

# Learning Through Labour: Farm Workers' Educational Experiences in Adult Education Contexts

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## Abstract

Adult education continues to occupy a critical position within international debates on lifelong learning, social justice, and inclusive development. Despite increased global attention toward educational inclusion, rural labouring populations, particularly farm workers, remain marginalised within mainstream adult education scholarship and policy discourse. This article critically examines the educational experiences of farm workers participating in Adult Education and Training (AET) programmes within a rural South African context. Guided by Experiential Learning Theory and informed by Freirean critical adult education perspectives, the study explores how adult learners negotiate educational participation amid labour demands, poverty, and historical educational exclusion. A qualitative interpretive case study design was employed. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with purposively selected farm workers enrolled in adult learning programmes. The findings reveal that adult education contributes significantly to literacy development, workplace confidence, social participation, and identity transformation. However, structural barriers, including physically demanding labour, financial insecurity, fatigue, and limited institutional support, continue to constrain meaningful educational participation. The study argues that adult learning among farm workers cannot be understood solely as literacy acquisition but must be conceptualised as a socially situated process shaped by labour experiences, historical inequality, and struggles for dignity and recognition. By foregrounding labour as a critical site of knowledge construction, the article contributes to international adult education scholarship on marginalised rural learners and expands debates on lifelong learning within contexts of socio-economic inequality.

**Keywords:** Adult education, lifelong learning, farm workers, experiential learning, labour, social justice, rural education

## 1. Introduction

Adult education has become increasingly central to international debates concerning lifelong learning, social inclusion, poverty reduction, and sustainable development. Contemporary educational discourse recognises adult education not merely as remedial literacy provision, but as a transformative mechanism for addressing poverty, inequality, exclusion, and social marginalisation (UNESCO, 2021). Within Global South contexts, adult education remains particularly significant due to persistent socio-economic disparities, unequal educational access, and historical patterns of exclusion affecting marginalised communities (Aitchison, 2022).

Globally, rural labouring populations continue to experience substantial educational disadvantage despite international commitments toward inclusive lifelong learning opportunities. Agricultural workers remain among the most educationally vulnerable groups due to structural poverty, labour exploitation, geographical isolation, and limited institutional support (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2023). These realities are especially pronounced in South Africa, where the historical legacy of apartheid contributed significantly to educational inequality among Black rural communities and farm workers.

Although adult education scholarship has expanded significantly over recent decades, existing research frequently prioritises urban learners, formal educational institutions, digital learning environments, and employability agendas. Scholarly attention has been comparatively limited to understanding how labouring adults in rural agricultural settings experience adult learning while negotiating poverty, labour demands, and social exclusion (Walters & Watters, 2021).

Recent scholarship further suggests that adult learning among marginalised workers should not be conceptualised solely as skills acquisition or literacy development, but rather as a socially situated process shaped by lived experience, labour relations, identity, and power structures (Milana, Webb, Holford, Waller, & Jarvis, 2020). Consequently, understanding the educational experiences of farm workers requires engagement with broader questions concerning social justice, dignity, labour inequality, and educational transformation.

This article critically examines the educational experiences of farm workers participating in Adult Education and Training (AET) programmes within a rural South African context. Drawing on Experiential Learning Theory and Freirean critical adult education perspectives, the study conceptualises labour not only as a barrier to learning but also as a significant site of knowledge construction and identity formation.

The article contributes to adult education scholarship in three important ways. First, it foregrounds the voices of marginalised rural workers who remain underrepresented in mainstream adult education literature. Second, it extends experiential learning debates by examining how labour experiences shape adult learning processes. Third, it contributes to international discussions on lifelong learning by situating adult education within broader struggles for social recognition, empowerment, and dignity.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Adult Education, Lifelong Learning and Social Justice

Adult education has evolved from narrow literacy-focused interventions toward broader understandings of lifelong learning, empowerment, social transformation, and democratic participation. According to UNESCO (2021), lifelong learning is increasingly recognised as essential for achieving social inclusion, sustainable development, citizenship participation, and human dignity.

However, scholars continue to critique neoliberal approaches to adult education that prioritise employability, productivity, and economic competitiveness while neglecting broader human development concerns (Biesta, 2022). Freire (1970) argued that education should function as a process of conscientisation through which oppressed populations critically interrogate social inequalities and develop agency to transform their realities. Contemporary adult education scholars similarly emphasise that learning should promote democratic participation, critical reflection, and social justice rather than serving solely labour market demands (Brookfield, 2020).

Within many developing contexts, adult education remains shaped by tensions between economic functionality and transformative educational goals. Walters and Kotze (2023) argue that adult learning programmes frequently operate within policy environments dominated by employability rhetoric, while the lived realities of marginalised adult learners remain insufficiently addressed. Consequently, adult education scholarship increasingly calls for contextually responsive approaches that acknowledge inequality, labour precarity, and historical exclusion.

Recent studies further indicate that adult learning among marginalised populations contributes not only to literacy development but also to confidence, identity transformation, workplace participation, and social agency (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Adult education, therefore, occupies a critical role within broader struggles for social justice and inclusion.

### 2.2 Labour, Rurality and Educational Marginalisation

Educational exclusion among rural labouring populations remains a persistent international concern. Research conducted across Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and South Asia demonstrates that agricultural workers frequently experience educational barriers linked to poverty, exploitative labour systems, geographical isolation, and limited institutional support (ILO, 2023).

In South Africa, farm workers continue to experience substantial socio-economic disadvantage rooted in colonialism, apartheid, and exploitative labour relations (Visser & Ferrer, 2015). Historical systems of racial segregation systematically excluded Black rural communities from meaningful educational opportunities, resulting in intergenerational cycles of poverty and educational marginalisation.

Contemporary farm labour conditions continue to reproduce many of these inequalities. Recent studies demonstrate that rural workers frequently struggle to balance labour demands, family responsibilities, and educational participation (Ngcwangu & Daniels, 2022). Long working hours, workplace fatigue, transport limitations, and financial insecurity significantly affect adult learners' ability to participate meaningfully in educational programmes.

Scholars additionally argue that rural adult education should not be analysed independently from broader structural realities such as labour exploitation, land inequality, social exclusion, and economic precarity (Tikly, 2021). Adult education within labouring contexts, therefore, becomes deeply connected to dignity, survival, identity formation, and social recognition.

Internationally, the educational experiences of South African farm workers resonate with broader Global South debates concerning educational justice and labour inequality. Similar educational challenges have been documented among agricultural workers in Brazil, India, Kenya, and other developing contexts where adult learning occurs within conditions characterised by structural inequality and socio-economic vulnerability (Milana et al., 2020).

### **2.3 Experiential Learning and Critical Adult Education**

This study is informed primarily by Experiential Learning Theory, developed by David Kolb. Experiential Learning Theory conceptualises learning as a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984). Adult learners draw upon lived experiences, workplace realities, and social interaction to construct meaning and interpret new knowledge.

Recent scholarship continues to recognise experiential learning as particularly relevant in adult education, as adults enter learning environments with accumulated occupational, social, and personal experiences that shape their learning processes (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). In labouring contexts, workplace experiences often serve as important reference points through which adult learners negotiate identity, confidence, and social participation.

However, scholars have increasingly criticised experiential learning approaches for failing to adequately address structural inequality, oppression, and power relations (Brookfield, 2020). Consequently, this study additionally draws on Freirean critical adult education perspectives to strengthen the analysis of labour, marginalisation, and empowerment.

Freire (1970) conceptualised education as a transformative process through which oppressed individuals develop critical consciousness regarding their social realities. Recent adult education scholars similarly argue that learning among marginalised populations should be understood within broader struggles for agency, dignity, and social justice (Biesta, 2022).

The integration of experiential learning and critical adult education perspectives therefore, enables this study to conceptualise labour simultaneously as:

- a site of exploitation,
- a source of lived experience,

- and a context for knowledge construction and identity transformation.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Paradigm and Design**

The study adopted an interpretivist qualitative research paradigm to explore how farm workers subjectively experience adult education within their social and labour contexts. An interpretivist approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences rather than measure predetermined variables.

A qualitative interpretive case study design was employed to facilitate an in-depth examination of adult learning experiences within a specific rural farming context in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

#### **3.2 Research Site and Participants**

The study was conducted in a commercial farming community in rural KwaZulu-Natal. The site was selected due to its established Adult Education and Training programme serving farm workers with limited formal educational backgrounds.

The study involved twenty-two farm workers enrolled in Adult Education and Training programmes and two farm managers responsible for overseeing farm operations and supporting employee development initiatives. Participants were selected through stratified purposive sampling to ensure representation across age, gender, educational background, and work responsibilities. Farm workers represented varying levels of participation within the AET programme and provided diverse perspectives regarding the relationship between labour, learning, and everyday life.

#### **3.3 Data Generation**

Data were generated through semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to share personal educational experiences, motivations, and challenges in depth, while focus group discussions facilitated collective reflection and interaction.

Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language and later translated where necessary. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and supplemented by field notes documenting contextual observations and reflective insights.

#### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke's analytical framework was used to analyse the data. The analysis process involved:

1. Familiarisation with the data,

2. Initial coding,
3. Theme generation,
4. Theme refinement,
5. Interpretation and synthesis.

Themes were developed inductively from participants' narratives while simultaneously engaging relevant theoretical concepts from experiential learning and critical adult education scholarship.

### **3.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations**

Trustworthiness was enhanced through prolonged engagement, member checking, and triangulation between interviews and focus group discussions. Credibility was strengthened through participant verification of emerging interpretations.

Ethical principles of confidentiality, informed consent, voluntary participation, and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

The researcher additionally engaged in reflexive practice to critically consider positionality, assumptions, and power relations throughout the research process.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

### **4.1 Learning Within Conditions of Labour and Survival**

Participants consistently described their educational experiences as occurring within challenging labour conditions characterised by long working hours, physical exhaustion, and economic insecurity. For many participants, educational participation required negotiating competing demands between work, family responsibilities, and learning commitments.

One participant explained:

“Sometimes you leave work tired and your body says sleep, but your mind says go to class because you want a better future.”

Another participant reflected:

“The hardest part is not the learning itself. The hardest part is finding energy after work.”

A third participant stated:

“There were days when I wanted to stop attending because work was too much, but I kept reminding myself why I started.”

Participants further indicated that labour conditions often negatively affected concentration and study preparation.

One participant explained:

“After working the whole day in the fields, sometimes your body is too tired to even open a book.”

Another participant stated:

“We want education, but work takes most of our energy and time.”

These narratives demonstrate that participation in adult education was not a straightforward educational activity but rather a continuous process of negotiating structural and personal constraints. Similar findings have been reported in adult education studies where labouring adults experience tensions between economic survival and educational advancement (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Importantly, participants did not perceive work solely as an obstacle to learning. Instead, many described how workplace experiences influenced classroom engagement and deepened their understanding of educational content.

One participant explained:

“When we discuss things in class, I relate them to what happens on the farm every day. That helps me understand better.”

Another participant reflected:

“We learn from the work we do every day, and when we come to class, we understand things better because of our experiences.”

This finding reinforces experiential learning perspectives, which suggest that adult learners construct knowledge through the interpretation of lived experience. The findings further demonstrate that labour itself becomes an important site of learning and meaning-making within adult education contexts.

#### **4.2 Educational Participation as a Process of Dignity and Identity Reconstruction**

Participants frequently described adult education as transformative, particularly in relation to confidence, self-worth, and social recognition.

One participant reflected:

“Before coming to school, I felt ashamed because I could not read forms properly.”

Another participant explained:

“Now I can sign documents, read messages, and help my children with schoolwork. That makes me proud.”

A third participant stated:

“People used to speak for me because I could not read. Now I can speak for myself.”

Participants further associated educational participation with increased confidence and communication skills within workplace and community environments.

One participant explained:

“Education gave me the confidence to ask questions when I do not understand something at work.”

Another reflected:

“Before coming to school, I was afraid to speak in meetings because I could not read properly.”

One participant further explained:

“Now I can help my children with homework and communicate better with people.”

These findings suggest that educational participation contributed not only to literacy development but also to identity transformation and expanded social participation. Participants described becoming more visible, respected, and active within family, workplace, and community contexts. The findings align with Freirean perspectives that conceptualise education as a process of empowerment and agency development. Adult education, therefore, functioned as more than literacy acquisition; it became a mechanism through which participants reclaimed social voice, dignity, and self-worth.

### **4.3 Poverty as an Educational Barrier**

Participants consistently highlighted poverty as a major factor influencing both prior educational exclusion and current participation in learning.

One participant recalled:

“I left school because my family could not afford for all of us to continue.”

Another participant explained:

“Education was not the priority. We had to survive.”

Participants indicated that financial challenges continued to affect educational participation in adulthood.

One participant stated:

“Transport money is not always available, and sometimes you must choose between family needs and school.”

Another reflected:

“You want to study, but life has many responsibilities.”

A participant further explained:

“Sometimes there is no money for transport, and after work you still have responsibilities at home.”

These findings reveal how educational participation remains deeply embedded within broader socio-economic realities. Poverty, labour demands, and family responsibilities continue to shape rural workers' access to adult learning opportunities. Importantly, the findings caution against romanticising resilience among marginalised adult learners. Participants' educational persistence occurred within conditions characterised by exhaustion, economic insecurity, and institutional limitation.

#### 4.4 Adult Education and Workplace Agency

Participants frequently associated adult education with increased workplace confidence, improved communication skills, and enhanced awareness of workplace rights.

One participant explained:

“Now I understand instructions better, and I can communicate with supervisors without fear.”

Another stated:

“Education helped me understand some of my rights as a worker.”

A participant further reflected:

“I can now read notices and information for myself instead of waiting for someone to explain.”

Participants also reported increased willingness to engage in workplace discussions and decision-making.

One participant stated:

“I used to stay quiet because I was scared of making mistakes, but now I can speak with confidence.”

Another explained:

“Education made me feel like I am also important in the workplace.”

These findings demonstrate that adult learning contributed to workplace agency that extended beyond literacy development. Educational participation enhanced confidence, communication, and awareness, enabling participants to engage more actively within workplace environments. The findings further support contemporary adult education scholarship, suggesting that learning among marginalised populations contributes not only to academic advancement but also to increased participation, social recognition, and empowerment.

## 5. Conclusion

This article critically examined the educational experiences of farm workers participating in adult education programmes within a rural South African context. The findings demonstrate that adult learning among farm workers cannot be understood solely as literacy acquisition or employability enhancement. Instead, adult education within rural labouring contexts emerges as a socially situated process shaped by poverty, labour relations, historical exclusion, and struggles for dignity and recognition.

The study contributes to adult education scholarship in three important ways. *First*, it foregrounds the educational experiences of farm workers, a population that remains underrepresented within contemporary adult education literature. *Second*, it extends experiential learning debates by demonstrating how labour itself functions as a site of knowledge construction and meaning making. *Third*, it contributes to social justice and lifelong learning scholarship by illustrating how adult education supports dignity restoration, identity transformation, and workplace agency among marginalised rural workers.

Rather than conceptualising farm workers solely as economically disadvantaged individuals, the findings demonstrate that they are active learners who utilise educational opportunities to negotiate structural constraints and create new possibilities for participation, recognition, and empowerment.

However, structural inequalities, including exploitative labour conditions, workplace fatigue, poverty, and limited institutional support, continue to constrain educational participation among farm workers. Consequently, adult education policies and programmes must move beyond narrow economic approaches toward socially responsive models that acknowledge the lived realities of labouring adult learners.

The article also contributes to international debates on adult learning in Global South contexts by foregrounding educational experiences that are frequently absent from mainstream lifelong learning literature.

Although the study was context-specific and based on a limited sample, it provides important insights into the relationship among labour, learning, and social transformation in rural adult education contexts. Future research should explore comparative rural adult education experiences across different labour sectors and Global South contexts.

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