THE ATTRITION PROBLEM IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION:
A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT
This literature review explores the possible reasons why Adult Basic Education (ABE) students experience such a high rate of attrition and suggests ways to remove barriers to graduation. A significantly large portion of Canadian adults do not have sufficient literacy skills to function in a knowledge based economy, and ABE is one potential avenue of improving these skills. Despite the advantages and low cost of graduating from an ABE program, attrition rates remain as high as 50 percent or more in some programs. It is difficult to characterize ABE students since they are a very heterogeneous group, but they are all motivated, at least initially, to complete their high school equivalency diploma. There are numerous reasons given for leaving ABE, but most can fall under one of five barriers to success: situational, institutional, attitudinal/dispositional, pedagogical, and academic. Women and men face the same barriers, but not in the same proportions. The literature suggests various ways of removing barriers, such as increasing childcare availability, assisting with financial difficulties, improving the learning environment, and ensuring that instructors utilize appropriate teaching techniques. However, removing barriers does not guarantee success, since it is only when adult learners make a strong commitment and the appropriate supports are in place is there a possibility of success (Thomas, 1990).

INTRODUCTION
Adult Basic Education (ABE) in Newfoundland and Labrador provides adult learners who have not graduated from high school the opportunity to earn a high school equivalency diploma. In order to graduate, students must complete a minimum of 36 credits, with specific requirements in the areas of Mathematics, English, and Science. ABE is offered at public and private training
institutions throughout the province, and tuition is usually paid for by sponsoring agencies such as Human Resources Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) or the Department of Human Resources, Labour and Employment (HRLE).

Despite the convenience, low cost and benefits of an ABE diploma, many students who start the program do not successfully finish. For example, in the fall semester of 2008, 153 students enrolled in the ABE program at the Prince Philip Drive campus of the College of the North Atlantic in St. John’s, Newfoundland. Of these 153 students, 31 graduated from the program, 45 did not finish but remained in the program and 77 students were discontinued. This translates into a 50 percent retention rate. “Discontinued” is a generic term used by the college to explain any reason why a student does not complete a program, and includes everything from voluntarily leaving the program to expulsion. Of the 77 students who were discontinued, one was dismissed for poor academic performance, one died, two left due to illness, two enrolled in a different program, three transferred to a different campus, 11 left for personal reasons, 11 were dismissed due to poor attendance, and 46 left for unknown reasons.

The reasons why students do not complete the ABE program need to be researched in detail, so that the underlying deterrents to graduation can be identified and possibly rectified.

The aim of this literature review is to examine the reasons why some students who enrol in Adult Basic Education do not subsequently complete the program and to identify strategies that can be used to overcome these barriers. This aim will be achieved by investigating the deterrents to ABE graduation faced by these students as described in the literature, comparing
the profiles of students who successfully graduate from ABE to those who do not, and identifying possible ways of increasing retention of ABE students to graduation.

**Literacy Rates**

A significantly large proportion of Canada’s adult population is not equipped to participate in a knowledge based society. A staggering 5.8 million Canadians aged 25 years and over do not have a high school diploma or higher credentials, and an estimated 9 million Canadians aged 16 to 65 years have literacy skills below the level considered as necessary to live and work in today’s society (Myers, 2006). A 2002 study conducted by ABC Canada also indicates that 38 percent of Canadians have difficulty with everyday reading and writing tasks.

The impacts of low levels of literacy and education on adults are manifested in many ways, but the economic impact of low literacy is perhaps best described in the literature. Low-literate adults are more likely to be financially worse off than better educated adults and are reported to have two-thirds the income of other Canadians (Human Resources Development Canada, 2001). They are likely to experience relatively poor labour market outcomes over the course of their career in the form of lower wages, and work in lower-status jobs (Myers & de Broucker, 2006). These less-educated workers are more likely to fall further behind their more educated coworkers over the course of their careers, since those with higher levels of education are more likely to participate in future educational and training endeavours which often result in better, higher paying jobs. Low literate adults have higher unemployment rates than average, and those who do work are often the first to lose their jobs (Thomas, 1990). A disproportionately large number of them do not participate in the workforce and are more likely to receive some
form of social assistance (Human Resources Development Canada, 2001). Literacy related problems also negatively impact the financial bottom line of business and industry via lost productivity, health and safety issues, training and retraining.

**Mandate of Adult Basic Education**

Adult Basic Education (ABE) offers adults with low literacy and educational levels the opportunity to obtain the skills, knowledge and training they did not previously acquire in secondary school (Winters, 1996). ABE includes a broad range of courses such as fundamental academic skills, academic upgrading, and life skills or career preparation (British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, 2005). The mandate of ABE, however, varies provincially, nationally and internationally. For example, in Newfoundland and Labrador, the main purpose of ABE is to provide graduates with a provincially recognized high school equivalency diploma. In the United States, however, ABE is often used to prepare students for the General Educational Development (GED) exam. Winters (1996) also maintains that ABE also plays a role in developing self-confidence, self-respect and enhanced interpersonal skills in its participants.

Bossort, Cottingham and Gardner (1994) report that the impacts of ABE on learners are overwhelmingly positive. Over 90% of the respondents in their study reported positive impacts, with the most salient and impressive impacts of the ABE experience being psychological, such as increased self-esteem and self-confidence. The ABE experience is seen as a long-term powerful influence, and gives participants the confidence to continue learning on all kinds of levels throughout their lives. Beder and Valentine (1990) add that adult literacy education
helps officially expunge internalized and socially enforced feelings of inadequacy, and is a
necessary and logical first step in making changes in participants’ lives.

**Participation Rates in ABE**

Despite the negative impacts of low literacy levels and the positive experiences reported by
ABE participants, participation rates in ABE remain very low. ABC Canada (2002) reports that
only 5 to 10 percent of eligible Canadian adults with low literacy skills participate in literacy
programs. This statistic is evident in a study of French-language literacy programs conducted by
Russell (2008), where only 1% of the francophone population in Ontario participated in learning
activities in adult education centres from 2007-2008. This study also found that the people
who could benefit most from educational activities – less educated adults – are the least likely
to participate in them. From an international standpoint, the adult learning rate of the least
educated Canadian adults compared to those of other countries is quite low and has not
significantly improved in five years (Myers & de Broucker, 2006).

**Characteristics of ABE Students**

ABE students are a highly heterogeneous group (Thomas, 1990). They are as diverse and as
goal-oriented as any group of learners participating in prolonged and demanding educational
activities (Beder & Valentine, 1990). They are as different from each other as they are from
non-ABE college students (British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, 2005) and other
than sharing a desire to improve their own literacy skills, are a disparate group (Porter, Cuban &
Comings, 2005). Pare (1994) states that ABE students come from a range of demographic
backgrounds but many are not from the dominant cultures. Specifically, they are typically not
middle-class, not white, many are poor and do not speak English as their primary language, and there are slightly more women than men enrolled in ABE. As expected, most ABE students dropped out of school, and most did so under unhappy circumstances (Quigley, 1998). Literacy levels of students in ABE is often low, and one study showed that native English speakers demonstrate lower average levels of achievement than do students who were learning English (Porter, Cuban & Comings, 2005). Consequently, many ABE learners tend to set unrealistic occupational goals considering their scholastic ability (Garrison, 1985). Learning disabilities are prevalent in ABE, with up to half of enrolled students exhibiting a learning disability (Winters, 1996). In addition, ABE students have an increased likelihood of low self-esteem and associated social problems (Human Resources Development Canada, 2001). Many students experience financial difficulties while enrolled in ABE (British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, 2005).

ABE students have numerous obstacles to overcome while attending the program (Pare, 1994). Thomas (1990) reveals that initially they have to overcome their fears and anxieties about returning to school, then once enrolled have to juggle job and/or family responsibilities. They have to deal with institutional barriers and bureaucracies, and they worry about sponsorships, renewals, and how to finance the next stage of their education. Despite the odds being overwhelmingly stacked against them, most students enjoy participating in ABE programs (Winters, 1996).

**Motivations for Participating in ABE**

It is important to understand what motivates people to pursue ABE, as this information can be used to design promotions and course content that will be relevant and appealing to specific
groups of learners (Pross & Barry, 2004). There are many motivating factors, but perhaps the most important and encompassing one is that the learning experience be a real and worthwhile one that will make a difference in their lives.

There are several motivating factors that can bring adults to articulate a need for education. Self improvement is a strong motivator which is more psychological in nature but remains a very important motivator for the population (Beder & Valentine, 1990). Literacy can be a means of expanding personal and mental horizons, and can help people achieve their goals and dreams (Thomas, 1990). In Thomas’s (1990) study, women whose economic circumstances are more favourable reported improving their literacy skills for their own sake. Pross and Barry (2004) found that the stigma of low literacy can also be a motivating factor for adults considering participation. Family responsibilities motivate some adults to attend ABE, and include reasons such as wanting to set a better example for children, be a better parent, help children with homework, take better care of one’s family and to be a better spouse. Thomas (1990) concurs that the presence of children can be a powerful motivator to attend ABE. A great many potential participants seek literacy training to help them advance or succeed in their jobs (Pross & Barry, 2004). Some participants have the backing of their employer. Another motivator is the use of ABE as a launch pad for further studies. Students who report launching as a motivator tend to be young, and some include women whose marriages have broken up and are forced into providing for themselves (Thomas 1990). Evidence of this motivator is provided in the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education 2005 ABE Survey, where over 49% of respondents took their courses to enter a post-secondary program or
institution, 37% wanted to upgrade for further education or training, and 13% wanted to get their high school graduation.

There are several other motivators reported in the literature. These include the desire for social activity and stimulation, improved written and oral communication skills, greater community and/or church involvement, economic need, educational advancement, and the urging of others (Beder & Valentine, 1990). It is important to note that motivation is multidimensional and there are distinct subgroups of learners in the low-literate population (Thomas, 1990).

**Persisting in ABE**

As noted earlier, ABE students must overcome a multitude of challenges in order to successfully complete the program. It is important to understand the characteristics of persisters when devising strategies to increase retention rates in ABE. Persistence in the context of ABE is defined by Jonik and Goforth (2002) as adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow. Program participation and persistence is multifaceted in nature and involves the interaction of individuals and their environment (Malicky & Norman, 1994). Jonik and Goforth (2002) identify four important supports to persistence, which include awareness and management of the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence, self efficacy, establishment of a goal by the student and progress toward reaching a goal.
There are several identifying characteristics of ABE persisters. Demographically, persisters are often older students with fewer children under the age of thirteen. They tend to be goal oriented, and remain in ABE not because it feels good, but because they see it as a means of meeting their goals (Quigley, 1998). Persisters often enter ABE with a higher completed level of education and work more hours on their ABE courses (Pare, 1994). However, beyond three months after enrolment, previous schooling is not a good predictor of persistence in programs. Pare (1994) also notes that persisters seek teachers’ advice more often and experience positive social integration at school. Persisters also have a more favourable assessment of instructors’ knowledge, both initially and subsequently.

**Dropouts**

ABE has historically been plagued by high rates of absenteeism and student turnover (Thomas, 1990; ABC Canada, 2001). Rates of participation in adult literacy programs tend to be low and are accompanied by high dropout rates for those who do participate (Malicky & Norman, 1994). Porter and Comings (2005) note that in order to advance one grade level, adults require between 100 and 150 hours of instruction. On average, adults in ABE participate in only 70 hours of instruction per year, far below the minimum required to succeed in the program. Dropout rates are highest during the first few months of the program, and those who do remain often participate intermittently due to barriers to participation. A minority of students are long-term participants (Porter & Comings, 2005). In the literature, the terms “dropout” and “leaver” are used interchangeably to describe students who enrol in ABE but do not complete
their program of study. This differs from non-participants, who are classified as adults who are eligible to attend ABE but choose not to for various reasons.

Numerous studies report on the statistics surrounding dropout in ABE. Adults who enrol in ABE are four times more likely to drop out than are adults in other programs (Garrison, 1985; Malicky & Norman, 1994; Pare, 1994). In their three year study of 94 participants in literacy programs, Malicky and Norman (1994) noted that about half of the participants dropped out of literacy classes before they met their goal. A similar percentage of Learning and Basic Skills learners in Ontario were reported to achieve their goals (Jonik & Goforth, 2002). In their study, Pross and Barry (2004) report that 31 percent of respondents who enrolled in a literacy program ended up dropping out before the program completed. ABC Canada (2001) presents similar statistics, stating that less than half of those who contact a literacy group actually enrol and of those who do enrol, 30 percent drop out. In a 2005 study, Porter and Comings found that almost two-thirds of entering adult literacy students stopped participating within six months of enrolling in library literacy activities.

Drop out rates vary depending on age, sex and nationality. Pross and Barry (2004) found that 39 percent of male respondents, compared to 23 percent of female respondents, dropped out of their studies. They also found that respondents aged 16-24 had the highest dropout rate at 42 percent, while the dropout rates of those aged 45 and older were only 17 percent. Malicky and Norman (1994) found in their study that 68% of Canadian born students dropped out versus 39% of immigrants, with Canadian-born men having the highest dropout rate of any group. This discrepancy may be explained by the fact that immigrants reported fewer problems
in school, which may lead to greater confidence than Canadian-born participants in their ability to learn. As well, while Canadian-born participants often express the dream of a better life when they enter literacy programs, they have less belief in the power of education to change their way of life than do immigrants.

There are several studies that provide information on the characteristics of leavers. According to a study by the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education (2005), females were more likely to complete courses than males, up to 50 percent of leavers had children, up to 20 percent of leavers identified themselves as Aboriginal, 29 percent reported having a physical or mental limiting condition, and 37 percent learned English as a second language. Less than half of drop outs had received a high school diploma or the GED and a high proportion of dropouts in the first three months had a grade 9 education or less (Malicky & Norman, 1994). Most leavers were satisfied with the courses they took, but paradoxically, one study found that dropouts thought their courses were more relevant and were more certain of their goals than persisters, even though dropouts had lower scholastic ability (Garrison, 1985).

The British Columbia study also reported that leavers are less likely to overcome – or face more – barriers to do with financial resources and personal circumstances. Dropouts tried to work more or cut back on their expenses in order to solve their financial problems, but almost a quarter admitted that they did not solve their financial problems. Over half of dropouts worked, a quarter were supported by family and friends, and significantly fewer leavers than persisters received financial aid. A study by Harris and Ganzglass (2008) also found that youth
from higher income families earned their high school equivalency at a rate of 85 percent compared to just 43 percent of youth from lower income families.

The learning environment was found to have an impact on persistence. Somewhat higher proportions of leavers took courses through delivery methods that required them to work independently, such as self-paced study or print based distance education (British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, 2005). Pare’s (1994) study revealed that while students who left the ABE program were less affiliated than students who persisted, they were also slightly more at ease in school than persisters and they believed more in school. This anomaly may be explained by the finding that they also felt that they did not receive sufficient attention from their teachers.

Dropouts can also be characterized by their attitudes before, during and after enrolment as reported by the dropouts themselves. Dropouts differ from eligible non-participants in that they had been motivated to enter programs and for the most part had a very different experience from their earlier stints in school (Thomas, 1990). While enrolled in the program they tended to complain about procedures, lack of money, and bad experiences, but overall they rate the experience as a positive one (British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, 2005). In fact, evaluations of the help they received to develop communication skills such as writing clearly, speaking well, reading better and working well with others tended to be fairly high. Leavers were also less likely than persisters to say they were well prepared for further study and less likely to report that their courses helped them build self-confidence, set goals, adapt to change, manage their work better, or develop a positive attitude to learning.
While only about half of leavers achieved their study goals, a sizeable majority said they planned to enrol in further courses sometime in the future (British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, 2005). Many dropouts have a history returning to ABE, as quite often either their personal situations were not favourable to study or learning the first time around, or the necessary support systems were not in place (Thomas, 1990).

**BARRIERS TO SUCCESS**

There are a number of barriers to success that are faced by most ABE students, and can be categorized as situational, institutional, attitudinal/dispositional, pedagogical, academic and workplace related. Situational barriers are those that arise from one’s own situation or environment at a given point. Institutional barriers are practices and procedures that exclude or discourage adults from participating in organized learning activities. Dispositional or attitudinal barriers are related to the attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner (Cross, 1981). Pedagogical barriers are linked to a lack of understanding of adult learning principles and strategies on the part of ABE instructors. Academic barriers include low literacy and numeracy skills, and low cognitive function. Workplace related barriers involve a lack of cooperation on the part of the employer to allow or provide access to adult literacy training (MacKerarcher, Stuart & Potter, 2006). Low literate adults often experience a combination of barriers, rather than one or two in isolation, thus compounding the difficulty of eliminating such obstacles (Hayes, 1988).
Situational Barriers

Situational barriers are composed of broad circumstantial conditions that limit the ability of adult learners to gain access to and participate in learning opportunities (MacKeracher, Stuart & Potter, 2006). These include but are not limited to multiple conflicting responsibilities for home, family, children and work; financial difficulties; lack of adequate and affordable childcare services; job commitments; transportation issues; having a physical, mental or learning disability; and lack of support from others. Numerous studies report that work and family-related reasons are the primary reasons for non-participation in ABE (ABC Canada, 2001; Jonik & Goforth, 2002; King, 2002; Thomas, 1990; Ziegler, Ebert & Cope, 2004). Situational barriers are most prevalent during mid-life (Beder, 1990). How well the demands of school are congruent with or can be integrated into the adult learner’s other roles and responsibilities is an important factor in dropout (Garrison, 1987).

Lack of transportation can be a serious barrier to participation, as the learners who need ABE the most are usually the least likely to own a car, have access to a car, or even afford public transit should it exist (Pross & Barry, 2004). Lack of transportation is a major problem for literacy programs offered in rural areas, especially if the learning centre is located far away from its target community. Lack of transportation not only impacts students’ ability to get to and from school, but their ability to bring their children to daycare as well (Annapolis County Learning Network, 2002).

Lack of childcare is another commonly cited reason given for not participating in literacy programs (Pross & Barry, 2004). This barrier to participation is reported by relatively more
women than men (Tuijnman, 2001). Childcare can especially be a problem when the childcare facility is not located in the same community as the school for the adult learner (Annapolis County Learning Network, 2002). In this case the learner may be forced to bring their child to a facility in a neighbouring town.

Financial problems can create a major barrier to participation (Pross & Barry, 2004) and lack of money is often cited as a reason for not participating in adult education (Tuijnman & Boudard, 2001). Financial difficulties can include lack of financial assistance and other costs such as fees, books, school supplies, transportation and childcare. Financial difficulties tend to amplify all other barriers to participation and create high levels of personal stress that are detrimental to successful learning (Pross & Barry, 2004). While many Canadian family and adult literacy training programs are offered free of charge, participants with financial problems may still have trouble accessing them.

When personal and/or family health and security are compromised, learners may experience barriers to participation. Health and security issues can include unstable living conditions, including poor health and nutrition and inadequate housing; issues of violence, abuse and addictions; and need for corrective devices such as eyeglasses or hearing aids (Human Resources Development Canada, 2001). In order to remain healthy and secure, communities must have access to clean drinking water, hospitals and public nurses, police services, fire and rescue services and adequate housing (Pross & Barry, 2004).

Many adults who need literacy training do not have the support of their friends and family members, making any other barriers even more difficult to overcome (Pross & Barry, 2004).
Often this lack of support is experienced in childhood, where the absence of family motivation for learning affects learning ability (Baran, Berube, Roy & Salmon, 2000). Learners that belong to family or social networks that harbour negative attitudes towards formal learning are much less likely to participate in ABE (Pross & Barry, 2004). The other issue with family and social networks is that many low-literate adults rely on close networks of friends and family members for help with reading and writing. This can result in these adults expressing hesitation at achieving literacy skills, for fear of disrupting their social network and making current social relationships awkward (Pross & Barry, 2004).

Special needs, which include disabling conditions such as physical, psychological and learning disabilities, can exclude some adults from participating in currently available programs (Carpenter & Readman, 2004). Many people with complex multiple physical and learning disabilities require one-on-one attention, a specially designed environment and specialized equipment in order to make learning accessible and to facilitate learning new skills.

Employment conflicts also represent a major barrier to participation in family and adult literacy programs (Pross & Barry, 2004). Lack of support from employers and having class times during work hours are often significant factors that prevent adults from participating in education. “Too busy at work” and “lack of time” are commonly cited as barriers to participation (Tuijnman & Boudard, 2001). Lack of time due to a busy work schedule is seen as an important barrier to the pursuit of education and training by the majority of employed adults who want to take a course but do not (Tuijnman, 2001).
Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers consist of limitations inherent in the methods institutions use to design, deliver and administer learning activities (MacKeracher, Stuart & Potter, 2006). These include the complexities of providing financial support to learners to pay for tuition fees and the resources needed for learning activities; negative attitudes towards adult learners; a general lack of support services at times and places suitable to adult learners; and recognition of prior learning and previously obtained academic credentials. Other examples include lack of flexibility in courses, poor guidance, and lack of appropriate local learning opportunities (Selwyn & Gorard, 1999). Pross and Barry (2004) also include inconvenient location, long waiting lists, lack of accommodations for learning disabilities and the high costs of tutors as institutional barriers. These barriers are frequently cited by non-participants and dropouts as central reasons for not enrolling in or leaving a program (ABC Canada, 2001).

There are few programs and policies to support less-educated adults, despite the rhetoric surrounding the importance of lifelong learning (Myers & de Broucker, 2006). Provincial adult learning systems are often complex, fragmented and incomplete\(^1\). Provision of quality programs and services are complicated by dramatic regional variations in models of funding and service delivery across Canada (ABC Canada, 2001). Additionally, there are significant gaps

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\(^1\) The education and training system in Newfoundland and Labrador is the responsibility of the provincial Department of Education. The department is divided into three branches: Primary, Elementary and Secondary Branch; Corporate Services Branch; and Advanced Studies Branch. The Advanced Studies Branch includes the divisions of Institutional and Industrial Education, Student Financial Assistance, and Adult Learning and Literacy. Adult Basic Education falls under the auspices of the Adult Learning and Literacy division, but much coordination is required with the Primary, Elementary and Secondary Branch to ensure the ABE program meets the rigors of the high school curriculum (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2005).
in coordination, information dissemination, counselling, financial aid, employer support and government investments (Myers & de Broucker, 2006).

**Attitudinal/Dispositional Barriers**

Attitudinal or dispositional barriers relate to learners’ perceptions of their capability to look for, register in, attend, and successfully complete learning activities (MacKeracher, Stuart & Potter, 2006). These include such barriers as lack of interest and motivation, low value on education and perceived lack of return on investment (Russell, 2008). Some students experience anxiety and embarrassment in the form of low self-esteem, fear of returning to school, fear of not being able to complete their program in a timely fashion, fear of low skill level being discovered and fear of failure (Thomas, 1990). Other students have difficulties with current school culture, which tends to mirror white, male middle class values and concerns (Pare, 1994). In the literature these barriers are most often self-identified by participants rather than perceived by instructors or researchers (Beder, 1990; Hayes, 1988; MacKeracher, Stuart & Potter, 2006; Pare, 1994; Russell, 2008; Thomas, 1990).

Adults with low perceived need do not view their lack of education as a major problem. They may find it easier to compensate for low-literacy skills than to correct them, or they may have other influences that more successfully compete for their time (Thomas, 1990). Perception of need decreases as non-participants age (Beder, 1990).

Older learners may feel more anxious or nervous about attending school than younger students, due to a feeling that they are too old for school (Pross & Barry, 2004). This is especially evident in employed individuals who have relatively positive attitudes towards
themselves as learners and towards education, but fear a negative response to their participation from family, friends and co-workers. These individuals are mainly deterred by a fear of failure that may be linked to early educational difficulties or the false perception of being too old to learn (Hayes, 1988).

Negative early educational experiences strongly influence how adults view present educational opportunities, and can present a serious barrier to participation. For example, many indigenous peoples suffer from Residential School Syndrome, a serious aversion to formal schooling, due to the extremely negative experiences that many had in residential schools (Pross & Barry, 2004). The effects of these negative experiences are often passed from generation to generation. Adults with low levels of formal schooling tend to also have negative feelings about their educational experiences, and are thus more likely to have adverse views about ABE. Negative perceptions may include ideas about what the teacher will be like, the nature of the course content and the expected behaviour of other class participants (Pross & Barry, 2004). Some adults also have misconceptions about ABE programs and expect large classes and instruction similar to the past (Thomas, 1990). Many learners often enter ABE with mixed emotions, many of which are negative, that arose from past schooling experiences where they have previously experienced failure, loss of self-esteem, and lack of responsiveness to their personal needs and goals (Quigley, 1998).

They often struggle with these past experiences and the stigma of illiteracy (Pare, 1994). If adult schooling replicates or echoes past difficulties, especially those that undermine cultural identity or dignity, it is anticipated that student participation will likely be negatively affected.
Lack of motivation or interest with respect to participating in adult education can be a barrier to participation (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985). Adults often come to ABE with sufficient motivation to succeed, but for various reasons lack the motivation to continue, usually early on in the program (Quigley, 1998).

**Academic Barriers**

Less frequently mentioned in the literature are academic barriers, which relate to the skills that are essential to successful learning (MacKerarcher, Stuart & Potter, 2006). Examples of academic barriers include lack of basic literacy, numeracy and computer-related skills, the inability to access and understand information, lack of critical and reflective thinking skills, and poor skills in writing essays, examinations and tests. Since the purpose of ABE is to improve the aforementioned skills, this barrier may appear to be somewhat circular. This barrier refers specifically to the cognitive ability that is required to participate in academic learning, which is unfortunately lacking in some ABE students. The ability to learn and preferences in learning are important long-term factors that influence the decision to attend ABE (Baran et al., 2000).

**Pedagogical Barriers**

Pedagogical barriers are mainly based on a lack of understanding on the part of instructors, facilitators and administrators about how adults learn. Other areas that are poorly understood include the benefits of learner-centered teaching and active learning, the diverse types of learning styles and preferred types of learning activities and information, the need for relevant content, recognition of prior learning, respect from others, and a responsive lifelong learning system (MacKerarcher, Stuart & Potter, 2006). Also included are instructional approaches,
settings and facilities, testing procedures, teaching materials, and time frames that are inappropriate or inadequate to the adult learner (Human Resource Development Canada, 2001). One study found that the most common reason for students leaving a traditional literacy program was dissatisfaction with the way their tutors approached teaching (Quigley & Uhland, 2000). Fingeret and Danin (1991) conducted interviews with students who dropped out of a traditional adult literacy program and found that while students felt their instructors “were nice as a person” (p. 82), they were not effective teachers.

**Gender Specific Barriers**

Women are much more likely than men to encounter socioeconomic – circumstantial barriers to participation in adult education programs (King, 2002; Pross & Barry, 2004; Thomas, 1990). There are several specific barriers that are more commonly faced by women than men. Family responsibilities and childcare are commonly cited by women, especially younger single women, as a barrier to participation (ABC Canada, 2002; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Hayes, 1988; Pross & Barry, 2004; Thomas, 1990). Money problems are also more commonly cited by women than men, and female single parents are most likely to cite financial problems as a barrier to participation (ABC Canada, 2002; Hayes, 1988). Mothers with dependent children are often more concerned with finding employment than upgrading their education (Hayes, 1988; Thomas, 1990). Women are slightly more likely than men to have an unsupportive spouse (Pross & Barry, 2004). Women are more likely than men to be nervous or anxious about attending ABE, and are concerned about not receiving individual attention, being older than the
other students, not being treated as an adult, and the teacher not being friendly (Pross & Barry, 2004).

**Minority Groups**

Different barriers to participation may be more relevant for different groups of the low literate population (Hayes, 1988). King (2002) found that low participation among minority groups is correlated to perceived barriers to employment in the workforce. As such, the physically disabled as a group are disproportionately less likely to participate in ABE. As well, African-American populations have extremely low participation rates in relation to the needs of the population.

**Reasons for Dropout**

The reasons for dropout are similar to the reasons for non-participation (Pross & Barry, 2004). For example, some reasons given for dropping out of literacy programs include previously acquired negative attitudes toward learning, lack of motivation, work and family responsibilities, problems with program delivery such as inappropriate materials and/or lack of learner involvement (Human Resources Development Canada, 2001). For many who dropout, however, there is no concrete explanation. Dropout can perhaps be best explained as a function of the lack of integration of school within the life space of the adult learner (Pare, 1994).

Situational reasons given for dropping out include social, family or personal problems; pregnancy and/or childcare; and mental or physical health problems (Malicky & Norman, 1994).
Some leave because they find work or because their job situations change (Pare, 1994). In the 2005 British Columbia ABE Survey, it was found that only about 5% of dropouts reported leaving ABE because of financial difficulties. While financial problems did not cause many students to dropout, over 20% reported having financial difficulties while in school.

Institutional reasons given for dropping out include problems with the pace of the program, lack of course relevance, perceived conflict with the instructor and frustration with course content (Malicky & Norman, 1994). Although most adults who drop out liked ABE, many reported receiving inadequate attention from their instructors (Winters, 1996).

Few studies report on specific attitudinal or dispositional reasons for dropping out. Pare (1994) indicated that some students dropped out because they did not want to forfeit their cultural identity or their freedom, and the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education (2005) noted that a small percentage drop out because they change their minds about the program. In the same study, the only academic reasons given for dropping out were that students completed the courses they wanted, completed the credits they needed, or qualified to transfer to another program. No pedagogical reasons for dropout were found in this literature review.

There are several indicators that may predict dropout. One study showed that all participants who dropped out during the first three weeks had sought attention not from their teachers or classmates but from the counsellor of the institution. It was found that while dropouts made repeat visits to the counsellor during their decision period to leave early the persisters did not. None of the would-be dropouts had approached their teachers for advice whereas the
persisters developed a strong relationship with the same teachers (Quigley & Uhland, 2000).

The same study showed that students at risk of dropping out exhibit high field dependence, which indicates a very high need for acceptance by peers, co-workers and friends. Other indicators of at-risk students include poor attendance, lack of progress, and inappropriate classroom behaviour (Jonik & Goforth, 2002). Socioeconomic variables, however, had no significant predictive power (Pare, 1994).

IMPROVING RETENTION RATES

Why Remove Deterrents to Graduation

As discussed earlier, the impacts of low literacy and low education levels are detrimental economically and socially on an individual and national level. It is important to remove or reduce as many barriers to participation in ABE as possible to minimize the negative impacts of low literacy levels. As indicated in a 1990 BC study, over 80 percent of ABE students reported they would go back to the program if their barriers to participation were removed (Thomas, 1990b). The White Paper on Public Post-Secondary Education (2005) remarks that a learning society recognizes the value of education for all citizens throughout their lives, and strives to create an environment where a responsive, high quality education is affordable, equitable and accessible by all. It is of critical importance in a learning society that as many adults as possible take advantage of opportunities to continue their learning. It is not possible to achieve this goal unless the deterrents to participation are better understood and practical strategies are developed to combat these deterrents, thusly increasing retention rates in organized educational activities for adults (Annapolis County Learning Network, 2002).
Adult basic education programs have the potential to significantly improve the economic and social well-being of those with relatively low initial education and literacy levels. Better educated individuals earn higher wages, have greater earnings growth over their careers, and experience less unemployment (Myers & de Broucker, 2006). Learners often experience other benefits such as improved self-confidence, better parenting skills, more community involvement, and improved family relationships (Human Resources Development Canada, 2001). Literacy programs can also teach students the dominant language, affording them the opportunity to participate in meetings, in conferences and in the wider community (Campbell, 1996).

Society as a whole also benefits from improved education and literacy levels. Better educated nations, for example, have higher long run economic growth and higher standards of living (Myers & de Broucker, 2006). Finally, on a more personal level, ABE instructors often feel they have somehow failed – failed their learners, their program or themselves – when students drop out of ABE (Quigley & Uhland, 2000).

The literature suggests that there is a reasonable chance for success only when adults have made the commitment to participate and the necessary supports are in place (Thomas, 1990). Some deterrents are within reasonable control of program planners, such as course location or provision of on-site child care, while others are not within reach, such as lack of interest or employer reimbursement. Removing barriers does not guarantee improved attrition rates, however, and the needs of particular students should be analyzed before implementation. For example, Jonik and Goforth (2002) report that college literacy basic skills programs in Ontario
implemented several retention strategies, which included adapting attendance and lateness policies for young, single mothers; reducing contact hours so that students can attend to personal commitments but still remain a part of the program; and encouraging part-time or ‘flex-time’ home study. Despite these efforts, attrition continued to be a problem.

The first three weeks are of critical importance to improving retention (Quigley, 1988). It was found that a disproportionate degree of attrition occurs in the first three weeks of programs, with about 18 percent dropping out before completing 12 hours of instruction (Quigley & Uhland, 2000). Any implementation of retention strategies should therefore be conducted as early as possible in the program.

**Removing Situational Barriers**

Unfortunately ABE practitioners can often do very little about situational barriers (Quigley, 1998). Porter, Cuban and Comings (2005) report that many institutions are reluctant to develop a social service capacity. In their study, social services were restricted to on-site childcare or transportation vouchers, they were implemented slowly, and they did not fully address students’ needs. Situational barriers can best be addressed by policy makers at provincial and national levels, such as providing ways to mitigate financial problems and providing solutions to family responsibilities (ABC Canada, 2002).

Provision of childcare would remove a major barrier, especially to young, single mothers. Pross and Barry (2004) recommend that literacy programs should offer free or subsidized childcare for participants. Whether a childcare service is operated by the program, or participants are connected with another source of subsidized childcare, the important thing is that childcare
support is included in budgets and planning. Offering on-site childcare is particularly challenging, and may be restricted to larger institutions that already have the infrastructure and budget in place. Subsidized childcare on the other hand could be more readily implemented and utilized by those who need it.

To overcome financial barriers, the use of cash incentives and rewards for those who complete literacy programs could be explored (Pross & Barry, 2004). A study by Ziegler, Ebert & Cope (2004) in the United States showed that welfare recipients who received a cash incentive made significantly more progress than those in the same program who did not receive an incentive. While a cash reward is only one factor involved in encouraging adults on social assistance to participate in ABE, it may be an important motivational incentive for adults who have multiple responsibilities as parents, students and workers who may lack access to reliable transportation and childcare. Although the study showed that the incentive of a cash reward for making progress appeared to increase persistence in ABE, it would be misleading to suggest that a cash reward is the only reason for the increase in persistence. Incentives may be dependent on the context in which they are given. The authors suggest that for an incentive program to be successful, the incentive program must be realistic and achievable, a clear link must be demonstrated between the incentive and the outcome, the bureaucratic practices and processes that detract from the motivational effectiveness must be minimized, and rewards should be given promptly.

Evaluating and addressing learning disabilities – a key barrier to persistence for many adult literacy students – is another area that should be explored (Porter, Cuban & Comings, 2005).
Students and practitioners agree that early diagnosis of a learning disability is very important (Goforth & Jonik, 2001). A thorough assessment of each individual at the start of any literacy program would allow practitioners to be fully informed about the adult’s unique learning needs and to determine the exact nature of the person’s learning disabilities (Carpenter & Readman, 2004). Specific supports and accommodations need to be implemented to help these people, such as provision of one-on-one tutoring, use of alternative instructional techniques, and aids to help them learn in the way best suited to their learning styles (Winters, 1996).

All mainstream literacy programs should be accessible to people with all types of disabilities (Carpenter & Readman, 2004). This can best be accomplished by fostering cooperation and linkages within and between the literacy and disability communities to facilitate the documentation and dissemination of best practices. Several steps must be taken to improve the outcomes for people with disabilities. Professional development and training opportunities should be given to literacy practitioners (Carpenter & Readman, 2004). Accommodations and supports for special needs students should also be provided. These can include resources, learning materials and technology; instructional strategies specifically developed to meet individual needs; and modifying the learning environment to ensure physical comfort, reduce distracters, and provide a balance of group and individual instruction. Other supports include ensuring building accessibility, providing additional funding, and making sure transportation is available (Carpenter & Readman, 2004).
Removing Institutional Barriers

It is important for practitioners to continue working at removing institutional barriers, but they may be difficult to remove (Quigley, 1998). There are several types of institutional barriers that may be reduced or eliminated to help improve retention rates.

Public policy needs to be developed by provincial governments with input from the public, private and non-governmental sectors to ensure ABE remains a viable option for those who need it. Myers & de Broucker (2006) argue that adults should be provided a ‘right to learn’ that is similar to the ‘right to learn’ that is already established for children and youths. This can only be achieved if skills development of the least educated is as much on the economic and political agenda as it is on the social agenda. At the institutional level, adult education providers need to develop policies and procedures that are sensitive to the needs of adult learners and their family life (King, 2002).

Classrooms or learning centres need to be attractive to students and students need to feel comfortable there (Thomas, 1990). The preferred location is a classroom in a local school, college or university. Most students do not want to attend upgrading programs in public settings such as coffee shops, restaurants and pubs. Likewise, many do not like the idea of attending classes at their workplace or local church (ABE Canada, 2002). Library literacy programs may also be a viable option, and have many positive attributes such as one-on-one tutoring, classes and small group instruction, and computer assisted learning (Porter, Cuba & Comings, 2005).
Flexibility and convenience need to be taken into consideration by adult education providers when developing and offering ABE programs. Programs should be developed that allow participants to enter at a time convenient to them (King, 2002). Courses should be offered at times that are convenient to the learner (Pross & Barry, 2004). Within reason, program length should also be as flexible as possible so that students can progress at their own pace. Class schedules should also be as flexible as possible and offer as many choices as possible. Another possibility is to offer off-site instruction and drop-in classes to make instruction more accessible to students with transportation difficulties or scheduling conflicts (Porter, Cuban & Comings, 2005).

Offering ABE courses via distance learning could benefit students who face time constraints due to work or travel schedules, or are location-bound due to geographic or family responsibilities (Galusha, 1998). Before implementing distance or online courses, it is important for administrators to consider the limitations and constraints associated with this type of program delivery. Students often report a perceived lack of feedback or contact with the instructor, feelings of isolation and alienation, and a lack of the social interactions that are present in a traditional learning environment. Learning to use the hardware and software necessary for an online course can often present challenges to the student. As well, the requirement for specific infrastructure and technology need to be considered (Galusha, 1998).

Research shows that is very important to have friendly, well-trained workers in frontline positions such as ABE office personnel. The initial contact students have with the ABE program should be an affirmative one. Frontline staff and program workers need to be very friendly,
encouraging and positive when they communicate with students (Pross & Barry, 2004). This can be ensured through the provision of more sensitivity training and awareness of the issues faced by low-literate adults among front-line institutional and government workers (Winters, 1996).

Goforth and Jonik (2001) found that setting up focus groups of ABE students has great potential for informing practitioners about the barriers, needs and concerns of learners. Focus groups allow direct information to be gathered which can help practitioners gain a deeper understanding of the complex and highly personal issues related to retention. Focus groups also involve students in the decision making process about programs and policies, giving them a sense of ownership over the program (Human Resources Development Canada, 2001). Focus groups were found to help improve attendance, enhance new students’ sense of belonging and discover their own solutions (Goforth & Jonik, 2001).

Given the wide range of reasons for dropping out of ABE, especially those involving personal and family problems, there is a need for a broad range of available services to adults entering literacy programs (Malicky & Norman, 1994). This appears to be especially important in the beginning stages of literacy programs since this is when the highest dropout rates occur. One of the strongest predictors of student retention is the presence of support services such as counselling (Human Resources Development Canada, 2001). Peer counselling, tutoring and assistance with program transitions are seen by learners as necessary and effective (Pare, 1994; Winters, 1996; Thomas, 1990).
Participants must find the course content useful and valuable to their daily lives, or they will view the programs as a waste of time (Pross and Barry, 2004). In order to appeal to potential participants as a worthwhile activity, it needs to be relevant to their linguistic, cultural and social experiences. This is especially true when developing literacy programs for Aboriginal students. Incorporating the use of traditional languages and customs into literacy programs can help increase participation and retention rates among First Nations learners. Program developers should incorporate traditional knowledge, languages, stories and customs when designing course content and supporting materials. As well, it is essential that program instructors are sensitive to cultural differences and do not have racist attitudes (Pross & Barry, 2004). George (2003) argues that there is a need for distinct Aboriginal approaches to literacy and education. This will require a national comprehensive whole-of-government Aboriginal adult literacy, numeracy and life skills policy, as well as a coordinated Aboriginal literacy strategy.

There are several other ways to reduce or eliminate some institutional barriers. Many adults need bridging opportunities such as one-on-one tutoring or work in a learning centre with individualized help before enrolling in regular ABE classes (Winters, 1996). These programs help build self-confidence and assure learners that they are capable of attending ABE. Myers and de Broucker (2006) indicate that tuition fees are sometimes noted by students as being a barrier to participation. By making high-school related skills upgrading free regardless of age, this barrier would be eliminated (Myers and de Broucker, 2006). Not being able to work at one’s own pace is another barrier cited in the literature. Offering programs that allow students to work at their own pace could possibly increase participation and retention rates (Pross &
Barry, 2004). The longer a program runs, the greater the chance of dropout. Thus, shorter programs will likely have more success in retaining students (Pross & Barry, 2004).

Removing Dispositional/Attitudinal Barriers

Dispositional and attitudinal barriers can be difficult to modify, but there are a number of strategies that practitioners can employ to reduce the impact of these barriers on attrition. The most direct way to combat these barriers is to make learners feel welcome and encourage them to participate in the life of the program (Thomas, 1990). Practitioners should acknowledge the nervousness and anxiety felt by adult learners, provide reassurance, and emphasize success (ABC Canada, 2002). Literacy instructors and program coordinators need to be very encouraging and supportive of learners in their programs, so that participants can gain the confidence they need to succeed in their program (Pross & Barry, 2004). Early verbal connections with new learners are critical in maintaining student motivation. As students progress in their program, the teacher-learner relationship becomes increasingly important in sustaining student motivation (Quigley, 1998). Quigley (1998) notes, however, that if a student suffers from low self-esteem even the most caring and devoting teacher may little impact on the student’s success.

Some students need to take a break from learning. Practitioners should follow up students who miss classes as a way of keeping them interested and motivated (Thomas, 1990). If a student withdraws from the program a follow-up call should be placed by someone on behalf of the program. By doing this their reasons for withdrawing can be documented and the learner is
made aware that someone in ABE cares about their absence. This can motivate the student to return when circumstances change (Winters, 1996).

A sensitive interviewing process for new learners at intake and early in the program can be used to identify at-risk students who need more attention (Quigley, 1998). Some new learners will have more significant dispositional barriers than others and once identified can be assisted to stay in programs longer. Cues for dispositional barriers can include scepticism, hostility, hesitancy, and uncertainty. Several supports can be implemented for these at-risk students, which include creating smaller peer support groups for at-risk students, creating after-class support groups for at-risk students, using peer mentoring approaches, and adding volunteer tutors to ABE programs, either within or outside of the ABE classroom (Quigley, 1998).

ABE students may have unrealistic expectations and often set for themselves unrealistic goals (Garrison, 1987). However, current research suggests that students remain in programs longer if they set for themselves achievable, realistic goals (Jonik & Goforth, 2002). Students with lower academic ability, lower self-esteem, and greater socioeconomic change may set impracticable goals for themselves, and have idealistic expectations of the program resulting in an incongruence which leads to dropout (Garrison, 1985). Prospective adult learners should initially be counselled on the expectations of the program and practitioners should discuss with them whether or not their goals are realistic given their ability and time constraints. A majority of ABE practitioners feel that learners stay with unrealistic goals for too long, and should therefore have their goals reviewed every two to three months (Jonik & Goforth, 2002).
Program providers need to recognize that attending ABE is a social experience that involves social interactions and situations. This may lead some adults to feel fear or intimidation. One way to possibly alleviate this is to permit learners to bring a friend or family member with them for additional support, at least during the initial orientation to the program (Pross & Barry, 2004).

Overall, the main way practitioners can combat attitudinal or dispositional barriers is to create a safe and welcoming atmosphere for learning to occur. This requires caring and sensitive program coordinators, facilitators and tutors (Pross & Barry, 2004). Combating these barriers requires little in the way of policy change and relies more heavily on training and professional development opportunities for instructors. Program planners should ensure that funding or other incentives exist that encourage practitioners to participate in such educational pursuits.

**Removing Pedagogical Barriers**

Many pedagogical barriers to participation can be removed through a greater understanding of the principles of adult education, the characteristics of adult learners, and applicable instructional techniques. Carpenter and Readman (2004) discuss some of the principles of adult education that are applicable in the ABE classroom. It is of utmost importance that learning takes place at a pace and in a way that suits the learner. Adult learners need to be able to direct themselves. They must be actively involved in the learning process and instructors should act as facilitators rather than teachers. Adults have amassed an underlying base of life experience and knowledge including work-related activities, family responsibilities and previous education. New learning needs to be connected to this existing foundation of
knowledge and experience. Program participants need to be aware of how each part of the program has been designed to help them attain their personal goals. Adult learners need to understand why they are learning something and how it will be useful in their lives. They need to be seen as equal partners in the educational process. Finally, instructors must recognize that issues of self-esteem and confidence are very personal and sensitive, which can cause students to become defensive and embarrassed.

Polson (1993) discusses some of the characteristics of adult learners that must be taken into consideration by ABE practitioners. Adults are involved in multiple roles which impact the amount of time and energy they can devote to educational pursuits. Instructors must recognize and honour non-academic interests and commitments. Adults commonly experience life changes and in any given class there may be students moving in, moving through or moving out of many different life transactions. Most adult students are off-campus directed and are less concerned with on-campus activities than are younger students.

This has several implications for teaching adults. Adult students will want to know how a course will help them meet their goals. Instructors should therefore learn very early why each student is enrolled in the course. Adults learn by constantly reorganizing and restructuring information. Instructors will need to help students integrate new information with previously acquired knowledge. This is facilitated via active participation by the students. When students are involved, they are more likely to investigate other ways to think about the subject as well as think about alternative ways to complete the task. Some adults have developed preconceptions and will react defensively and emotionally when their truths are questioned. It
is important for instructors to recognize that this is a normal pattern of learning and that students will need time to focus on and absorb new information (Polson, 1993).

Particular attention should be given to the needs and learning styles of older adults in ABE. Older students have longer reaction times than younger students and may do more poorly on timed multiple choice tests. Instructors can compensate for this by offering a variety of evaluation methods to measure student learning. Older students tend to suffer from some short-term memory loss. Instructors should progress at a speed that students can follow and cover less material in order to have in understood and retained (Polson, 1993).

Human Resources Development Canada (2001) suggests that there are several common elements that comprise good practice in adult literacy programs, including trained instructors; an open, welcoming learning environment; adult-oriented resources and approaches to learning and assessment; and individualized instruction. Both traditional and non-traditional teaching strategies should be implemented where appropriate. For example, a multisensory teaching approach which encourages the utilization of several sensory input strategies at the same time to enhance learning has shown to be successful among adults with learning difficulties (Winters, 1996). Some programs could incorporate self-paced study plans to accommodate different patterns of learning (Porter, Cuban & Comings, 2005). However, Winters (1996) points out that because of their poor academic abilities many adult learners would benefit from direct instruction. Class sizes should be kept small and one-on-one tutoring should be available (ABC Canada, 2002; Quigley, 1998). Thomas (1990) suggests several other elements of good adult literacy programs. Learning assistants, aides and tutors may be
required to help instructors. The importance of healthy group and social interaction should be recognized, and allowances should be made for slower students to reach their goals. Learners need to know that progress is being made and require frequent positive reinforcement and evidence of success.

On-line technologies are not yet being used by the majority of institutions that offer ABE, and cost, training, inappropriate instruction, integration and access are problems (Human Resources Development Canada, 2001). The use of technology itself can become another basic skill barrier and there is no guarantee of actual increased demand for learning simply because it is technologically repackaged (Selwyn & Gorard, 1999). In a study by ABC Canada (2002), only a third of respondents were interested in using the Internet, while another third were not interested in the Internet option. While there are several disadvantages to online technologies, it seems that offering certain ABE courses online could benefit younger computer literate adults who, due to time or other constraints, cannot attend regular ABE classes. Because so few institutions offer online ABE courses, there is little research available to determine its effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Adult Basic Education offers adults with low literacy and education levels the opportunity to improve their skills and their overall standard of living. It is therefore unfortunate that as few as 50 percent of adults who enrol in ABE successfully graduate. It is important for practitioners to understand the characteristics of ABE students so that the appropriate supports can be put in place to help ensure success. It is also important to keep in mind that the barriers to
participation listed in the literature are applicable in a specific time and place, and may not be pertinent to other situations. The characteristics of any particular ABE student should be noted by practitioners as soon as possible in order to identify possible barriers that the student may encounter.

Some of the suggestions for removing barriers are more practical than others. Learning institutions can remove pedagogical barriers by hiring properly trained and certified instructors, or by providing specialized training to instructors who require it. Other barriers are much more difficult to remove, such as providing adequate childcare, transportation or financial support.

The ABE attrition problem is a multifaceted one that requires a multifaceted response from interagency networks to foster literacy.

Removing all barriers to participation does not guarantee a student will graduate from ABE. The student may face barriers that cannot be removed, or may simply not have the cognitive ability to successfully complete a rigorous academic program. In these cases alternatives to high school equivalency need to presented, such as occupational or essential skills training, contextualized bridging programs, apprenticeship, or other on-the-job training.

This literature review provides a framework upon which barriers to success may be identified and possibly rectified. Barriers can only be removed if there is a concerted effort on the part of learners, practitioners, and policy makers. The attrition problem in ABE needs to be recognized, and a plan of action that involves appropriate governmental departments, public and private educational institutes, and non-governmental volunteer agencies needs to be implemented.

This will involve identifying specific barriers that are being faced by particular groups of
students, and developing policies that will tear down these barriers. There is no simple solution to this problem, but it needs to be addressed so that learners can enjoy greater success in ABE.
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