

“I’m Just Kind of Winging It”

PREPARING AND SUPPORTING EDUCATORS OF ADULT REFUGEE LEARNERS

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Instructors of adult refugees often have limited preparation to teach adult ESL and adult literacy. We can support these instructors’ professional development in simple ways.

English learners (ELs) represent the fastest-growing sector of adult education in the United States (Strucker, 2007), and educational opportunities, particularly in English as a second language (ESL) and adult basic literacy (ABL), are crucial for refugees and immigrants to obtain jobs and become self-sufficient. Adult ELs come to language and literacy programs with a wide variety of educational experiences (Anderson, Purcell-Gates, Gagne, & Jang, 2009; Barton, Ivanič, Appleby, Hodge, & Tusting, 2007; Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, 2004), and they often face challenges and have needs that differ from those of other adult learners. This is particularly true for refugee learners (Barton et al., 2007; Muth & Perry, 2010; Perry, 2007, 2008, 2009). For example, Barton et al. (2007) found that refugees have higher levels of confidence in educational settings than do other adult learners and are often highly educated. However, some refugees are

unschooled or have had severely interrupted schooling (Anderson et al., 2009; Muth & Perry, 2010).

Those who tutor or teach in ESL and ABL programs may not be well equipped to deal with the specific needs of adult refugees (Suda, 2002). In an effort to better support those who provide language and literacy instruction to adult refugees in one Southeastern U.S. city, we researched local educators’ perceptions of their preparation to teach refugees. Our concept of preparation involves experiences that provide the knowledge necessary to teach adult ELs, such as formal training and/or certification programs, informal training opportunities, prior teaching experiences, inservice professional development, or independent study. The term *educators* encompasses the full spectrum of those who teach English and literacy to refugees, including paid and unpaid teachers who teach in group settings and one-on-one.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Brandt’s (2001) concept of literacy sponsorship offers a useful theoretical frame for this study. Brandt defines *sponsors of literacy* as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support,



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teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy” (p. 556). For Brandt, a focus on sponsorship creates an explicit link between “literacy learning and systems of opportunity and access” (p. 559). Literacy sponsorship emphasizes societal issues such as economic and political changes, immigration, and technological advancements.

In this case, adult ESL educators are both the sponsors and the sponsored; that is, not only do they act as agents of sponsoring institutions, such as refugee resettlement agencies or community literacy organizations, they also individually sponsor the refugee learners they teach. At the same time they are sponsored by the programs and contexts within which they teach—that is, the institutions and contexts may or may not support the learning and professional development of the educators who teach refugees. As sponsors, educators have enormous power to shape the course of learning for their students, yet their own preparation can reveal a great deal about how society views particular learners and how conditions might be altered to be more equitable and empowering for both educators and the refugees they teach.

Adult Literacy and ESL Instructor Preparation

Adult literacy and ESL programs encounter unique challenges that are not faced in K–12 or higher-education settings (Muth & Perry, 2010) and that may result from the nature of the programs themselves. Programs are often run on shoestring budgets by community organizations using volunteer educators who may have little (if any) professional experience or training in language acquisition theories, effective methods for teaching language and literacy, or other pedagogical content knowledge (Anderson et al., 2009; McKenna & Fitzpatrick, 2004; Sandman-Hurley, 2008). The lack of preparation for volunteer tutors in adult literacy has been known for some time (e.g., Chisman, 2011; Crandall, 1994). Although scholars have given increased research attention to preparation of adult literacy educators, a corresponding increase has not occurred in research related to adult ESL educators.

Ziegler, McCallum, and Bell (2009; also Bell, Ziegler & McCallum, 2004) investigated (a) volunteer educators’ training and certification and (b) their pedagogical content knowledge with respect to teaching adult literacy. Participants’ self-assessment of their knowledge “rarely corresponded to their actual mastery of that content” (Bell et al., 2004, p. 555) or in assessing what they needed to learn. The researchers

also found that credentialing (defined as either a bachelor’s or higher degree or a teaching certificate) mattered, in that credentialed instructors knew significantly more than uncredentialed instructors (Ziegler et al., 2009). Volunteers had about the same level of knowledge as paid educators, but unlike paid instructors, volunteers spent most of their professional development in independent study, as opposed to attending conferences, workshops, or college courses.

Training programs may be ineffective in preparing volunteer educators. Ceprano (1995) found that tutors’ instructional practices bore little resemblance to the techniques they learned in training but instead reflected their own learning experiences. Belzer (2006) found that, when asked about the most important influence on their tutoring practice, none mentioned initial training. Training may have limited effectiveness in part because it is so short; volunteers typically receive 15–20 hours (if any) of training (Crandall, 1994). Such training can convey broad ideas but is less likely to convey technical aspects of teaching literacy (Belzer, 2006).

Research Questions

Few studies have examined preparation to teach adult literacy (Ziegler et al., 2009); this is especially true with respect to teaching adult ESL, particularly to students with limited literacy skills. We offer an exploration of educators’ perceptions of their preparation to teach ESL and literacy to refugees in one community, with a focus on those who are volunteers. The exploration is based on the following research questions: (a) From their point of view, how prepared are local educators to teach refugees? (b) What supports are needed to help these educators better meet refugees’ educational needs?

Methodology

This analysis is part of a larger qualitative case study that is focused on education for adult refugees in one community. Here, we focus on educators in local educational programs. Organization names are pseudonyms. Some participants wished to have their real names used; others are pseudonyms. All pseudonyms are marked with an asterisk (*) at first usage.

Researchers’ Positions

For the past nine years, Kristen (first author) has tutored and mentored refugees. In addition,

she has offered educational support to Refugee Resettlement* (RR) in the form of a weekly evening ESL course (cotaught by one participant in this study) and professional development workshops for local educators (after conclusion of the study). Susan (second author) joined the project near the end of data collection, in part because of her expertise in professional development for teachers.

Research Context

Our analysis focused primarily on three local organizations that provided most of the ESL and literacy education to local refugees: Literacy Action* (LA), Meadowbrook Community College* (MCC), and RR. We also included data from Grassroots Literacy*, one church-based ESL program, and an ESL teacher at a public high school who taught adult refugees who still qualified for public high school. LA is run by MCC, although the two organizations are housed in separate locations and have important structural differences. RR matches its refugee clients with tutors and occasionally offers onsite ESL sessions, although this is not central to their mission. The church program was part of a Baptist outreach ministry. Each program provided students with free classes, tutoring, or both. Table 1 summarizes the programs as well as the training and other prerequisites for educators.

MCC’s instructors were paid, and they were the only educators who had to meet basic qualifications: having a bachelor’s degree in any field (e.g., art history or computer science would qualify). MCC staff indicated that most instructors had teaching certification and/or significant experience. Instructors were also required to participate in ongoing

professional development. All other educators were volunteers, and their training requirements varied. LA required a 12-hour training program that covered a variety of topics. The Baptist church program required training, which the coordinator described as, “I think, either a 13- or 16-hour training,” that was developed by the North American Mission Board. Grassroots Literacy apparently offered training (one participant indicated that she had been trained there), although we were unable to obtain information about that training. RR did not offer training for its tutors, although staff organized infrequent 1- to 2-hour orientations for new volunteers.

Participants

Our analysis focused on the 10 participants (out of 33 involved in the larger study) who were adult educators (see Table 2). Kristen recruited the 33 participants in the larger study—local refugees, tutors and instructors who worked with local refugees, staff at RR, and other stakeholders (e.g., the city’s head of multicultural affairs)—via e-mail and postal mail. Individuals who agreed to participate were sent a qualitative questionnaire, which included a question asking participants to indicate whether they were willing to be interviewed. We received 10 completed questionnaires from tutors and instructors; seven of these educators participated in interviews, and three then agreed to allow observations in their ESL classes. Data from all 10 educators in the study are included in this analysis.

Data Collection Methods

Data sources included responses to open-ended questionnaires, semistructured interviews, and

TABLE 1 Overview of ESL Programs

Program name	Program description	Educator type	Educator prerequisites	Training required
<i>Baptist church program</i>	Leveled classes that meet once per week	Volunteer instructors and tutors	Specific Christian beliefs	13- to 16-hour training program
<i>Literacy Action</i>	Leveled classes that meet 2–4 times per week	Volunteer instructors	None	12-hour training program with optional apprenticeship
<i>Meadowbrook Community College</i>	Leveled classes that meet 2–4 times per week	Paid instructors	Bachelor’s degree in any field	No preservice training, but ongoing professional development
<i>Refugee Resettlement</i>	Individual tutoring, typically once per week	Volunteer tutors	None	None

FIGURE 1 ESL and Adult Literacy Provision for Refugees Questionnaire

In this study, I am exploring the educational opportunities (ESL and adult basic literacy courses and programs) available to refugees in the local area. I am particularly interested in the constraints and affordances that may shape how refugees do, or do not, participate in available programs, as well as the types of training and support available for teachers and tutors. I hope that this study's findings may be useful in understanding ways that our community can work together to provide good support for refugees and those who work with refugees. Your perspective on these issues will be very helpful in this endeavor. Please answer the following questions as best you can. Feel free to attach additional sheets if necessary.

In what capacity do you work with local refugees?

- Teacher/Instructor
- Tutor (paid or volunteer)
- Caseworker
- Other: _____

For how long have you worked with local refugees? _____

Approximately how many refugees have you worked with? _____

From which countries? _____

For educational programs:

How often do classes meet? ____ At what time(s) of day? ____

For how long? _____

How often do new classes form? _____

How much do your classes cost? ____

Approximately how much do textbooks and other materials cost? ____

For teachers/tutors:

What sort of training and/or experience have you had in teaching English learners and/or adult literacy learners?

What challenges do you face in being able to support/teach the refugees you work with?

What has supported your ability to provide educational opportunities to refugees?

What additional types of support would you find helpful as a teacher/tutor of refugees?

For everyone: From your perspective...

What types of educational opportunities are available to refugees in local?

How are the available programs meeting (or not meeting) local refugees' needs?

What types of additional programs or resources might be necessary, in your opinion?

What challenges do refugees face in being able to participate in local educational opportunities? (e.g., cost, transportation)

What sorts of things support refugees' ability to participate in local educational opportunities? (e.g., availability of tutors, child care)

Other comments?

Would you be willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview? Yes No

If yes, how can I contact you (phone number or e-mail address)?

observations. The questionnaire and interview protocol are included as Figure 1 and Figure 2, respectively. We audio recorded and transcribed all interviews verbatim. We shared transcripts with participants to

(a) check for accuracy, (b) clarify points, and (c) offer an opportunity to omit sensitive data.

We also conducted three observations in two instructional settings: a high-beginning ESL class

FIGURE 2 Semistructured Interview Protocol—Educators

Before beginning interview, ensure that interviewee has signed consent form and agrees to be audio recorded. **Please note:** Semistructured interviews allow the interviewer to probe responses more deeply and follow threads in the conversation (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). Thus, other questions not listed on this protocol may be asked.

(Before beginning interview, review participant's responses to the questionnaire.)

Tell me a little bit about your experiences working with refugees here.

For teachers/instructors: Tell me about your class/program.

For tutors: What is a typical tutoring session like for you? Do you prepare a lesson/activity ahead of time?

What kind of training/prior experience have you had with teaching ESL and/or literacy?

Do you feel that this adequately prepared you for teaching refugees?

If no: What do you feel you need to be better prepared to work with local refugees?

What challenges do you see refugees facing in their ability to participate in educational programs here in local?

What sorts of things support refugees' ability to seek educational opportunities in local?

Are the local programs meeting refugees' needs? Why or why not?

In your opinion, what still needs to be done in order to fully support refugees in learning English and/or literacy?

Is there anything else you'd like to share with me?

offered through LA and a “preliterate” ESL class taught by an RR volunteer. Observing in other settings was not possible during the period of data collection because of scheduling conflicts and a lack of timely responses from some programs. Observations were open-ended, with a focus on instructional techniques used by the educators.

Data Analysis

Analysis was ongoing, concurrent with data collection. The first stage involved coding participants'

questionnaires by first identifying broad themes in responses (e.g., instructor preparation) and then inductively developing initial and final codes. Codes identified specific activities, concepts, beliefs, and needs. We used matrices, charts, diagrams, and other visual displays to organize data, identify important themes, and draw conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Throughout, we wrote analytic research memos to raise questions about initial data or to explain and interpret findings (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

We validated our research findings through triangulation and member checking. Triangulation involved using several data sources to develop a robust data set and crosschecking findings across data sources (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Participants had an opportunity to view and comment on transcripts and field notes. During interviews, we also shared initial findings from questionnaires with participants to (a) check the findings' validity and (b) discuss practical implications.

Findings

Although certified teachers were among those who taught in various programs, it is clear that such certification was not expected. Only the community college required credentialing for its instructors, and in that case credentialing involved a bachelor's degree in any field, not necessarily in ESL or literacy education. Thus, immigrants and refugees seeking adult ESL and literacy classes might be taught by a qualified educator or by someone with no certification and little, if any, training to teach language or literacy. These circumstances illustrate the ways in which literacy for refugees is being sponsored, particularly the ways in which it is being regulated, suppressed, and withheld (Brandt, 2001), even if unintentionally.

Additionally, requiring little certification or training for tutors indicates the ways in which tutors as sponsors of literacy are, in turn, being sponsored by the institutions and organizations on whose behalf they are teaching. Participants reported that although their training programs had been helpful, they nevertheless felt unprepared. Their stated needs included teaching tools and techniques, along with "people resources" such as mentoring. They often asked for vaguely articulated "help." We will describe these findings in more detail in the following sections.

Educators' Perceptions and Experiences

Educators in this study had a wide variety of preparation for teaching ESL and/or literacy, ranging from no preparation whatsoever to certification and significant teaching experience. We initially explored three specific areas of preparation: (1) teaching ESL, (2) teaching literacy (particularly adult literacy), and (3) teaching low-literate ESL (i.e., teaching those who are learning to read and write for the first time or who are working to improve basic literacy skills). Refined analysis allowed us to more closely categorize *preparation*: (a) teaching certification, (b) other

types of training, and (c) prior teaching experiences. Participants' comments suggested that self-education also was important.

Table 2 offers an overview of participants' preparation for teaching. Four educators were certified in teaching ESL: two instructors at LA (Cathy and Gail), an RR tutor (Justin), and one public high school ESL teacher (Marina). Only two educators had K–12 certification (Cathy and Marina), one of whom (Cathy) also worked as a public school literacy coordinator. Six participants had undergone program-led training (Carolyn, Carrie*, Cathy, Katie, Laura*, & René), four through LA (Carolyn, Carrie, Cathy, Katie), one (Laura) who had done both LA and Grassroots Literacy's training, and one (René) who had taken the Baptist church training. Seven participants had prior teaching experiences before they began working in an educational capacity with adult refugees: Carolyn had been a school librarian in American schools overseas; Carrie was a teaching paraprofessional; Cathy, Gail, and Marina had taught in public schools; Justin had taught ESL in Turkey; and Laura had been a substitute paraprofessional.

These data suggest that educators' preparation to teach ESL and/or literacy to adult refugees was deeply uneven. All participants but one had certification or some program-related training before they began teaching refugees, but the wide range of types and amounts of preparation suggest that "being prepared" may mean different things in different contexts. Additionally, this wide range of instructor preparation suggests that institutions are deeply uneven in the ways in which they are sponsoring literacy development among refugee populations.

Educators' Perception of Their Own Preparation. Participants seemed to be aware of what their preparation experiences afforded, along with their limitations. Carolyn, for example, had volunteered with LA for over a decade and had worked as an overseas school librarian. However, she felt that LA's training and her prior experiences had not prepared her to teach low-literate refugees:

I'm not trained as a reading teacher, you know. I'm trained as a librarian....I was a teacher in a sense, in that I taught kids how to use the library, but I'm not a reading teacher. So, I'm not always sure that I know sequentially how to go about teaching somebody to read.

TABLE 2 Tutors' Preparation to Teach With Respect to Certification, Training, and Prior Experience

Name	Role	Organization	Type of teaching	Certification			Other training			Prior experience	Self-teaching
				Lit.	ESL	Other	Lit.	ESL	Other		
Carolyn	Volunteer educator	Refugee Resettlement	"Prilliterate" ESL				LA		School librarian	X	
Carrie	Volunteer educator	Literacy Action	ESL				LA		3rd-grade teacher assistant		
Cathy	Volunteer educator	Literacy Action	ESL	X	X		LA		Teaching ESL, literacy, and GED		
Gail	Volunteer educator	Literacy Action	ESL		X				Public school teacher		
Justin	Volunteer educator	Refugee Resettlement	ESL		X				1 year ESL teaching overseas		
Karen	Volunteer educator	Refugee Resettlement	Literacy & ESL							X	
Katie	Volunteer educator	Literacy Action	ESL				LA			X	
Laura	Church volunteer	Grassroots Literacy	ESL				LA & Grassroots		Substitute teacher's aide		
Marina	ESL teacher	Public schools	ESL (some literacy)	X	X				Teaching literacy in Russia		
René	ESL coordinator & instructor	Baptist church	ESL					Church			

Nevertheless, Carolyn felt that her prior experiences had been useful: "I think having an education background is really helpful. I had...worked with kids for so long that I was not afraid at all to just jump in and try things."

Katie, who took LA's training, described herself thus: "My background's not in education. I'm just kind of winging it." Karen similarly had no prior teaching experiences, but unlike Katie she received no training. Her attitude was, "I've never done this before, but I'd love to try." She was assigned to tutor a low-literate Liberian refugee: "Because I'd never done it before, I wanted to start with someone who knew how to speak English mostly, but wanted to learn how to read and speak American English." Karen discovered that teaching someone to read was harder than she thought, and she "finally ordered a book on how to teach someone to read."

Educators' On-the-Job Learning. Like teachers in any setting, educators learned a great deal from their own experiences. Carrie said, "Just like when you go to school to be a teacher, does anything really adequately train you for...the reality of what you're gonna find?" She repeatedly noted that jumping in and trying things out was most useful to her. For others, the most helpful preparation occurred through apprenticeship with experienced instructors or through self-education.

Apprenticeship opportunities were valued as highly useful in preparing educators, and these opportunities also indicated one way in which local institutions sponsored instructors through enabling and supporting their own development. Laura noted that experience as a substitute classroom aide had helped her: "I did kindergarten and computer labs and 4-year-olds, Early Start, and I picked a lot of it up from the kindergarten teachers, as to how to approach [teaching]." Carolyn spoke highly of LA's formal apprenticeship program:

You spend some time with somebody who's actually out there teaching. And I think that's been very helpful. I had a lot of students come in and apprentice with me, and it's good for me too....I learn things from them.

Although Carrie believed that apprenticeship programs could be useful, she also noted that classroom contexts varied greatly, and that observing in one context might not necessarily prepare educators for what they might face with their own students.

Participants also engaged in self-education, such as reading professional books, searching the Internet for resources, seeking expertise, and purposeful reflection. Karen described herself in the initial survey as “self-taught with adult reading books from library.” In the interview, she elaborated, “That one book that I found was a lot better for that...I think the title was called *You Can Teach Anybody to Read....* I did use that book with the woman initially, because I needed something to follow.” Carolyn appeared to engage in the most self-education; indeed, she seemed exemplary in this regard. When Carolyn realized she was unprepared to teach someone to speak English *and* become literate, she sought friends and family with teaching expertise:

Initially I said, I don't know how to do this, you know, I don't know where to begin, and I actually got in touch with [someone] who teaches at MCC and is one of the trainers for Literacy Action....She e-mailed back and said, 'You can do this, you're a librarian—go on the Internet and do some research!' So that's what I did, and I was amazed really at what I found. There was a lot of information out there, and what I took away from it basically was that it's almost like a child learning a language, that you have to initially begin to accumulate some vocabulary before you can ever begin learning the alphabet and all of that sort of thing. So that's what I did in the beginning.

Carolyn also consulted with her sister-in-law, a Montessori teacher, when it was time to introduce the alphabet to her learners.

Carolyn seemed naturally to engage in purposeful reflection, a trait that researchers and teacher educators identify as highly important for effective teaching:

Most of the time when I come home from a class, if I have time, I sit down right then. I make note of what we did, what worked, what didn't work, and notes about what I want to do next week. And then I always type up a lesson plan.

Although other educators, such as Katie and Carrie, talked about engaging in lesson planning and other preparation prior to teaching, only Carolyn spoke about purposeful reflection as a routine.

Benefits of Training. Participants' discussion of the overall benefits they received from training was another indication of the ways in which local

organizations sponsored ESL development in the community by attempting to enable, support, teach, and model (Brandt, 2001), even though these efforts may have met with uneven success. Participants who underwent local training (i.e., not formal certification) offered mixed opinions about the training's benefits. Carolyn believed hands-on experience had been more helpful than training. In contrast, Carrie and Katie felt they had received some benefit from training, including confidence, access to (and knowledge about) resources, and apprenticeship. Carrie said, “I felt like [the training] was pretty comprehensive....Now, having no other experience, to me it was comprehensive.” Carrie's comment suggests an awareness that she might not know what she was missing. Later, when asked whether the training had adequately prepared her, Carrie replied, “I think they did the best they could, and I just think, you know, just like in teaching in a classroom setting, every day is different. Um, I'd say, you know, 75% [prepared].”

Access to materials and resources was a benefit identified by both Katie and Carrie. Carrie noted that the training had provided “an impressive binder and packet of information.” Katie similarly noted that training “guided me toward resources to help in the class.”

Katie and Carrie also indicated that one helpful aspect of the training was its emphasis on working with adult learners. Carrie, who had worked as an elementary classroom paraprofessional, noted:

Teaching adults is very different than teaching children, so it was good for me to see that....They spoke a lot about that. So it was good. I think we were as well prepared as we could be until we actually get into it.

Katie, too, referred to training when she described her approach to curriculum: “A big part of our training was the emphasis on the student. I mean, we are tutors. We are there to help them, whatever they want to study.”

While some of the benefits were tangible, such as a binder of resources, others were less so. Training gave Katie “a lot of confidence, which I think was

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kind of the general purpose.” Given the limited nature of the training, we might question whether such confidence is misplaced, and whether misplaced confidence may in fact undermine instructors’ ability to sponsor their English learners. As Bell et al. (2004) found, confidence often does not correspond with competence. However, given the high rate of turnover among volunteer educators, confidence may not be a small matter and could make the difference between an educator who persists in teaching (and seeks additional professional development or self-education opportunities) and one who does not. Next, we analyze the additional resources and training that educators need to support their teaching of adult refugees.

What Adult ELL Educators Need

Not only did participants feel inadequately prepared to teach, most also had difficulty articulating what they still wanted, or needed, to know. This difficulty may be inherent in the complex nature of educators’ tasks, but it may also reflect lack of awareness of what they were missing. Moreover, it is another indication of the ways in which institutional sponsors of language and literacy may have inadvertently been withholding literacy. Articulated needs fell into three main areas: (1) teaching tools and techniques, (2) people resources, and (3) other supports.

Teaching Tools and Techniques. Needs related to teaching tools and techniques included (a) general training, (b) teaching materials, (c) teaching ideas/activities, (d) curriculum and lesson plans, and, perhaps most important, (e) pedagogical content knowledge. A common theme was the need for more training, also connected to obtaining information about teaching materials and activities. “Further training would be helpful—perhaps occasional ‘inservices,’” Carrie wrote, whereas Cathy wanted “guidelines/training—so that I know we’re covering the material we should be (how much emphasis on spoken language skills; how much on literacy?).” Even though Justin was a certified ESL teacher, he wanted access to teaching materials, such as lesson plans. Carolyn had once enrolled in a masters-level education course at a local university, but

I dropped the class, because I wanted some nitty-gritty, what to do in the classroom kind of class, and I would suspect that most people like me would feel that way. I did not need another graduate-level class in theory.

Opportunities to interact with other tutors and instructors—a social network—would be helpful.

This “nitty-gritty,” as Carolyn called it, was a need overwhelmingly identified by participants. Carrie wanted “other activities or ideas for presenting material” to increase her repertoire so that students did not get bored. Katie commented,

I wish I knew more fun things to do....I mean, some things in the book are fun, but the book can be so dry, and it’s a two-hour class, so I don’t want to do two hours of the book.

Our analysis clearly indicated that participants’ needs were related to *pedagogical content knowledge* (Shulman, 1986), although participants did not use this term. Participants wanted to know both (a) *what* to teach and (b) *how* to effectively teach it (Shulman, 1986). When asked if she had enough knowledge to teach low-literate ELs, Carolyn replied, “Sometimes I do question that. You know, I’ve gotten to a point where I’m not sure I can take them to the next step very well. I don’t have anybody telling me what the next step should be.” Katie focused on one specific area in which she felt she struggled: teaching pronunciation. An excerpt from our interview is illustrative:

Katie: It would be helpful to me maybe to have more training on how to teach them to pronounce things....Between the websites and things...they’ve got a lot of materials here. I mean, as far as, you know, specific things to do in the classroom, you know, games, or little teaching units, or something. I mean there’s a lot of that out there.

Kristen: Right. So you feel like you have access to some of the resources you need, but you maybe want just more information about how to implement some things.

Katie: How to do them, or what, yeah, what works...instead of me, trial and error, or I’ll try that—“Well, that was stupid.”

When Carolyn said she did not know how to take her low-literate ELs to the “next step”—or even what

that next step might be—she indicated that what she really needed was pedagogical content knowledge. When Katie stated that she had access to a wide variety of teaching ideas and materials but wanted to know “what works,” she needed knowledge related to what some call *best practices*. Both women needed to know both what to teach—whether skills and strategies (e.g., decoding, pronunciation) or content (e.g., grammar rules)—and how to teach it effectively. When training did not exist or provide pedagogical content knowledge, educators turned to other sources of expertise.

People Resources. Participants indicated that one of the most important supports they needed was access to expertise in the form of (a) mentoring, (b) a “reference person,” and (c) social networking among educators. Karen, who had not had access to any training, “liked the idea of someone else knowing more than I did” and noted that having a “reference person” was what had encouraged her to stick with tutoring for as long as she did. Others also talked indirectly about the importance of a reference person, such as when Carolyn described contacting the ESL trainer and her sister-in-law with questions, or when Katie talked about how helpful the director was in passing along resources. These comments indicate the importance of individual literacy sponsors who could support, model for, and even teach these instructors.

Furthermore, participants indicated that having opportunities to interact with other tutors and instructors—a social network—would be helpful. Katie wrote about wanting “occasional meeting with other tutors to exchange useful techniques.” In her follow-up interview she added, “We don’t meet each other enough. You know, it probably would be good for us to have a regular time to sit down and gather and talk to each other, ’cause we pretty much work in isolation.” Cathy similarly wanted “communication opportunities with other volunteer tutors...to exchange ideas, etc.”

A final important “people resource” was access to professional expertise, beyond informal contacts. Staff at MCC and LA wanted a more formal partnership with experts at local universities. LA’s coordinator stated:

What we’d like is for the university to help assess the people who come here and provide a guidance as to how we can help these people, because we have people coming here that have been coming here [for years]. They’ve gotten no further along in their reading abilities because we keep doing the same thing, over and over,

expecting a different outcome, because that’s all we know to do.

Thus, access to expertise and people resources could be informal (e.g., when educators consult with mentors or when they share ideas together) or more formal (e.g., when educators have access to professional expertise).

Other Supports. Participants identified a variety of other types of necessary educational supports. We coded data as “help—nonspecific” when participants stated that they needed help but did not, or could not, articulate the types they needed. Other identified supports included cultural education/awareness and structural supports. Karen, for example, felt completely unprepared to deal with the refugees’ cultural differences and noted that “just a little bit of cultural education” would have helped enormously.

Discussion

Participants in this study represented a wide range of types of preparation to teach ESL and adult literacy to refugee learners, a finding with important implications for these instructors, who were intended to sponsor English and literacy development in a refugee community. Forty percent (40%) of participants had some sort of formal teaching certification. Half of the participants (50%) had received some program-related training. The majority of participants (70%) had some kind of teaching experience prior to teaching refugees; these experiences ranged from public school teaching to substituting as a paraprofessional to teaching experience with adults. Only one participant described herself as having no preparation whatsoever.

Although the majority of participants had some sort of training or preparation, enormous differences existed in the amounts and the nature of that preparation. This finding may be highly problematic for educators and the refugees they teach and is indicative of the nature of literacy sponsorship for both refugees and those who teach refugees. Our findings offer a complicated picture. Not surprisingly, uncertified educators who had participated in program-related training felt unprepared. Yet, even certified teachers felt unprepared to teach adult ELs, particularly when these learners were refugees with limited prior schooling and/or limited literacy skills. Thus, both certified and uncertified educators needed additional support for teaching adult refugee learners.

Even though 90% of participants in this study had certification or some training, these programs were likely insufficient in preparing educators for the tasks ahead of them and thus inadvertently suppress and withhold language and literacy development among refugees and other adult ELs. For example, certification in K–12 education or literacy may not adequately prepare educators to teach ESL or to work with adult learners; conversely, ESL certification may be insufficient to prepare those who work with low-literate students. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that 12–16 hours of training—covering classroom management, lesson planning, literacy and language development, and principles related to teaching ESL and working with adult learners—can truly provide educators with what they need to know.

Considered in relation to Brandt's (2001) construct of literacy sponsors, our findings offer a troubling implication: If educators are unprepared or underprepared to teach adult refugees, then refugee learners are poorly served by their literacy sponsors. Others have noted the injustice of having the neediest adult learners taught by (well-meaning) volunteers who may be unprepared to teach them (Sandman-Hurley, 2008).

Ideally, all who teach adult refugees would be fully trained and certified in teaching literacy and/or ESL to adults. Given the existing nature of adult education programs, the reality is that educators are likely to be (or feel) unprepared, and this is especially true when educators are volunteers. The question then becomes how to best support adult ESL educators. Several implications arise from the findings of this study; we offer recommendations in three areas: (1) training, (2) people resources, and (3) support for self-education.

Training

Belzer (2006) suggested that upfront training may not be very meaningful to volunteer educators, and that increased investment in ongoing, targeted professional development may make more sense in volunteer-taught adult literacy programs. Our study's findings suggest the appropriateness of this recommendation for adult ESL contexts as well. Requiring certification or extensive training simply is not feasible for most programs. Inservice professional development, however, may be a realistic way to support, model for, and teach adult ESL instructors. Ongoing, targeted professional development could take more traditional forms, such as the “occasional

inservices” Carrie suggested, once educators are in the field and have a basic understanding of their own teaching contexts and their particular learners' needs. Alternately, hybrid types of inservice training could be developed that rely on other supports identified in this study—namely, people resources and self-education opportunities—as we will discuss.

General inservice training and professional development might expand educators' knowledge of broad topics (i.e., information already introduced in preservice trainings). However, specific, *targeted* inservice training would better sponsor these instructors by offering better opportunities to (a) identify topics specific to educators' own situations and (b) capitalize on their existing knowledge and experiences. For example, local targeted training for participants in this study might involve such topics as the differences between teaching children and adults (Carrie's need), suggestions for how to teach pronunciation (Katie's need), or the stages of literacy development and how to teach literacy to adults (Carolyn's need). Such targeted training would avoid the pitfall Carolyn faced when her graduate class focused on theory but what she needed was literacy pedagogy. Targeted training must be locally specific, requiring that those who are providing the professional development get to know adult educators and their teaching contexts.

People Resources

Participants clearly valued apprentice and mentoring opportunities prior to teaching, and they wished for further sponsorship of this type after teaching had begun. Increasing opportunities for apprenticeship, particularly when new educators can be paired with highly experienced and highly effective mentors, may support beginning educators' development of knowledge and skills. More formal access to expertise can be fostered by collaborating with experts at local universities and community colleges or through K–12 public school systems. Experts might conduct targeted training, or they might act as sponsors by being “on call” as a reference for specific questions and problem solving.

Perhaps the most novel sponsorship recommendation from our data is to develop social networking opportunities wherein educators can share experiences, ask questions, and learn from one another. Social networking might support a variety of connections among mentors and apprentices, educators across various organizations

(such as community colleges, literacy nonprofits, and immigrant/refugee social services), or educators and experts. Social networking could occur face-to-face, such as through regular brown-bag lunch sessions for professional development, or it might take place online through Facebook, a Google group, or other social networking tools. Online social networking might foster innovative forms of informal professional development. For example, experts and mentors might video record model lessons, post successful lesson plans, or blog about best practices for teaching on specific topics. Educators could post drafts of lesson plans or videos of their own teaching for analysis and feedback, in the same way that many preservice teachers in certification programs receive feedback from collaborating teachers and supervisors.

Self-Education

Because access to training and expertise is not always available, sponsoring educators' efforts at self-education is essential. Developing opportunities for independent study is another way in which programs can sponsor professional development targeted to educators' specific situations and needs. Programs can develop physical libraries of professional resources on a variety of topics, including adult learners, learning and development, teaching tools and techniques, lesson plans, and curriculum materials. Developing online libraries and other clearinghouses of information may be more cost effective, would allow educators to access information on their own schedules, and could help them filter vast amounts of online information. Online professional development modules on common topics (e.g., working with adults, teaching early literacy) could further support educators' ongoing development.

Although our recommendations are aimed at supporting educators who work with adult refugees, particularly those who volunteer, these suggestions may help all adult educators. Though calls have been made to close the gap in credentialing and certification for adult educators (Chisman, 2011), it is unlikely that all educators will become certified in adult education, particularly when programs operate outside the formal education system and rely upon volunteer labor. These recommendations cannot stand in place of rigorous credentialing or certification programs, but they may be a realistic way to sponsor professional development in a largely volunteer teaching force.

Take Action

STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

Many opportunities exist for tutors and instructors who work with adult English learners to initiate their own informal professional development. Here are some suggestions for ways to get started:

- ✓ **Find a mentor:** Contact a more experienced instructor or someone at a local college, university, or public school.
 - Ask to observe while your mentor teaches.
 - Share your lesson plans for feedback before you teach them.
 - Ask your mentor to observe your teaching and provide feedback.
 - Ask questions—over the phone, via e-mail, or in person at the local coffee shop.
- ✓ **Meet regularly with other instructors:** Find instructors who, like you, want to improve their teaching and discuss experiences and approaches.
 - Organize a brown-bag lunch and invite experienced instructors or local experts to share their expertise.
 - Start a professional literature book club, select professional books related to your teaching, and meet to discuss them.
 - Video record your own teaching and analyze it with your group.
- ✓ **Join or create an online social network:** Connect with others locally, nationally, and internationally.
 - Start a Facebook or Google group.
 - Create a wiki to act as a repository for resources.
 - Invite experts to join your social network.
- ✓ **Share what you know:** Once you gain experience, be sure to pay it forward—remember that you have knowledge and expertise to contribute, too!
 - Offer to mentor a new instructor.
 - Blog about resources and successful lesson plans you've used.
 - Post videos of your own effective teaching.

By supporting adult ESL educators, we also sponsor the literacy sponsors—we enable, support, teach, and model for those who sponsor language and literacy development in adult refugees. Adequately preparing the educators who do this work strengthens opportunities to be successful and reduces the likelihood of frustration and possible failure. In addition, better supporting educators may decrease the high levels of burnout and turnover among volunteers. Finding ways to better prepare and support those who work with refugees and other adult ELs is an important step in ensuring an improved future for resettled refugees as well as the communities that welcome these newcomers.

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More to Explore

CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES

Book

- Parrish, B. (2004). *Teaching Adult ESL: A Practical Introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Online Resources

- www.authenticliteracyinstruction.com
- Center for Adult English Language Acquisition: www.cal.org/caela/tools/
- Center for Adult English Language Acquisition: www.cal.org/caela/tools/instructional/prac_toolkit.html