

# ORGANIZATIONAL DETERMINANTS OF TEACHER RESPONSIBILITY AND ENGAGEMENT AMONG ADULT EDUCATORS IN NORWAY

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## Abstract

*The purpose of the current research was to use structural equation modeling to estimate the organizational determinants of teacher responsibility and engagement among adult educators in immigrant schools in Norway. The path coefficients were estimated using data from a sample of Norwegian adult educators. The empirical analysis showed clear relations among the components of the model. Relational trust and informal learning among adult educators were seen as important precursors of adult educator responsibility, but the contextual factors appeared to be more complex. The analysis showed that authorities in charge of immigrant schools should design policies that consider the trust and relationships among adult educators. Personal influences are important for adult educator responsibility. Although the study has several limitations (i.e., the cross-sectional nature of the study and the fact that self-reported data were used), it contributes new insights into the empirical foundation for the model.*

**Key words:** adult education, informal learning, job autonomy, leadership, teacher responsibility.

## Introduction

Every year, Norway's population increases through immigration, and immigrants in Norway currently comprise roughly 10% of the population (Thorud, Haagensen, & Jølstad, 2010). The key to integrating immigrants is that they develop the skills required to communicate in Norwegian (Chiswick, & Miller, 1995; Ministry of Labor and Inclusion, 2008; Shields, 2004; Villund, 2008). In addition to functional language skills, immigrants should gain knowledge of Norwegian history and Norwegian social issues. The goal of the Norwegian integration policy is for adult immigrants to realize their potential and all immigrants to learn sufficient Norwegian to be able to participate as employees and citizens within 5 years of arrival (Ministry of Labour and Inclusion, 2006). Newly arrived immigrants are normally required to complete a 2-year introductory cultural and language program, of which immigrant schools are an important aspect. The goal is to encourage immigrants to become financially independent as quickly as possible (Ministry of Education and Research, 2007a, 2007b). Language teaching and work training are the most important components, after which the aim is for immigrants move into the regular workforce (Fangen, Fossan, & Mohn, 2010; Støren, 2004; Van Tubergen, 2004).

The Norwegian parliamentary audit office has criticized the ministries and their departments, counties, and local authorities in charge of adult education (Office of the Auditor General of Norway, 2008) for failing to coordinate with the ministries involved and their departments, for not making an effort (local authorities and county councils), as well as not providing

supervision (county governors). Participation levels in the introductory program have been very low and well below the authorities' expectations. Many immigrants give up but start again. The dropout rate is high. A reason for this may be that adult educators often lack the special skills required to teach the subject. There are also locale and individual differences in the learning program, and adult educators lack a common perception of the subject content in Norwegian courses for immigrants.

This criticism has resulted in accountability being implemented in the government adult education programs. The rationale is that "teachers will assume responsibility for student outcomes in response to clear performance indicators and corresponding incentives and sanctions" (Lauermann & Karabenick, 2011, p. 136). Another question is whether formal responsibility as defined by an accountability system (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Carnoy & Loeb, 2002) actually induces personal responsibility and engagement and an internal sense of obligation among adult educators:

Whereas those who are held responsible are judged as such externally, those who feel responsible act as their own judges of responsibility and hold themselves accountable, which implies internal regulation. This also implies that teachers may voluntarily accept responsibility for work-related outcomes well beyond their formal obligations (Lauermann & Karabenick, 2011, p. 123).

In this study, teacher responsibility is characterized by an internal sense of obligation and responsibility and engagement among adult educators (Ames, 1975). Adult educators are committed to all immigrant students' learning and claim personal responsibility for their learning outcomes. Lauermann and Karabenick (2011) (who adopted Hans Lenk's 1992 and 2007 frameworks of responsibility) explicated a model of how responsibility is embedded in contextual factors (e.g., job autonomy, role overload, the head's communication of goals) as well as personal factors (e.g., trust among educators, relational trust between educators and heads, etc.).

The purpose of this study was to analyze the organizational determinants of teacher responsibility and engagement among adult educators in immigrant schools in Norway. Examining the determinants is important, because "an explication of teachers' internal sense of responsibility may provide ways to accomplish desired improvements in educational outcomes other than through the use of external incentives and sanctions" (Lauermann & Karabenick, 2011, p. 123). The quality of the relationships between adult educators and their principals is an important resource in improving schools, and the challenges for heads of immigrant schools are situated in employee-organization relationships. There are reasons for emphasizing the factors contributing to quality promotion of primary processes in the immigrant school system and the manner in which management affects these primary processes (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008). Primary processes in schools are all the instructional methods, curriculum choices and organizational preconditions which make it possible for pupils to acquire knowledge (Scheerens & Bosker, 2007). This involves how contextual factors, as well as personal factors and human development among educators, influence the adult educator's sense of internal responsibility and engagement to produce or prevent designated outcomes. Little research has been carried out on adult education, and it differs from other forms of education in significant respects. Immigrant students at the introductory program are adults, and they are potentially vulnerable to difficulties, such as perceiving themselves as peripheral participants in the community and experiencing academic difficulties, which can undermine their feelings of legitimacy at times (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Therefore, providing new knowledge about how adult education teachers perceive their own teaching role is a core challenge. In addition, organizational determinants of adult educator responsibility and the relative impact of these aspects on responsibility (i.e., the individual educator's engagement) are explored.

First, an overview of the type of education under study is presented. Second, the theoretical framework is elaborated. Third, the empirical survey is described. Fourth, in the discussion section, the results are interpreted and placed in the context of the debate on teacher engagement and responsibility. Finally, the limitations of the study are described, the implications for practice are explained, and conclusions are drawn.

## Adult Educators

Immigrant schools, similar to other school types, are special organizational cases, because adult educators are often isolated in their main work of teaching immigrant students and evaluating their work. An egg-carton structure of schooling with its separate and isolated classrooms is a characteristic of Norwegian adult educators' work conditions. They are quite different from those of employees working in careers demanding a high degree of immediate and direct interaction with colleagues. Therefore, teachers in general and adult educators in particular are of interest to researchers of human resource management and development. Establishing the determinants of adult educator engagement and responsibility in the context of immigrant schools is necessary, because adult educators should feel an internal obligation to provide the best possible education for immigrant students.

A school is "loosely coupled" as an organization (Weick, 1976), and the employer has only partial oversight over employees' actions (Elmore, 2004). Much of adult educators' work can take the form of hidden actions. Adult educator-immigrant student interactions are hard to pin down despite attempts to measure vital aspects of processes and outputs. For this very reason, adult educators must be committed to doing a good job. In the absence of available information about the effort and effectiveness of adult educators, employers have to take into account the sometimes-unreliable indicators of adult educator performance (Christophersen, Elstad & Turmo, 2010; Koretz, 2008): students' language test results and information about the students' presence or absence in the immigrant school. The pressure placed on immigrant schools by this results-based orientation via transparency and controls is steadily growing. In occupations based on performance-related pay (e.g., fish gutters, stock brokers, real estate agents), this control type of analysis perspective can contribute to a better understanding of workers' actions, because the connection between effort and result is easily measured (Laffont & Martimort, 2001). A foundation of human resource management is that to successfully manage human resources, individuals need personal credibility and knowledge of how contextual factors as well as personal factors influence the adult educator's sense of internal obligation and responsibility to produce or prevent designated outcomes. Adult educators' engagement to all immigrant students' learning and claiming personal engagement and responsibility for their learning outcomes is seen as useful. Adult educator engagement is an important factor in school improvement. A premise in the theoretical approach is that quality development depends on immigrant school employees being able to develop a sense of internal obligation and engagement to produce or prevent designated learning outcomes. When adult educators feel a sense of engagement, they feel a greater sense of responsibility, which likely leads to better learning outcomes among students. This argument is in line with commitment-centered systems for handling human resources in immigrant schools (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999).

This study focuses on the determinants of adult educator engagement (abbreviated CO). In doing so, two strands of research on employee-organization relationships (EORs) that have as their focal point adult educator responsibility (Lauermaann & Karabenick, 2011) and human resource management (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997; Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2010; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009) are integrated.

## Contextual Influences

### *Job Autonomy*

According to Lauermaann and Karabenick (2010, p. 131), “Among the factors and conditions with the potential to foster an internal sense of responsibility, most research has focused on its relation to autonomy.” Autonomy (abbreviated AU) is the degree to which a job provides an adult educator with the discretion and independence to schedule his or her work and determine how to do it. High levels of autonomy on the job will likely increase job satisfaction and motivation. Increased autonomy can make adult educators feel a stronger sense of responsibility and engagement in their job and therefore increase their motivation. Their perceptions of autonomy may exert a significant influence on their level of responsibility. Job autonomy is expected to have a positive impact on the development of adult educator responsibility.

### *Powerful Leadership*

Transformational leadership enhances the motivation, morale, and performance of adult educators through their sense of responsibility to the mission of immigrant schools and the collective identity of the school organization. The school principal is a role model for adult educators. A new political rhetoric of transformational leadership is named “powerful” or “clear” leadership. In the Norwegian debate, powerful leadership (abbreviated LS) means that principals put more direct pressure on adult educators. When educational authorities increase the pressure on school principals to achieve improvements, school principals pass on these added demands in terms of expectations that become apparent during their daily interactions with the adult educators. If the improvement targets become a part of the predominant social norms in interactions among adult educators and between school principals and adult educators, then the predominant mechanism is that adult educators attempt to honor these obligations. The associations between external accountability and powerful leadership are, however, expected to be complex. Accountability thinking is seeping into the structures of adult education governance in several countries. During the past decade in Norway (as in many other countries), accountability devices have been established in systems of education governance. These devices put pressure on educators imposed by a sprawling external accountability system. However, external accountability is not directly measured in the present study.

### *Personal Influences*

Relational trust among the school staff is regarded as a significant factor contributing to a positive climate between colleagues. A distinction is drawn between two types of relational trust: trust between adult educators (abbreviated ED) and trust between heads and adult educators (abbreviated HT).

### *Trust among Adult Educators*

Trustworthiness is seen as a core feature of an organization (Coleman, 1990). Trust (or a lack thereof) is forged when adult educators discern the intentions of other adult educators’ actions and those of their leaders (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Unpredictability and soreness are the lot of the educator’s work life (Lortie, 1975). There is an assumption that it is easier to overcome soreness and unpredictability when the adult educator enjoys good relationships with colleagues. Therefore, trust among adult educators is hypothesized to have a positive impact on the development of adult educator responsibility. Trust discernments in the adult educator’s role

set include respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 23). Trust may take root in the school staff's beliefs regarding responsibility to immigrant students. A synchrony of responsibility and expectations across a school community might catalyze a supportive work culture that fuels the adult educator's engagement in teaching; the process "feeds back to expand [the] base of trust" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 125).

#### *Principal-Adult Educator Trust*

Relational trust between heads and adult educators catalyzes an internal sense of obligation and responsibility among adult educators. "Principals play a key role in developing and sustaining relational trust" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 137). Therefore, relational trust between principals and adult educators is expected to have a positive impact on the development of adult educator responsibility.

#### *Informal Learning*

Informal learning (abbreviated LE) refers to the dynamic link between contextual and personal influences in the sense that daily learning processes elicit positive effects by increasing adult educators' knowledge. For example, according to Lauermaun and Karabenick (2011), "[L]earning opportunities can . . . lead to a person-environment fit because learning experiences not only shape personal beliefs about responsibility but also enable the individual to shape the organizational environment" (p. 135). Informal learning opportunities can nurture responsibility. Therefore, daily informal learning opportunities are hypothesized to have a positive impact on the development of adult educator's responsibility.

### **Methodology of Research**

#### *Sample and Procedures*

An electronic questionnaire was sent to all 1,721 adult educators (i.e. the total population) in Norway, and 764 educators responded. The response rate was therefore 44% of the total number of adult educators working in immigrant schools. This rate is comparable to the response rates typically reported in surveys of educators and other employees (Osborne, & Costello, 2004).

#### *Measurement Instruments*

Measurement instruments previously reported in the literature (Morgeson et al., 2006, Bryk & Schneider, 2002) were translated (by the researchers) into Norwegian. In the questionnaire survey adult educators responded to items on a 7-point Likert scale with options ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, where the fourth alternative represented a neutral midpoint.

#### *Dependent Variable*

Adult educator responsibility is characterized by the educator's sense of responsibility and engagement, which was operationalized using several items. A sample item used to measure this construct was the following: "I discuss classroom teaching et cetera with other educators in meetings and in the teacher staff room."

### *Mediating Variable*

Informal learning is the dynamic link between contextual and personal influences (Laurermann & Karabenick, 2011), and elicits positive effects by increasing informal learning and cooperation among adult educators. Informal learning was seen as the mediator between contextual and personal influences. A sample item used to measure this construct was the following: “I cooperate with other educators in this school in planning teaching.”

### *Independent Variables*

**Powerful leadership:** A sample item for measuring powerful leadership was the following: “Management helps me understand what is expected of me and ultimately allows the school to achieve its goals.”

**Principal trust:** Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) teacher-principal relationships construct was adjusted and used. The following was a sample item: “I take the principal at his or her word.”

**Trust among adult educators:** Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) teacher-teacher trust construct was adjusted and used. A sample item used to measure trust among adult educators was as follows: “Educators at this school respect colleagues who are experts at their craft.”

### *Analysis*

The data were analyzed in several phases. 764 respondents participated. However, some of the respondents did not answer every item. Therefore, the sample size analyzed was  $N = 684$ . Repeated confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to identify the best indicators of the different constructs. Two items, ed02 and co03, had loadings less than 0.60. For all the other items, the loadings were larger than .70. The assessments were also based on the  $p$  value for the  $\chi^2$ -statistic, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), and the comparative fit index (CFI). The standard criteria  $p > 0.05$ , GFI and CFI  $> 0.95$ , and RMSEA  $< 0.05$  were used for good fit and the criteria  $p > 0.05$ , GFI and CFI  $> 0.90$ , and RMSEA  $< 0.08$ , for acceptable fit between the model and the data (Blunch, 2008; Kline, 2005).

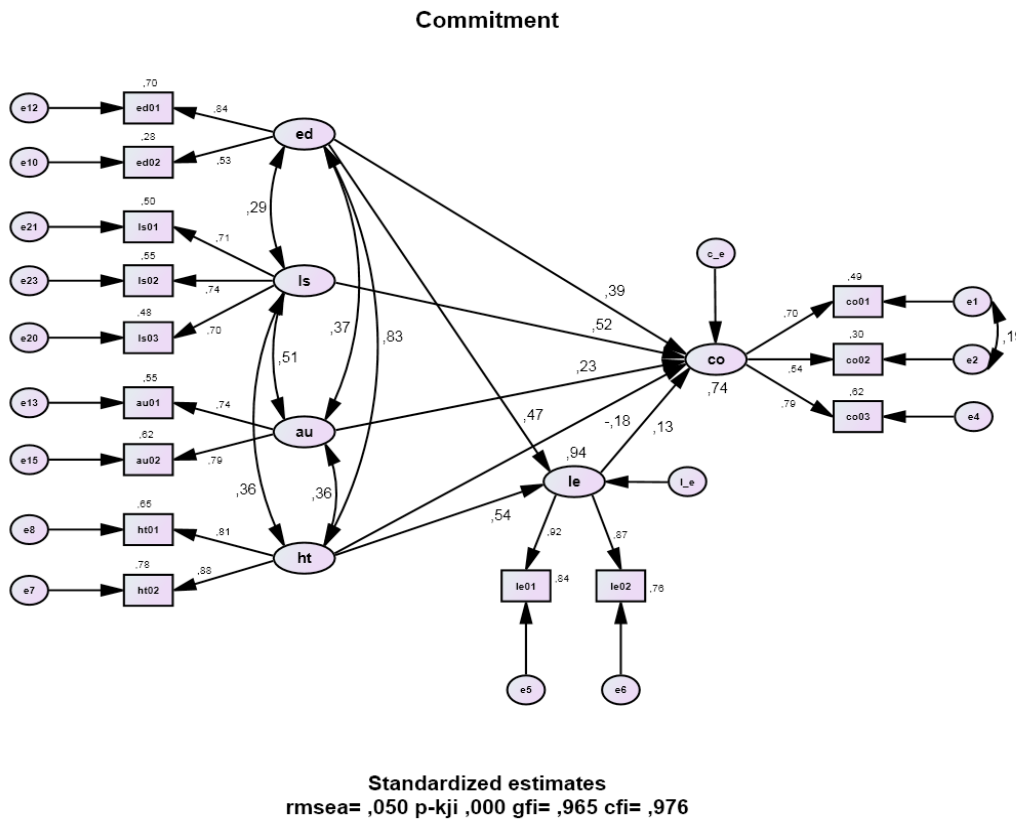
In addition, Cronbach’s alpha was computed for scales with more than two items. Coefficients of 0.70 or higher were considered acceptable (Nunnally et al., 1994). For the LS and CO scales, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.76 and 0.73, respectively, indicating satisfactory internal consistency (reliability).

To analyze the relationships between the variables, structural modeling was used. The model was assessed in the same way as the measurement model using AMOS 18. According to the values RMSEA = 0.050,  $p < 0.000$ , GFI = 0.965, and CFI = 0.976, the structure model provided an acceptable fit to the data.

## **Results of Research**

The estimated model is presented in Figure 1. Table 1 shows the estimated effect components for the structure model. The table shows that the largest total effects are found for powerful leadership (0.52) and educator trust (0.45), followed by autonomy (0.24). The model statistically explains 74% of the variance in responsibility.





**Figure 1: Structure model with responsibility as the dependent variable.**

Abbreviations: co=teacher responsibility, ed=trust among educators, ls=powerful leadership, au=autonomy, ht= principal-educator trust, le= informal learning among educators.

**Table 1. Estimated Effect Components for the Structure Model with Responsibility as the Dependent Variable.**

	Correlation	Total	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Spurious Effect
Educator trust, ED	0.60	0.45	0.39	0.06	0.00
Powerful leadership, LS	0.73	0.52	0.52	0.00	0.00
Autonomy, AU	0.63	0.24	0.24	0.00	0.00
Principal trust, HT	0.53	-0.11	-0.18	0.07	0.00
Learning, LE	0.58	0.13	0.13	0.00	0.45

Note.  $R^2$  (Responsibility) = 0.74.  
N = 684.

## Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to expand our understanding of the factors explaining adult educator responsibility. SEM has been increasingly seen as a useful technique for estimating and testing hypothesized models describing causations among variables (Kline, 2005).

By focusing on organizational antecedents to adult educator responsibility, we explored what possibly creates adult educators' inner sense of job commitment. The results supported the hypotheses that relational trust between adult educators predicts adult educator responsibility, accounting for a substantial percentage of the variance in adult educator responsibility. Powerful leadership and autonomy also seem to be important determinants for educator responsibility. However, the total effects of principal trust and informal learning are significantly weaker. By focusing on the organizational determinants of adult educator responsibility, we explored factors leading to adult educator responsibility. Our principal conclusion is that the quality of human relationships between heads and educators is evidently an important resource in improvement work. The findings showed that relational trust was a very strong predictor of teacher responsibility, while clear leadership (in which possible accountability mechanisms are manifested) was also a predictor of teacher responsibility. Immigrant schools need adult educators who are committed. Thus, future researchers must develop more nuanced concepts of adult educator responsibility and its determinants in leadership, management, and administration.

The results were mainly supportive of the hypothesized model. The findings are interesting and require further exploration. Not least, school principals need to be aware of the nature of informal learning, which may be seen as mediating the relationship between contextual and personal influences.

Our investigation may contribute to the adult education literature by the assessment of explanatory mechanisms of teaching responsibility. Our investigation may also contribute to the mainstream leadership literature: leader-adult educator trust and leadership may increase levels of teacher responsibility. Our study - together with other studies such as Bryk and Schneider (2002) and McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) - indicates also that an experience of job autonomy influences teacher responsibility.

Our theoretical model is based on the principle of parsimony. All unnecessary or peripheral elements have been removed from the model. This is in line with recognized research strategy in proceeding from the simple to the more complex. As Rapoport notes, 'if the fundamentals have been captured, the work has started and can go on. Variables can be added, relations modified, and results interpreted in other contexts' (1959, p. 371). Including additional factors, such as factors external to the school, would be a possible route for studying what types of organizational situations affect the mobilization of a teacher's inner sense of commitment. A challenge in terms of measuring such factors is that they become more difficult to measure the further the factor is from the actual phenomenon that forms the endogenous variable (Elster, 2007).

### **Study Strengths and Limitations**

In terms of strengths, this study was carried out with a relatively large sample. Moreover, in terms of psychometric constructs, the structural model had good fitness characteristics. In addition, the model was theory generated, which suggests the estimated path coefficients reveal causality.

Although the study benefited from several strengths, we also acknowledge several limitations. First, relatively little quantitative research has been carried out in relation to work cultures at immigrant schools. Second, longitudinal and quasi-experimental studies are needed to approach inferences about causality. A cross-sectional study represents only a static image of an organization and does not allow us to test causal relationships among determinants of adult educator responsibility; this type of study does not allow causal linkages to be examined. Longitudinal designs are needed to enable researchers to draw strong causal inferences. The effects of personal influences on adult educator responsibility, for instance, might operate in the opposite direction to that assumed in our hypothetical model. More research along the same lines



will increase our understanding of the assumed causal relationships and of the mechanisms we assume are responsible for what we are measuring. Third, due to the use of self-reported questionnaire data, the subjective component of the study is undeniable. Independent judgments can provide interesting data about an employee's performance, but carrying out this process is difficult while honoring promises of anonymity. A further limitation is that we did not have the opportunity to connect adult educator self-reporting to objective goals in terms of task performance.

Furthermore, factors from outside the immigrant school system should be included to study the kinds of external factors that influence the mobilizing of adult educator responsibility. One challenge in measuring such factors is that measurement becomes increasingly difficult in proportion to the remoteness of the factor in the hierarchical organization of the education sector.

The empirical material covers only a 54% response rate. This fact leaves some unpredictability about whether the sample is representative.

### **Implications for Leadership Practice**

Despite the limitations, this study contributes to the understanding of how contextual and personal influences impact adult educators' sense of responsibility and how informal learning is a dynamic link between contextual and personal influences. If the associations between the exogenous and endogenous variables represent causal relationships, our findings might have implications for practice.

This survey joins the ranks of studies highlighting the fact that the human qualities of immigrant school staffs make a difference in how adult educator responsibility unfolds. Significant quality-enhancing mechanisms (Elster, 2007) in our survey included powerful leadership and adult educator trust. Unpredictability is the educator's lot in life (Lortie, 1975), and good relationships can contribute to reducing adult educator unpredictability and soreness, which in turn can be a catalyst for responsibility that will be put into service on behalf of the immigrant school. When relationships between educators are good, collective processes among the teaching staff can also be strengthened while the unfortunate individualistic characteristics of some teaching cultures (Lortie, 1975) can be reduced. A further mechanism inherent in the mentioned path is that the principal can be regarded as a role model and thereby as a moral imperative for making an effort that exceeds the minimum expected of an adult educator. In addition, relational trust may underpin social norms, which create reciprocal obligations and thereby influence adult educators' judgments concerning how they are committed in their work. These recognizable mechanisms, and perhaps several related ones, can be precipitated in situations of relational trust but without postulating any form of rule in this respect. It should be acknowledged that it is difficult to propound concrete universal principles.

During the past decade in Norway (as in many other countries), accountability devices have been established in systems of education governance. These devices have put pressure imposed by external accountability systems on immigrant schools. If the statistical associations reflect causal mechanisms, our survey could be seen as evidence that the principals' degree of powerful leadership is important in persuading adult educators to be committed. The significance of educator trust and mutual support appears as a complementary factor to that which is the popular chorus of today: target management and control. Inherent in this is an acknowledgment that the tough management systems in the educational sector can have limitations despite attempts to extend the areas of control and measurement of the immigrant schools' processes and products. Increasing the knowledge base in relation to how adult educator responsibility emerges can influence the nature of the interactions among immigrant school staffs.

## Conclusions

Western countries use substantial resources for adult education, but at the same time, there are substantial challenges in relation to quality in adult education. There are therefore grounds for emphasizing the factors contributing to the quality promotion of primary processes in adult education and how organizational determinants affect these primary processes. During the past decade accountability mechanisms have been established in systems of education governance. Increasing the knowledge base in relation to how schools' management behaviors can influence the nature of the relationship with school teachers' attitudes and behaviors is relevant for practice, policy shaping and teachers' perceptions of organizational politics (Mintzberg, 1979; Cropanzano et al., 1997). This study contributes important novel knowledge to the existing research base regarding factors influencing teachers' sense of responsibility. The results may be seen to support the idea that a good relationship between teachers and leaders is an important factor of teacher responsibility. If the statistical associations reflect causal processes, relational trust between adult educators is a central factor, as well as powerful leadership. The investigation contributes to the human development literature by assessing the explanatory mechanisms found in the employee relationship literature. The investigation also contributes to the mainstream school leadership literature: Powerful leadership may work in tandem with educators' mutual trust. The pattern of results suggests that the model is appropriate for explaining adult educator responsibility; however, further research is required to explore other factors that might influence responsibility.

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