

## ABSTRACT

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) can have lasting effects on psychological well-being, stress regulation, and self-efficacy, which in turn influence academic motivation and persistence in adulthood.

Adult learners often face financial, emotional, and educational challenges, and early trauma may reduce their ability to stay motivated and persist in demanding academic environments. These difficulties can be intensified when balancing work, family responsibilities, and studies.

This paper examines how ACEs impact motivation and persistence in adult learners, highlighting the importance of understanding this relationship to improve educational outcomes. Trauma-informed educational approaches can help foster resilience, confidence, and long-term academic success.

*Keywords: adverse childhood experiences, adult learners, academic motivation, trauma-informed education, resilience*

## INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events before age 18 that can have lasting effects on health, learning, and well-being (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025; Felitti et al., 1998). Research shows ACEs impact emotional, cognitive, and social development across the lifespan (Islam et al., 2023).

Lived experience and research together highlight how education can support healing and growth through post-traumatic development. Transformative learning theory emphasizes that adults can reinterpret past experiences and create new meaning (Mezirow, 1991).

Critical and experiential perspectives view education as a process of empowerment and social change (Freire, 1970; Dewey, 2015). Learning is shaped through experience, reflection, and interaction with others (Dewey, 2015).

The concept of *carrere* further highlights reflection on past, present, and future experiences as a way to reshape meaning and identity (Pinar, 1975). Similarly, education can awaken imagination and expand possibilities for change (Greene, 1988).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature consistently links trauma to adult learning, development, and resilience (Bano & Hou, 2025; Griffith et al., 2025). Key themes include trauma's impact on learning, ACEs outcomes, identity, growth, trauma-informed practice, and resilience.

### Effects of Trauma on Learning

Trauma disrupts emotional regulation, affecting memory, attention, and engagement in learning (Bano & Hou, 2025). Adult learners with trauma histories often face barriers to persistence and achievement (Tognin et al., 2023). High rates of trauma exposure further highlight its widespread impact on adult education (Miller-Roenigk et al., 2023).

### ACEs and Outcomes for Adults

ACEs are prevalent and linked to poorer educational, health, and socioeconomic outcomes (Douglass et al., 2021; Suiter & Meadows, 2023). These effects are shaped by structural inequities and unequal access to education (Suiter & Meadows, 2023). Childhood adversity is consistently associated with lower educational attainment across populations (Tognin et al., 2022).

### Adult Identity and Meaning Making

Adult learning involves reflecting on lived experience to reshape identity and meaning (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative learning enables individuals to reinterpret experiences through critical reflection (Govindaraju, 2021). Education also serves as a space for empowerment and social transformation (Freire, 1970).

### Post-Traumatic Growth and Learning

Trauma can lead to growth, resilience, and positive transformation in adulthood (Fayaz, 2025). Supportive learning environments help rebuild confidence and increase engagement (Watt et al., 2023). Emotional processing plays a key role in growth-oriented learning (Bano & Hou, 2025).

### Trauma-Informed

Trauma-informed approaches recognize the impact of adversity and emphasize safety, flexibility, and support (L'Estrange & Howard, 2022). These practices improve learner engagement and self-efficacy (Bano & Hou, 2025). Research supports the need for early and ongoing trauma-informed interventions (Yeo et al., 2024).

### Resiliency in Adult Learners

Adult learners show resilience by adapting and drawing on prior experiences (Govindaraju, 2021). Critical reflection strengthens agency and supports persistence despite challenges (Griffith et al., 2025). However, ongoing stressors can still affect confidence and educational goals (Griffith et al., 2025).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Trauma-informed adult education should prioritize consistency, trust, safety, and flexibility, recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting learners impacted by trauma. By connecting learning to lived experience and offering choice, collaboration, and self-directed opportunities, educators can promote engagement, resilience, and meaningful transformation.

At the same time, trauma can create significant barriers such as anxiety, reduced confidence, and external stressors thus making supportive, inclusive environments essential for persistence and success. As research reminds us, "the impact and presentation of trauma is diverse" (Harvey, 1996, as cited in Koslouski & Chafouleas, 2022).

### Key points:

- Prioritize safety, trust, and predictability in learning environments
- Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches to trauma
- Connect learning to lived experience and reflection
- Offer choice and flexibility to restore learner control
- Create opportunities for integration of experience
- Address barriers like anxiety, stress, and low confidence through inclusive practices

## CONCLUSION

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) can significantly shape adult learners' motivation and persistence, making it essential to understand and support their impact. By creating trauma-informed, inclusive learning environments, educators can promote resilience, confidence, and meaningful post-traumatic growth. Adult education should center curiosity, critical reflection, and psychological safety, recognizing that learning itself can be an act of empowerment and transformation because, as Freire reminds us, "the oppressed in order to become free, also need a theory of action" (Freire, 1970, p. 156).

### References

