The Experiences of Adult Learners in Reintegrating Into the Education System: A Case Study of Mashishi Adult Learning Centre in Driekop Circuit

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa, the reintegration of adult learners is one of the most important aspects of the lifelong learning agenda. This is particularly true for rural CLCs that cater for communities that have been marginalised historically. Although the nation has made a lot of promises regarding access to education, adult learners still face complicated barriers that have a profound effect on their ability to go back to school. This qualitative case study brings to light adult learners' challenges at Mashishi Adult Learning Centre, Driekop Circuit, and tries to understand how personal experience, economic factors, institutional conditions, and psychological aspects affect their reintegration journey. The study which is grounded in Knowles' Adult Learning Theory and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, utilized semi structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis to provide detailed and comprehensive stories. Through purposive sampling, eight learners and three educators were interviewed, whose perspectives not only reveal the adult learning space challenges but also the opportunities. It came to light that reintegration is a result of various factors that intersect such as money problems, disruption of previous schooling, taking care of the family, lack of academic confidence, and support in the institution which is not always there. At the same time, students use their determination, inner drive, study group, and teachers who encourage to continue learning. According to the study, reintegration is a multifaceted, emotional, and potentially transformative journey. The recommendations call for the support systems to be strong, pedagogies to be flexible, and resources provisioning to be improved across the CLCs.

Keywords: Adult learning; reintegration; Community Learning Centres; transformative learning; lifelong learning

INTRODUCTION

Adult learning is one of the core global issues addressed in the major educational commitments made. The commitments speak of education that is inclusive, equitable, and lifelong especially in environments where structural inequality and broken educational trajectories are the main characteristics. In South Africa, the drive to widen the adult education access is a move backed up by history which shows us that apartheid has been the root of the systematically denial of educational opportunities to Black communities which eventually resulted in limited literacy becoming the norm for generations, socio economic marginalisation, and stunted human development (Aitchison, 2015; Walters & von Kotze, 2017). The setting up of Community Learning Centres (CLCs) under the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) is one of the national redress measures which has kept the wheel spinning for the provision of flexible, community-based learning opportunities to adults that are looking for foundational, vocational, or matric level qualifications (DHET, 2019). However, despite reforms in education policies, adult learners have not been free of barriers and hurdles as they try to get back into formal education systems.

Education reintegration for adults is not merely a moment when they go back to school but an ongoing weave shaped by their socio-economic realities, psychological histories, cultural identities, and interpersonal experiences. The current research shows that adults who decide to continue with their education do so under the

presence of issues such as poverty, early school leaving, unemployment, caregiving responsibility, and trauma of the past schooling experiences (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Prinsloo, 2020). On the other hand, these decisions are driven by the inner self through the goal of personal growth, better employability, higher self-esteem, and the wish to be living examples of lifelong learning to the younger generations (Brookfield, 2018). These struggles between the existence and the personal will to bring about change show the complexity of reintegration.

Mashishi Adult Learning Centre at Driekop Circuit is a convincing example by which we can study the interaction of these dynamics. Being in a rural area that faces an economic downfall, the centre is a perfect reflection of the systemic problems that CLCs face nationally. These include shortages of resources, educators' instability, problems caused by bad or lack of transport, and limited learner support systems. However, it also stands for places where adults can gain back their power, change the common educational story of their lives, and come up with the new ones they will be able to share. It is vital to know the real life stories of learners in such situations not only for the adult education research but also for the creation of educational policies responsive to the different contexts and practices.

While there is an increasing number of research works on adult education in South Africa, a significant gap in qualitative, case-based studies focused on the emotional, social, and pedagogical aspects of CLCs' life in rural areas still exists. The majority of research works that constitute the body of literature deal mostly with systemic problems or policy frameworks and therefore, they hardly ever touch upon the subjective and relational dimensions of reintegration. This paper is a step towards closing that gap. It does so by delving into how the learners at Mashishi Adult Learning Centre might deal with reintegration, what challenges and facilitators might impact their education, and what they might think of their learning journeys.

The study is based on three research questions: (1) How do adult learners at Mashishi Adult Learning Centre experience the process of reintegration into the education system? (2) What challenges and enabling factors influence their participation, engagement, and persistence in the learning environment?

This research provided an opportunity to focus on the experiences of the learners and look at their social and cultural background to comprehend how reintegration occurs as a process that is deeply embedded and has many facets. The study made a valuable contribution to the discussion around educational justice, adult learner support, and TLC transformation for rural community development that is diverse in the needs.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, the present research is based on Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy) and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory combined with the interpretation of adult education theories of the present time. These two theoretical concepts serve in combination as an integrated framework for recognising the return of adult learners as a pedagogical process and a life altering experience whereby their agency, context and identity reconstruction co determine the outcome.

Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy)

According to Knowles' Adult Learning Theory adult learners are conceptualised as self-directed, and they are regarded as people who have a rich experience and are motivated internally. Moreover, these learners are largely influenced by their social roles, responsibilities, and the immediate needs of life (Knowles et al., 2015). On the other hand, current adult education research has also recognized the importance of andragogy in such areas as community education and lifelong learning, where adult learners consider relevance, flexibility, and practicability of the learning process as their focus rather than the abstract or content driven instruction (Merriam & Bierema, 2019; Boeren, 2021).

Recent research maintain that the past experiences of adult learners serve not only as mental resources but also as emotional filters through which the learning process is viewed. For learners whose education has been disrupted in the past, these experiences might be related to things such as prior academic failure, being marginalized or excluded, all of which can influence learners' confidence, educators' expectation, and their determination to continue learning programmes (Illeris, 2018; Tett et al., 2022). In rural Community Learning

Centres (CLCs) where the socio-economic situation is still a matter of concern, acknowledging learners lived realities becomes the key to their successful reintegration.

Moreover, the present adult learning research also addresses the significance of learner centred and problem based educational strategies that consider adults' multiple burdens and different learning speeds (UNESCO, 2022). The most effective methods for continuing the involvement of adult learners include flexible scheduling, establishing a respectful educator learner relationship, and the use of contextualised learning activities which, among other things, have been consistently pointed out by practitioners and researchers. In this vein, it is the support of the institutions that makes feasible reintegration when they help adult learners to be autonomous but at the same time recognize the social structures which limit their participation.

Transformative Learning Theory: Recent Developments

One of the major contributions of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory to explaining how narrative adults come up with new interpretations of their life experiences and reorganise their worldview through critical reflection (Mezirow, 2000). Modern scholars have gone beyond this by integrating the psychological, relational, and socio-cultural aspects of the change process, especially those that occur in the situations of inequality and educational upheaval, to this theory (Taylor & Cranton, 2019; Dirkx, 2021).

One of the findings is that adults returning to education frequently experience identity renegotiation processes when they encounter the internalised assumptions about their academic ability and social worth. Transformative learning takes place when the learners critically examine these assumptions, interact with the others and finally, establish new self-concepts that, among other things, have elements of agency, confidence, and future orientation (Brookfield, 2018; Tett et al., 2022).

Above all, the latest research emphasizes that transformation is not only a cognition related process which takes place inside one's mind, but is a inextricable part of social life. Thus, the role of educators who provide support, peer relationships and friendly learning environment should not be underestimated as they facilitate the reflective process and help learners to reach a new understanding. As far as rural and community-based learning contexts are concerned, the relational aspects, on the one hand, mostly provide opportunities for the material support and, on the other hand, allow transformation to be a collective and contextualised process rather than an individual accomplishment.

Integrated Theoretical Perspective

By integrating the two theories of andragogy and transformative learning one is provided with a holistic conceptual framework useful for the analysis of the return of adult learners to the educational milieu. On the one hand, andragogy describes adults' learning orientation, thus stressing autonomy, relevance, and experience, whereas on the other hand, transformative learning accounts for the profound changes in the learner's identity, perception of self and empowerment. The combination of these theories suggests that the return to education is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by factors such as the motivation of learners, the responsiveness of institutions and the opportunities for reflection and dialogue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adult Education in South Africa

Education for adults in South Africa is still at the core of the effort to reverse the once again, post-apartheid policy reforms have led to the promotion of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) that is expected to be offered at the Community Learning Centres (CLCs) which are under the jurisdiction of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2019; UNESCO, 2022). However, the present research about education for adults in the remote areas of South Africa point out a discrepancy between policy and practice. Rural adult education provision is experiencing a deterioration of conditions such as poor infrastructure, lack of materials, and support for both educators and students, buckets of complaints have been pouring in from the recent literature on rural adult education (Walters & von Kotze, 2019; Prinsloo, 2020; McKay & Romm 2023). These restrictions

contribute to the destruction of the continuity of the learners' participation and point out the gap that exists between the policy and the educational realities experienced by the people.

Reintegration into the Education System

The concept of reintegration in formal education, in most cases, is seen now as the one concept which depicts a complicated, continuous process rather than a single action of enrolment (Boeren, 2021). Adults who go back to school come with diverse reasons of which the major ones being the desire for employability, personal development, and social participation. At the same time, they must deal with their past academic failure, low self-efficacy, and even find the time for their family or work responsibilities (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). The new research shows that reintegration is associated with identity work, as adults reflect on their previous self-concept and now see themselves as learners and find the proper position in the educational and social structures they belong to (Tett et al., 2022). This process depends on the inner drive as well as on the help given from the outside, thus, it is essential to see reintegration as a socially engaging and emotional experience.

Barriers to Adult Learning

Current writings on the topic keep on identifying three groups of barriers to adult learning, these are situational, institutional, and dispositional, and they also point out that these groups being closely linked to each other (Boeren, 2021). Situational barriers like poverty, lack of job opportunities, the necessity to take care of a child or an aged person, and problems with transportation are still very much pronounced especially in the rural areas (McKay & Romm, 2023).

Institutional barriers are those that come from the limited resources, crammed places or learning, unchangeable schedule, and lack of professional development for adult educators (Walters & von Kotze, 2019). Dispositional barriers, among which are fear of failure, low confidence, and internalized negative learner identities, usually go back to education exclusion in the past and are thus reinforced by the present socio-economic hardship (Illeris, 2018). The latest research argues that the problems raised in these areas cannot be solved separately, as they support each other.

Enablers of Adult Learning and Reintegration

Recent findings point to the existence of numerous important factors that facilitate the successful reintegration of adult learners. Among such factors are learner centred pedagogies, flexible and relevant at the local level curricula, supportive relationships between teacher and student, and the solid network of friends (Brookfield, 2018; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Peer support has the power to develop emotional strength, common problem solving, and the sense of being part of the community within the community-based learning environments (Tett et al., 2022).

Intrinsic motivation continues to be one of the main sources of learners' persistence, especially in the case when learners' goals are in harmony with personal, familial, or community aspirations (Boeren, 2021). Re-entry to education becomes not only sustainable but also transformative when institutional support structures are in line with learners' internal motivations.

Gap in the Literature

The foremost understanding of adult education policy and participation which has been realized through recent scholarship is not yet sufficient as there is still lack of a good number of qualitative research that is context specific and focuses on the experiences of adult learners in rural South African CLCs in terms of their reintegration. The emotional, relational, and identity dimensions of returning to education are scarcely represented in the literature. This research covers this gap by providing detailed narrative based insights into adult learners' reintegration experiences within a rural community learning context.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

The current research work implemented a qualitative research design with a case study approach to delve into the lived experiences of adult learners who went back to the education system at Mashishi Adult Learning Centre. Qualitative research is a method, which is highly suitable for social sciences, especially when the purpose is to understand complex social phenomena, as it involves an extensive exploration of participants' viewpoints, their interpretations, and the social settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The case study framework helped the investigator to look at the return as a complicated process that happens in a certain place and thus obtain the depth, and complete, but indirect, account of the interactions between learner agency, institutional structures, and socio-economic conditions (Yin, 2018). The research, by concentrating on one learning centre, would be able to reveal the depth and the intricacy of the adult learners' experiences and at the same time, it can produce the results, which can be generalized theoretically, to other similar rural Community Learning Centres in South Africa.

Research Setting

The research took place at Mashishi Adult Learning Centre, which is in the Driekop Circuit, a rural area that is characterized by the lack of infrastructure, high unemployment rates, and limited access to educational resources. The centre offers Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) and matriculation support programs to adult learners who had previously left the formal education system or had not completed their schooling. The socio economic as well as the geographic features of the Driekop Circuit make the centre the perfect place for a study on challenges and enablers of adult learners' reintegration, especially at contexts where structural inequalities intersect with personal and familial responsibilities (Ndlovu, 2019; Walters & von Kotze, 2017).

Population and Sampling

The study's population was adult learners at Mashishi Adult Learning Centre and educators facilitating adult learning programs. Purposive sampling was used to choose participants who could provide rich, relevant, and diverse insights into the reintegration process (Patton, 2015). Eight adult learners representing different age, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds were chosen together with three educators who had experience in adult pedagogy. The chosen strategy ensured that the participants had firsthand experience of the phenomenon under study, therefore the credibility and the depth of the findings have been improved (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The sample size, although limited, is in line with qualitative research standards, which emphasize data depth and richness rather than statistical generalizability.

Data Collection

Data collection was through semi structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. This enabled methodological triangulation and enhanced the study's trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi structured interviews with adult learners and educators allowed for the collection of experiences, motives, and views related to reintegration. Also, there was room for the interviewees to express themselves in freedom and in their own language (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Classroom observations helped in describing the learning environment, the teachers' methods, and the interactions as the learners' involvement was taking place. At the same time, document analysis of learner records and institutional materials gave the setting and the support. Altogether, these techniques put the investigator in a position to come up with a detailed, multi layered view of the return of learners to Mashishi Adult Learning Centre

Data Analysis

The researchers used thematic analysis to analyse the data, which is a highly relevant method for spotting, understanding, and describing patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The analysis consisted of repeated stages: getting acquainted with the data, coding the significant parts, coming up with the first themes, checking and polishing the themes, and finally, integrating the findings with the theoretical framework and the

research questions. This strategy made it possible to link up the stories of the participants with the theoretical perspectives of andragogy and transformative learning, thus opening the way for a detailed investigation of how the structural, dispositional, and institutional aspects combine with the agency and identity reconstruction of the learners. NVivo software was used to facilitate and coordinate data, thus the analysis process was more rigorous and transparent.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the pertinent institutional review board before the commencement of data collection. Consent that was fully informed was obtained from all persons involved in the study. They were given a thorough explanation of the study's aims, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without incurring any disadvantages (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pseudonyms and the secure storage of data were the means through which confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. Special care was taken of the sensitivity of the adult learners' experiences, because it was understood that talking about academic failure in the past, socio economic difficulties, and struggles in reintegration could bring about emotional upset. The ethical concern was always present, and the researcher maintained a respectful and empathetic attitude during the collection and analysis of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

Trustworthiness

The reliability of the research work was made possible by employing several strategies. Using different methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis, the study was able to confirm the credibility and the dependability of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). "Member checking" was done by sharing the initial results with the participants to get their view on the correctness of the interpretations. The audit trail documenting the stages of the research, data gathering, and decisions made during the analysis further facilitated openness and confirmation. The researcher's reflexive journal helped to deal with possible prejudices and to keep the ethical and analytical parts of the research going (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results from this research study shed light on the experiences of adult learners practically the challenges of reintegration into education as well as the implications of these findings on community learning centres (CLCs) nationally. Although the sample was taken from a single rural area, the issues raised reflected the adult education sector in South Africa at a systemic level, and thus, the data have significant bearings on policy and practices at the national level.

Learner Motivation and Reintegration: From Policy Intent to Practice Reality

The return to schooling of the participants was largely driven by their personal goals such as self-improvement, better career prospects, and the desire to regain one's dignity through education. A participant shared,

"I came back because I wanted to prove to myself that I can still learn and finish what

I started."

This is consistent with the national adult education policy, which positions lifelong learning as a means of empowerment and socio-economic participation.

Nevertheless, participants' statements showed that access to education was more than just a matter of motivation as the policy promised. Several learners revealed that after they had registered, they scarcely received any support from the institution to maintain their engagement. A participant commented,

"You register, but after that, you are mostly on your own."

It shows that there is a gap between the policy and the actual work of CLCs, which means that national strategies should not only focus on enrolment but also on retention and learner support.

Institutional Barriers and Systemic Challenges

The study also demonstrated that the lack of sufficient resources, few learning materials, and the irregularity of teachers adversely affected the learners' experiences of their reintegration. These problems are in line with the issues raised at the national level about the resourcing of CLCs. A participant said,

"There are times when we share books, and at other times there is no teacher because they are taken to another place where they are needed."

Such situations reflect the limitations of the system rather than the incompetence of the centre management at the local level. CLCs under the Department of Higher Education and Training are supposed to provide quality adult education; however, the survival of these problems show that the execution of policies is still patchy especially in rural areas. Therefore, the results point to the necessity of better funding mechanisms, more robust accountability, and targeted assistance for the less resourced centres.

Educator Support and Professional Practice

Participants, on a consistent basis, pointed to educators as the main contributors to their learning experiences. Supportive educators encouraged the learners' confidence and willpower, and limited involvement weakened the learners' feeling of being part of a group. One learner remembered,

"When the teacher explains slowly and encourages us, you feel like you belong here."

This emphasizes the vital role of educator receptiveness in adult learning settings.

From a policy and practice standpoint, this discovery indicates the necessity of ongoing professional development for CLC educators especially regarding adult learning principles and implementation of inclusive pedagogies. National policy frameworks see educator quality as a factor which leads to learner success; however, the findings indicate that more resources are needed to make this principle a reality in all centres.

Psychosocial and Identity Dimensions of Reintegration

The participants considered reintegration not only as an academic process but also as an emotional and personal identity journey. Some participants revealed that they were afraid of failure and had residual self-doubt which came from their past educational exclusion. One participant recounted,

"At first, I was scared to answer in class because I thought I was too old and would get it wrong."

Their accounts reprioritize the psychosocial facet of adult learning, which are largely ignored in national adult education policy. While policy frameworks emphasize curriculum delivery and certification, the results suggest that an emotional connection and a positive learner identity are prerequisite for the re-entry process to be effective. This implies that CLCs need to have implementations that see mentoring, peer encouragement, and supportive learning environments as indispensable components of adult education provision.

Peer Support and Community Based Learning

The research also discovered that peer relationships were critical in learners' participation continuance. Participants acknowledged the support from fellow learners who had a similar life experience as them. One participant said,

"When others don't give up, it gives you the strength to continue."

It is a reflection of the socially interactive character of learning in local community-based settings.

On the ground, this piece of information means that CLCs need to deliberately organize collaborative learning activities and peer support groups. At a national level, policy can be a great support to the community learning

work of CLCs by giving a formal recognition to peer learning as a resource of pedagogy rather than merely an informal result.

Implications for National Policy and Practice

In sum, the results show that successful return to adult education requires the alignment of policy goals and daily routines in community learning centres. Although national policies endorse concepts of lifelong learning, inclusion, and empowerment, the learners' testimonies advocate continuous lack of resources, support from educators, and psychosocial provision.

This research by focusing on the real-life experiences of adult learners is a valuable input into national policy discussions and it makes a strong case for systemic investments in learner centred support, educator development, and context responsive practices. If these areas are strengthened, it will no longer be possible for CLCs to be merely access points but rather they will become transformative spaces where adult learners' sustained engagement and success are facilitated.

Limitations Of The Study

This research has different limitations that need to be considered while interpreting the findings. The major limitation was all about a limited sample size that was intentionally small due to the qualitative and exploratory nature of the research. The scope of the research narrowed the study of one single Community Learning Centre (CLC), and it involved a limited number of adult learners, so the results of the study couldn't be generalized to the CLCs or different contexts of adult education.

While a limited sample affected statistical generalizability, it allowed the study to produce detailed, rich, and insightful data in the real-life context of the adult learners' lived experiences of reintegration into education. Qualitative research puts emphasis on the depth of the data, processes of meaning making, and gaining of a deeper understanding of the context rather than representativeness, so the sample size was sufficient for achieving the study's aims.

Another issue was that participants' experiences were influenced by the specific socio economic and institutional conditions of the selected rural area. The results may not fully reflect the situations of adult learners in the urban setting or well-resourced learning centres. Besides, the dependence on self-reported data may have caused subjective bias since participants' responses were influenced by their personal views, memories, and emotional interpretation of the past experiences.

Despite these limitations, the research provides valuable empirical evidence through shedding light on the reintegration of adult learners to education in line with the less explored aspects of rural community-based education. The results can serve as a base for further studies with a bigger and more varied sample from different sites, which could increase transferability and broaden the understanding of adult learners' reintegration trajectories.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The research focused on the adult learners' experiences of reintegration into education at the Mashishi Adult Learning Centre, and it brought out the diverse and interrelated aspects of the learners' educational journeys. The outcome of the study depicts the return to education as being influenced by a complex coaction of structural, situational, and dispositional factors, which are the socio-economic challenges, institutional constraints, and the learners' earlier educational experiences. The adult learners make their way through these hurdles with determination, and as a result, they have recourse to means such as mutual support, intrinsic motivation, and involvement in learner centred pedagogical practices to keep them going. The study also points out that reintegration is not an academic exercise only but a transformational process to the core, in which learners

experience a change in their perception of self, confidence, and aspiration to life, next to the development of social networks and community participation.

Interpretation of these experiences heavily benefited from the theoretical frameworks presented by Knowles' Adult Learning Theory and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. Knowles' principles shed light on the necessity of elements like autonomy, relevance, and experience as a source of learning, and at the same time, Mezirow's viewpoint explains how critical reflection and facing new knowledge led to identity reconstruction and transformative change in agency. The two approaches together assert that successful return to education hinges not only on the motivation within the learners but also on the responsiveness of educational institutions to local conditions. The results suggest the best functioning of adult reintegration programmes at rural Community Learning Centres when these institutions take care of the academic, psychosocial, and socio-economic needs of learners in an integrative manner, thus not only facilitating the acquisition of knowledge but also enabling personal and social transformation.

Recommendations

Several recommendations arise from the study's findings for practice, policy, and further research. At the institutional level, Community Learning Centres ought to facilitate learner centred, adaptable pedagogical approaches that recognise adult learners' prior experiences and consider their socio-economic background. Educators should be exposed to continuous professional development in adult education principles, which include the implementation of strategies that lead to the engagement, resilience, and transformative learning outcomes of learners. The development of peer support mechanisms and mentorship programmes, thus, can help learners not only to broaden their social capital but also to enhance their academic and emotional persistence, by providing them both the necessary support from the social and education spheres.

From the point of view of the policy, the huge infrastructural rural adult learning challenge can be met if there is a well targeted investment plan which should include adequate learning materials, teaching resources, and transport facilities, thus removing the structural barriers that hinder participation. The policies should, in addition, incorporate a holistic support system that would investigate the socio-economic realities of learners and at the same time provide for their necessities such as financial assistance, counselling, and the engagement of the family in the learning process. The partnerships between the government departments, the community organisations, and the private stakeholders can become not only the sources of funds, but also the great avenues for programme sustainability and the widening of the adult education opportunities to a larger number of people.

In the next phase of study, it is necessary to examine longitudinal adult education learners' reintegration trajectories as this would result in more insights into an educational re-entry's long-term impact on economic, social, and personal outcomes. Also, research focusing on the rural adult education contexts concerning the intersection of gender, age, and socio-economic status may result in the design of equitable and responsive programmes. In general, the research highlights that adults going back to the education system is a profound change, and as such, it demands a holistic approach, which is sensitive to the context and centred on the learner; thus, it has implications for practice, policy, and theory.

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