Who Can Teach? Making the Case for Adult Learners as Adult Education Teachers

Alisa Vlahakis Povenmire

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Making the Case for Adult Learners as Adult Education Teachers

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Winston School of Education and Social Policy, Merrimack College

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Abstract

This paper explores the rationale for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education policy requirement of a bachelor’s degree as the minimum qualification for instructors in state-funded adult education programs and how this requirement obstructs equitable access to teaching careers in adult education. The bachelor’s degree policy is analyzed with respect to three complimentary theories: democratic education, equality of intelligence, and empowerment. Analysis is supported with mixed-methods research consisting of a literature review with a focus on the benefits of student leadership; review of pertinent adult education policy; a survey of staffing challenges in Massachusetts adult education programs; a comparison of state policies regarding credential requirements for adult education instructors; and an interview with the MA Director of Adult Education. This research makes the case for training and hiring graduates from adult education programs to provide critical professional opportunity for adult learners, diversify the teaching workforce, and address the critical teacher shortage. Meaningful teaching opportunities can be crafted at levels appropriate to adult learner skills and experience.
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Who Can Teach? Making the Case for Adult Learners as Adult Education Teachers

Until mid-2018, adult education programs funded by the state of Massachusetts could hire instructors who met program-generated criteria for “highly qualified staff” (ACLS, 2015, p. 24). While programs often hired those with at least a bachelor’s degree (Comings, 2023), they were not required to do so. However, beginning in September 2018, an ongoing effort to professionalize the field of adult education, along with a concerted national focus on college and career readiness, led the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to require instructors in state-funded adult education programs to have at least a bachelor’s degree in order to teach (ACLS, 2018).

Meanwhile, adult education programs in Massachusetts have a rich tradition of student leadership. Until 2018, student leadership initiatives in adult education could be funded by DESE (ACLS, 2015). Student leaders are talented, enthusiastic adults who understand the cultures, languages, and lived experiences of their fellow students, and who conduct activities on behalf of their fellow students, education programs, and communities. While many adult students develop leadership skills that are directly transferable to teaching, these students do not generally have a bachelor’s degree.

Recently, the Covid-19 pandemic amplified an already concerning shortage of teachers (Schmitt & deCourcy, 2022). In Massachusetts, the bachelor’s degree presents a barrier to hiring and training competent instructors from a capable pool of adult learners. Adult education can, through empowering adult education alumni to teach their peers, reinvigorate and diversify its workforce, provide critical professional employment opportunity, and address the current critical teacher shortage.
The purpose of this capstone is to analyze the current Massachusetts adult education policy requiring that all adult education instructors hold a bachelor’s degree, examine whether holding a bachelor’s degree is a fair and equitable pre-requisite for teaching, and explore how student leaders in particular might be trained to address the teacher shortage in adult education. For many years, and especially since the Covid pandemic, education leaders have bemoaned the difficulty in finding qualified teachers to fill open positions in their schools. The bachelor’s requirement leads to the exclusion of many skilled candidates who have valuable, transferrable life experience, but no degree. In essence, the requirement prohibits the hiring of the very people that the adult education system serves. If Massachusetts wishes to grow its teaching force and truly advance its own the student-centered vision and mission, it can give adult education graduates the opportunity to teach through the endorsement of alternative on-the-job practical, experiential teacher training.

**Literature Review**

**What is Adult Education?**

For the purposes of this paper, adult education comprises a variety of opportunities for adults “to develop literacy and English-language skills needed to qualify for further education, job training, and better employment” (Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education [MCAE], 2024, para. 1). Adult education is generally divided into two main kinds of programming: Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). ABE is divided into two or more levels of instruction, generally including ABE (pre-high school level) and ASE (high school equivalency). ESOL offers classes in speaking, listening, reading, writing, as well as civics and US culture. The adult education system also provides workforce training for high-need job sectors, which includes basic skills instruction (ABE or ESOL) contextualized for the
emplacement industry and culminates in an entry-level industry-recognized credential. In addition, Transition to College programs support adult learners who have their high school credential but need additional academic support to prepare for entry into college programs.

Who are Adult Learners?

ABE students are generally adults who have not obtained a high school credential and are returning to school to do so to attain personal, employment, or higher education goals. ABE students can be aged 16 or older, with diverse skills, needs, and goals. ABE students often have experienced significant educational challenges, early parenthood, military service, poverty, trauma, and addiction. ABE students may have left school early in their education career or as late as the 12th grade. Adult ELL students are immigrants from countries all over the world, who also have a diversity of education background; some may have no or very little previous schooling, while others may have attained higher education degrees in their country of origin. All adult learners have valuable knowledge, resiliency and resourcefulness, gained through socioemotional and economic challenges, immigration and cultural adaptation, and varied life/work experience.

Who are Adult Education Instructors?

Teachers come to adult education with various educational backgrounds and employment experience. Some come from K-12 environments, some have been literacy volunteers or tutors, while others have no teaching experience at all. Because Massachusetts currently requires it, 100% of instructors employed in adult education have a bachelor’s degree, but even in 2002, before there was such a policy, 94% of teachers had a bachelor’s degree (Comings, 2023).
Adult Education in Massachusetts

Massachusetts has a robust adult education system with 113 programs throughout the state. The vision and mission for the Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS) division of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) are, respectively:

We envision a future where every adult in Massachusetts can gain the knowledge, skills, and support they need to build the life they aspire to live. (DESE, 2023, para. 1)

Working with providers and partners, ACLS stewards a public adult education system that puts no-cost quality instruction, advising, job training, and career pathways within reach of all adult students in Massachusetts. (DESE, 2023, para. 2)

Addressing the Critical Teacher Shortage

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic confirmed the stark reality of inequity in education, challenged existing educators to the breaking point of their careers, and caused an exodus of educators at all levels (Hough, 2021). Education leaders report a high turnover rate among instructors (Barnum, 2023), with 44% of school systems reporting teacher vacancies and 23% of school systems reporting more than 5% of their teaching positions unfulfilled (Schmitt & deCourcy, 2022). Trends in adult education reflect similar challenges.

In program year 2022, Massachusetts served approximately 19,771 adult learners, 14,075 of which were English language learners (ELLs) while 5,696 were ABE students (UMass Donahue Institute, 2023). Of these almost 20,000 adult learners, 723 adult learners gained their high school credential, and an additional 1,117 ELLs tested into advanced educational functioning levels as defined by the National Reporting System (2022). This means that, in 2022 alone, 1,840 adults persisted to the highest levels possible in the spectrum of adult education coursework.
Results from prior years are similar in number. These students, with their valuable, transferable experience in the adult education system, represent the potential for adult education to address its own teacher shortage.

**History of Adult Education in Massachusetts**

Adult education has a long history in Massachusetts and indeed, in the United States from the founding of the country. Training through apprenticeship was perhaps the earliest form of adult education with a focus on employment, and adult learning happened in a variety of environments in the 17th and 18th centuries: trade schools, libraries, churches, and farming organizations. Massachusetts embraced the concept of adults as simultaneous teachers and learners, as demonstrated by Josiah Holbrook’s establishment of the first “lyceum” in Millbury, MA, where members could teach and learn in a public forum (Martin, 1970).

Adult education has always been responsive to the changing needs of the world. The 19th century saw the development of many volunteer-driven, adult education associations, which flourished. Many of these organizations, such as the YMCA and YWCA, are still in existence today. In the late 1800’s, when a new focus of adult education became to reach people wherever they were at, school extension and correspondence programs came into being. In the early 1900’s, in response to increasing complexity in work environments, Massachusetts forged a foundation for public adult vocational education, so that both young and old alike could develop the skills needed for the evolving job market. At this time, Massachusetts also responded to the needs of a burgeoning immigrant population with formation of citizenship and English language programs (Martin, 1970).

States all across the US developed and imparted much-needed adult education services in the same manner as Massachusetts. After World War II, the focus of adult education expanded
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beyond a strong focus on vocation to concern about illiteracy. Adult education organizations advocated for federal support to fund the establishment of state directors of adult education and professionalization of the field (Rose, 1991). In response, the federal government passed the Adult Education Act in 1966. As a result, Massachusetts began to establish a cohesive, state-sponsored system of adult education in 1982, with an initial $600,000 in designated funding (Comings, 2023). Several federal acts later, that support has grown exponentially to $60,000,000 in 2023 (Commonwealth of MA, 2024).

The Evolution of Current Massachusetts Adult Education Policy

The current Massachusetts adult education policy is rooted in the inclusion of adult education objectives in the state’s 1993 Education Reform Act (ERA). The ERA objective most relevant to this paper is development of “a network of trained, full-time professional instructors, qualified to provide high quality effective services” (Comings, 2023, p. 91). The Act did not define “professional” or “qualified”.

MA adult education policy has been further influenced by federal legislation including the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and the more recent 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which emphasizes education for employment preparation purposes and established the National Reporting System (NRS) to track and evaluate advances in various literacy measures, attainment of high school equivalency, advancement into college or training, and employment outcomes (Comings, 2023). The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, which is also known as Title II of WIOA, legislates that “Each eligible agency receiving funds under this title shall consider whether the eligible provider’s activities are delivered by well-trained instructors, counselors, and administrators who meet any minimum qualifications established by the State, where applicable, and who have access to high quality professional
development, including through electronic means” (AEFLA, Title II, Subtitle C, Section 231.e.9). The federal government does not define “well-trained”; there is no mention of a minimum education requirement for instructors.

The Massachusetts Public Adult Education System is administered through the Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS) division of the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Until 2018, the MA DESE did not set a minimum education requirement for instructors in its adult education programs. The 2015 Massachusetts Policies for Effective Adult Basic Education in Community Adult Learning Centers and Correctional Institutions states, “Programs must ensure a fair and equitable process to hire highly qualified staff. The hiring process/protocols must be documented in a handbook or relevant program documentation” (ACLS, 2015, p. 24).

It was not until 2019, that DESE made a significant change to its policy, perhaps reflecting a pressure to further professionalize the field: “ACLS requires that all teachers have, at a minimum, a bachelor’s degree. (Note: Preferred qualifications for teachers are: a bachelor’s or master’s degree and teaching license/certificate; a bachelor’s or master’s degree in the content area they teach; or a bachelor’s or master’s degree in education.)” (ACLS, 2019).

In September 2023, DESE scaled back the language in its most recent policy manual: “ACLS requires that all teachers have, at a minimum, a bachelor’s degree. (Note: In certain circumstances, programs may be eligible for a waiver to hire a teacher who is currently enrolled in college and within two years of completion of a bachelor’s degree. A program that discovers a need to pursue this option is required to submit a written request to the state administrator.)” (DESE, 2023, p. 25).
The policy discrepancy between the federal regulation for “qualified instructors” and the MA state requirement of a bachelor’s degree for instructors is central to the question “who can teach?”

**Challenges Due to Current Policies**

There are a good many reasons to review the necessity of the bachelor’s degree as a minimum qualification for adult education instructors. One is the practical matter of not being able to address the extremely high demand for adult education services with current levels of support. The National Reporting System data shows that in Massachusetts program year 2022, 463,262 adults in the state do not speak English well or at all, and 350,578 do not have a high school credential. However, the state’s 118 programs were only able to serve 19,419 adults during that program year (Coalition on Adult Basic Education [COABE], 2023). While current allocated funding is not enough to serve all adults in need of education, and not all adults in need of education want or are available to take classes, funding is not the only barrier to adequate service of adult language and literacy need. There are simply not enough teachers to fill available positions in current adult learning centers, and there are many challenges to retaining staff. This situation has been exacerbated as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Another reason to question current policy is that a bachelor’s degree does not automatically confer the ability to teach. The bachelor’s signifies that a person has studied at a college level for years. Those who graduate from college with a bachelor’s degree in education, have learned about teaching by practicing teaching during their course requirements, and even this experience does not necessarily indicate that a person will be an effective teacher. It is when people have the chance to practice on-the-job that they have the opportunity to become effectual. If the actual job training is what is critical to success, it seems that innovative teaching education
could start at the job, with adults who may or may not have attended college, but do have valuable real-life, transferable skills.

A third reason to question the bachelor’s degree requirement is that it prohibits equitable access to teaching jobs. US Census Bureau Data shows that, in 2022, approximately 50% of Whites have a bachelor’s degree, compared to ~33% of Blacks, and ~23% of Hispanics (American Community Survey, 2022). Skills-based hiring practices could increase the diversity of a predominantly White adult education workforce in Massachusetts.

A final challenge to DESE’s current policy is MA Governor Maura Healey’s recent “Lead By Example” Employer Talent Initiative which aims to promote more inclusive hiring practices at the state level by focusing primarily on applicant experience and skills and removing education level requirements for most jobs. According to Governor Healey, “too many job applicants are being held back by unnecessary degree requirements.” With her Executive Order, she directs her administration “to focus on applicants’ skills and experiences, rather than college credentials,” noting that doing so “will expand our applicant pool and help us build a more inclusive and skilled workforce than ever before” (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2024, para. 2).

**Relevant Theories of Adult Learning**

Prominent adult education theorists promote the importance of fostering learner voice, developing leadership skills, and cultivating critical thinking for community action. They further advocate for centering students’ experience in the teaching and learning process (Friere, 1970; Greene, 2006; hooks, 2003). This report considers the following theories to inform its evaluation of the MA DESE policy requirement of a bachelor’s degree as the minimum qualification for teaching in adult education.
Democratic Education: Education as Freedom. Democratic education proponents ground their practice in respect for the intelligence, experience, and voice of their students. Democratic education is often called “freedom-based education”, where students choose what they want to learn and direct how they will learn it. Democratic education is antithetical to traditional education models with a prescriptive and system-driven, teacher-centered curriculum. Democratic education requires trust, collaboration, and working toward the common good. Democratic education is founded in the belief that people naturally want to learn and grow and in trust that people will learn and grow. It promotes “positive freedom”, which is freedom to collaborate with others to surmount barriers in order to progress toward liberation (Morrison, 2008). Democratic education therefore affords students partnership and responsibility for authentic lesson planning and curriculum development.

In Pedagogy of The Oppressed, Freire advocates for students’ lived experiences as central to teaching and learning, where there are no “students” and “teachers”, but “student-teachers” and “teacher-students”. There is no hierarchy, and each person’s knowledge and skill is valued in a collaboration for understanding and action. He posits that critical reflection and dialogue are essential to democratic education, and all involved become more fully human in the process (Friere, 1970).

In Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope, bell hooks (2003) advocates for deconstruction of the traditional, authoritarian educational experience to liberate the voice of the students and staff. She notes, “the politics of class elitism ensure that biases in the way knowledge is taught often teach students in these settings that they are not deemed sophisticated learners if they do not attend college” (hooks, 2003, p. 42). She maintains that students and teachers alike must engage in critical reflection of their environment and themselves and apply
their learning to action. “Education is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world” (hooks, 2003, p. 43).

Benhabib (1996) proposes, “democratic education not only encourages free deliberation by people (say, teachers and students) in public institutions, but also unconstrained engagement by them as moral and political equals… such that all participants have the same chances to initiate speech acts, to question, to interrogate, and to open debate” (Benhabib, 1996, as cited in Waghid, 2014, p. 1). If one accepts the premise that learners are truly equals with teachers in the democratic classroom, and that the lived experience of all participants in the education setting is valued, then the imposition of a requirement of specific higher learning on the teacher is contradictory.

Equality of Intelligence. Jacques Ranciere’s philosophy of Equality of Intelligence is rooted in a fundamental trust that people are generally smart enough to work together to make meaning of life through conversation and reasoning. Equality of Intelligence does not mean to imply that all people have the same abilities with regard to academic pursuits or scientific endeavors, for example. Instead, it posits that most of what people do need to do together to function well in community—have relationships, communicate, live together, solve problems, make plans—does not require a formal education with a professional guide. Ranciere believes that people think they need an expert, because they have been taught to think so, “because the presupposition of inequality has been ingrained in us” (May, 2009, p. 8). Ranciere points out that the hierarchy that is embedded in the contexts of gender, race, employment, and government is grounded in the belief that people lack a fundamental equality of intelligence. This belief in this lack of equality of intelligence is so pervasive that it is a challenge to imagine life without
hierarchy. Ranciere notes that equality is often considered something to be distributed or bestowed by those at the top of the hierarchy, rather than presumed of each individual. Acknowledgement of this Equality of Intelligence is a prerequisite to true democracy, which Ranciere describes as the practice of embracing dissent from an established “order that maintains oppressive relationships in favour of a participation that starts from the idea that each participant is equal” (May, 2009, p. 19).

**Empowerment Theory.** Empowerment theory is foundational to the exploration of adult students’ abilities and right to teach in the adult education system. Researcher Mark Zimmerman (2000) organizes empowerment theory into three levels: individual, organizational, and community. Individual empowerment encompasses personal decision-making, resource management, and ability to collaborate. Organizational empowerment comprises participation in decision-making, sharing responsibility, and sharing leadership. Community empowerment includes access to resources, innovative and inclusive governance, and acceptance of diversity (Zimmerman, 2000).

He further distinguishes between empowering processes and empowered outcomes. Empowering processes develop and strengthen individuals, organizations, and communities, “guided by principles of social justice, such as inclusivity, equality, and an understanding of oppression” (Coady et al, 2014, p. 373). In adult education, those processes are embedded in the classroom through practices such as developing English, numeracy developing job readiness skills, peer tutoring, team-building, and providing student leadership opportunity. Empowered outcomes are the results of empowering processes and include critical awareness, participatory skills and action, ability to compete for resources, formation of coalitions, and diverse leadership. In the adult education sphere, empowered outcomes have included students
participating in school activities, volunteering to help fellow students, giving presentations at regional and state meetings, finding jobs, and advocating with health care professionals. This paper argues that adult education students working in adult education is the ultimate empowered outcome.

**Student Leadership in Adult Education**

Existing adult and higher education research illustrates the inter-relationship between student leadership development and increased student civic engagement, enhanced language, literacy, and skill development, and employment and education outcomes (Alexandrowicz et al., 2019; Dunbar et al., 2018; Gott et al., 2019; Peck, 2018; Rhodes & Hands, 2020). Numerous studies promote the importance of fostering student voice (Gouin et al., 2023; Greene, 2006; Hunt et al. 2019). In addition, adult education practitioners advocate for and report beneficial outcomes of including students in the planning, administration, and advocacy of adult education (Bien-Gund & Elrowmeim, 2019; Hernandez, 2019; Suit, 2016; Toso et al., 2008).

While programs might tend to foster student leadership in those students who show a natural inclination toward leadership activity, a study by Rhodes and Hands (2020) finds that active engagement in leadership initiatives so enhances adult student learning and programming, that the researchers recommend that programs promote such engagement for all students, not just those that happen to step forward. Student leadership skills not only enhance personal and programmatic effectiveness, but they are also directly transferable to other aspects of adults’ lives, especially their careers (Toso, et al., 2008; Peck, 2018). There is support for a reciprocal relationship between leadership development and employment skills, where employment of students in teaching roles is the primary strategy for developing transferable leadership skills. Gott, Bauer, and Long (2019) demonstrate how three different student employee projects
facilitate development of transferable leadership skills at the Kansas State University Staley State School of Leadership, where “students, faculty, and staff members are whole and capable beings with something to teach and learn” (p. 92).

For almost 30 years, with the goal of empowering disenfranchised adults, MA DESE has encouraged adult education programs to foster not only literacy and employment outcomes, but also activities such as student-centered instruction, student leadership, civic engagement, and participatory action. In prior policy documents, Adult and Community Learning Services at MA DESE explicitly recognized and supported the value of student leadership to catalyze learning as well as personal and professional growth. For example:

“Massachusetts has a long tradition of support for student leadership development through many venues including student health teams and community projects. Student leadership projects are an effective medium for contextualizing education, as students:

- research a topic of interest that is relevant in the program or community,
- *teach other students about the topic* [emphasis added],
- make and distribute brochures,
- develop and conduct surveys,
- participate in or facilitate informational fairs,
- arrange for related community activities or services at the program, and
- document and take action around community issues.

The power in student leadership teams is the purpose and focus around an issue of real concern, with the intention of making a change that has visible results.

Participation in such projects is transformational for learners and staff; along with the highly motivating personal growth that comes from being involved and being supported in
projects about real issues, student leaders develop new knowledge, skills, and awareness. While reading, writing, math, and technology skills are enhanced through student leadership projects, learners also develop communication, research, and presentation skills, and they develop knowledge about the economic and political environment surrounding community issues” (ACLS, 2015, p. 56-57).

Current DESE policy support for student leadership practices is embedded in the department’s Indicator of Program Quality for Educational Leadership:

“Standard 9.3: Educational leaders, in collaboration with staff, students, and relevant stakeholders, establish culturally responsive and sustaining policies and practices to support a diverse and inclusive environment, promote reflection, shared responsibility, clear communication, and maintain high expectations for all” [emphasis added throughout] (ACLS, 2022, p.3).

Alternative teacher training options

System for Adult Basic Education Support (SABES). DESE has a strong resource in place to develop its own instructors by working with its existing ABE professional development organization, SABES, to adapt its foundational adult education trainings for adult education alumni. SABES was established in 1990 to improve adult education program quality through provision of resources, training, and technical assistance to a field of practitioners with diverse education backgrounds and teaching experience (Comings, 2023). SABES offers a wealth of courses in literacy, language, and numeracy development, teaching strategies, classroom management, adult learning theory, curriculum development, and professional standards. SABES employs experienced adult education instructors to conduct its trainings (SABES, 2024).
Grow Your Own (GYO). Existing GYO Educator Programs involve community organizations, colleges, and school districts in the recruitment and support of non-traditional students to persist in their journey to becoming certified teachers. “GYO provides a framework for how to improve teacher preparation for the benefit of the communities they serve. Through its focus on who is recruited into teaching and how to remove barriers and promote teacher candidate persistence and success, GYO facilitates partnerships grounded in the needs and realities of local schools” (New America, n.d, para. 4). Common elements of GYO efforts include financial support, academic advising, flexible scheduling, and paid work experience in instructional support roles. While current GYO programs focus on supporting students to earn a bachelor’s and address K-12 system needs, the elements of the model are entirely transferable to the adult education context.

Gist (2021) argues that GYO programs can provide more equitable access to the teaching profession by valuing educator diversity, elevating resiliency as a critical teacher trait, and employing multiple approaches to assessing teacher learning. Gist argues, “By countering commonly accepted narratives about who teachers are and what is most important for supporting their growth, GYO programs can create opportunities for a broader range of BIPOC to enter the profession” (p. 52).

Teaching Assistance as Apprenticeship. Apprenticeship is a practice commonly associated with employment in skilled trades such as carpentry, plumbing, and electrical service. However, teaching apprenticeship can occur in the context of the teaching assistant role when it involves “dialoguing [with the lead teacher] about lesson development, execution, and assessment, and then working side by side to deliver instruction” (Fortner, et al., 2015, p. 7). Fortner, et al (2015) assessed the characteristics and educational outcomes of K-12 classroom
teachers who were teaching assistants first in North Carolina public schools. They found that those teachers with teaching assistance experience are older and more racially diverse, and that those teachers tended to enter the teacher workforce through alternative routes. They also found that these teachers tend to be more effective in teaching in elementary grade levels, and that they persist in their roles at a higher rate than those teachers who were not teaching assistants first.

**Capstone Focus**

This capstone will analyze the current Massachusetts DESE policy of requiring adult education teachers to have a bachelor’s degree with respect to the theories of democratic education, equality of intelligence and empowerment. This analysis will include a comparison of teacher credential requirements across several states, information gleaned through an interview with the Massachusetts Director of Adult Education, as well as a review of promising alternative practices in educator development.

**Methodology**

In order to analyze the current MA state requirement of a bachelor’s degree for teachers in adult education, it was important to investigate the history of the adult education system, learn more about the roots of and rationale for the current MA DESE policy, compare MA adult education policy with policies other states, and examine the role and outcomes of student leadership in adult education. This analysis was supported with a mixed-methods approach consisting of a literature review, review of current and past pertinent education and governmental policies, a survey of adult education program leaders regarding adult education staffing challenges, and an interview with the Director of Adult Education at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Email correspondence with ACLS
program specialists and numerous US state directors of adult education informed understanding of the rationale for both ACLS and other states policies.

**Materials and Procedure**

To review relevant government policies, I researched the requirements for adult education instructors set forth in the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which is the federal legislation that informs the implementation of adult education in the states. I also reviewed three MA DESE adult education policy manuals for three discrete funding cycles over the past ten years. Finally, I made direct email inquiries to adult education directors of all 50 states of the U.S., as well as several U.S. territories, asking “does your state require that teachers hold a bachelor’s degree to teach in adult education?” I also requested supporting documentation for the state policies regarding teacher credential requirements. I followed up non-responders with a repeat request. I assembled responses and policy information into a comparison table in Microsoft Excel. This table can be found in Appendix C.

I collected adult education staffing challenges information through an online survey using Google Forms and utilized Googles compilation tool for analysis. The survey was sent to 88 adult education program directors and coordinators. There were four prompts which focused on the staffing conditions in adult education since the Covid pandemic, and the challenges of attracting and onboarding adult education instructors. The survey can be found in Appendix A.

I conducted an interview of the Director of Adult Education using a ten-question interview protocol that I developed to help discern the rationale for MA DESE’s policy requiring a bachelor’s degree for adult education instructor. Questions one, two, and five focused on MA DESE state policies and changes in policy over time. Questions three and four focused on required skills for effective teaching. Question six focused on skills-based vs education-based
hiring. Questions seven and nine focus on professional development and innovative training options for new adult education instructors. The last question asks for final thoughts regarding DESE’s adult education teacher qualification policy and adult learners becoming instructors. I transcribed responses to the interview questions to extract information and themes relevant to teacher credentialing and qualifications. The protocol can be found in Appendix B.

Results

Adult Education Policy Information

Federal: The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, also known as Title II of WIOA, legislates that “Each eligible agency receiving funds under this title shall consider whether the eligible provider’s activities are delivered by well-trained instructors, counselors, and administrators who meet any minimum qualifications established by the State, where applicable, and who have access to high quality professional development, including through electronic means” (AEFLA, Title II, Subtitle C, Section 231.e.9).

U.S. States/Territories: An email inquiry to directors of adult education in 50 states and two US territories regarding the requirement of a bachelor’s degree to teach in adult education resulted in 37 responses, including Massachusetts. Responses revealed a variety of regulation approaches, including no regulation at all, no regulation but credential recommendations, an associate’s degree, a bachelor’s degree, teacher licensure which most often requires a bachelor’s degree, and a master’s degree. While 16 respondents indicated that there was no state requirement of a bachelor’s degree, 2 of these respondents indicated that an associate’s degree would be required, and 7 others reported that school district or institutional requirements in their states would amount to educators needing a bachelor’s degree. Therefore, only 8 states/territories
that responded do not stipulate a college level degree as a minimum qualification to teach in adult education, while 29 do.

Survey: Staffing in Adult Education

While teacher turnover is well documented in K-12 research, there is much less published information regarding the present state of staffing in adult education. To obtain current information, I surveyed 88 adult education program leaders regarding their recent experiences with hiring and retaining teachers. 40 program leaders responded.

Critical themes that emerge from the staffing survey include turnover of staff and challenges related to recruiting, onboarding, and retaining new qualified staff. Over a third of the respondents report loss of staff due to retirement and 40% report staff loss due to seasoned teachers leaving for higher paying and/or benefitted positions in other organizations. Almost 90% of respondents report difficulty in finding new qualified staff and 40% indicate that newly hired teachers struggle with job requirements and leave within one year of hire.

While 25% of respondents reported no difficulty with onboarding new hires, and 82.5% indicate that their new hires generally have teaching experience, 55% of respondents indicate that new hires do not often have experience in adult education, which might be related to the 42.5% who report that new hires are overwhelmed by job expectations. Half of the respondents say that onboarding new teachers is challenging because it takes a long time, and when teachers are hired later in the school year, they often have to start teaching before they have finished the onboarding process.

When asked why finding qualified teachers is challenging, school leaders cite lack of apparent qualified candidates (55%), lack of salary that is competitive with K-12 opportunities (62.5%), lack of sufficient working hours (47.5%), and lack of benefits (45%). Open-ended
responses show concerns about impending retirement of key experienced staff, and also point to the need for bilingual staff, a lack of understanding of student needs on the part of new hires, and the challenge of finding staff, new or experienced, who have or want to develop the significant digital literacy and proficiency skills needed in today’s teaching environment.

*Interview: Massachusetts Director of Adult Education*

My interview with the Director of Adult Education for Massachusetts revealed that DESE has been actively thinking about how to center adult student voice and experience at the state level, and about how teacher credentials affect student learning. What follows is other information she shared that is relevant to the scope of this paper.

*Regarding the Bachelor’s Degree requirement:* ACLS did not require a Bachelor’s Degree for adult education teachers until 2018. There were long conversations and disagreements about establishing that policy. In the end, it was decided that if adult education centers are in the business of creating and implementing college and career readiness programs, ACLS had to ensure that students would benefit from instructors who had college experience themselves.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, DESE waived established credential requirements and issued many emergency licenses to people with and without degrees to fill open teaching positions. DESE is in the process of comparing student learning data from both traditionally licensed teachers and emergency teachers to discern whether specific credentials make a difference to student outcomes.

Governor Healey’s Executive Order that state jobs institute skill-based hiring at all levels will result in a review of the education requirements for all jobs in adult education, and further discussion about which requirements are necessary and which are not.
Whether a bachelor’s degree is required or not for teaching, it is important to understand what a bachelor’s is, and how it is a ticket that opens doors to certain experiences.

**Regarding skills conferred by a Bachelor’s Degree:** The college experience confers specific college system navigation skills, as well as learning how to apply oneself to complex tasks, how to learn in different ways, and how to manage one’s time.

**Regarding how to discern whether someone new to adult education has the potential to be an effective teacher:** We should look at the whole person and their journey. Are they willing to work hard, to be open to learning? Students should be a part of the teacher hiring process. A good practice is that prospective teachers demonstrate a sample lesson with students before they are hired. Listen to students’ feedback after the demonstration.

**Regarding lack of a teacher certification requirement for adult education instructors:** There is no evidence to suggest that a certification or license results in being an effective teacher.

**Regarding empowerment-based routes to teaching:** ACLS has partnered with the organization, English for New Bostonians, to offer a free 130-hour training course to equip participants with the necessary skills to effectively teach adult ESOL in Massachusetts. This initiative is meant to create a career path to adult education for immigrants and address the shortage of ESOL teachers. ACLS suggests that trainees in this program who do not have a bachelor’s degree can work as teaching assistants rather than in full teaching positions. ACLS considers teaching assistance as an important staffing option for adult education centers. Teaching assistants can teach their own classes if they are mentored by an experienced instructor with a bachelor’s credential.
Regarding student leadership: Student voice is important. It’s important to work together with students to get adult education right.

Discussion

A bachelor’s degree seems like a relatively innocuous requirement for teachers in adult education. Nevertheless, when this requirement is reviewed with respect to valuable education theories and research in adult student leadership, it becomes clear that the requirement presents a barrier to equitable access to teaching opportunity in adult education.

The email survey of state directors conducted for this capstone revealed that the majority of states require a minimum of a bachelor’s credential to teach in adult education programs, even with 15 states not responding to the survey. Massachusetts policy is in line with the majority of the country.

However, an inquiry to the director of adult education in Massachusetts about why the bachelor’s is a requirement for teaching in the field reveals justification for the requirement that seems logical at first but does not hold up on deeper reflection. The rational of DESE for bachelor’s is that if adult education programs are offering college and career readiness preparation, then adult education instructors should have college experience themselves. While it is important that some adult education instructors be knowledgeable about how to navigate college processes and expectations, it is not necessary for all instructors to have this knowledge. Adult education students attend school for a variety of reasons, many of which have nothing to do with college. They might need to learn to read and write more effectively in order to communicate more effectively in their jobs, or to participate in community action activities. They might need to learn English in order to engage with their doctors, their children’s teachers, or with the grocery store clerk. They might need to developed higher computer or math
proficiencies for job training or promotions. Many of these goals can be addressed by teachers without college experience.

ACLS’s mission is to operate an education system “that puts no-cost quality instruction, advising, job training, and career pathways within reach of all adult students in Massachusetts” (DESE, 2023, para. 2). We can analyze the “quality instruction” aspect of the mission with respect to the complementary theories of democratic education, equality of intelligences, and empowerment, and find that a bachelor’s degree requirement is unrelated to quality instruction. The degree itself is not necessarily contradictory to quality instruction, but the requirement is.

While democratic education theory is rooted in student-directed learning, trust for the learner and learning process, and collaboration, the bachelor’s degree requirement is rooted in institution-driven education, trust in hierarchical power structures, and individual achievement. If adult education leaders placed trust in the participants of its system, they would advance critical learning, meaningful employment opportunity, and enhance the ability of all involved to think and work in a more inclusive manner. When all members of a community are welcome to participate meaningfully and actively in an organization, all benefit from the productive struggle that comes from including diverse perspectives in collective problem-solving. This productive struggle produces a variety of skills that are transferable to other important community action, and which are the foundation for an effective democracy.

Ranciere’s philosophy of equality of intelligence attributes equal ability to think, learn, and collaborate for problem-solving to all people, while requirement of the bachelor’s to teach implies an unequal ability. Finally, empowerment theory promotes processes that develop and strengthen, and manifest in skills, actions, and leadership. In adult education, empowerment theory would suggest that if ACLS really wants to put “job training, and career pathways within
reach of all adult students”, they might clear the path of the restrictive bachelor’s requirement, and make a teaching career in adult education accessible to adult learners. With supportive, empowering processes, such as are embedded in student leadership development programs, adult education students can develop essential skills that are directly transferable to teaching adult learners.

It can be argued that the bachelor’s degree requirement is at odds with ACLS’s own core principles of working together and driven by equity:

“Working together: We cannot achieve our vision alone. Together with our partners, providers, and students, we comprise a public adult education system that works to address needs, opens doors, and strengthens cross-cultural relationships – making sure no adult who wants to learn gets left behind [emphasis added throughout].

Driven by equity: Equity is at the heart of everything we do. We understand that many adults face barriers to opportunity and that, as a student-centered public adult education system, we are in a unique position to do our share to bring about positive change”

[emphasis added throughout] (ACLS, 2023, p.1).

However, the MA state director shared that various leaders at DESE have differing views on the bachelor’s requirement. She acknowledges that creating policy that works for everyone is challenging, but that it doesn’t keep ACLS from working to address equity in adult education in other ways. She points to the three-year ACLS-sponsored Anti-racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ADEI) training that has been available to staff and students alike, where student voice and student experience is central to the curriculum. ACLS recognizes the strength that adult learner leaders bring to adult education programs. This spring, ACLS launched a state-wide student ambassador program where adult education students can become spokespeople and
advocates for adult education. As mentioned in this paper, ACLS has also launched an innovated ESOL teacher training program where adult education students are being trained to become ESOL teachers or teacher assistants. And finally, ACLS is now encouraging adult education programs to create teacher assistant positions, as those positions do not require a bachelor’s degree. These last three initiatives in particular, provide valuable opportunity for students and alumni to take on teaching roles in Massachusetts.

The staffing survey illuminates many of the challenges adult education programs are facing with regard to hiring and retaining teachers. Worthy of note is that 100% of teaching staff in adult education currently have a bachelor’s degree. And yet, program leaders report new teachers struggling with job requirements, technology skills, and typical issues in adult education classrooms. This data indicates that we need to consider more carefully how teachers can be better supported and trained on the job, as the bachelor’s degree programs might not be providing the skills needed.

By offering teacher development alternatives to the bachelor’s degree, Massachusetts DESE has a unique opportunity to address the staffing crisis in adult education. ACLS can provide further growth and employment opportunity for adult learners to teach by supporting additional innovative Grow-Your-Own programming, combining paid apprenticeship opportunity with supportive teacher training tailored specifically for alumni of adult education programs, utilizing its own professional development system, SABES. With an enhanced perspective on who is qualified to teach, they can widen the employment pool by implementing elements of proven student leadership and education apprenticeship models to support adult learners to become effective teachers. In doing so, ACLS can advance a model for employment
equity and inclusivity in adult education that will lead to the development of a refreshed, diverse workforce grounded in the lived experiences of adult learners.

**Limitations of the Project**

Limitations of this project are many. I feel as if I have only scratched the surface of all the issues embedded in the proposal that adults should not need a bachelor’s degree to teach in adult education. The project lacks depth of information regarding the educational and practical benefits of a bachelor’s degree beyond its blanket requirement for many “skilled” jobs. It could also have benefited from further exploration of the skills conferred by studying in a bachelor’s degree program and how these skills impact teaching ability. It would also have been richer with the adult education leader and student perspectives on what qualities make for an effective instructor.

Exploration of credentialing across states could have benefitted from more specific questions with regard to specific environments that require a bachelor’s degree (for example, community colleges, K-12 schools, community programs), as well as at what level the requirement is determined, (at the state office level, municipal level, or the institutional level). Some states offered this information without being asked, but others gave no qualifying information. Had I anticipated the variety of teacher qualification guidelines, I would have crafted a more detailed questionnaire. Greater depth of information would better inform rationale for suggested revisions to credentialing requirement.

This project could also have benefitted from exploration of data related to adult learner persistence in higher education and analysis of whether the typical adult learners can afford to obtain a bachelor’s degree. Even with free community college and financial aid, adults need to support themselves and their families, and can have difficulty balancing job obligations and
education goals. As a result, it can take much longer than the traditional four years to obtain a bachelor’s, which can discourage persistence.

**Implications for Future Studies**

During Covid, DESE relaxed its education requirements for teachers. It is in the process of gathering student outcomes data with a goal of comparing the data of students who learned from teachers with and without credentials. This data will surely impact DESE’s openness to supporting alternative pathways to teacher development.

DESE has launched an ESOL teacher training program in collaboration with English for New Bostonians. Trainees in this program are English Language learners who have completed high school and are proficient in English at NRS level 6+. It will be important to follow this program and its impact on staffing and student outcomes in adult learning programs.

It would be interesting to research the teacher credentialing practices of countries with similar education systems to the US. For example, in the United Kingdom, graduates of their A-Levels, which are comparable to the US junior and senior years of high school, are considered adequately prepared to teach students in A-Level courses. Study about the practice and outcome of A-Level graduates then teaching A-Level students would have direct applicability to adult education graduates teaching adult learners.

People cannot teach what they do not know. Adult learners’ ability to teach effectively does reside in part on their particular proficiency in what it is that needs to be taught. For example, English language learners who are proficient in English at NRS level 5 are likely better suited to teach basic English courses, rather than intermediate or advanced. Similarly, a high school equivalency graduate might be more comfortable teaching basic math concepts than Algebra. It is worth exploring how to structure tiers of teaching opportunity.
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Appendix A

Staffing in Adult Education

Dear Colleagues, I am writing a paper exploring the challenges and possible solutions to finding and retaining qualified staff. Would you please help me to accurately describe your recent staffing challenges by responding to this survey? Thank you for your consideration!
Sincerely, Alisa Povenmire, Notre Dame Education Center-Lawrence

* Indicates required question

1. Email *

2. Kindly check the statements below that reflect the staffing conditions at your adult learning center since the Covid Pandemic. Please check all that apply.

Check all that apply.

- [ ] One or more teachers have retired
- [ ] One or more seasoned teachers have left the center to work elsewhere for higher salary
- [ ] Newly hired teachers remain in their position for one year or less
- [ ] Newly hired teachers struggle with job requirements
- [ ] Seasoned teachers are dissatisfied in some way with their work
- [ ] Finding new qualified teachers is challenging
- [ ] Some teaching positions have remained unfilled after the start of the school year
- [ ] We have onboarded new teachers with no previous teaching experience
- [ ] We have experienced significant turnover in teaching staff
- [ ] We have experienced significant turnover in non-teaching staff (i.e., advisors, coordinators, data entry personnel)
- [ ] Newly hired teachers often leave the organization within one year
- [ ] Newly hired teachers leave the organization within one-two years
- [ ] Other: ___________________________
3. Please check all that apply. *
We have had difficulty onboarding new teachers effectively because

Check all that apply.

☐ it takes so much time
☐ we do not have enough resources
☐ new hires are overwhelmed by job expectations
☐ newly hired teachers do not often have teaching experience
☐ newly hired teachers do not often have experience in adult education
☐ newly hired teachers are unprepared for typical issues in adult education classrooms (tardiness, absence, mental health needs, trauma, etc)
☐ We do not have difficulty onboarding new teachers.
☐ Other: __________________________

4. Please check all that apply. *
Finding qualified teachers is challenging because

Check all that apply.

☐ our salary is not competitive with other adult learning centers
☐ our salary is not competitive with K-12 opportunities
☐ we cannot offer enough hours
☐ we cannot offer benefits
☐ there do not seem to be many qualified candidates
☐ education level required for hiring is unnecessarily high or restrictive
☐ language proficiency level required for hiring is unnecessarily high or restrictive
☐ other hiring requirements are too restrictive
☐ Other: __________________________

5. Please describe any other challenges with staffing that you have experienced. *
Appendix B

Interview PROTOCOL: Interview with MA DESE Director of Adult Education

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I am conducting this interview for my capstone paper at Merrimack College. The purpose of this capstone will be to conduct a policy review on adult learners becoming adult education teachers. Please know that our conversation will be confidential, and no identifying information will be used in the final capstone paper. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. When the state-sponsored adult education system was first conceived, who received funding? What were the accepted qualifications for instructors and other AE staff at that time?

2. Current MA DESE Adult Education policy guidelines require that adult education instructors have a minimum of a bachelor’s degree (no particular concentration is required). Advisors are not required to have a degree. What is the rationale for the policy for teachers? And for the difference in requirement for advisors?

3. What essential skills does DESE feel a bachelor’s degree confers to potential teachers?

4. Many teachers come to adult education without prior experience in adult education. How do you know if someone has the potential to be an effective teacher?

5. DESE/ACLS has worked to professionalize the ABE/ESOL field for about 30 years through alignment with the K-12 system, development of curriculum and professional standards, and
provision of a professional development system dedicated to adult education. Yet it has stopped short of requiring that instructors, advisors, or administrators to pass a particular certification exam or obtain a license. Why?

6. Governor Healey issued an executive order, the “Lead by Example” Employer Talent Initiative, which promotes skills-based, rather than education-based, hiring practices for many of the state's job postings. How is ACLS applying (or thinking about applying) this order to current adult education policies?

7. DESE/ACLS sponsors a professional development system dedicated to adult education, SABES. SABES offers workshops and courses that teach people with no teaching experience about the adult education system, principles of adult learning, and what and how to teach in ABE and ESOL classes. Might these same courses be effective for anyone interested in teaching, regardless of degree status? Why or why not?

8. ACLS has been very supportive of student leadership initiatives, student-centered instruction, and teacher/student collaboration in developing program policies, informing program administration, making curriculum decisions, and facilitating learning in and outside of the classroom. Why is ACLS so supportive of these types of practices? How might these practices foster teaching skills?
9. Might ACLS consider empowerment-based routes to teaching in adult education, such as establishment of teaching assistant positions, and/or apprenticeship or contextualized MassSTEP type programs?

10. Do you have any other thoughts about adult learners becoming adult education teachers? Or is there anything else you think would be helpful for me to know about the DESE policy?

CLOSING: Thank you for your time today, I really appreciate it. I am going to be going over my notes over the next few weeks. Would it be okay if I reach back out to you just in case I need any clarification? [YES/NO]

Thank you again. Have a wonderful evening.
Appendix C

Does your state or territory require that teachers hold a bachelor’s degree to teach in adult education?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>State level Bachelor’s Requirement? Yes/No</th>
<th>District or Institutional Requirement? Yes/No</th>
<th>License/certification requirement? Yes/No</th>
<th>Adult Education Course requirement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>