researching the factors that prevent low-literacy people from completing these programmes once they are in the course. The article takes this as an opportunity to examine the reasons of drop-out in the field. Based on interviews with trainers in literacy and adult basic education (n = 13), central reasons for drop-out are identified and characterised along individual, life-contextual and institutional factors.

Keywords: Drop-out; literacy and adult basic education; reasons for drop-out

Zusammenfassung

Eines der zentralen Ziele im Bereich der Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung ist die Vermeidung von Kursabbrüchen (Drop-out), da ihre Teilnahme nachweislich gesellschaftliche Partizipation für ihre Zielgruppen fördern kann. (Inter)nationale politische Organisationen haben aus diesem Grund Programme zur Förderung von Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung in Feldern wie Politik, Praxis und Forschung etabliert. Im Fokus der Forschung stehen in diesem Zusammenhang insbesondere Fragen von Zielgruppenakquise und Teilnahme, während teilnahmeverhindernde Faktoren von gering literalisierten Erwachsenen bedeutend wenig erforscht werden. Im Beitrag wird dieses Desiderat zum Anlass genommen, um Ursachen für Kursabbrüche im Feld der Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung herauszuarbeiten. Als Datengrundlage dafür dienen Expert:inneninterviews mit Dozierenden, die im Feld tätig sind (n = 13). Zentrale Ursachen für Drop-out werden so aus Perspektive von Kursleitenden identifiziert und entlang individueller, lebenskontextueller und institutioneller Faktoren charakterisiert.

Schlagworte: Drop-out; Kursabbrüche; Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung; Ursachen für Drop-out

1 Introduction

Participation in literacy and adult basic education potentially increases literacy skills for adults and promotes both social and political participation (OECD, 2016). Consequently, a number of (inter)national political organisations have launched programmes to promote basic education. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, for instance, started the international *Education for All Initiative* in 2000 to reduce barriers to educational access (Schemmann, 2012; 2019). In Germany, the *National Decade for Literacy and Adult Basic Education (2016–2026)* was founded to strengthen literacy and adult basic education in various fields such as policies, practice and research. The starting point for all such measures and initiatives has been the shared conviction that literacy and adult basic education is the prerequisite for a self-determined life, lifelong learning, and social and professional participation. Appropriate basic education, which includes teaching reading and writing skills, aims to increase learners' chances of independently completing everyday tasks, enabling their participation in society and achievement of professional qualifications. Thus, literacy and adult basic education includes not only reading and writing skills but also numeracy, basic IT knowledge, health education, basic financial literacy, and basic social skills (Euringer, 2016). Such education is oriented towards the practical use of written language in everyday work and social life, and teaching everyday competencies leads to the improvement of reading and writing (General Agreement on the National Decade for Literacy and Basic Skills).

However, participation rates in literacy and adult basic education are relatively low. In Germany, the *Leo Studies* (2011 and 2018) have identified a strong need for literacy and adult basic education as well as great difficulties in addressing their target groups. Only 0.7% of the 6.2 million low-literacy people in Germany participate in a literacy and adult basic education programme (Grotlüschen et al., 2019). In observing the low participation rates compared to the self-proclaimed goals of literacy and adult basic education, it becomes clear that one of the central purposes of basic education practice is recruiting the target group and keeping participants in their courses. Therefore, an important aspect of literacy and adult basic education is the avoidance of drop-out (Dorschky, 2016). Although research has increasingly been conducted on participation behaviour in adult education, it is also necessary to examine the reasons and causes for absences in adult education (Dutz & Bilger, 2020; Hoffmann et al., 2020). Specifically, in the context of literacy and adult basic education, little research has been done on how to retain participants once they are in the course. Accordingly, there seems to be a high discrepancy between the political importance of the topic and the successful maintenance of attendance. Remarkably little attention has been paid to researching the factors that prevent low-literacy people from completing these programmes. Considering the tremendous research gap regarding drop-out, this article aims to examine the causes of drop-out in adult education. This can be summarised in the following research question: *What reasons for drop-out can be identified in literacy and adult basic education?*

In this study, this question is answered through an interview study of trainers¹ in literacy and adult basic education in the ongoing research project “DRAG – Drop-out in literacy and adult basic education”². Trainers in literacy and adult basic education can give an overview of the reasons for drop-out due to their proximity to participants in the course and their professional role in the institutions. Especially with focus on drop-out, trainers represent a key component interfacing between the institutions and participants.

To address the research question, this article first articulates the current state of research on drop-out for adult education (2.1), as well as on the specific field of literacy and adult basic education (2.2). The presented models and studies serve as a heuristic and theoretical framework for subsequent analyses. Methodologically, this article is based on a qualitative interview study with 13 trainers in literacy and adult basic education (3). The findings evince different reasons for drop-out in literacy and adult basic education, as observed from trainers’ perspectives, and therefore give an overview of factors that might influence (permanent) participation (4). In addition, the findings are discussed against the background of the current state of research; finally, conclusions are drawn with regard to current debates in the field (5).

2 Reasons for Drop-Out in (Literacy and) Adult (Basic) Education: State of Research and Theoretical Framework

Research on drop-out in the field of adult education started in the 1970s and has used different definitions of the term, making a clear delimitation of the phenomenon difficult (Hoffmann et al., 2019). In addition to the classic definition of drop-out, which can be summarised as the discontinuation of an adult education activity that has begun (Schmidt, 2011, p. 203), many empirical studies have a broad understanding of the phenomenon. Definitions range from the failure to take final examinations to the short-term suspension of an offer or the general withdrawal from the education system (also called non-participation) (Hoffmann et al., 2020). The obscurity of the phenomenon is understood as the cause of large research gaps in the field and the occasionally widely divergent results of studies (Schmidt, 2011; Thomas, 1990). Chapter 2.1 presents how the phenomenon is commonly researched in adult education. Expanding on this, Chapter 2.2 focuses on the specific field of literacy and adult basic education and explains how drop-out is researched in this context. Both sections reveal how causes for drop-out are researched in the field and serve as a heuristic framework for the subsequent analysis.

1 There are a variety of terms used to describe teaching staff in the field of literacy and adult basic education. In the following, the term *trainer* is used. This refers to all persons who teach in the field in various course formats.

2 The research project is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) as part of the National Decade for literacy and adult basic education 2016–2026 with the funding codes W1474BFO and W147AFO.

2.1 Research on Drop-Out in Adult Education

Concerning research on the causes of drop-out in adult education, different dimensions for drop-out have been identified: individual factors, institutional factors, (socio-)structural factors, and situational reasons have been named in existing studies on the phenomenon (Hoffmann et al., 2020). The beginnings of drop-out research mainly featured studies with psychological explanatory models. A relevant theory in this context is Boshier's (1973) *congruence model*, which identifies drop-out decisions where the individual needs of the participants (self-concept) do not match the institutional arrangements of the course (learning environment). Garrison (1985, 1987) adopted this model and extended it to consider psycho-social factors by considering participants' individual expectations of their courses in relation to social influences. Darkenwald and Gavin (1987) additionally focused on social factors as causes of drop-out in their empirical studies and developed the *social environment theory*, which focuses on the fit between learners and course structure. They considered trainers as relevant actors in the drop-out process and emphasised that social interactions between participants and trainers can promote or reduce retention in adult education. According to the current state of knowledge, individualised approaches to participation decisions have progressively been replaced. Cross's (1981) *chain of response model* demonstrated possible interrelationships between variables that affect participation behaviour in educational activities. By differentiating between factors that influence decisions on participation, different barriers can be identified through this model – situational barriers (e.g. lack of money, lack of time, professional and family obligations, lack of transport), institutional barriers (e.g. inconvenient class times, inappropriate entrance requirements, lack of study guidance), and dispositional barriers (e.g. self-esteem and the attitude of the adult learner). More advanced models, such as Boeren's (2017) *comprehensive life-long learning model*, have examined participation along different levels of action in adult education. Boeren (2017) analysed the perspectives of individual learners (micro-level), educational institutions (meso-level) and regulating governments (macro-level) to examine participation behaviour by considering multiple relevant actors in this context.

The models mentioned above focus exclusively on participation in adult education. As a research perspective that explicitly examines drop-out in adult education, the *typology of non-fit in cases of drop-out from adult education* (Thalhammer et al., 2022) should be mentioned as an explanatory approach to examining drop-out. It assumes that decisions against participation in adult education cannot be traced back to individual aspects and are rather influenced by a series of situational factors. The researchers examined drop-out as a matter of suitability and developed different types of non-fit that can be related to individual – as well as institutional and structural – causes for drop-out. The basis for this model came from interview data from drop-outs in adult education. According to the findings, the reasons for drop-out can be attributed to the following seven types of non-fit: intra-individual non-fit, life context-related non-fit, inter-personal non-fit, individual-institutional non-fit, institutional-individual non-fit, intra-institutional non-fit, and inter-institutional non-fit. These types of non-fit give an overview about various reasons for drop-out. In the following analysis, they are contex-

tualised within the specific field of basic education and used as a heuristic framework to establish a classification system for the interviews with trainers in the subsequent analysis (3).

2.2 Research on Drop-Out in Literacy and Adult Basic Education

With regard to drop-out research in the field of literacy and adult basic education, Thomas (1990) summarised that despite numerous studies, little holistic research has been conducted on the phenomenon. According to Pickard (2013), this changed in the 1990s, when there was a shift from a predominantly unidimensional view of drop-out to a multi-dimensional view. Subsequently, it has become apparent that causes, risk factors, and preventive measures of drop-out have been researched using different approaches. Empirical studies have identified individual, institutional and structural barriers to participation (Kumar, 1994; Pickard, 2013; Thomas, 1990). Socio-demographic experiences, psychological constitution, external influences from the environment, and institutional barriers, such as supply structures or the learning atmosphere in the course, were identified as relevant causes for drop-out, reflecting the multi-layered effects and complexity of the phenomenon (Kumar, 1994). This is of particular importance for the target groups of literacy and adult basic education. In this context, Prins and Schafft (2009) criticised the traditional research on drop-out as follows: “When situational factors such as inflexible work schedules or health problems are discussed, they are often treated as randomly occurring personal problems rather than social problems that disproportionately affect poor families” (Prins & Schafft, 2009, p. 4). It becomes clear that factors influencing decisions on participation are often located in the life circumstances of participants. Thus, it can be determined that low literacy has been researched less as an individual matter than as a social-structural phenomenon (Müller, 2012). Therefore, low participation in literacy and adult basic education should be seen as a complex interplay of different influences in which the structural interweaving of social circumstances and participation decisions play a particularly important role (Pickard, 2013). In her review, Pickard (2013) summarised that most participants attributed their drop-out to circumstances beyond their influence, such as their workplace, health problems or economic constraints.

However, this multi-perspective view of participation barriers in literacy and adult basic education has not always been evident. In 1994, Sparks criticised the dominance of psychological explanatory models for non-participation in basic education. These models, she argued, hide the structural inequalities, political struggles and cultural differences experienced by people of colour, women, and other marginalised groups. In her comprehensive study of non-participation in the field of literacy and adult basic education in Colorado, USA, Sparks drew attention to the significance of the experiences of oppression for non-attendance in basic education opportunities. Additionally, she criticised the prevailing discourse on non-attendance, which is limited to learning motivations and implicitly blames individuals for their low literacy. Especially for marginalised groups, reasons for drop-out should be seen along categories of difference such as race, class and/or gender (Sparks, 1994).

Further evidence in support of this is Bremer's (2004) study on the *myth of the self-learning subject* also emphasising that participation in literacy and adult basic education is often less a matter of motivation than a matter of privilege. It is important not to deny the participants of literacy and adult basic education their power to act, but the current research shows that the interweaving of different experiences of inequality can make participation difficult. Cutz and Chandler's (2000) study, which examines the non-participation of the indigenous population – especially women – in Central America, also exemplifies this phenomenon. They concluded that patriarchal structures in families can have a considerable influence on the non-participation of women in basic education programmes. They demonstrated that many women avoid literacy programmes to avoid personal threats and conflicts in relationships (Cutz & Chandler, 2000). The study showed that violence and oppression can be major barriers to women's participation. Horsman (2000) also conducted research on women's participation behaviour as it relates to experiences of violence. Her examination built on extensive research that revealed the wide range of impacts violence has on adult literacy learning. Overall, empirical studies on drop-out in literacy and adult basic education have shown that the reasons for it are multi-layered and cannot be seen as isolated decisions.

Now focusing specifically on adult education research in Germany, it has to be noted that there is very little evidence-based research examining drop-out in literacy and adult basic education although the phenomenon may be particularly topical (Hoffmann et al., 2019). With regard to the Covid-19 pandemic, empirical findings have suggested that pandemic-related living conditions have acted as a push factor for drop-out in literacy and adult basic education and reinforced risk factors for participants in the field. A study by Bickert et al. (2022) revealed that the pandemic has further amplified existing educational inequalities and that this predominantly affects the target groups of literacy and adult basic education. In view of the current state of research, this article now identifies the causes and reasons for drop-out according to the perspectives of trainers working in the field of literacy and adult basic education.

3 Methodological Approach

This article aims to identify reasons for drop-out as observed by trainers in literacy and adult basic education. As indicated above, the findings of this research are based on a qualitative interview study in the field of literacy and adult basic education. Guided interviews (Gläser & Laudel, 2010) were conducted with persons who have "expert knowledge" (Gläser & Laudel, 2010, p. 11) about the research field due to their involvement in it. Thus, 13 interviews with trainers who were teaching literacy and adult basic education courses in German *Volkshochschulen* and other educational institutions were conducted. The interviewed persons teach in formal, non-formal, and low-threshold programmes which cover the range of basic education offers in Germany. The interview guide included questions on the trainers' activities, the target groups of basic education programmes, the importance of drop-out in the field, the causes of drop-out, and preventive measures against drop-out.

The interview material was then evaluated using qualitative content analysis based on Kuckartz (2016). The category system for the interviews was established through a multi-step procedure that developed deductive and inductive categories. The intercoder reliability calculated over the entire data corpus had a satisfactory Cohens-Kappa value of 0.69 (Cohen, 1960; Krippendorff, 2004).

Aiming to identify the main causes for drop-out, the article focused on deductive categories on reasons for drop-out based on *Thalhammer et al.'s model*, as indicated above (2.1), and on inductive categories that emerged from the material (Fig. 1).

Category	Definition (based on Thalhammer et al. 2022)	Subcategories (inductive emerged from the material)
intra-individual non-fit	The type of intra-individual non-fit indicates a non-fit within a subject in relation to enduring and temporary/situationally required forms of dealing with the world and oneself. A drop-out is given when enduring characteristics also occur in the adult education situation and lead to participation no longer being possible (e.g. psychological reasons).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of motivation • No concentration • Life circumstances • Avoidance attitude • Traumas • Expectations • Effort • Fatigue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health problems • Overload • No progress • Lack of learning strategies • Fear of infections • Shame/fear
life context-related non-fit	The type of life context-related non-fit refers to (varying) life circumstances that make further education irrelevant or difficult to achieve (e.g. new job, move, childcare, etc.).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Care work • Pregnancy (new) job • Relocation • No capacities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No lack of motivation • Unstable living conditions • Change in living conditions
inter-personal non-fit	The type of inter-personal non-fit takes a look at interactions of persons. In adult education situations, at least two persons meet (in the course context or in other contexts) which can lead to non-fits due to different expectations (e.g. conflicts between the individual and other participants or between the individual and their partner).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When friends leave • Demographic characteristics • Group dynamics do not fit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private environment • Conflicts with other participants
individual-institutional non-fit	The type of individual-institutional non-fit refers to a discrepancy between the individual and institutions, such as the educational institution itself, or other institutions. The individual's expectations, formulated demands on institutions, assessments of fit and interests do not fit from the beginning or no longer fit during the educational activity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corona measures • Course content • Trainer decides • Too expensive • Expectations • Teacher leaves <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselling as a barrier • Change to online teaching • Framework conditions of the courses
inter-institutional non-fit	The type of inter-institutional non-fit refers to the fact that a non-fit can also occur between institutional bodies, for example between an employer who finances adult education programmes and the educational institution that offer the programmes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course is dissolved • Participants are not allowed in courses • Disruptions/Failure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corona pandemic • Reduction of courses • Digital conversion
target achieved	The course is ended or discontinued by the participants when they feel that they have achieved the goal they set for themselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual goal achieved • No new registration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue learning independently

Figure 1: Reasons for drop-out of the perspectives of trainers in literacy and adult basic education according to the *Typology of non-fit in cases of dropout from adult education* of Thalhammer et al. (2022)

During the coding process, the categories *individual-institutional non-fit* and *institutional-individual non-fit*, as well as *intra-institutional non-fit* and *inter-institutional non-fit*, were merged. Additionally, the inductive category *target achieved* was added to the codes. Furthermore, inductive subcategories were formed for each of the presented codes further differentiating the reasons for drop-out. Consequently, the analysis is based on the main- and subcategories presented in Figure 1. As the interviews and the coding were carried out in German, the quotations in the following chapters were translated into English by the author.

4 Results

The central findings of the analysis are presented as follows: First, reasons for drop-out concerning individual barriers (such as health or psychological problems) are mentioned (4.1). In addition, changed or persistent life circumstances of participants (4.2) and discrepancies between individuals and institutions (4.3) are presented as causes for drop-out.

4.1 Dealing with the World and Themselves

Reasons for drop-out can be influenced by different factors that reveal a non-fit between the individual needs of participants and course conditions. This section focuses on the causes for drop-out found within the individuals themselves. Trainers of literacy and adult basic education reported that participants in their courses are rarely used to organised learning due to their educational biographies. Therefore, participants are often frustrated when they do not achieve self-imposed learning goals which trainers frequently consider to be unrealistic. Frustration about the lack of progress in their own literacy skills and the lack of successful learning strategies are described as reasons for drop-out (I02_Pos. 70). At the same time, permanent participation is described as being “easier for people who either already have a certain level of schooling or a learning biography” (I07_Pos. 63).

From the trainers’ point of view, another reason for drop-out is the lack of fixed daily structures for some participants. One interviewee explained that low-literacy adults, in particular, have “big hurdles to cope with everyday life” (I07_Pos. 62). According to this trainer, some participants must make extensive preparations to keep fixed appointments during the week. Therefore, regular attendance presents challenges for parts of the target group of literacy and adult basic education (I07_Pos. 62). Simultaneously, firmly established everyday structures of participants clashing with course time can cause drop-out. One of the trainers reported that a woman stopped participating because she prioritised other obligations such as “going out with her dog during course time” (I07_Pos. 101). The interviews thus illustrate how heterogeneous the target groups of literacy and adult basic education – and therefore their causes for drop-out – are. The interviewed trainers also explained that some participants could not continue attending the courses for psychological reasons (I01_Pos. 32). These include addiction problems

(I02_Pos. 66) or depression, as well as fears that make course participation impossible (I03_Pos. 47).

Overall, it can be said that these causes of drop-out are often closely related to the individual condition of the participants. One of the interviewed trainers summarised that “[some participants] can’t integrate [the course] into their everyday life, because they just can’t manage it” (I10_Pos. 103). At the same time, the interviews show that many trainers adjust to the individual needs of the participants and give them the opportunity to participate unregularly: “Whoever comes is always warmly welcomed, and there is no culture of ‘You have to come regularly though.’ I don’t do things like that” (I10_Pos. 103).

4.2 (Changing) Life Circumstances that Make Education Difficult to Complete

In addition to the previous reasons for drop-out which are found in the individuals themselves, the article now focuses on the life circumstances of participants that make permanent participation difficult to achieve and therefore cause a drop-out. Trainers reported that participants faced changing life circumstances such as getting a new workplace or finding a job which constitute a central reason for stopping a programme (I12_Pos. 110). If the working hours of the new job clash with the course times or it is simply too exhausting to come to the course after work, participants usually prioritise their work (I09_Pos. 73). Regarding the target groups of literacy and adult basic education, this can be explained by economic constraints that force participants to earn money instead of improving their literacy skills (I13_Pos. 143, I03_Pos. 34). Often, the opportunity to find a (new) workplace is one of the main reasons why potential participants enrol in a course. They may either be obliged to do so by the job centre or expect better chances in the job application process by improving their reading and writing skills (I03_Pos. 39). In addition to a new job, trainers also mentioned that moving to another region is a common cause of drop-out (I12_Pos. 161).

The findings also show that the most common causes for course drop-out are the lack of childcare, as well as “women’s circumstances” (I08_Pos. 20). In this context, trainers emphasised that participation is almost never a question of motivation but is prevented by the participants’ life circumstances. Women, in particular, have to give up courses due to pregnancy or care work. One interviewee described the women in her course as follows: “They are managers. It’s not an issue that they drop out because they don’t like it anymore” (I08_Pos. 51). Another trainer stated the following:

“What makes it even more difficult for many women – even middle-aged women – is their children. There are a lot of things piling up around them that have to be done or that make it difficult for them to have their own head free or to have the time to do it regularly. The will... I think the will is not so much questioned by the participants” (I07_Pos. 72,73).

It becomes clear that reasons for women’s drop-out are located in their life circumstances that are characterised by care work and mental load. Sometimes, women re-enter their courses after their pregnancy (I08_Pos. 27), but often, care work (including

taking care of children and being responsible for housekeeping) does not decrease across these years, so it remains a central reason for drop-out (I04_Pos. 87, 88). According to trainers, care work as a cause for drop-out affects not only mothers but also grandmothers who take care of their grandchildren (I04_Pos. 73).

In this context, the private environment of participants must also be kept in mind when it comes to drop-out. Trainers reported, for instance, that spouses may forbid their partners from participating to prevent learning progress and the associated independence. One interviewee described a scene in which “women were asked by their husband to stop” (I05_Pos. 41). When the trainer confronted the man, he replied that “his wife didn’t need [the course] as he could take care of everything for her” (I05_Pos. 43). According to the interview data, this particularly affects women, but in exceptional cases, parents sometimes forbade their adult children from taking part in the course. Generally, trainers reported that “in the vast majority of cases, there are many reasons for [drop-out], which mainly lie in the personal circumstances of life, [...] outside the course” (I07_Pos. 45).

4.3 Discrepancy Between Individuals and Institutions

As already indicated above, a frequent reason for drop-out is that participants’ ideas about the courses may not match the course content offered (I09_Pos. 67). This can be related to unrealistic expectations regarding participants’ own learning success, as well as other facets of the course, such as “structure or format” (I07_Pos. 81). The following section focuses on the reasons for drop-out that are located in the institutions or the framework conditions of the courses. One interviewee reported that “the difficulty is really to organise the lessons in such a way that everyone is equally supported” (I05_Pos. 71). Another trainer summarised that “everyone is different and some people need more time, others are quicker, and that is actually the atmosphere in our courses. That everyone is welcome” (I09_Pos. 99). This shows that trainers often try to adapt the course content to the individual needs of the participants. However, this balance can be difficult, especially with regard to difficulties of their lessons because the participants of the courses are very heterogeneous (I13_Pos. 206).

Other reasons for drop-out include conflicts within the course group or between participants and trainers (I09_Pos. 88). In terms of long-term participation, a good relationship between trainers and participants is seen as particularly important in the field of literacy and adult basic education. Relationships therefore function as course-binding elements, as well as factors for drop-out. For example, a trainer reported that participants dropped out when their trainer stopped giving lessons (I11_Pos. 156). It was also reported that no successor could be found after the trainer quit, so the institution could not continue to offer the course.

The Covid-19 pandemic also caused drop-out in the field of literacy and adult basic education. According to trainers, courses have been cancelled due to institutional restrictions or had to be switched to an online format. This has been difficult to implement for the target groups of basic education programmes. Since many participants had neither the digital equipment nor the skills for online instruction, some trainers

tried to give one-on-one lessons over the phone or sent worksheets home to the participants (I07_Pos. 15, I06_Pos. 32). In addition to pandemic-related measures, institutions also had to contend with other requirements, such as a minimum number of participants for a course to take place (I07_Pos. 48). In addition to drop-out reasons located in the individual or in their life circumstances, institutionally caused drop-out becomes relevant in the field of literacy and adult basic education.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the perspectives of trainers, the article provides key reasons for drop-out in literacy and adult basic education, revealing that causes for drop-out are due to the participants themselves, their life circumstances, or the educational institutions. With regard to individual factors causing drop-out, trainers mainly described frustration and unrealistic expectations of participants' own learning progress. Addiction problems, depression, and other illnesses were also named as causes for drop-out. Trainers observed that the target groups of literacy and adult basic education often have difficulties with organised learning due to their own school and learning biographies. Consequently, the target groups of literacy and adult basic education are often described as educationally distant, which has been critically debated in current research (Mania, 2018). In the context of participation, it has been argued that it is not the participants who are educationally distant but the programmes that are far from the living environment or the needs of the participants (Bolder, 2006). For this reason, low-threshold programmes are seen as particularly valuable in basic education practice. These programmes enable participants to access learning in a way that is close to their everyday lives (Bremer & Pape, 2019).

Furthermore, the analysis of the interviews has shown that factors for drop-out can also be found in the participants' life situations. This primarily consists of a (new) workplace that clashes with course times and causes participants to drop-out. Even though the target groups of literacy and adult basic education are very heterogeneous, many of them are considered marginalised (Tröster, 2010). Trainers stated that many participants must prioritise their work due to economic constraints. Furthermore, trainers particularly observed women's life circumstances leading to drop-out. Care work and patriarchal family structures can accordingly be seen as gender-specific reasons for drop-out in literacy and adult basic education. Gender-specific causes for drop-out are often intertwined with other factors, such as economic constraints, making participation for women in basic education even more difficult.

Furthermore, the findings show that drop-out is not necessarily caused by participants or their life situation but can also be caused by institutions. For example, pandemic-related measures that terminated or interrupted courses should be mentioned here. Trainers also reported that in the field of literacy and adult basic education, it is difficult to recruit trainers, so courses may have to be terminated if no trainer can be found. Thus, not only are the target groups of literacy and adult basic education affec-

ted by marginalisation but the field of basic education is also partially precarious for their staff (Lernende Region – Netzwerk Köln e. V., 2021).

All in all, drop-out in the field of literacy and adult basic education is influenced by various factors. Through the findings of this interview study, it became clear that this phenomenon must be researched multi-dimensionally: the causes for drop-out are as heterogeneous as the target groups of the field (Grotlüschen & Riekmann, 2021).

The findings contribute to participation research in literacy and adult basic education. The interviews of trainers not only confirmed findings from the current state of research, especially with regard to basic education in Germany but also provided new insights into the research field such as institutionally induced reasons for drop-out that have so far only been marginally researched. The characterisation of causes for drop-out in the field provide information about factors which prevent permanent participation. These can be used to derive measures to prevent drop-out. A central question that remains might be how to counteract drop-out in practice when the needs of participants vary so greatly within a course.

The findings of this study can be linked to debates on structural educational inequalities in adult education (Erler, 2013). With regard to the gender-specific factors for drop-out indicated above, it is very important to determine how permanent participation can be enabled for women in literacy and adult basic education programmes. To this end, the perspectives of other actors in the field should also be taken into account (e. g. those of participants themselves) who may identify further risk factors and reasons for drop-out.

References

- Bickert, M., Arbeiter, J., Sindermann, L., Thalhammer, V. (2022). Drop-out in der Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung Erwachsener – Pandemiebedingte Herausforderungen und theoretische Perspektiven. *Zeitschrift für Bildungsforschung* 12, 61–79 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s35834-022-00338-6>
- Boeren, E. (2017). Understanding adult lifelong learning participation as a layered problem. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 39(2), 161–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2017.1310096>
- Bolder, A. (2006). Warum Lisa M. und Otto N. nicht weiter weitergebildet werden wollen. In P. Faulstich & M. Bayer (Eds.), *Lernwiderstände: Anlässe für Vermittlung und Beratung* (pp. 26–38). VSA-Verlag.
- Boshier, R. (1973). Educational participation and dropout: a theoretical model. *Adult Education*, 23(4), 255–282. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171367302300401>
- Bremer, H. (2004). Der Mythos vom autonom lernenden Subjekt: Zur sozialen Verortung aktueller Konzepte des Selbstlernens und zur Bildungspraxis unterschiedlicher sozialer Milieus. In S. Engler & B. Kraus (Eds.), *Das kulturelle Kapital und die Macht der Klassenstrukturen: Sozialstrukturelle Verschiebungen und Wandlungsprozesse des Habitus* (pp. 189–213). Juventa.

- Bremer, H., & Pape, N. (2019). Habitus als Ressource der (Nicht-)Teilnahme an Weiterbildung: Überlegungen am Beispiel der Alphabetisierungsforschung. *Hessische Blätter für Volksbildung*, (4), 365–376. <https://www.hessische-blaetter.de/articles/10.3278/HBV1904W365/gallery/91/download/>
- Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung & Kultusminister Konferenz (2016). *General agreement on the national decade for literacy and basic skills (2016–2026): Reducing functional illiteracy and raising the level of basic skills in Germany*. https://www.bibb.de/dokumente/pdf/EN_General_Agreement_on_the_National_Dedade_for_Literacy_and_Basic_Skills.pdf
- Cohen, J. (1960). *A coefficient of agreement for nominal scales*. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 20, 37–46.
- Cross, K. P. (1981). *Adults as learners*. Jossey-Bass.
- Cutz, C., & Chandler, P. (2000). Emic-Etic conflicts as explanation of non-participation in adult education among the Maya of western Guatemala. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 51(1), 64–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07417130022087125>
- Darkenwald, G. G. & Gavin, W. J. (1987). Dropout as a function of discrepancies between expectations and actual experiences of the classroom social environment. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 37(3), 152–163. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001848187037003003>
- Dorschky, L. (2016). Soziale Arbeit im Kontext der Erwachsenenalphabetisierung. In C. Löffler & J. Korfkamp (Eds.), *Handbuch zur Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung Erwachsener* (pp. 264–276). Waxmann.
- Dutz, G., & Bilger, F. (2020). Bildungshintergrund und Weiterbildungsteilnahme gering literalisierter Erwachsener. In A. Grotlüschen & K. Buddeberg (Eds.), *LEO 2018: Leben mit geringer Literalität* (pp. 323–352). wbv.
- Erler, I. (2013). *Soziale Ungleichheit und Erwachsenenbildung*. Arbeitsmarktservice Österreich. https://ams-forschungsnetzwerk.at/downloadpub/AMSinfo262_263.pdf
- Euringer, C. (2016). Grundbildung im Spannungsfeld Bildungspolitik. *Journal for Research on Adult Education*, 39, 241–254. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40955-016-0066-9>
- Garrison, D. R. (1985). Predicting dropout in adult basic education using interaction effects among school and non-school variables. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 36(1), 25–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001848185036001003>
- Garrison, D. R. (1987). Dropout prediction within a board psychosocial context: An Analysis of Boshier's Congruence Model. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 37(4), 212–222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001848187037004003>
- Gläser, J., & Laudel, G. (2010). *Experteninterviews und qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Als Instrumente rekonstruierender Untersuchungen* (4. Aufl.). VS.
- Grotlüschen, A., & Riekmann, W. (2012). *Funktionaler Analphabetismus in Deutschland: Ergebnisse der ersten leo. – Level-One Studie* (Vol. 10). Waxmann.
- Grotlüschen, A., Buddeberg, K., Dutz, G., Heilmann, L. M., & Stammer, C. (2019). *LEO 2018 – Leben mit geringer Literalität*. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Anke-Grotlueschen/publication/333421633_LEO_2018_-_Leben_mit_geringer_Literalitaet_Pressebroschuere_Hamburg/links/5ced18c692851c1ad4983f42/LEO-2018-Leben-mit-geringer-Literalitaet-Pressebroschuere-Hamburg.pdf?origin=publ

- Hoffmann, S., Thalhammer, V., von Hippel, A. & Schmidt-Hertha, B. (2020). Drop-out in der Weiterbildung—eine Verschränkung von Perspektiven zur (Re-) Konstruktion des Phänomens Drop-out. *Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung*, 43(1), 31–46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40955-019-00143-1>
- Horsman, J. (2000). *Too Scared to learn: Women, violence and education*. Routledge.
- Kuckartz, U. (2016). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung* (3rd ed.). Beltz Juventa.
- Kumar, P. (1994). *Participation, non-participation and dropout in adult basic education: The Singapore experience*.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). Reliability in Content Analysis: Some Common Misconceptions and Recommendations. *Human Communication Research*, 30(3), 411–433.
- Lernende Region – Netzwerk Köln e. V. (2021). *Grundbildung in der Arbeitswelt gestalten: Praxisbeispiele, Gelingensbedingungen und Perspektiven*. wbv Media.
- Mania, E. (2018). *Weiterbildungsbeteiligung sogenannter „bildungsferner Gruppen“ in sozial-raumorientierter Forschungsperspektive*. wbv Media.
- Müller, K. (2012). Alphabetisierungsforschung in Deutschland – Eine Bilanz. *REPORT-Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung*, 35(1), 55–61. <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/55378>
- OECD. (2016). *Skills matter: Further results from the survey of adult skills*. OECD.
- Pickard, A. (2013). Attrition Happens: Towards an Acknowledgement and Accommodation Perspective of Adult Literacy Student Dropout. *Journal of Research and Practice for Adult Literacy, Secondary and Basic Education*, Vol. 2 No. 2, 114–126.
- Prins, E., & Schafft, K. A. (2009). Individual and structural attributions for poverty and persistence in family literacy programs: The resurgence of the culture of poverty. *Teachers College Record*, 111(9), 2280–2310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810911100902>
- Schemmann, M. (2012). Weiterbildungsteilnahme und Gerechtigkeit in internationaler Perspektive. In D. Schäffer & O. Dörner (Eds.), *Weiterbildungsbeteiligung als Teilhabe- und Gerechtigkeitsproblem* (pp. 57–68). Herbert Utz Verlag.
- Schemmann, M. (Ed.) (2019). Internationales Jahrbuch der Erwachsenenbildung. International Yearbook of Adult Education. *Adult Basic Education Research*. wbv Media.
- Schmidt, B. (2011). Dropout in der Erwachsenenbildung. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, 57(2), 203–213. <https://doi.org/10.25656/01:8715>
- Sparks, B. (1994). *Structural-cultural factors of nonparticipation in adult basic education by Chicano/a adults in urban communities in Colorado*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED391069.pdf>
- Thalhammer, V., Hoffmann, S., von Hippel, A., & Schmidt-Hertha, B. (2022). Dropout in adult education as a phenomenon of fit: An integrative model proposal for the genesis of dropout in adult education based on dropout experience. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 13(3). <https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.3351>
- Thomas, A. M. (1990). *The reluctant learner: A Research Report on Nonparticipation and dropout in literacy programs in British Columbia*. UNESCO.

Tröster, M. (2010). Unsichtbares sichtbar machen – Analphabetismus und Grundbildung in Deutschland. In M. Kronauer (Ed.), *Inklusion und Weiterbildung: Reflexionen zur gesellschaftlichen Teilhabe in der Gegenwart* (pp. 211–234). wbv.

Author

Lena Sindermann, M. A., is a research associate and doctoral candidate at the Chair of Adult Education/Continuing Education at the University of Cologne. Since January 2021, she has been working there on the research project DRAG (“Drop-out in Literacy and Basic Education: Analysis of causes and prevention options”). Previously, she completed a Master’s degree in Intercultural Communication and Education at the University of Cologne.

Contact

University of Cologne
Faculty of Human Sciences
Department of Educational and Social Science
Professorship for Adult and Continuing Education
Innere Kanalstraße 15
50823 Cologne
Germany
lena.sindermann@uni-koeln.de