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# ***The Value of Immigrant Parents, The Power of Effective Adult Education: Fueling viable parent involvement through school-based adult ESL classes***

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Key words: Adult ESL; parent involvement

**ABSTRACT:** This quasi-experimental study compares school-based adult ESL classes *intentionally focused on parent involvement* with those that are not. It addresses the need for empirical research of adult ESL instruction that integrates the most compelling goal of vast numbers of adult ESL students: supporting their children's school success.

## **Introduction**

Within the adult education community, a substantial number of students are primarily interested in learning English as a Second language (ESL). In fact, ESL is the fastest growing area of instruction in the field of adult education (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). And of particular significance, a large number adult ESL students have school-aged children (Schmidley, 2001).

Considering these significant changes to the field of adult education, it is important to look to research to guide our understanding of best practices for adult ESL instruction. One essential and relevant finding is that adult education is most effective when it is contextualized in goals that are authentic to the students (Beder & Medina, 2001; Knowles, 1980; Long, 2000; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000). This form of instruction is more engaging to adult learners and increases the possibility that students will practice the skills being taught outside of class (Purcell-Gates, Degener, Erikson & Soler, 2000).

Accounting for the fact that a significant number of adult ESL students have school-aged children, it is also important to look to research on K-12 education, as a way to illuminate what might be some authentic goals for many adult ESL students. In so doing, it clearly emerges that most parents seeking to learn ESL also have a strong interest in developing skills related to parent involvement: These parents place a very high value on their children's education and are strongly motivated to be involved in helping their children succeed in U.S. schools (e.g., Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Valdés, 1996).

## **Purpose for the study**

In spite of these facts linking knowledge of effective adult ESL instruction and what we know about many adult ESL students, there is no empirical research on the value of integrating parent involvement goals into an adult ESL instruction (Waterman, 2003). This correlates with a general need for empirical research in the field of adult education.

For these reasons, I designed a quasi-experimental study intended to examine school-based adult ESL classes that are *intentionally focused on parent involvement skills and English language acquisition*. The operating hypothesis was that students receiving this form of instruction would learn both skills sets, simultaneously and synergistically.

In order to do this, and include attention to the gaps in existing research, I created an intervention where professional development in relation to developing instructional materials was central. Therefore, each professional development session included in the intervention emphasized guiding adult ESL teachers to utilize existing materials as well as create their own lesson plans. The participating teachers were also guided to determine what parent involvement goals would be most engaging and meaningful. In order to do this, they were provided with data throughout the study that illuminated all points of congruence between their adult students' goals, those of the principals and teachers in the school where the adult ESL class was offered, and points of compliance with No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

### **Methodology**

The study was conducted in Altura School District (ASD), a large urban school district in Colorado. There are 148 schools in ASD and many of these schools majority low socioeconomic status (SES) and challenged by low achievement scores.

I utilized multiple inclusion criteria when creating the sample for the study. First, I only included elementary schools, wanting to ensure that the contexts where the classes were offered were as similar as possible. Second, schools each had at least 50% immigrant parents and more than 85% students of low socioeconomic status (SES).

Drawing from all of the schools that met these criteria, I randomly selected a single ESL class from each of four different schools to be the treatment group and did the same for the control group. The treatment group received the intervention for six months, while the control group did not.

In order for these to be true treatment and control groups, I also took steps to ensure that there was an average equivalency between the groups of mothers included in the final analysis and the adult ESL teachers involved in the study (Light, Singer & Willet, 1990). In regards to the participating parents, I determined this equivalence by first including only Mexican women, and then using the following baseline data: SES, age, date of arrival to the U.S., level of formal education, hours of attendance to the ESL class included in the study, and prior experience of ESL instruction. For the adult ESL teachers, the baseline data included their formal training related to adult education and teaching English language learners and their prior experience teaching adult ESL.

### **Research Design**

I utilized a “formative experiment” design (Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer & Schauble, 2003) for this study. The primary components are theory, an intervention and an iterative approach to analysis), where a theory-based intervention aims to address conspicuous gaps between research and practice (Reinking & Bradley, 2004).

### **The Intervention**

*Monthly Teacher Training, covering the following content:*

**Student Goals:** The training helped teachers establish what parent involvement goals would be most engaging and meaningful.

**Using authentic school-based texts to generate ESL lesson plans:** The training focused on the general concepts and approach related to utilizing authentic, school-based texts to generate ESL lessons.

**Project-based instruction:** The training included information about project-based instruction (Wrigley, 1998) and how this approach could be modified in order to integrate parent involvement goals.

#### **Data collection and analysis:**

I addressed the following research questions with quantitative methods:

*Do school-based ESL classes (intentionally focused on parent involvement) foster increased ESL skills as well as parent involvement skills and behaviors? If yes, to what extent?* The methods included a survey containing 20 questions intended to measure all aspects of the operationalized definition of parent involvement and the Basic English Skills Test (CAL, 1989), used to measure student ESL skills. I administered both of these to all participating students at the beginning and end of the study ( $N=66$ ).

I addressed the following questions with multiple qualitative methods: *How do school-based ESL classes (intentionally focused on parent involvement) foster, if at all, increased ESL skills as well as parent involvement skills and behaviors? What are the factors that explain this?* I interviewed every participating student ( $N=66$ ), at the beginning and end of the study; I conducted in-depth student interviews with two-three students from each ESL class and in-depth teacher interviews with all participating teachers. I also observed ESL instruction at least once a month and conducted informal teacher interviews after each observation. And I collected ESL lesson plans and analyzed these in relation to what I learned through observation and teacher interviews.

I analyzed the quantitative data by using a T-test, evaluating whether the change over time of each of the outcome variables for the treatment group and the control group was statistically significant. And I analyzed the qualitative data using several tools standard to the field of educational research (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), including coding and cross-case analysis, looking for points of comparison and contrast, patterns or emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis of all data was iterative, incorporating a continuous cycle of data collection and analysis intended to determine what contextual factors enhanced or impeded the intervention's effectiveness.

### **Findings**

#### *Quantitative data:*

The results of the quantitative analysis are dramatic and unequivocal: At the end of the intervention, the change over time for the ESL skills of the treatment group was 17.5 points higher ( $p<0.0000$ ) than the ESL scores for the control group. And the change over time for the scores on the parent involvement survey was 9.6 points higher for the treatment group ( $p<0.0000$ ). This stands in contrast to the situation before the intervention, when there was no statistically significant difference between the ESL scores and parent involvement skills of the treatment and control groups.

#### *Qualitative data:*

The role of contextualizing the instruction in authentic goals and skills: All qualitative data sources made it clear that a powerful causal mechanism influencing the results of the study was the fact that the ESL instruction was contextualized in parent involvement goals and related skills. These data revealed that not only did students in the treatment group learn both skills sets simultaneously, but they learned them in a way that was

more engaging because the content of their ESL class was so directly linked to their own deep desires and goals.

Additionally, although being engaged during classroom instruction is very important, one of the most significant findings was that this approach to instruction yielded increased opportunities to practice these new skills outside of class. In comparison with the control group, the parents in the treatment group were motivated and guided to extend their learning well beyond the 4-6 hours of weekly, classroom instruction the adult ESL teacher offered. Many parents in the treatment group, for example, explained that they engaged with their children's homework in ways unlike they had before because their ESL teachers had utilized authentic examples of their own children's homework as part of class. Another common comment from parents was that they talked to their children's teachers now, or the school principal, "for the first time." When Carolina was asked what she liked about the ESL class, for example, she referred to a special class-based activity where the ESL students had an opportunity to meet and talk to their children's teacher. This activity was one of the final "projects" that Carolina's ESL teacher had been preparing for within the ESL class for several weeks. Carolina's enthusiastic description mirrored similar comments made by other treatment group parents:

... Ever since we tried that, talking to the teachers, now I think differently! Now I think differently because I tried and now I *know* that I *can* do it. I *can* talk English to the teachers! So, now, I have been trying more, trying to talk to the teachers more, and so I keep practicing my English, and now I know that I can do it!

Carolina's comments reveal another one of the most significant factors operating to influence the success of the intervention: This aspect of the ESL instruction is not only valuable because it is linked to tasks that the students can and would like to practice outside of class, but it also functions to help students transcend fears that often impede their second language learning. And this point corresponds closely to existing research on second language acquisition. Specifically, it is widely understood in second language acquisition theory that students are impeded from learning a new language when they have a high level of anxiety about such things as trying to use the second language. Conversely, when they have experiences that help diminish that anxiety, they are much more receptive to learning when they are given opportunities (Krashen, 1985).

These data, therefore, point to the ways that the intervention's approach to ESL instruction effectively fueled second language learning because it provided opportunities for students to diminish their fears. As illustrated in the example of Carolina, *students benefit when they are offered opportunities to practice authentic tasks within the structure of the class*, such as the project-based instruction activity involving an individual meeting with a child's teacher. Opportunities such as this class activity provided a way to scaffold student learning as well as encourage students as they try out tasks that they may feel nervous about. And, as evident in Carolina's comments, this approach to adult ESL instruction can provide an opportunity for students to experience a degree of success that then can inspire and motivate them to choose to continue to practice new skills outside of class.

### **The influence of professional development**

Many of the study's findings point to the central influence and value of the kind of professional development offered as part of the intervention. This point was particularly evident in light of the average equivalence of the participating adult ESL teachers' capacities and experiences that was apparent throughout the data.

On one level, it is important to consider the implications of the fact that the treatment group students learned more English as well as skills directly tied to their own parent involvement goals. Looking to the qualitative data for further insight, it was clear that the teachers in the control group desired and would have benefited from receiving some training and guidance. Every control group teacher said that she needed this, yet the school district seemed to operate out of an assumption that it was sufficient to create an adult ESL class for parents yet offer absolutely no support. The data also revealed that the school district did not even suggest what might be an appropriate text for teaching ESL to adults (vs. those that are used with children). Therefore, the study's findings underscored an important message for schools that offer adult ESL classes: Equally qualified adult ESL teachers may deliver classes of vastly different quality if they are not provided a minimal degree of training and support.

Much data also clearly demonstrated that the control group ESL teachers were knowledgeable about parent involvement and were also committed to communicating with parents and supporting parent involvement as part of their job as a school-staff person, *yet had no awareness that parent involvement could be, or should be, integrated into their adult ESL instruction*. Considering many findings that highlighted their general skills and capacity to be effective adult ESL teachers, it is particularly significant that ultimately, they were much less effective than the treatment group teachers who were equally qualified. This finding again points to the influence of professional development, as the treatment group teachers only knew to and were guided to support their students' and the school's parent involvement goals into their ESL instruction as a result of the guidance they received at the monthly professional development sessions and the follow-up visits to their ESL classrooms.

Looking further into the data, there were also points to note about the value of the content that was offered through the intervention's professional development. One important element was providing the treatment group teachers with input and guidance regarding what were their own students' parent involvement goals, always emphasizing goals that also correlated with principal goals and compliance with NCLB. Another important element was that these teachers received guidance and ideas related to generating lesson plans that included skills specifically related to these goals.

On another level, the pedagogical approach to the professional development was also important. Facilitating a dialogue amongst the teachers, for example, and asking them to share from their experiences in relation to the content we had discussed in previous trainings, engaged the teachers, fueled their learning and promoted a sense of cohort amongst the teachers. This also modeled for them an approach to instruction that I had suggested they use with their own students.

And finally, the data also illuminated the need for professional development opportunities aimed at guiding adult ESL teachers to utilize existing materials as well as create their own. This should also include creating a space for teachers to share their knowledge and experiences with each other. Within the study, this was particularly important regarding effectively teaching discrete skills, such as English grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, within the context of also teaching parent involvement skills. This proved to be a very difficult task, and should not be assumed to be simple or obvious, nor something that can be "taught" by simply following a text. Therefore, while I would contend that professional development is always valuable regarding selecting and generating appropriate and meaningful adult education materials, this study's findings suggest that it is particularly necessary now, for school-based adult ESL teachers, when there are so few materials available.

### Implications

All points of data from the study clearly point out that school-based ESL classes intentionally focused on parent involvement can fuel viable parent involvement as well as an increase in ESL skills, simultaneously and synergistically. And both the quantitative data and the qualitative data highlight the dramatic difference between this type of school-based ESL as compared to a type of adult ESL instruction singularly aimed at increasing ESL skills. Of particular significance, this finding critiques a prevalent assumption that exists in public schools and amongst adult educators: Many believe that all school-based adult ESL classes support an increase in parent involvement. And this point is often highlighted and emphasized as a way to promote support for these classes. Yet while the findings of this study do not claim that these adult ESL classes do not support parent involvement in any way, they do suggest that these classes, comparatively, are limited and ineffective when compared to classes that are intentionally focused on integrating parent involvement goals into the ESL instruction.

The implications of these findings are of great importance, for a number of reasons. Primarily, they illuminate a problematic flaw in current assumptions: When public schools support adult ESL classes, they expect some form of benefit in return-- an outcome--- that corresponds to the school's mission of supporting children's academic achievement. They are not interested in simply and benevolently offering a service to parents. Therefore, when these classes are ineffective at producing the desired outcome, schools withdraw their support, assuming that parents are not motivated or invested. Logic suggests, therefore, that the converse is likely: If schools experience that the adult ESL classes they support do yield an increase in goals that parents, principals, teachers and NCLB share, they will continue to support these efforts. Inherently, parents would then experience affirmation and support of their genuine interest in learning English and learning new skills and knowledge that will foster their ability to support their children's education in meaningful ways. And ultimately, there would be a positive influence on children's academic achievement—as has been established by research on parent involvement—and teachers and principals would benefit from a form of meaningful partnership toward shared goals.

Equally important, and consistent with purpose of the study, the intervention did not require a significant amount of resources. In fact, the only additional resources offered to existing adult ESL classes offered in Altura School District were those associated with a monthly professional development opportunity of two to three hours, followed by a classroom visit each month, and the support of a school-staff person acting as a liaison between the school and the adult ESL class. Ultimately, therefore, the obvious benefit to a broad array of partners---adult ESL student, adult ESL teachers, K-12 classroom teachers, school principals and children--- should compel all schools attempting to offer adult ESL classes to give serious consideration to replicating this intervention.

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