

# Community Literacy Journal

---

Volume 7 | Issue 2

Article 2

---

Spring 2013

## Becoming Qualified to Teach Low-literate Refugees: A Case Study of One Volunteer Instructor

Kristen H. Perry

*University of Kentucky*, [kristen.perry@uky.edu](mailto:kristen.perry@uky.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Perry, Kristen H. "Becoming Qualified to Teach Low-Literate Refugees: A Case Study of One Volunteer Instructor." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2013, pp. 21–38, doi:10.25148/clj.7.2.009347.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcc@fiu.edu](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

# Becoming Qualified to Teach Low-literate Refugees: A Case Study of One Volunteer Instructor

*Kristen H. Perry*

---

This case study investigates Carolyn, an effective volunteer ESL and literacy instructor of adult African refugees, in order to understand both what it means to be a qualified instructor, and also how community-based volunteer instructors may become more qualified. The study's findings suggest that Carolyn's qualifications are a combination of personal dispositions, such as cultural sensitivity, and professional behaviors, including self-education, seeking mentoring and outside expertise, and purposeful reflection on her teaching. Several implications for supporting community-based volunteer literacy and ESL instructors emerge from these findings.

---

English language learners (ELLs) represent the fastest-growing sector of adult education in the U.S., and refugees represent an increasingly important segment of this population (Bricket et al. 1; Kerwin 2). In 2007, approximately 48,000 refugees resettled in the U.S.; this number increased to sixty thousand in 2008, and the resettlement ceiling has been raised to eighty thousand for 2011 (Kerwin 3-4). The U.S. also has accepted refugees from an increasingly diverse range of nations. In 2009, for example, refugees from over sixty countries resettled in the U.S. – twenty-three of which were African nations (Kerwin 6). Another important trend is that refugees are increasingly being resettled in cities that are non-traditional gateways for immigrants, such as Lansing, Michigan, and Omaha, Nebraska. The government's Preferred Communities program purposefully resettles refugees in small and mid-size communities “beyond the main urban centers in which those newly arrived have traditionally concentrated” (USCRI), based on a belief that these communities are better prepared to meet newcomers' needs. Lexington, Kentucky represents one of the communities in which increasing numbers of refugees have settled. Caseworkers at the local refugee resettlement agency, for example, reported that over 150 individuals and families resettled in Lexington in 2008 alone; this number jumped to 230 in 2009 and exceeded three hundred for 2010.

Educational opportunities, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) and Adult Basic Literacy (ABL), are crucial for refugees to obtain jobs and become self-sufficient. Adult refugees come to language and literacy programs with a wide variety of prior educational experiences, yet they often have challenges and needs that differ from those of other adult learners (Anderson et al. 15-18; Barton et al. 102-103; Perry 35; Muth & Perry). For example, Barton et al. found that refugees have higher levels of confidence in educational settings than other adult learners and often already

are very highly educated (102-103). However, other refugees are unschooled or had severely interrupted schooling (Anderson et al. 15-18).

Unfortunately, those who tutor or teach in ESL and ABL programs often are not well equipped to deal with the specific needs of adult refugees (Suda 22). ESL/ABL classes and individual tutoring frequently are staffed by community volunteers who tend to have limited – if any – training or experience in teaching ESL or literacy (Ceprano 63; Chisman 3-4; McKenna and Fitzpatrick 40; Ziegler, McCallum, and Bell 131). Although some universities offer certification programs, few instructors take advantage of the programs (Chisman 3-4), which may not be especially surprising when we consider that a large percentage of the potential clientele are unpaid instructors who volunteer their time. This lack of training and expertise among adult literacy and adult ESL instructors is problematic, as these educators are expected, but unprepared, to work with students whose learning needs may be significant. While volunteer instructors bring interest, commitment, and passion (Belzer 560) to their teaching, some adult literacy and ESL programs experience high rates of volunteer instructor turnover (Perry 78), which may be due in part to frustration and feelings of unpreparedness.

Recent attention has been paid to issues of credentialing and certification among the adult education teaching force (e.g., Chisman), although this attention is focused primarily on paid instructors and not volunteers. Despite the fact that adult ESL instruction faces many challenges and problems related to training, certification, or credentialing among instructors and tutors, and despite the fact that requirements for training, certification, and credentialing typically do not apply to volunteer instructors, there nevertheless are success stories that can offer important lessons. Chisman calls for studies “to investigate the characteristics of teachers who do and do not participate in [credentialing] systems, and why or why not, and to ask how they think the systems might be improved” (26). This case study is, in part, a response to that call.

In this manuscript, I present the case of Carolyn, an experienced but uncredentialed instructor of a low-literate ESL class for adult African refugees in Kentucky, in order to explore issues related to teaching qualifications among volunteer adult literacy/ESL educators. Carolyn had little formal training to teach, yet her teaching practices and her prior experiences suggested that while she may not be *certified* to teach, she may, in fact, be very *qualified* to do so. The following research questions shaped this analysis: What does it mean to be *qualified* to teach pre- or low-literate English language learners? How might uncredentialed or non-certified instructors become qualified?

## Certification Versus Qualification

As Chisman notes in *Closing the Gap: The Challenge of Certification and Credentialing in Adult Education*, “teacher certification and credentialing are orphan issues in adult education” (11). Adult ESL and adult ABL programs often are 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. 47; Chisman, *iii*; McKenna and Fitzpatrick 40). Chisman concludes that most adult educators are “‘experienced but not expert’, for two basic reasons: few have had extensive formal training in adult basic skills instruction and too few suitable in-service programs are available to them” (*iii*). This lack of training may result in poor quality instruction and poor student outcomes. For example, in a case study of volunteer adult literacy tutors, Ceprano finds that participants typically utilized teaching strategies based on what they were exposed to as learners, rather than those grounded in current theory and practice, which “could ultimately lead to feelings of frustration and defeat for their clients” (63).

In addition to being “orphaned” in adult education policy and practice, the issue of adult educator credentialing, particularly concerning volunteer educators, also has received limited attention in educational research. Of course, the lack of preparation for volunteer tutors in adult literacy has been known for some time (e.g., Crandall 2). Although recent research has attended to the issue of instructor qualifications in adult literacy (e.g., Belzer; Chisman), research investigating issues of volunteer teacher credentialing in adult ESL, particularly for instructors who also work with clients who are developing basic literacy skills, is scant.

Another challenge is that the terminology used to refer to these issues is contested. Chisman (5) notes that “the terms used to describe the process of establishing standards and measuring whether teachers meet them often carry symbolic and bureaucratic ‘baggage’ both within and outside the field.” These contested terms include *certification*, *credentialing*, *endorsement*, and *professionalization*. According to Chisman, *credentialing* may be viewed as relatively neutral and signifies “the process of measuring proficiency by any means or for any purpose” (6). In contrast to *certification*, which implies earning a certificate or some other endorsement from an accredited entity, such as a university, *credentialing* implies flexibility in evaluating teaching proficiency. Yet the flexibility of *credentialing* is also problematic, because credentialing in adult education may mean holding a teaching certificate, but it also may mean having a bachelor’s degree in any field (Ziegler, McCallum, and Bell 131). Thus, someone with a BA in art history or a BS in biology is credentialed and, thus, supposedly qualified to teach basic education or literacy to adults.

Of course, the term *qualified* itself is also contested, as a result of legislation like No Child Left Behind that requires all certified teachers to be “highly qualified,” which usually means that teachers can pass a standardized test (Berry 2). However, as Berry points out, such a definition is, at best, limited: teachers may be able to pass a test, but they may not be effective in the classroom. Instead, Berry suggests that highly-qualified teachers “are teachers who know not only their subject matter, but also how to organize and teach their lessons in ways that assure diverse students can learn those subjects....Highly qualified teachers don’t just teach well-designed, standards-based lessons: They know how and why their students learn” (2). Following Berry and Chisman, in this paper, I distinguish between *certified teachers*, who may hold particular certifications or endorsements, and *qualified teachers* who may not necessarily possess these documents, but who demonstrate both knowledge and skill related to teaching and the ability to help their students learn. That is, a qualified teacher may or may not be certified and vice versa.

## **Adult Literacy and ESL Instructor Preparation**

The education field has long accepted that teachers need several types of knowledge, including content knowledge, knowledge of teaching theory and practice, and pedagogical content knowledge, or “ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others” (Shulman 9). In addition to the typical types of instructor knowledge related to issues such as learner-centered instruction techniques, building learning communities, and appropriate assessments, Chisman suggests that those who instruct in basic literacy, GED, and life skills ESL programs require additional expertise, such as “managing open-entry classrooms with students of different abilities” (2).

Ziegler, McCallum, and Bell (also Bell, Ziegler, and McCallum) 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, Ziegler, and McCallum 555) or assessment of what they needed to learn. These 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, McCallum, and Bell 136). 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 in conferences, workshops, or college courses.

Chisman’s report notes that “numerous barriers prevent teachers from increasing their knowledge and skills, meeting standards, and earning credentials” (iii), and this may be particularly true for instructors who are unpaid, community-based volunteers. However, research also suggests that, even when volunteer instructors do have access to training programs, those programs may be ineffective. Ceprano (63) found that tutors’ instructional practices bore little resemblance to the techniques they learned in training, instead reflecting their own learning experiences. Training may have limited effectiveness in part because it is so short; volunteers typically receive fifteen to twenty hours—if any—of training (Crandall 2). Such training can convey broad ideas but is less likely to convey technical aspects of teaching literacy (Belzer 135).

## **Methodology**

Few studies have examined preparation to teach adult literacy (Ziegler, McCallum, and Bell 132); this is especially true with respect to teaching adult ESL, particularly to students with limited literacy skills. This case study offers an analysis of Carolyn, a community-based, volunteer adult ESL and literacy instructor, with a focus on her non-traditional qualifications to teach.

## **Research Context**

Lexington, Kentucky is one of many communities that has seen an exponential growth in refugee populations, due to the Preferred Communities resettlement program (USCRI). Several organizations offer free ESL and/or ABL instruction to adult refugees, including the local community college, various community

organizations, and some local churches (details of these programs can be found in Perry and Hart). Carolyn's class began after she was approached by both the refugee resettlement agency and a community-based literacy center; they were in desperate need of a class for a group of older African adults, all of whom needed to learn to read and write for the first time, in addition to learning English. Carolyn's class met at the community-based literacy center in the heart of downtown; this center offered or supported a variety of literacy-oriented programs, such as after-school tutoring programs, adult ESL, French and Spanish language classes, and workshops for aspiring writers. Carolyn's class met one morning a week in a small library room that featured resources for writers.

Carolyn's group consisted of three to four adult refugees, all in their 60s or older, who originally came from either the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) or Burundi. As Carolyn wrote on her questionnaire, "My class may be somewhat unique in that the students are older, their goals being perhaps different. They enjoy the comfortable setting, the opportunity to visit with each other, and the chance to learn some English." Carolyn indicated that, due to the nature of her students, this class was very different than previous adult ESL classes she had taught, in which her students had attained high levels of prior formal education. In contrast, Carolyn's current students had no formal schooling, and this impacted her teaching in many ways. As she noted,

I was amazed, one time I had them cut out objects, that they didn't know how to use scissors. You know, they just had not done that. We learn that from the time that we're children. And holding a pencil, forming those letters, and I'm still [teaching] that.

## **Carolyn**

I first met Carolyn when the local refugee resettlement agency asked us to help put on a training session for new volunteer tutors. This training session offered a brief orientation to working with refugees and teaching English. Carolyn brought several bags full of teaching materials – most of which she had created herself – that she used with her adult ESL and literacy students. Knowing little else about her, I assumed that Carolyn was a veteran, certified teacher. I learned that, while Carolyn indeed had taught literacy and ESL classes for many years and also was a retired school librarian, she was not a certified teacher. Nevertheless, the quality of the materials she created, her own descriptions of her teaching, and the glowing recommendations from caseworkers and others familiar with her teaching, suggested that Carolyn might be an effective teacher of low-literate adult refugees. In the following sections, I provide a fuller description of Carolyn and her teaching.

I recruited Carolyn to be part of a larger study of educational opportunities for refugees in Lexington (e.g. Perry and Hart; Perry and Mallozzi). Carolyn completed an open-ended questionnaire and also agreed to participate in a follow-up interview and to allow observations in her classroom.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data sources for this case study included Carolyn's responses to the open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interview, along with observations of her teaching. Among other topics, the questionnaire included items with respect to Carolyn's training and relevant experiences. The semi-structured interview gathered more in-depth data regarding her preparation for and experiences with teaching refugees. An undergraduate research assistant participated in this interview, and we audio-recorded and transcribed the interview verbatim. We shared the transcript with Carolyn in order to (a) check for accuracy, (b) clarify any points, and (c) offer an opportunity to omit any sensitive data.

The research assistant and I also conducted two open-ended observations in Carolyn's class. Observations focused on instructional techniques and Carolyn's interactions with her students. We wrote field notes, to which we added more detail after the observation; we immediately shared the field notes with Carolyn in order to check for accuracy and to identify sensitive data.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis was ongoing both during and after data collection. The first stage involved coding Carolyn's questionnaire, looking for broad themes and then developing specific codes for activities, beliefs, and needs. Differences in coding were resolved through discussion. Analysis of the questionnaire also guided some questions we asked during the interview. Analysis of the interview transcript proceeded in the same manner. Throughout analysis, we wrote analytic research memos to raise questions about initial data or to explain and interpret findings (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 155-162). We validated our research findings through triangulation and member-checking. In addition to viewing and commenting on transcripts and field notes, Carolyn also reviewed an early version of this manuscript.

## **Carolyn: Snapshot of a Volunteer Instructor**

Carolyn was an effective instructor of adult refugees who were simultaneously learning English and learning to read and write. She was trained and certified as a school librarian, and she had many years of experience working as a librarian in international schools. Additionally, she had ten years of experience teaching ESL to adults. Following her retirement and return to the U.S., Carolyn began teaching ESL at the local literacy center, working with people who were "well educated in their own language," including native Spanish speakers and graduate students from China and Japan. She contrasted this prior experience with her current situation in teaching unschooled African adults:

If they were literate in their own language, there's enough similarity that you can build on that all the time, and you could talk about what a noun and verb are, so it's quite different. And because [my current students] speak so little, it's very difficult to even explain things to them. That's why I use so many hands-on things and so many pictures and objects, because we don't have a lot of ways to communicate.

Despite her many years of experience working as a librarian in international schools, her participation in the literacy center's training program, and her years of experience teaching ESL with adults, Carolyn indicated that she did not necessarily feel prepared to teach her students. Carolyn's unease seemed to stem in large part from the nature of the students she was now teaching – students whose English learning also involved learning to read and write for the first time. As Carolyn explained,

I'm not trained as a reading teacher, you know. I'm trained as a librarian, and I taught – 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.

Analyzing Carolyn's response in relation to her training and experience suggests that being qualified to teach is a complex matter. Although Carolyn had a number of years of experience in the field of education and had taught adult ELLs for a decade, teaching low-literate adult ELLs felt entirely different to her. Her feelings were common among community-based instructors in Lexington, who indicated the same general feeling of unpreparedness for the teaching they were being asked to do with adult refugees, no matter their level of training, certification, or amount of prior teaching experience (Perry and Hart).

Carolyn explained that “the only training I have is the training that they [the literacy center] gave me, which was, I don't know, 12 hours or something.” I asked Carolyn to evaluate whether or not this was enough training to do what the literacy organization and the refugee resettlement agency hoped she could do with her particular learners. She responded,

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. ... Every week I'm figuring out for myself what's the best thing for me to do for them. And, you know, I've gotten them to the point where they can read a little bit, but I don't know that I'll ever get very—well, for one thing as you know I only see them one hour a week. You're not going to get a whole lot of progress.

Carolyn's response to my question revealed a great deal about her level of preparedness, about herself as an instructor, and about the context in which she was being asked to teach. First, her response suggested a great deal of uncertainty about her teaching; not only was she “not sure” she could take her students to the next level, but she also was unsure even of what that next level might be. Her response indicated a sense of isolation, in addition to the uncertainty, as she noted that she had to figure out “for myself what's the best thing.” Yet, her response also suggested a pragmatic awareness of the limitations placed on her teaching by the context – even a credentialed, highly-experienced literacy teacher likely would not see much progress in students who only received one hour of literacy and language instruction per week.



## Being a Qualified Instructor

Although she was not *certified* to teach English or literacy, and despite the fact that she felt unprepared for the task of teaching ESL to low-literate adults, Carolyn exhibited many characteristics of teaching professionalism that might contribute to being *qualified* to teach. These characteristics fell into three themes: (1) Carolyn's *cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity*, (2) the fact that she was a *reflective practitioner*, and (3) her *philosophy of teaching and learning*. These themes suggest routes that other instructors in similar circumstances might follow in order to enhance their own professionalism and qualifications.

### Cross-Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity

Carolyn's cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity to her students grew out of her personal background and professional experiences. Carolyn and her husband both had significant experience abroad, having worked in international schools in a variety of Middle Eastern countries. As Carolyn explained,

We started out in Kuwait and spent two years at the American School of Kuwait. Then, we went to Saudi Arabia and spent six years there, and then to the United Arab Emirates and lived in the emirate of Abu Dhabi and worked at the American School there for 12 years.

Extensive experience with living overseas and working in international schools seemed to foster a high level of cultural awareness in Carolyn that served her students well. Carolyn herself believed "that having worked with children from lots of different cultures has made me more perceptive." She shared a vignette from her previous ESL teaching experience, in which she was able to directly draw upon her international experiences:

I think it's just been wonderful that I've had the opportunity to work with kids from all different countries, and for instance, for a little while I had a student from somewhere in Arabia, I can't even think where it was. But the first time she came in, I greeted her in Arabic...and you would have thought that I had given her a platter of food or something.

Carolyn's cross-cultural awareness translated into a sensitivity toward her students and an understanding of the many challenges facing them. This understanding and sensitivity, in turn, including understanding what it was like to be an outsider unable to speak the language, likely influenced her teaching and her relationships with her students. Indeed, this kind of cross-cultural sensitivity is a disposition that teacher preparation programs often seek in prospective teachers.

### Being a Reflective Practitioner

Throughout her interview, Carolyn demonstrated that she reflected a great deal on her experiences and her teaching practice. This reflection – a disposition endorsed in teacher-training programs – served Carolyn well; being a reflective practitioner in

many ways helped her overcome her feeling of being unqualified to teach. Carolyn clearly did not feel prepared to teach adult literacy, yet she also believed that her prior experiences had helped to prepare her for this teaching, at least in part: “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.” Indeed, in contrast to her earlier statement of uncertainty about teaching African refugee adults to read, Carolyn described a success story with one of her students, Eugenie (all students’ names are pseudonyms), with whom she had been working one-on-one for some time:

I had gotten to the point where I had made a little book for her and photographs with a picture with the two of us. “Eugenie is short, Carolyn is tall. Eugenie and Carolyn are friends” you know. I was adding to this little booklet, and then I started getting a couple of other people. All of a sudden I had to pull back from that, because I had to go back to the beginning. But I honestly think that if I could just work with her, she’d be reading now, really reading, because she is so bright. And yet, I’m sure she never learned to read or write her own language.

Carolyn’s success with Eugenie suggests that, while she may not have felt confident in her abilities to teach both English and literacy to adult refugees, she nevertheless was a successful instructor who was able to think carefully about her students’ abilities and learning needs.

In fact, Carolyn reported engaging in routine, purposeful reflection on her own instruction and her students’ learning as a regular part of her teaching practice:

I spent 20 years as a librarian; I tend to be a very organized person, and 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.

Carolyn attributed this routine reflection to her experience as a librarian, which suggests that prior experiences *outside* the field of education may be beneficial for volunteer instructors. Carolyn, for example, was able to draw upon professional habits related to organization and research skills to analyze her learners’ strengths and needs, and to educate herself about learning and teaching. As with cultural awareness and sensitivity, Carolyn’s habit of purposefully reflecting on what did – or did not – work in her individual lessons is one that teacher education programs attempt to cultivate in prospective teachers. Strong teachers constantly reflect on their teaching and their students’ learning, and Carolyn clearly exemplified this disposition.

### **Philosophy of Teaching & Learning**

Taking note of what worked (or did not work) appeared to have helped Carolyn to develop a philosophy of teaching and learning for low-literate adult ELLs. Evidence of Carolyn’s philosophy occurred in statements of belief, such as when she explained, “I

believe that repetition is just essential.” Or, as I noted in field notes during a pause in her class,

Even though she focuses on the sounds, she also thinks sight words are important. Carolyn said that she learned to read before phonics, and that she had used sight words to learn to read herself. She believes sight words are important particularly because students who have always learned by listening need to focus on what things look like.

Carolyn’s many descriptions of her own teaching, along with my observations, demonstrated that she engaged in many effective pedagogical techniques for teaching beginning literacy, as I will describe. Carolyn’s belief in “just jumping in and trying things,” coupled with her disposition as a reflective practitioner, likely worked in concert to help her become an effective teacher. Her willingness to experiment with new techniques, and her regular reflection on what did and did not work, suggest that prior experience and specific habits might contribute to being qualified to teach, even when teachers have limited training.

During our interview, Carolyn described how she structured the beginning of her lessons – a technique she had adapted from her own language learning when she took a Spanish language class:

I start every class with what day is today. And I found a couple years ago, when I took a Spanish class at the [literacy] center, that it was comforting to me if the class began with something I knew. So, even though we do it every single time, it’s a way to begin, and everybody knows the answer. So, everybody feels good about being able to answer the question, and I have one student who has been with me the longest, who is VERY bright. I always ask her first, so that the other students can model her, and so we always start with what day is today and what is the date? What is the year? What is the season? And what is the weather? And then I write it down and my star student is at the point now, where once I have that all written out on the white board, she can read it all. And she’ll come up, point to the words and read the sentences, and then each of the other students will come up.

Observations of Carolyn’s teaching confirmed that her lessons always started off in this manner, including the routines of stating the date and the season and describing the day’s weather – a beginning literacy routine very similar to the calendar routines found in many U.S. primary grade classrooms. The observed lessons then followed a common structure that involved reviewing something the students had recently learned (e.g., months of the year, words that begin with a specific sound), introducing a new phonics concept (e.g., the letter of the day, rhyming words), and writing practice related to the phonics concept (e.g., words that start with the letter of the day or that rhyme). If time remained in the lesson, Carolyn sometimes had her students read from homemade pattern books with predictable text (e.g., “I see \_\_\_\_”). Carolyn purposefully structured her lessons in this way, in

accordance with a philosophy of learning she had developed through her prior teaching experience:

I believe that repetition is just essential, and you know I've worked with enough kids, like I mentioned earlier, I always go with my best student first. Nobody seems to mind that, because I'm almost certain she'll know the answer, and then I go to the one, the next one, you know, from the top and let them go. By the time I get to the last person, they've heard the answer three times, and that gives them an opportunity to be successful. And I think that comes from experience. Just, maybe, it's a very small thing to realize that repetition and the need to feel successful when you're learning.

Like many effective literacy teachers, Carolyn used visual aids, hands-on materials, and realia in her teaching to support her students' language and literacy learning. Although she purchased some materials from a local teacher supply store, she created most materials herself in order to make them appropriate to adult students and to connect them with her students' lives and needs. During one lesson, for example, Carolyn reviewed vegetable vocabulary the students had learned in previous lessons, using her homemade cards. The cards had words typed in a large font, illustrated with colorful clip-art illustrations, mounted on green construction paper (Carolyn always mounted words from a given theme on the same color of paper):

Carolyn holds up the cards, and the students say the vegetables. For many of the veggies (e.g., cabbage, carrots, broccoli, and garlic), Carolyn asks the students if they have it in Africa. The students lean forward to look at the cards. Carolyn then picks up the carrot card and asks, "What color are the carrots?" She does this for several veggies. The students debate whether the beans are red or brown (they are brown). The students typically reply with one word answers (e.g., "red," "orange," or "green"). Then, Carolyn repeats their answer in a complete sentence: "The broccoli is green." Carolyn asks Valérie to give her the pumpkin. She asks Eugenie to give her the carrots. She asks Boniface to give her the tomatoes. The students locate the appropriate veggie cards and hand them to Carolyn. Carolyn repeats this with the remaining veggies, asking each student in turn. When Boniface gets stuck on *cucumber*, Eugenie whispers something to him.

This excerpt from Carolyn's teaching typified her instructional style and was evidence of her teaching & learning philosophy in action. Carolyn used a variety of effective scaffolding techniques for developing both language and literacy, such as using picture cards with word labels, repeating predictable questions, allowing students to answer with one-word responses, modeling appropriate grammatical structures, and encouraging peer support. Additionally, asking students if the depicted vegetables were available in Africa scaffolded students' learning by drawing on their prior

knowledge and encouraging them to make personal connections to the concept being taught.

As in the field note excerpt, Carolyn's teaching frequently relied on realia and homemade materials that she used to teach vocabulary, phonics, or other literacy concepts. According to Carolyn, this was a technique she had learned after consulting with her sister-in-law, "who taught Montessori for years." As Carolyn explained,

Her suggestion was to teach the sounds of the letters rather than the names of the letters, and that may be what kindergarten teachers do, I don't know, to take very different sounds. So I took the word *bat* first, and taught B and A and T and slowly produced the letter sounds and words that would go with the letters. When I was teaching B, I took a basket and walked around my house and gathered up anything that began with a B, and I'd do the same thing for other letters of the alphabet.

Indeed, Carolyn started using realia during her very first day of teaching language and literacy to this group of students. She reflected:

I remember the first class was in February, and it was really cold, so I grabbed every color of jacket I had, you know, red, blue, green, pink, and sweaters, and mittens and gloves, and hats, I think, which was a lot. And so I started out with the names of each of those, the colors, and how many there were. And that was just the beginning, you know, so then I kind of got the idea to use themes.

Using this type of realia was so integral to Carolyn's teaching that she kept a permanent bag of materials and brought it to every class. I initially had seen Carolyn's bag of teaching materials when I first met her at the workshop we conducted for other volunteers, and I was able to get a closer look at it during one of my observations of her teaching. Carolyn's bag included many objects she had gathered or purchased for teaching, including colored pencils, balloons, buttons, and pens, all of which she used for counting, colors, and object names. She had a bag of coins and a few small bills for counting money, along with small clocks for telling time. Her bag included word cards and other flashcards – some store-bought, but mostly homemade. Her store-bought flashcards indicated vowels, consonants, and pictures with word labels. Homemade cards covered themed topics such as items in the living room, bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen. She also created sets of homemade cards of everyday words that started with specific letters, such as H (e.g., hat, hanger, hammer, husband), which she used when she was teaching letters and letter-sound correspondences. Carolyn's bag also included a file box that contained many pictures of items or concepts, such as clothing, rooms in a house, or seasons, which were "just pictures I collected out of catalogues and magazines." Carolyn showed me sets of color strips made of tagboard that she gives to students when they come to her class for the first time. She explained that she always carries this bag of materials "because you never know who's going to be here" and because she sometimes found herself with extra

time at the end of her lesson for review: “If I have five minutes at the end, I’ll pull it out and we’ll just go back and practice.”

The portrait I have painted of Carolyn’s teaching shows that, while she was not certified in either ESL or literacy education, her teaching was grounded in pedagogical practices that are known to be effective in teaching language and literacy. Carolyn’s descriptions of and reflections on her own teaching suggest that she took a great deal of care in thinking about her learners, in thinking about their prior experiences and learning needs, and in preparing lessons that fit her learners.

## Becoming a Qualified Instructor: Implications

Carolyn’s case suggests that, for volunteer teachers of adult refugees, being qualified may involve a mixture of experiences and professional habits that can be cultivated over time. For example, unlike some volunteer tutors, Carolyn had a great deal of experience in both educational and cross-cultural settings, and she was able to draw upon these experiences to inform her own teaching. Her professional experiences as a librarian also likely disposed her toward helpful habits such as being organized and prepared and also knowing how to seek information through research. Indeed, another important theme among the findings of this study was that much of Carolyn’s qualification to teach was due to the efforts she made at professional self-education. In addition to purposefully reflecting on her teaching, Carolyn engaged in behaviors designed to increase her professional knowledge.

Because Carolyn did not have any specific training to teach literacy, and because she felt unprepared to teach adult students who needed to read and write, she actively sought information and taught herself the knowledge needed to educate her learners. Part of this self-education process involved seeking guidance and mentoring from experts. When she was approached “to take on a pre-literate group,” Carolyn’s initial reaction was “I don’t know how to do this ... I don’t know where to begin.” Instead of turning down the opportunity, Carolyn sought expertise from her sister-in-law, who was a Montessori teacher, and from an experienced adult ESL teacher:

I actually got in touch with [someone] who teaches at [the community college] ... I emailed her and said what do you think? And she emailed back and said, “You can do this, you’re a librarian—go on the Internet and do some research!” [*laughs*] ... So that’s what I did, and I was amazed really at what I found.

## The Challenge of Credentialing Requirements for Volunteers

Finding and retaining qualified instructors is a great challenge for adult education in general (Chisman *iii*); this challenge is even greater for community-based programs that are staffed by volunteer instructors and tutors, as are many adult ESL programs. Calls have been made (e.g., Chisman) to increase the qualifications of the adult education teaching force, to increase the knowledge and skills that instructors possess, and to ensure that they are credentialed. While these goals are important, they are less feasible for volunteer instructors in community-based programs than they are for instructors who are paid, whether part-time or full-time. In fact, formal

credentialing was one technique that was surprisingly unsuccessful for Carolyn; shortly after she first began teaching ESL ten years prior to the study, Carolyn had enrolled in education courses at a local university. However, she quickly discovered that the available programs and courses did not fit her perceived needs:

After I'd been back [in the U.S.] and I was doing this about a year, I thought, "Well, maybe I should just, you know, take some coursework," and I started a class at UK, but I had to take this semester of theory class ... first, and I got into the class and I thought, you know, I'm in my 50s, and I've been teaching for 20 years. I'm not going to sit for a semester through this theory class. This was not what I want, and this is not what I need, and so 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.

Carolyn's narrative illustrates a number of potentially significant issues. Importantly, her narrative suggests that some volunteer instructors, particularly those who make it past a few months of teaching, may be willing to pursue – and pay for – university coursework related to language and literacy pedagogy, even if they are “just” unpaid community-based volunteers. However, Carolyn's experience also reveals some of the barriers toward this type of professional development. For example, requiring theory classes as prerequisites may deter those instructors who are already in the field and looking for immediate solutions to the challenges they are facing with their current students. While theory certainly is relevant for all instructors, other methods and models – such as embedding theory into other pedagogical content instruction – may be far more effective with these instructors, who may seek to enhance their qualifications without undergoing an entire certification program.

### **Supporting Volunteer Professional Development**

Community-based ESL and literacy programs certainly can work toward recruiting instructors and tutors who are qualified and credentialed, although this may not be a realistic or pragmatic goal for most programs, if they must rely on the generosity and free time of volunteers. Instead of requiring certification or other credentialing for volunteer instructors in community-based adult ESL and adult literacy programs, it may make more sense to support these instructors in specific ways that will help them work toward being qualified.

#### *Ongoing professional development.*

Directors and staff of community-based adult education programs can work in conjunction with education departments at local colleges and universities, or with local school districts, to offer periodic professional development workshops to volunteer instructors. Experts at local colleges, universities, or school districts also can develop free or low-cost online modules that are targeted to volunteer instructors in community-based programs. Online modules could be credit-bearing with

a local institution, or they could offer some sort of certificate of completion. Some online modules could be standard, offering training and professional development on general topics related to adult language and literacy pedagogy, while others could be developed specific to the local contexts in which volunteers are teaching. For example, for instructors such as Carolyn, who face a large population of African refugees who have never been to school, a module could be developed that helps instructors understand differences in teaching adult literacy with unschooled adults versus teaching adult literacy with schooled adults who have reading disabilities. Online modules might avoid the pitfall Carolyn faced when she attempted to enroll in a local university program, but found she would need to take theory courses before she was able to take courses that would have better addressed her immediate needs.

#### *Professional connections.*

Carolyn's case illustrates the importance of volunteer instructors having access to peer mentors, such as the instructor at the community college and her Montessori-teaching sister-in-law. Community-based education programs can foster formal mentoring partnerships – matching a mentor with an apprentice instructor, providing access to a local expert at a university or school district – or individual instructors can seek out such partnerships on their own. Other types of partnership opportunities, such as online social networking sites in which instructors can connect with each other or with experts, can serve as additional ways in which instructors might increase their professional qualifications, as they share knowledge and resources. For example, instructors and experts might set up professional reading book clubs – either online or face-to-face – in which they have opportunities to increase their knowledge of learning and teaching. Finally, as Carolyn's case suggested, having access to appropriate literacy teaching materials for adults was a great challenge; as a result, Carolyn invested a great deal of time, money, and energy in developing and making her own teaching materials. Community-based programs might offer workshops, similar to scrapbooking parties or quilting bees, in which instructors gather together to create teaching materials that they could keep themselves or contribute to a common materials library. Alternately, instructors could organize such materials-making parties themselves.

#### *Encouraging self-education.*

The amount of time and energy that Carolyn put into educating herself about effective language and literacy instruction suggests that self-education is an important technique for volunteer instructors of adult ESL and adult literacy, particularly those who may feel that they are unprepared and/or have little in the way of support. Finding ways to support individual volunteer instructors' self-education, whether through professional development modules, social networking opportunities, or individual reading and research, is important. Additionally, Carolyn's case suggests that purposeful reflection may be critical for volunteer instructors as an important way to increase their teaching qualifications. Helping these instructors understand that reflecting on their own teaching – or even giving them a brief introduction to action research in educational settings – may be an effective way to increase



the qualifications of instructors who are not certified to teach, and who are not compensated for the important teaching they do.

## **Conclusion: Being (And Becoming) Qualified**

Volunteer instructors in community-based programs, like Carolyn, are in great need of opportunities to increase their qualifications to teach (Chisman *iii*); however, this need also exists for paid instructors and for instructors who already have some credentialing or certification, particularly if their credentials do not fit the population they are teaching. As the case of Carolyn suggests, *being qualified* is more than a matter of holding a specific certification (e.g., in literacy education or in ESL education). Being qualified includes having content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical-content knowledge related to teaching language and literacy to adults (Shulman 9), but these areas of knowledge are not sufficient. In addition to holding certain types of knowledge, being qualified also may mean having had certain experiences and specific dispositions that can support a teacher in her efforts to work with adult ELLs.

As Carolyn's case demonstrates, prior experiences can contribute to being qualified to teach. Many volunteers may come to adult ESL and adult literacy programs with prior experiences in education (Perry). However, prior experiences in education may not necessarily prepare instructors to work with adults or for the specifics of teaching language and/or literacy. Educators trained for the elementary field, for example, may not be adequately prepared to meet the unique learning needs of adults. Similarly, secondary educators trained in fields like math and science education may not have the knowledge or skills necessary to teach language and/or literacy. As a result, even credentialed teachers may need opportunities to increase their qualifications with respect to working with adult learners, teaching ESL, teaching literacy, or any combination of the three. While requiring adult educators to complete coursework or enroll in continuing education may be feasible for part-time or full-time paid instructors, requiring credentialing or formal coursework is unrealistic in volunteer-taught, community-based adult literacy and ESL programs. However, increasing volunteer instructors' qualifications through other avenues is both possible and promising.

Carolyn's case illustrates some ways in which community-based programs may support instructors' development of qualifications, or in which individual instructors may seek to enhance their own qualifications. Yet, Carolyn's case does not provide the whole story; it raises questions for future research. For example, if cross-cultural awareness is important, how can this quality be fostered in instructors, or potential instructors, who have had limited experience with people who are culturally different from themselves? If dispositions and experiences, regardless of whether those experiences involve teaching, are important, how can adult education programs effectively recruit and/or screen for instructors with those qualities? How can programs foster purposeful reflection and the development of appropriate philosophies of teaching and learning among volunteer instructors? In short, the value of this case study of Carolyn and her effective teaching is that it offers both a portrait of what a qualified—although uncredentialed—teacher may look like and

some hints toward supporting the development of these qualifications in other teachers. Yet, such a case study cannot offer conclusive answers about increasing the qualifications of volunteer instructors; much further research is required.

## Works Cited

- Anderson, Jim, et al. *Implementing an Intergenerational Literacy Program with Authentic Literacy Instruction: Challenges, Responses, and Results*. Vancouver, BC; University of British Columbia. 2009. Report.
- Barton, David, et al. *Literacy Lives and Learning*. London: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Belzer, Alisa. "What Are They Doing in There? Case Studies of Volunteer Tutors and Adult Literacy Learners." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 49.7 (2006): 560-572. Print.
- Belzer, Alisa. "Less May Be More: Rethinking Adult Literacy Volunteer Tutor Training." *Journal of Literacy Research* 38.2 (2006): 111-140. Print.
- Bell, Sherry Mee, Mary Ziegler, and R. Steve McCallum. "What Adult Educators Know Compared with What They Say They Know about Providing Research-based Reading Instruction." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 47.7 (2004): 542-563. Print.
- Berry, Barnett. "What It Means to Be a "Highly Qualified Teacher." 2003. Southeast Center for Teaching Quality. Web.
- Brick, Kate et al. *Refugee Resettlement in the United States: An Examination of Challenges and Proposed Solutions*. 2010. New York: Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs. Report.
- Ceprano, Maria A. "Strategies and Practices of Individuals Who Tutor Adult Illiterates Voluntarily." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 39.1 (1995): 56-64. Print.
- Chisman, Forrest P. *Closing the Gap: The Challenge of Certification and Credentialing in Adult Education*. 2011. New York: Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy. Report.
- Crandall, JoAnn. "Creating a Professional Workforce in Adult ESL Literacy." ERIC Digest. 1994. Web.
- Kerwin, Donald M. *The Faltering U.S. Refugee Protection System: Legal and Policy Responses to Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Others in Need of Protection*. 2011. New York: Migration Policy Institute. Web.
- McKenna, Rosa, and Lynne Fitzpatrick. *Building Sustainable Adult Literacy Provision: A Review of International Trends in Adult Literacy Policy and Programs*. 2004. Australia: The National Centre for Vocational Education Research. Web.
- Muth, William, and Kristen Perry. "Adult Literacy: An Inclusive Framework." *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts, Third Edition*. Eds. Diane Lapp and Douglas Fisher. New York: Routledge, 2010. 76-82. Print.
- Perry, Kristen. *Adult Literacy and ESL Provision in Lexington*. 2010. Lexington, KY: Collaborative Center on Literacy Development. Report.
- Perry, Kristen, and Susan Hart. "'I'm Just Kind of Winging It': Preparing & Supporting Educators of Adult Refugee Learners." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* (2012): 110-122. Print.

- Perry, Kristen, and Christine Mallozzi. "Are You ABLE...to Learn?": Power and Access to Higher Education for African Refugees in the U.S." *Power and Education* 3 (2011): 249-262. Print.
- Shulman, Lee. "Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching." *Educational Researcher* 15.2 (1986): 4-14. Print.
- Suda, Liz. *Discourses of Greyness and Diversity: Revisiting the ALBE and ESL interface*. 2002. Victoria, Australia: Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium. Web.
- USCRI. (2010). "Engaging Communities: Preferred Communities Program." *U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants*. USCRI, 2010. Web. 27 July, 2010.
- Ziegler, Mary, R. Steve McCallum and Sherry Mee Bell. "Volunteer Instructors in Adult Literacy: Who Are They and What Do They Know About Reading Instruction?" *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal* 3.3 (2009): 131-139.

---

Kristen H. Perry is an assistant professor of literacy education at the University of Kentucky. She has investigated literacy practices among Sudanese refugees and educational opportunities for adult refugees. She co-directs the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study.