



# JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE FOR ADULT LITERACY, SECONDARY, AND BASIC EDUCATION

Published Jointly by The Commission on Adult Basic Education and Rutgers University

## RESEARCH

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### **Spoken Oral Language and Adult Struggling Readers**

*By Dariush Bakhtiari, Daphne Greenberg, Nicole Patton-Terry, and Elena Nightingale*

### **Desire: A Key Factor for Successful Online GED Adult Learners**

*By Donita Shaw, Yuen San Sarah Tham, Julie Hogle, and Jody Koch*

### **A Need to Be Needed: The Intersection Between Emotions, Apprenticeship, and Student Participation in an Adult ESL Literacy Classroom**

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## PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVE

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### **Steps Forward and Back in Adult Numeracy Teacher Professional Development: A Reflection on a Teacher Workshop Experience**

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### **"Sit & Get" Won't Grow Dendrites: 20 Professional Learning Strategies That Engage the Adult Brain**

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### **Dyslexia Decoded: What It Is, What It Isn't, and What You Can Do About It**

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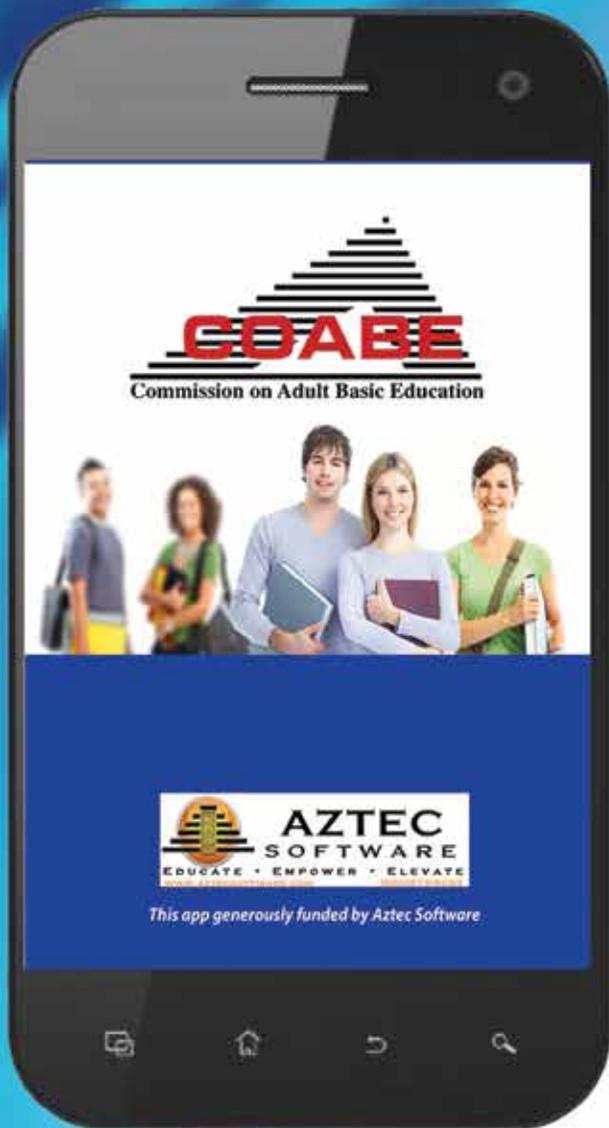
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# JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE FOR ADULT LITERACY, SECONDARY, AND BASIC EDUCATION

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## THE COABE JOURNAL, CELEBRATING 36 YEARS AS A MAJOR VOICE IN ADULT EDUCATION

Dear Readers,

We would like to thank Jim Berger for his years of labor on this journal. We have inherited a well managed and healthy journal, and this is in large part due to Jim's dedication and sheer hard work. Jim brought a strong vision for the journal. He wanted it to have an impact on research and practice by featuring excellent research and high quality reports on practice by and for people who actually work in the field of adult basic education, and he succeeded. This issue, which we believe is an excellent example of that vision, consists of articles that were primarily accepted during Jim's tenure.

The three of us bring diverse backgrounds to this task. Amy is a retired professor of adult education with over 30 years in the field. She researches a variety of topics including the history of adult education, policy issues related to adult education, and the intersection between adult education and higher education. Alisa is an associate professor at Rutgers University. Her research focuses on adult literacy policy, professional development, and issues of teaching and learning. Heather currently is the Executive Director of the Women + Girls Research Alliance at University of North Carolina at Charlotte; her research focuses on the connections between weight and learning in women of all ages. A former journalist, grant writer, and editorial assistant, her primary work on the journal will be in copyediting and serving as liaison for graphic design and production. In addition, we are thrilled that Nora Devlin, a graduate student at Rutgers University, has joined our team. We are also happy that all three column editors have agreed to continue. We are in the debt of Daphne Greenberg who ably guides the Resource Review section; David Rosen who writes on technology; and Gary Dean who writes the Research Digest.

Our primary aim is to continue Jim's vision while expanding the reach of the journal. We hope to continue the emphasis on high quality research and reports of innovative practices, but also increase the number of Viewpoints pieces as a way to present commentary on the key issues facing adult educators today. We plan to continue Jim's precedent of publishing articles from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Our own vision is to make this journal a vital and interactive enterprise where research and practice can be presented and where important issues can be discussed.

In this, our inaugural issue, the three research articles present differing perspectives on important problems within adult basic and literacy education. Finn presents a discussion of the role of emotion in an adult ESL classroom and of the flexibility and strength that can be found in the community-based classroom. Shaw, Tham, Hogle, and Koch look at the motivations of successful adult learners enrolled in an online GED program. This case study of a group of 12 learners finds that motivation or "desire" is an important part of the success of students in this type of program. The third research article by Bakhtiari, Greenberg, Patton-Terry, and Nightingale explores the research on the relationship between oral language and reading ability. They also bridge the divide between research and practice by making suggestions for how their findings can be used by classroom instructors. Finally, in the Practitioner Perspective section, Saliga, Daviso, Stuart, and Pachnowski examine a professional development experience for mathematics teachers in GED programs. This is a wonderful example of how practitioners can use data to reflect on their own experiences and provide information that can helpful to others.

We look forward to the adventure ahead as we work to sustain and develop the effort that Jim began. We hope you will participate in this process by making contributions to the journal, giving us feedback, and by participating in conversations the authors start. We believe the journal plays a key role in the field, but it cannot do so without you, our readers.

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## MISSION STATEMENT

The Journal of Research and Practice for Adult Literacy, Secondary, and Basic Education is published jointly three times a year by the Commission on Adult Basic Education and Rutgers University. The journal's mission is to provide a forum for sharing research, information, theory, commentary, and practical experiences that will improve the quality of services for adult basic education, literacy, and numeracy learners. These learners are found in publicly funded ABE, ESL, and GED programs; volunteer-based literacy programs; community-based literacy programs; family literacy programs; workplace literacy programs; correctional literacy programs; and many other places.

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## Spoken Oral Language and Adult Struggling Readers

**Dariushtari Bakhtiari**  
**Daphne Greenberg**  
**Nicole Patton-Terry**  
**Elena Nightingale**  
Georgia State University

### ABSTRACT

Oral language is a critical component to the development of reading acquisition. Much of the research concerning the relationship between oral language and reading ability is focused on children, while there is a paucity of research focusing on this relationship for adults who struggle with their reading. Oral language as defined in this paper includes: phonological awareness, morphological awareness, vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, listening comprehension, and dialect. Definitions of each of these constructs are provided. We explore the research on each aspect of oral language and its relationship to reading in adults who have low reading skills. Overall, adults who have difficulty with reading often have difficulty with oral language skills. Suggestions for instructors of Adult Basic Education classes are discussed.

Oral language is a critical component to the development of reading acquisition (National Reading Panel (NRP), 2000). However, much of the research concerning oral language and reading achievement is focused on children, and comparatively fewer studies focus on oral language and reading achievement in adults who struggle with their reading (Curtis, 2006; Taylor, Greenberg, Laures-Gore, & Wise, 2012). Research on adult literacy programs often focuses on skill building in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics and does not focus as much on oral language skills (Curtis, 2006). However, as the research discussed in this literature review will show, adults who struggle with reading often are also weak in their oral language skills. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize studies that have investigated aspects of oral language among adults who are struggling readers and to suggest future research studies relevant to this area of study. Oral language as defined in this literature review includes: phonological awareness, morphological awareness, vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, listening comprehension, and dialect (Hoover & Gough, 1990; Sabatini, Sawaki, Shore, & Scarborough, 2010; Taylor et al., 2012; Terry & Scarborough, 2011). The paper will begin with an

explanation of how articles were selected for this literature review, continue with definitions of the key constructs explored in this review, explore what is known about each construct and adults who have difficulty reading, and then end with suggestions for teachers of Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes.

## **SELECTING ARTICLES FOR THIS LITERATURE REVIEW**

Articles for this review were gathered using the Electronic Resources Information Center (ERIC) and the EBSCOhost online research databases. In order to be included in the sections on adult literacy and oral language, authors had to describe their participants as having difficulty with reading and include measures of at least one aspect of oral language skill and reading skill. The following search terms were used to search for articles for this review: adult basic education, struggling adult readers, oral language abilities, phonological awareness, morphological awareness, vocabulary knowledge, syntactic knowledge, listening comprehension, and dialect. Only peer-reviewed articles were included. Due to lack of articles in the relationship of dialect use and reading in adult learners, articles that included children were reviewed in the area of dialect.

## **DEFINITIONS**

### **Phonological Awareness**

Phonological awareness is the ability to manipulate spoken words as a whole as well as their combined and individual sounds (Elbro, Borstrom, & Peterson, 1998; NRP, 2000). This skill is considered critical for being able to sound out unfamiliar words. There are many tests that are used to measure phonological skill, one of which is the Elision subtest of the Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (CTOPP; Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1999). In this test, individuals are asked

to repeat a word and are then asked to say the word without a certain sound (e.g., *what is sling without /l/?* where the answer is *sing*).

### **Morphological Awareness**

Morphological awareness is defined as the ability to analyze and distinguish between different morphemes within words and manipulate their structures (Apel & Thomas-Tate, 2009; Wolter, Wood, & D'zatko, 2009). Morphemes include all base words, prefixes, and suffixes within full words that still hold meaning (Carlisle, 2003). Carlisle (2003) also posits that knowledge of meanings of base words, prefixes, and suffixes plays a significant role on vocabulary growth and language comprehension. To illustrate this skill, take for example the word *shifted*. This word contains two morphemes: the base word *shift* and the suffix *-ed*. A reader proficient in morphological awareness will know that the suffix *-ed* indicates that the verb occurred in the past.

The Grammatical Morphemes subtest of the Comprehensive Assessment of Spoken Language (CASL) battery is an example of a task that measures morphological awareness (Carrow-Woolfolk, 1999). In this task individuals are asked to complete analogies in which one word is left out and there is a certain morpheme that is being manipulated (e.g., *boat is to boats as hat is to...; where the answer is hats*).

### **Vocabulary**

Vocabulary knowledge is the degree to which an individual knows meanings of words. Proficiency in vocabulary knowledge is needed to be a good reader. Perfetti's (2007) Lexical Quality Hypothesis explains that a person needs to have precision and flexibility in his or her own knowledge of words in order to be a proficient reader. To be precise, an individual needs to know what is the correct context in which to use certain words (e.g., *orange* can be used as both the name of a color and as the name of a fruit, the use

of which is determined by context). An individual with poor precision may use some words at times in which it does not make sense. Individuals who are flexible in their knowledge of words have the ability to convey different meanings of words in several different ways (e.g., “exercising” may be another way of saying “jogging a few miles” or “doing aerobics”). According to this hypothesis, individuals who have higher quality lexical representations are able to read more proficiently than individuals who have lower quality lexical representations.

There are two types of vocabulary: expressive and receptive. Expressive oral vocabulary knowledge is the extent to which an individual possesses the breadth and depth of spoken vocabulary as measured by spoken phonological and semantic representation (NRP, 2000; Oulette, 2006). The Boston Naming Task (BNT) is a measure that focuses on expressive vocabulary in which participants are shown a target picture and are asked to name the picture (Kaplan, Goodglass, & Weintraub, 2001). Receptive oral vocabulary knowledge is known as the breadth and depth of comprehension of words that are audibly heard (NRP, 2000). A task that measures receptive vocabulary knowledge is the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test – 4 (PPVT-4; Dunn & Dunn, 2007) in which a participant is shown four pictures and is asked to point to a picture of a spoken target word.

### **Syntactic Knowledge**

Syntactic knowledge is the extent to which an individual possesses comprehension of how the grammar of a language is constructed and awareness of all of its rules and regulations (Scott, 2009). Individuals who are proficient in their syntactic knowledge are able to string together words with skill and efficiency, and furthermore, these individuals have been seen to possess greater reading comprehension compared to those who are weaker in syntactic knowledge (Taylor et al., 2012). An

example of a task that taps into syntactic knowledge is the Sentence Combining subtest of the Test of Language Development – Third Edition (Newcomer & Hammill, 1997). In this task, examiners say two or more simple sentences to participants who are asked to combine those sentences into compound or complex ones.

### **Listening Comprehension**

Listening comprehension is defined as how well an individual understands sentences when they are spoken as opposed to being written (Sabatini et al., 2010). Proficiency in listening comprehension involves an understanding of spoken vocabulary and sentence processing capabilities. If an individual is not able to comprehend spoken sentences, then that individual will typically have difficulty comprehending written sentences (Elbro, 1996; Perfetti, 2007). An example of a listening comprehension task is the Understanding Directions (UD) subtest of the Woodcock-Johnson III (WJ-III; Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001). On this task, individuals are told to point to one or more objects in a picture in a certain order and the examiner makes a note about whether or not the individual pointed to the correct objects.

### **Dialect**

Dialects are variations of languages that keep many of the same forms and features of that original language (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006). These are linguistic systems that require speakers to have knowledge of the systematic rules that govern language form, content, and dialect use. Different dialects of a language can form because of the political, social, and cultural forces that different groups have faced throughout history (Green, 2002; Labov, 1995). Dialects are variations of a language which are spoken by a group of people and can occur in all languages. Thus, importantly, everyone

speaks a dialect and no one dialect is more “correct” or “bad” than another. Rather, what is often used to differentiate these dialects are their linguistic features, the contexts in which these features are used, and the relative prestige they are assigned.

For instance, in the United States, Mainstream American English (MAE) is often used to refer to dialects that are deemed more socially acceptable, more aligned with printed English, more characteristic of affluence, and most often used in formal contexts like school and the workplace. Conversely, Nonmainstream American English (NMAE) is often used to refer to dialects that are most often used in informal contexts, more characteristic of disadvantage, or spoken by social or cultural minority groups. Not surprisingly, many NMAE dialects are considered by some to be low-prestige and are often perceived to be “incorrect,” “bad,” or “improper” English. These perceptions are inappropriate linguistically; however, these differences have become important in discussions about the reading achievement of cultural and language minority students.

The way in which a person speaks has been shown to have an impact on the way people learn to read (NRP, 2000, National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Dialects of a language contain phonological, morphological, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic differences from the mainstream language. For example, an individual who speaks a nonmainstream form of English may say the sentence, “*He runnin’.*” This is said instead of the correct mainstream form of English, “*He is running.*” It has been hypothesized that these differences in spoken language may be able to explain, at least in part, why some individuals experience difficulty in reading mainstream English. An example of a test that measures an individual’s spoken dialect use is the Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation – Screening Test (DELV-ST; Seymour, Roeper, & deVilliers, 2003). This

test is made up of two parts. In Part I, individuals are asked to repeat sentences and complete cloze sentences. In Part II, individuals are asked to answer questions about pictures that they are shown or repeat nonwords. Examiners record responses and determine whether or not they indicate that one is speaking with strong, some, or little to no variation from mainstream American English.

## **WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT ORAL LANGUAGE AND ADULT STRUGGLING READERS?**

The following sections focus on what is known about adult literacy learners in each area of oral language.

### **Phonological Awareness**

Phonological awareness is the oral language skill most studied in the field of adult literacy. All studies that we found suggest that adults who have low literacy skills struggle with phonological awareness skills. Two examples of studies that include phonological awareness skills will be described here.

Greenberg, Ehri, and Perin (1997) conducted a study that included children and adults reading at the third to fifth grade level (as measured by Woodcock Reading Mastery Test – Revised (WRMT-R; Woodcock, 1987). Participants were also given a phoneme deletion task and a phoneme segmentation task. Phoneme deletion skills were measured by Rosner and Simon’s (1971) task in which participants are asked to delete phonemes in common words to make new words (e.g., *Say snail without the /s/*). Phoneme segmentation skills were measured by how well participants could segment words by placing a chip every time they heard a sound pronounced (i.e., if the word *bicycle* is said, a participant would put 7 chips down). It was found that the adults had great difficulty with these tasks, with the children outperforming the adult readers

on both of these tasks. On the phoneme deletion task, adults had an overall mean score of 12.8 correct (out of 40 possible correct,  $SD = 7.3$ ) while children had an average of 24.1 correct ( $SD = 7.7$ ). On the phoneme segmentation task, adults in this study had an overall mean score of 2.6 correct (out of a possible 10 correct,  $SD = 2.6$ ), and children had an average of 6.3 correct ( $SD = 2.8$ ).

In a study by Thompkins and Binder (2003), adults who read at the second through fifth grade levels as measured by the Test of Adult Basic Education, version 7 (TABE-7) were administered phoneme recognition, deletion, and phonological spelling tests. To measure phoneme recognition, participants indicated whether word pairs had the same sound at the beginning, middle, or end (e.g. “Do *taste* and *take* begin with the same sound?”). In order to measure phoneme deletion, participants were asked to take words and say them without one of the letters, (e.g., “Say *sun* without the ‘s’”). For phonological spelling, 10 nonwords were presented for participants to spell orally. Results of this study found that the adults performed poorly on the phonological awareness tests and that their phonological awareness as a whole accounted for a unique portion of the variance in their reading ability.

### **Morphological Awareness**

Herman, Cote, Reilly, & Binder (2013) examined the effect of morphological awareness on reading ability in 169 native English speakers who were enrolled in ABE programs. Three separate tasks were adapted from other researchers and administered to participants in order to measure their morphology knowledge: the Test of Morphological Structure: Derivation (Carlisle, 2000), the Test of Morphological Structure: Production (Carlisle, 2000), and the Derivational Suffix Choice Test of Pseudowords (Mahony, 1994; Singson, Mahony, & Mann, 2000).

In the Test of Morphological Structure: Derivation task, participants heard a base word and were asked to complete a cloze task using a derived form of the word they were given (e.g., *Call. I was busy, so I could not answer the phone when you \_\_\_\_*). During the Test of Morphological Structure: Production task, participants were asked to name the base form of a word in a cloze task after hearing a derived word (e.g., *Windy. The \_\_\_\_ made her hair messy*). On the Derivational Suffix Choice Test of Pseudowords, participants were again presented with a cloze task, but were given four nonword choices to fill the blank. Each nonword contained a different suffix that matches typical suffixes in English. An example of this task is the sentence: “The woman is teaching us how to \_\_\_\_ food with a fork,” where the answer choices could be: *blicking, blick, blicks, blicked*. The researchers found significant positive correlations between all three morphological awareness tasks and reading comprehension ( $r = 0.30$  to  $0.48$ ).

In a similar study, Tighe and Binder (2013) investigated the effect that morphological awareness has on reading ability in struggling adult readers. This study included adults who had an average passage reading comprehension grade level equivalency of 4.4 and an average phonological decoding skill grade level of 5.8 as measured by reading scores on the TABE. The morphological tasks used in this study are the same as those described in Herman et al. (2013). The researchers in this study found that morphological awareness significantly accounted for 37.3% of the variance in their sample’s reading comprehension skills. Furthermore, scores on all three morphological awareness tasks were significantly positively correlated with reading comprehension ( $r = 0.69$  to  $0.77$ ). The adults had the most difficulty with morphologically complex words (i.e., words with multiple morphemes).

## Expressive Vocabulary

Gold and Johnson (1982) found a positive correlation between pre-test verbal language skills and post-test reading ability ( $r = 0.49, p < 0.001$ ) in adults reading on average at the third grade level as measured by the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT; Jastak & Jastak, 1965). The Verbal Opposites Subtest of the Detroit Test of Learning Aptitude (Baker & Leland, 1967) was used to measure verbal language ability. On this subtest, participants were told a target word, and were asked to give the antonym of the target. In a similar study, Cantwell and Rubin (1992) looked at struggling adult readers' ability to name objects. Significant correlations were found between adult's object naming ability and reading skill ( $r = 0.49, p < 0.05$ ).

Sabatini et al. (2010) used the Woodcock-Johnson Picture Vocabulary (WJPV) subtest to measure expressive vocabulary knowledge in adults who read on average at the third grade reading level as measured by the WJ Passage Comprehension subtest (Woodcock et al., 2001). They found that expressive vocabulary skills of adults struggling to read (average grade equivalency = 4.3) were only marginally higher than their reading skill levels, despite having many years of oral language experience.

Hall, Greenberg, Laures-Gore, and Pae (2012) measured expressive vocabulary knowledge using the BNT with adults who read between the third and fifth grade level. The mean score on the BNT was a 36, which is roughly the same average as 7 to 10 year old typically developing children on this task. The adults' scores on this expressive vocabulary test contributed to a significant portion of the variance in their reading comprehension (16.4%,  $p < 0.000$ ) and exception word reading scores (1.8%,  $p < 0.05$ ).

## Receptive Vocabulary

In the study conducted by Greenberg et al. (1997), adults reading between the third to fifth

grade levels (as measured by WRMT-R; Woodcock, 1987) were administered the PPVT (Dunn & Dunn, 1981). Results indicated that adults outperformed grade-matched children on this task at the third and fourth grade levels but not at the fifth grade level. The authors suggest that adults have greater life experiences which might give them larger vocabularies at the third and fourth grade levels but that advantage disappears at the fifth grade level. According to Greenberg et al. (1997), a possible explanation for the disappearance of this advantage is that at the fifth grade level, exposure to written language influences vocabulary development more than exposure to oral language.

Pae, Greenberg, and Williams (2012) compared third grade children to adults who read at the third to fifth grade level as measured on the WJLWID subtest. The PPVT-III Form B was administered to the participants. Adults in this study performed only slightly better ( $M$  (raw score) = 139.45) on this task than the children ( $M$  (raw score) = 132.99). However, during item analysis on the PPVT-III, it was found that adults in this study performed better on items pertaining to daily activities rather than constructs that are discussed in school.

## Syntactic Skill

After an extensive literature search, only one study was found that looked at syntactic skills and adults who have low literacy skills. Taylor et al. (2012) assessed the syntactic skills of 82 adults using the Word Ordering subtest of the Test Of Language Development – Intermediate (TOLD; Newcomer & Hammill, 1997). In this study, adults read between the third and fifth grade level as measured by the WJLWID subtest. The majority of adults in the study had difficulties with word order in sentences and with using target words to create sentences. The average age equivalency score on the Word Ordering subtest of the TOLD – Intermediate was found to be

8.89 years of age. Syntactic knowledge was found to be significantly positively correlated with scores on reading comprehension ( $r = 0.37, p < 0.01$ ) and reading fluency ( $r = 0.22, p < 0.05$ ).

### Listening Comprehension

The listening comprehension skills of adults were measured by Sabatini et al. (2010) using three subtests of the WJ-III: Oral Comprehension (OC), Understanding Directions (UD), and Story Recall (SR). On the OC task, participants listen to a short passage and are asked to provide a missing word in the passage. On the UD subtest, participants are presented with a picture and are asked to point to various items in certain orders on the page. During SR, participants hear a short paragraph and are asked to orally retell the story. The adults in this study read on average at the third grade level as measured by the WJ-III Passage Comprehension subtest (Woodcock et al., 2001). Performance on all three listening comprehension subtests were significantly positively correlated with passage comprehension (OC:  $r = 0.52$ ; UD:  $r = 0.46$ ; SR:  $r = 0.36$ ) and reading fluency (OC:  $r = 0.25$ ; UD:  $r = 0.32$ ; SR:  $r = 0.20$ ) and indicated that adults had listening comprehension skills of those at the third to fifth grade levels.

Mellard, Woods, and Fall (2011) also measured listening comprehension in adults who identified words and comprehended passages on average at the fourth grade level as measured on the Letter-Word Identification and Passage Comprehension subtests of the WRMT-R. In order to measure listening comprehension, the researchers used the Listening Comprehension subtest of the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF-3; Semel, Wiig, & Secord, 1995). On this task, participants hear a paragraph and are then asked to answer a few questions about the paragraph. Adults performed poorly on this task with average grade equivalency performance at the eighth grade level and below.

### Dialect Use

One area not investigated in the area of struggling adult readers is the relationship between dialect use and reading. Recent studies link children's NMAE use and their reading achievement. However, they have met with mixed results. Connor and Craig (2006) found that children who used NMAE more frequently than children who spoke NMAE at lower rates performed at similar levels on reading tasks as those who primarily spoke MAE. Children who spoke NMAE frequently performed better on phonological tasks than children who spoke NMAE at a moderate rate. Other studies that have examined NMAE use and reading achievement have found an inverse relationship between rate of NMAE use and reading skill (Charity, Scarborough, & Griffin, 2004; Craig & Washington, 2004; Terry, Connor, Thomas-Tate, & Love, 2010). In other words, the more NMAE an individual spoke, the more poorly that individual performed on reading tasks. More research should be conducted in order to inform the differences between the results of these studies. For example, Terry (2012) found that students performed better at reading tasks despite amount of spoken dialect use if they attended schools with higher socioeconomic levels. In addition, in a study by Craig et al. (2009), children who spoke high amounts of NMAE and learned to use MAE when taking literacy tasks outperformed other students who spoke high amounts of NMAE but did not learn to use MAE on these tasks.

There is some research on dialect use and adults in college. For example, Treiman and Barry (2000) compared British college students studying in Wales to American college students studying in Michigan. The researchers asked college students to spell a variety of words that included an /r/ sound such as *horde* and *leper*. British dialect speakers may pronounce these words as *haud* or *lepah*, while speakers of MAE would pronounce the /r/ sounds in the word. The researchers found that MAE students

produced fewer spelling errors when presented with these types of words compared to the British college students.

Understanding dialect use in subgroups of adults who have difficulty reading may shed important information. For example, according to Labov's (1995) mismatch hypothesis, individuals who speak NMAE frequently may experience a greater linguistic barrier when trying to map spoken forms of words onto written forms of English than individuals who speak MAE because spoken NMAE forms do not align well with print forms. The more NMAE an individual speaks, the more mismatches s/he will encounter while reading and writing and will therefore have difficulty reading and writing. For instance, an NMAE speaker may commonly say *skreet* instead of *street*, which is acceptable in NMAE oral conversation and is still commonly understood to mean the same thing as its MAE counterpart. However, when it is time to learn to read or write the word *street*, a mismatch between what is spoken and what is the MAE version may cause confusion for the individual because *street* is not spelled with a *k*. The same mismatch problems may occur for adults who have literacy difficulties and who speak a dialect different from MAE.

In addition, a group of similar hypotheses that are referred to as dialect awareness (Charity et al., 2004), dialect shifting-reading achievement hypothesis (Craig et al., 2009), and the linguistic awareness/flexibility hypothesis all state that the reading difficulties children who speak NMAE experience may be due to metalinguistic knowledge of the context (Terry & Scarborough, 2011; Terry, 2012). A fundamental part of each of these hypotheses is that individuals acquire the ability to change dialect use given the appropriateness for a particular context through a metalinguistic channel, usually through what is known as code switching.

Further exploration is warranted to investigate code switching/metalinguistic skills in adults who have difficulty reading.

## CONCLUSION

### Summary of Research Findings

Oral language skills are related to reading (NRP, 2000). As seen through the research presented here, adults who have difficulty with reading often also have oral language difficulties. Adults' oral language abilities in terms of phonological awareness, morphological awareness, vocabulary skill, syntactic skill, and listening comprehension all play a critical role in reading acquisition. Phonological tasks have been explored most often with adults struggling to read, and it has been seen to explain variance in their reading ability. In contrast, morphological awareness has not been as widely investigated with this population. However, research suggests that adults with more proficient morphological awareness skills have better reading ability (Tighe & Binder, 2013). The expressive and receptive vocabulary skills of adults struggling to read were found to be only marginally better than their overall reading ability, despite having more years of oral vocabulary experience than children. Studies with struggling adult readers indicate that syntactic knowledge and listening comprehension are also related to their reading ability. Lastly, spoken dialect has not been explored with adults who have difficulty with reading; yet, dialects differ in their phonological and morphosyntactic structures. Therefore, both basic and intervention research of oral language abilities of adults who struggle with reading might also benefit from addressing dialect differences explicitly.

### Future Directions

There are various gaps in the literature that need to be addressed. For example, there was only one

study found that included syntactic skills among adults who struggle with their reading. In addition, recent adult literacy researchers (Nanda, Greenberg, & Morris, 2010; Nanda, Greenberg, & Morris, 2014; Pae et al., 2012) have indicated that it is unclear whether tests designed for children are appropriate for adult learners. Therefore, although the studies described in this review clearly show that adult learners have difficulties with various oral language skills, it is unclear whether the measures that are used to assess these skills are valid and reliable with this population. In addition, while the tests appear to capture the adults' weaknesses, the measures may not be adequate in capturing their strengths. Finally, dialect use has not been studied with struggling adult readers, but based on the cited literature, we feel that further research with adults who have low literacy skills is warranted. For example, in a study by Craig et al. (2009), children who spoke high amounts of NMAE and learned to use MAE when taking literacy tasks outperformed other students who spoke high amounts of NMAE but did not learn to use MAE on these tasks. It may be useful to explore whether these types of findings are also apparent with adult learners.

### Suggestions for Instruction

This literature review highlights the importance of oral language skills and corresponds to several of the newly released College and Career Readiness (CCR; Pimentel, 2013) standards. While following these CCR standards are not required in ABE classrooms, they do provide a framework that ABE instructors can use as a guide in their teaching. According to these standards, it is recommended that ABE instructors focus both on complex reading and writing skills as well as speaking and listening skills. It is hoped that adults who are exposed to all of these skills will improve both their print and verbal communication skills. The following sections contain suggestions from various sources for ABE instructors

to follow when teaching specific oral language skills.

**Phonological awareness.** The CCR (Pimentel, 2013) suggests that adults should be able to understand spoken words, phonemes, and syllables. Instructors can facilitate this by asking students to identify rhyming words and to produce other rhymes. As appropriate, students can practice saying the sounds of all letters, especially the short and long vowel sounds in different combinations. Students can also be given exercises in which they are asked to isolate or subtract phonemes in words in order to produce other words. For example, McShane (2005) suggests that in order to teach phoneme isolation, teachers can ask individuals to pick out and provide single sounds from words (e.g., "What is the last sound in *camp*?" (/p/)). In order to teach phoneme deletion, it is suggested that teachers ask individuals to identify a word when a single sound is removed from a word (e.g., "What is *task* without the /t/ sound?" (ask)) (McShane, 2005).

**Morphological awareness.** Tighe and Binder (2013) suggest that instructors should explicitly teach adults how to break down morphologically complex words (i.e., words with multiple morphemes) and understand each part individually in order to improve reading skills. Teachers can ask students to provide the different morphological parts (base, suffix, prefix) of a word. An instructor could ask, "Label the base, prefix, and suffix in the word *uncollected*." In this example, the base would be *collect*, the prefix is *un-*, and the suffix is *-ed*. Asking students to provide all three parts seeks indication that a student understands each part of the word and knows which parts can be morphologically broken down.

**Vocabulary.** Curtis (2006) suggests that ABE instructors incorporate intensive vocabulary lessons into their classrooms. Specifically, instructors can introduce new words and their meanings to learners and the learners are then encouraged to think about and use those words in several different contexts.

McShane (2005) suggests that teachers ensure frequent exposure to new words, especially those that they would normally encounter regularly in everyday life. For example, if adults in a classroom live in the suburbs, the teacher may want to hold a class discussion on what the word *suburb* means and then have students read a passage on suburban living. The CCR (Pimentel, 2013) suggests that students acquire and use words gathered through conversations with others and reading in order to improve their communication skills. A way to do this is to present passages to students using words that they may not know and ask students to use those words in conversations with each other and in writing.

**Listening comprehension.** To improve listening comprehension skills, instructors can ask learners to recall spoken stories, follow spoken directions, and answer questions about spoken stories (Sabatini et al., 2010). Like McShane's (2005) suggestion for teaching vocabulary, instructors can include stories or directions that individuals may hear in everyday life or at work. To illustrate this, an instructor may tell a story about adults like them in another ABE course and then ask them questions about those individuals. Additionally, the CCR (Pimentel, 2013) suggests that individuals should participate in different types of discussions (e.g., one on one, or in small or large groups) with different people to develop their comprehension skills. Instructors should encourage students to ask questions in order to clarify topics that have been discussed. Furthermore, instructors should help students distinguish when it is appropriate to use formal speech (e.g., when giving presentations) and informal speech (e.g., when talking to friends).

**Syntactic knowledge.** Syntax skills can be improved by giving students flashcards with different words written on them, and asking the students to put the words together in order to produce progressively

more complicated sentences. The CCR (Pimentel, 2013) suggests that instructors encourage their students to demonstrate knowledge of grammar use when writing and speaking. A way instructors can do this is by providing sentences and asking students to explain the different functions of nouns, pronouns, adjectives, etc.

**Dialect.** Instruction could be designed to be responsive to students' dialect differences. For example, grammatical morphemes like *-ed* are often omitted in many spoken NMAE dialects; therefore, they are often absent from students' writing. Similarly, dialect differences would be important to consider when teaching about syntax, as the spoken syntax of many NMAE dialects differs from written syntax. Instruction that makes clear how these forms are represented in speech and print may benefit adult learners. ❖

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## Desire: A Key Factor for Successful Online GED Adult Learners

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of 12 adult online General Educational Development (GED) students to determine the role of program and personal factors that influenced their successful passing of the GED or their dropping-out of the program. Through surveys and interviews, we discovered that desire was the key factor for success. Teacher support also played a very important role. Our findings support the interest in adult online GED programs and provide insight to factors of persistence.

Online delivery of instruction is rapidly expanding throughout the field of education, yet few studies have investigated the topic of Internet use and online learning for Adult Basic Education (ABE) or General Educational Development (GED) students (Askov, Johnston, Petty, & Young, 2003; Porter & Sturm, 2006; Prins, Drayton, Gungor, & Kassab, 2012; Silver-Pacuilla, 2008). We define online learning as students using a computer specifically to access the Internet in order to receive their assignments, study content, take quizzes, and track their progress. Likewise, teachers use computers to send assignments, track students' work, and communicate via email. Online learning is not to be confused with distance learning, which may include other non-Internet based communication. Our paper focuses on online learning.

In 2001, Department of Education leaders from 15 states started a consortium to support each other in their efforts to effectively implement distance education programs for adult learners. One Midwestern state from the consortium was selected to participate in this study. Approximately 2,000

students throughout the state enroll in the online GED program during a calendar year. Of these, approximately 75% study entirely online, while 25% use a blended model (i.e. online and on-campus). Online students are required to study 20 hours a month or five hours per week.

The online GED program is taught by five full-time, state licensed educators. Each teacher guides the learning of 100-150 students per month. They have many responsibilities including welcoming new students and communicating with local adult education centers for students' Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) results; their primary responsibility is to teach. In addition to the instructors, there are two staff members who provide technology support to students as needed.

The online GED program utilizes two technological platforms: Blackboard and Skills Tutor. A Blackboard site was developed by a team of adult educators in the selected state. This continually updated curriculum covers all five subject areas of the GED: social studies, science, mathematics, language arts reading, and language arts writing. Most Blackboard material asks students to read about a concept and then take a quiz. Occasionally, links to additional material or videos are available to enrich the learning of students. The majority of enrolled students work with this curriculum. Skills Tutor by Houghton-Mifflin offers language and math practice. Skills Tutor is more interactive and sequential than the Blackboard curriculum; additionally, the program gives students immediate feedback on their assignments. Based on TABE testing, if students have low scores in one or more math/language areas, the teacher will often place the student in Skills Tutor. However, if the students score high in these areas, the teacher will place the students into the Blackboard curriculum. Both Blackboard and Skills Tutor are

used fluidly; teachers may move students into or out of either program based on students' current needs. Further, students independently progress through the lessons setting their own pace. Based on the combination of completed lessons and TABE testing, the teacher and student discuss when the student is ready to take the GED test.

Although this state's online program may differ from other states, research conducted about online and/or distance education students shows specific characteristics about successful students (i.e., those who completed the program). These students were able to work independently (Askov et al., 2003; Porter & Sturm, 2006; Shaw, Mikulecky, & Pilliner, 2013) and possessed some basic computer skills (Askov et al., 2003; Shaw et al., 2013). Askov et al. (2003) stated students who were most successful had reading skills at a seventh grade level or higher; Prins et al. (2012) said that students who studied through a distance education program were more academically prepared than those who studied in a classroom or a blended model. Successful online/distance education students possessed a goal as well as the ability to organize and had a fairly structured life (Askov et al., 2003).

Previous online/distance education research also shows that teacher-student communication and feedback is important (Askov et al., 2003; Petty, 2005). According to Askov et al. (2003), online teachers said it was more difficult to develop a relationship with students and support them without face-to-face interaction, yet they found alternative ways to build rapport such as sending individual emails rather than group emails and calling students to talk. Online and/or distance education students found teachers to be qualified instructors who provide motivation and support through frequent contact (Petty, 2005).

One area that needs further investigation is to learn more about factors that influence online

student success (Porter & Sturm, 2006), which helps educators be better prepared to motivate and support students in their online education (Askov et al., 2003). Our study informed this need by surveying and interviewing 12 adults who were previously or currently participating in the selected Midwestern state's online GED program. Our small sample allowed us to look more in-depth at the role of program and personal factors that influenced students' successful completion of the GED or their dropping-out of the program. We specifically sought to answer, "What program and/or personal factors did the students identify as important, and was either program or personal factors more essential?"

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To frame this study, we selected Vroom's (1964) expectancy-valence model. This model solicits students' expectations regarding the upcoming experience or program; additionally, it measures the worth, or valence, of the program through the students' eyes. This combination of expectation and program value potentially determines adults' participation and success. While this model has been used successfully (Quigley, 1992; 1993) in research, there are also more questions to be answered; specifically, how dispositional barriers interact with program factors. According to Wigfield and Eccles (2000), there are three types of value in motivation. First, utility value: when students believe what they are learning is useful or when the learning will help them reach their goal. Second, importance value: when students believe the material is valuable to who they are or how they view themselves. Third, cost value: their sacrifices or expenses are worth completing the academic task. One study, completed with distance education GED students, found the participants to be highly motivated. Likewise, the

students said they were strongly supported by their teacher. In reference to the expectancy-value model, the students believed the program had high utility and importance with moderate cost (Wolters, Karabenick, Johnston, & Young, 2005).

These three values in motivation are especially important in adult literacy programs and developmental college courses as they particularly struggle with high attrition rates (Alamprese, 2009; Comings, 2009). Affective research on competence, motivation, and self-efficacy states it is not unusual for people to avoid or discontinue frustrating and embarrassing situations in which they have previously been unsuccessful (Bandura, 1997; Dweck, 2000; Pressley, 2006), and educational programs where they perceive little likelihood of cost-benefit return (Beder, 1991). Students cite various reasons for discontinuing their adult education programs, most of which can be attributed to either institutional or personal factors (Beder, 1991; Tracy-Mumford & Baker, 1994; Quigley, 1997). For example, class location/schedule or the pace of instruction is considered an institutional reason for incompleteness (Perin & Greenberg, 1994). Personal factors attributed to incompleteness include family challenges, health issues, and non-instructional support services (Perin & Greenberg, 1994; Taymans, Swanson, Schwarz, Gregg, Hock, & Gerberg, 2009).

Persistence has been defined as "adults staying in a program for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop-out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow" (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone 2000, p. 2). Research on persistence has often occurred in traditional face-to-face classrooms. Fritz and Alsabek (2010) incorporated several structural elements into their campus-based English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes

to increase students' attendance and persistence. They created the classroom to be a democratic place with student voice and participation, adjusted the curriculum to meet students' interests and demands, and helped students understand the development of metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness skills. Fritz and Alsabek found these practices made a positive difference in persistence rates. Kefallinou (2009) implemented an intervention project while simultaneously conducting research on GED classes. To more effectively support student persistence, teachers discussed barriers with students, helped students monitor their learning progress, provided an orientation specific to persistence, and attempted to contact students who had dropped-out of the program. Kefallinou's results showed positive learning gains, and more importantly, an increased sense of community. They defined completion as finishing the coursework in June or achieving a set academic goal. As a result of the intervention, the completion rate for students rose from a previous average of 46% to 65%.

In sum, although we know the importance of persistence, we have more to learn about the complex interplay of personal and program factors, specifically of students enrolled in online classes. Our research contributes to the field by identifying the perspectives of 12 students. While the sample size is small, these 12 are representatives of numerous students pursuing their GED through an online option. Our specific research question was, "What program and/or personal factors did the students identify as important, and was either program or personal factors more essential?"

## METHOD

### Participants

Based on our goal to understand the influence of personal and program factors for successful completion of the GED, we desired to sample all possible types of participants: those who passed/ graduated, students who were currently enrolled, and those who dropped out (Sandelowski, Holditch-Davis, & Harris, 1992). Therefore, each of the five online teachers was asked to identify six volunteer participants: two students who had passed the GED, two students who were currently enrolled with anticipation of completing their GED within a few months, and two students who had dropped out of the online GED program. The goal was to receive data from 30 students with 10 in each category. However, teachers were only able to receive 21 volunteers. Despite repeated invitations, only 12 of the 21 adults participated in the study. The response rate was 57%. Table 1 shows the students and their characteristics.

### Materials

A survey and interview questions were created by the first author based on prior studies (Porter & Sturm, 2006; Prins et al., 2012). Permission was granted by the aforementioned authors to use portions of their data sources. Once the survey and interview questions were drafted, they were shared with the co-authors, the online GED director and instructors, and an outside expert: an adult literacy consultant. The survey comprised of 36 questions soliciting students' perspectives on the curriculum, contact with their teacher, self-evaluation of their organization, family support, and academic and life challenges. The survey was created and disseminated through an online engine called Qualtrics.

For the interview, we took the basic sections of

the survey and expanded questions for our particular study. For example, we used initial questions from Prins et al. (2012), “How often do you have contact with your online teacher? How (email/phone) do you communicate? Do you wish for more/less contact? Have you had any difficulties communicating with your teacher?” After these initial questions, we used follow up questions such as “How connected do you feel with your instructor and why?” In this way we attempted to not just get numbers or facts about communication, but ascertain the type of relationship between the student and teacher.

## Design

We have used a mixed-methods research framework (Creswell & Clark, 2007). As Creswell and Clark (2007) said,

By mixing the datasets, the researcher provides a better understanding of the problem than if either dataset had been used alone... In short, it is not enough to simply collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data; they need to be “mixed” in some way so that together they form a more complete picture of the problem than they do when standing alone. (p. 7)

This framework is appropriate because we began collecting basic information from 12 students through the use of a survey. We wanted and needed more information from students that simple multiple-choice or rated questions were not able to provide. Therefore, in addition to the quantitative survey, we asked 12 open-ended questions during an interview. We were thus able to provide opportunities for students to freely express themselves and we could truly hear the students’ voices. In this manner, we were able to gather insightful views from our students.

## Procedures

The teachers provided the 21 students’ names and email addresses to the first author, who personally contacted each adult multiple times. The first author sent personal emails with an invitational link to take the survey and to set up an interview. Within a six-week period of time, this invitational email was sent up to four times, pending response. The students were asked to contact the first author after completing the survey to schedule an interview, which 12 of the 21 respondents did. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted over the phone or through Adobe Connect, an online video-conferencing program which is used by the students. Responses from the 12 students were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

## Data analysis

As suggested by Creswell and Clark (2007) we brought our two datasets together by merging the data. First, we looked at the descriptive statistics provided through Qualtrics. This provided overall information about program and personal factors that provided us some tentative results. Second, we reviewed the qualitative data for themes to see if the findings converged or departed from the survey results. The interviews were analyzed through a case study approach where insight, discovery, and interpretation were sought (Merriam, 2009). The first author read through each of the transcribed interviews multiple times to identify themes. The third author read through anonymous interviews to identify themes. Inter-rater response between the first author and third author was 95%. Member checking (Creswell, 1994) occurred to ensure the information and conclusions were accurate. Finally, by merging survey and interview results we identified several findings, which are presented below.

## RESULTS

We provide the findings for program factors followed by personal factors. Since we merged the qualitative and quantitative data to discover our findings, both survey and interview data will be mixed throughout the results section of this paper.

### Program factors

We identified three themes that surfaced in our review of program factors: students' experience with the online curriculum (Blackboard/Skills Tutor), their connection with their teacher, and their interaction with peers. The findings will be presented in bold followed by support for the finding.

**Students were satisfied with the online curriculum.** According to the survey, eight students (67%) said they were very satisfied, two students (17%) were satisfied, one student (8%) was somewhat satisfied and one student (8%) was dissatisfied. The survey results showed slightly more student satisfaction (i.e. "very satisfied") with Blackboard than Skills Tutor. During the interview, students repeatedly said both Skills Tutor and the Blackboard Curriculum were user-friendly. Michelle [in reference to Blackboard] said, "All in all it was very easy. Easy to navigate and learn from the content." Matthew [Blackboard user] said, "What I like about the quizzes, if the quiz is low, like a low grade, I can ask her [teacher] to reset it and redo the test and then I can study again and see what I missed."

Ellen, who solely studied online, thought Blackboard was a great program. Ellen completed 139 hours of study time over four weeks and was greatly appreciative. She said:

I thought it was a win-win. I had no problem applying myself to what I needed to do. It was an all-around good experience. I never had a problem that Susan [teacher] wasn't available with. I liked when she gave me links and I

could figure it out. To me that is better...I just read and figured it out. I'm one of those people, you can explain something to me, but until it clicks in my head, I just have to do it myself...I didn't have to sit in class. It saved me a lot in travel time and gas money.

Two of the 12 students, Tammy and Danielle, enrolled in both on-campus classes and online classes. They used the online option to supplement their campus learning. Both of these women preferred the on-campus learning because they felt more connected with the teacher, and they liked the explanations of concepts the on-campus teacher provided rather than relying on Blackboard to teach them. Danielle said the Blackboard math lessons were too short and they did not explain why or how things happen. Tammy used Skills Tutor and said she never had an issue with it. She printed off materials and found a way to make the program work for her, meaning she was able to take the content presented in an online platform and change the format (i.e., print material) to her preferred style of learning.

Hope planned to attend campus-based classes because she thought they would be easier. However, Hope enrolled online because the campus-based classes did not work into her schedule. During her interview, Hope said she tried Skills Tutor once or twice, but it made her feel remedial and like a child. She recognized that some may need to learn that way and that is okay. "I loved Blackboard. It was user-friendly, definitely easy to figure out, had a great lay-out. All your extra-curricular study guides were on the side bar and they gave you all you needed. There were quite a few errors like broken links, and there was a site you would submit a claim. Within a few hours they [links, videos] were fixed. The tech support was great. The same day or next day it was fixed."

Overall, some (25%) students had preferences for one curriculum more than the other, but never once did an interviewee say s/he quit because of curriculum. Students noted that the online curriculum was imperfect – links or websites did not open, or students sometimes wished for more explanation about a concept, but the comments were not a prevailing part of the interviews and were common for any type of program analysis.

**The majority of the students were very satisfied and positive about their interaction with their teacher.** According to the survey, five students (41.6%) reported they had teacher contact about 2-3 times per week, another six students (50%) had teacher contact about 2-3 times per month, and one student had contact less than once a month. All used email as the primary means of communication, while four of the 12 students (33%) also used the phone. Through interviews, the students reported all five teachers responded very quickly to their inquiries, within the same day or the next day. Several students mentioned the teacher would call them to go step-by-step through the information, to explain a concept in more than one way, or to provide additional Internet resources. According to students, teachers did more than offer academic help. Teachers also provided support through encouragement and building the students' confidence. When students were asked how connected they felt with their online teacher, three (25%) were not very connected. Tammy, who used a blended model of online and on-campus learning, said, "I didn't know (online teacher) much. It was different from (on-campus teacher)." She further commented that the teacher was both accessible through phone and email as well as responsive. However, Tammy only contacted the teacher via email, which she chose to do on limited occasions. Two students (17%) said their connection was about

average. The remaining seven students (58%) felt a strong connection with their online instructor. Matthew said, "I am very connected with my online teacher. It's amazing how we connect. I never had that with the teachers in school." Ellen said:

I had a lot of connection with Susan [teacher]. Both academic and emotional. She was always encouraging. She said, 'I know you can do it!' She was impressed with my test scores. We discussed some personal issues. It was a very good experience. Susan is a very good teacher. She's a human. She speaks to you as a human.

Tess told about a time she had pneumonia and Susan "allowed me the time to get back. The support was great." Hope, who spent about six weeks studying "like crazy," had almost daily contact with her teacher. Hope said:

If I had questions I emailed her. She always responded within the same day or the very next day at the latest. She went the extra step so she would call me on the phone and go over step-by-step like math. It blew my mind because she had over 200 students and she always took the time I needed.

**Peer interaction was not very important to these online students.** Students were asked if they had any contact with peers, and whether this made a difference in their online academic experience. Three students (25%) responded they had a family member or friend with whom they met to study, and this was both encouraging and supportive. These select students found their strengths complemented their partner; one person would explain a difficult concept to the partnering student(s) who struggled with the concept. For the students (75%) who did not interact with a peer, one or two students suggested peer support would be beneficial, but the majority said

peer interaction was not important. Michelle said:

I'm very independent. I didn't speak to anyone but the teacher. I think it was easy enough to do it alone rather than with others. Sometimes more is too much. I have to say if I didn't have as much support [husband/family/teacher] as I did have, I would want more contact with others to know and believe I could do it.

## Personal factors

### **Motivation was key to student completion.**

According to the survey, 91% of the students said their personal desire was the most important factor for successful completion of obtaining a GED. Motivation out-ranked all the other personal factors, which ranged from 16-25%, and included their ability to organize and discipline their study, support from family, and no major life events that interrupted their learning. Desire and motivation seemed to be the greatest factor for success. Throughout the interviews, all the students who had completed or those who were almost ready to complete their GED discussed the role of this personal factor. Michelle (graduate) said:

I've been out of high school for 10 years. I haven't had the opportunity or time. It was always an excuse to go to work or to do something else. Even though I had all that to do now while I was doing online, I was able to succeed because I had that push to do it.

Danielle (currently enrolled) said:

I've grown up and realized what is important. I've never thought of dropping out this time. I tried and dropped out twice before – 8 years ago. This time I am determined to do it. I want to prove I can do it. One thing I believe you need to do is believe in yourself

and stick to it. You have to do it for yourself. If you don't want to do it for yourself you're not going to get it.

Hope (graduate) said,

I think you have to do this for yourself. If you don't have your mind made up, you won't succeed. This program changed my life, my outlook on everything. I have confidence that when I go back to school I won't struggle as much as I thought. That fear is gone thanks to Tara [teacher] and the program.

Seven out of 12 students (58%) had previously participated in GED classes prior to this online experience. The most common reasons they dropped out of those classes were due to family situations or schedule challenges. They shared comments such as, "it was hard trying to fit it all in," or "[father-of-my-child] was not a good influence on me."

While being interviewed, we specifically asked if students thought about dropping out of this particular GED program. Some students, like Matthew, said they had no time or thought about dropping out or stopping. Four of the 12 students considered dropping out mostly due to lack of motivation or exhaustion. For example, Derise said she became quite ill and considered dropping out because her health came first. However, she realized how important this goal of obtaining her GED was for herself and her children, so she continued her studies while going to the doctors. Her teacher was also encouraging, which helped her stay. Two of the 12 students actually dropped out during some period of their study before we collected data. Tabitha told about her increasing work demands and how it got in the way of her study time. Bob, frustrated with the initial communication delay with his teacher, said his work schedule and making money to support his family were reasons he needed to stop.

**Both program and personal factors played a role in students' success, but personal factors, specifically desire and motivation, were essential.**

During interviews, students were asked about the role of personal and program factors. They unanimously agreed the factors were mutually essential. Tess said, "They both are important. I was determined I tell you. That helped. I had goals. I knew what I wanted... But the teachers really helped... They were very supportive, very encouraging." Hope said:

I think that they are both very important. I think having the encouragement from the instructor and even if you have all the studies/programs, most people going back to get a GED have issues. They had problems in school and didn't finish or else they had life issues that made them so they couldn't finish high school. Anyone who goes back for a GED has huge emotional issues to face. Having someone there to keep you going plays a huge role in your success.

Conversely, the two students who dropped out had different reasons. Tabitha said, "I dropped out for personal issues I had to deal with. The program online was great. You have to make the time and have the energy." Bob said, "I've started the GED several times and had to drop-out. I'm in my mid-40s and my family comes first... I had family support and I was going to do this [online] program. I just had the job situation off/on again and then waiting for the teacher for weeks."

## DISCUSSION

Adults who pursue a GED have a variety of challenges in their life including past school failures, work obligations, family commitments, and more. Their lives are complex, and yet they desire to obtain a GED for their own self-efficacy among other reasons.

Minimal research has been conducted on adults who prepare for their GED online. We endeavored to better understand the complexity of adults' lives and their academic experiences, including personal and programmatic factors that influenced students' completion or their drop-out of one state-wide online GED program.

As data were collected, relationships among factors were apparent. Figure 1 shows how the positive and negative may appear through the interconnection of both personal and program factors. The dominant themes are listed in each circle, with the size of the circle depicting frequency of response. An outlier, whose comment was mentioned by one student, was randomly placed on its own outside of the diagram. This indicates that all factors are valid, but only those with repetition among students are listed as dominant themes. Desire, the heart of motivation, was placed in the center since this factor was the most important. Again and again, students said that desire had to be present, or they would not have made it this far in their program or to the passing line. All factors played a role, but making up one's mind and pushing through doubts and challenges was the most essential component. That said, it is clear that student-teacher relationships not only existed, but were important. Through email and phone interaction, teachers could build students' efficacy and provide support to boost students' internal desire. While the decision to stay or drop-out ultimately resided with the student, the teacher played a central role. Teachers who transition from face-to-face interaction to an online setting often fear less connection with students, but the data in this research clearly shows teachers are still involved and importantly so. In this way we can believe that support was a very important second factor for students' success.

As we evaluated the 12 online students' persistence

in relation to the expectancy-value model (Vroom, 1964), and three types of values in motivation (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), we saw all three values - utility, importance, and cost - to be quite high for those who currently studied or completed their GED. For Tabitha and Bob who both dropped-out of the program, it seemed that the cost value was lower than importance or utility. Tabitha said she moved up the ranks at work to be a manager and case manager, but she was not monetarily compensated for the advancements due to her lack of education. Work demands increased and she did not have time to study anymore. Thus, she knew obtaining the GED was a useful goal that would increase her value (importance), but the sacrifices (cost) were too heavy. Likewise, utility and importance seemed high to Bob; he was challenged by the cost. In this study, Bob showed he had a lot of motivation, but providing a home and food for his family were more immediate needs and thus he had greater motivation for them than for school.

Although not directly questioned, most students offered the fact that they would not have pursued their GED if they had to attend classes on campus. Their surveys unanimously showed that flexibility to study on their own time was a primary reason they enrolled online. Therefore, we can infer that the online option is sought after and necessary for some adults. Also, age does not directly matter in students' success as our population was slightly older than some previously studied online populations (Porter & Sturm, 2006). We recommend students be able to change advisors if they have sufficient reason for a change. This could be determined by the program director. The teachers have very heavy loads, and Bob may be one of several students who were misplaced. When Bob made his initial application and inquiry with the teacher, he was told it would

be the following week before he could get started with coursework. Something transpired and Bob's paperwork did not get processed in a timely manner. In Bob's case, he then took a passive approach and waited for months rather than being proactive and following up with Jennifer [his teacher] a week later. That said, if students have a situation where an instructor change would be beneficial, there may be a process in place to support students.

Zacharakis, Steichen, Diaz de Sabates, and Glass (2011) conducted focus groups from 25 adult learning centers with a total of 104 students. They identified six themes that impacted students' persistence and retention: empowerment, exigence, personal barriers, program challenges, program strengths, and self-perception. While our study did not specifically test these six themes, they often surfaced in the interviews. For example, Stacy did not believe she could pass the GED so her self-perception was low. Hope was empowered to believe she could continue her education. Sickness and a change in work hours were cited by students as reasons to consider dropping out, thus demonstrating exigence: a force outside of a person that impacts the participant's behaviors and choices. Overall, Zacharakis et al., found the teacher-student relationship crucial to adult learner success, which we found to be true as well. Like Zacharakis et al., our students overcame personal challenges and the experience of persevering and succeeding through a difficult time helped them be empowered. We believe that educators should be familiar with these six themes and have healthy discussions about the role of these themes in their own programs. The instructors can even present these themes to their students and provide an opportunity for students to identify which factor(s) may be impacting them. This openness may be a tool to assist students in working through negative forces that impact their ability to

persevere and succeed in passing their GED. This idea parallels Kefallinou (2009) who discussed barriers with students and orientated them to persistence.

Comings et al. (2000) identified four supports that should be in place for student persistence. Likewise, we found examples in our data confirming their findings. First, Comings et al. said teachers should help students be aware and manage the positive and negative forces that occur in their lives during their period of study. We saw this when Derise and Tess were faced with health issues and their teachers were encouraging, allowing them extra time to finish their work and believing they could complete it. Second, teachers should help students build self-efficacy. An example is Angela who felt she wrote a poor essay and her teacher gave her a much-needed emotional boost. Another example is Hope who talked about how her teacher played an important role in her newfound confidence. A third support for students is having established goals. Tess spoke on how important setting goals were for her success and other students alluded to this as well. Finally, students need to see progress towards their goals. This happened when students could see their scores/progress and receive feedback on Skills Tutor, Blackboard, and via email. Also, the TABE testing that took place every three months provided an opportunity for more formal progress monitoring. While it is encouraging to see these supports in place from our research, again, like Zacharakis et al. (2011), we suggest adult educators find ways to be transparent in providing and communicating support. Due to the heavy teacher load and numerous demands, perhaps the teachers' focus was to provide the actual support (e.g., "You can do it!") without discussing the reason (e.g., "Your self-confidence is low, but according to your practice scores I can see you are ready to take the test. After you pass the test, your self-confidence will

increase and you can remember this situation when you are faced with other challenges"). If students can learn to identify factors and support as they pursue their GED, perhaps they can then learn to identify these in other settings, which will continue to propel them forward toward their goals. Another idea is to place examples of these themes and supports into the orientation that is required of students. This may provide a common area where students become initially familiar with the ideas; they can look for ways the factors and supports play out in their experience throughout their program of study.

As with any study, this research has its limitations. Due to a convenience sample and small sample size, particularly of drop-out students, we only offer tentative findings. Statistical analysis was not possible and interviews were self-reported data. We also did not collect academic records or their achievement level when they started their program. Limitations can also be areas for further research. One obvious need is to conduct a similar study with more drop-out students than successful students to hear their voices and gather their perspectives. We also should repeat this study with other programs/students to see if the findings differ among student/program groups. It would be enlightening to conduct this same survey and interview with students who attend class on campus to see if desire is the most important factor, or would the scale tip a bit more to other aspects such as teacher interaction and peer support? We would also like to meet online students and shadow their study/interaction experiences. Triangulating their experience while shadowing their teacher and other peers could be an informative ethnographic study. Minimal research has been conducted on the role of peers, and it would be interesting to further investigate this type of interaction and support.

From the findings of this study, we are able to

conclude the 12 students were independent learners who were satisfied with the curriculum to prepare for their GED. The majority of the students felt an average or above-average connection with their teacher and valued their teacher's influence on their academic life. They also believed the support of their personal family/friends was important to their success. Peer interaction did not seem to be a necessary component for this select group of students. Organization with disciplined study and no life crises seemed to be influential personal factors. However, motivation and desire was the sole personal factor that repeatedly surfaced as most critical in both the survey and interviews. While program factors were important, we can conclude that personal factors play a very important role in perseverance, perhaps more so than program factors.

We offer two educational implications. First, this study provides understanding of the perspectives and experiences adult education students have about their online program. In an educational era where technology is an important tool for learning, we have discovered that online GED programs are a powerful and realistic option for many students. Thus, resources should be devoted to developing and improving online GED programs. Second, the findings document the need for adult literacy education centers and teachers to find a balance between maintaining a solid curriculum, but realizing success often relies on personal factors. Educators can have healthy discussions and implement practices about ways they can support their students. Adult literacy programs should empower students to be lifelong learners. ❖

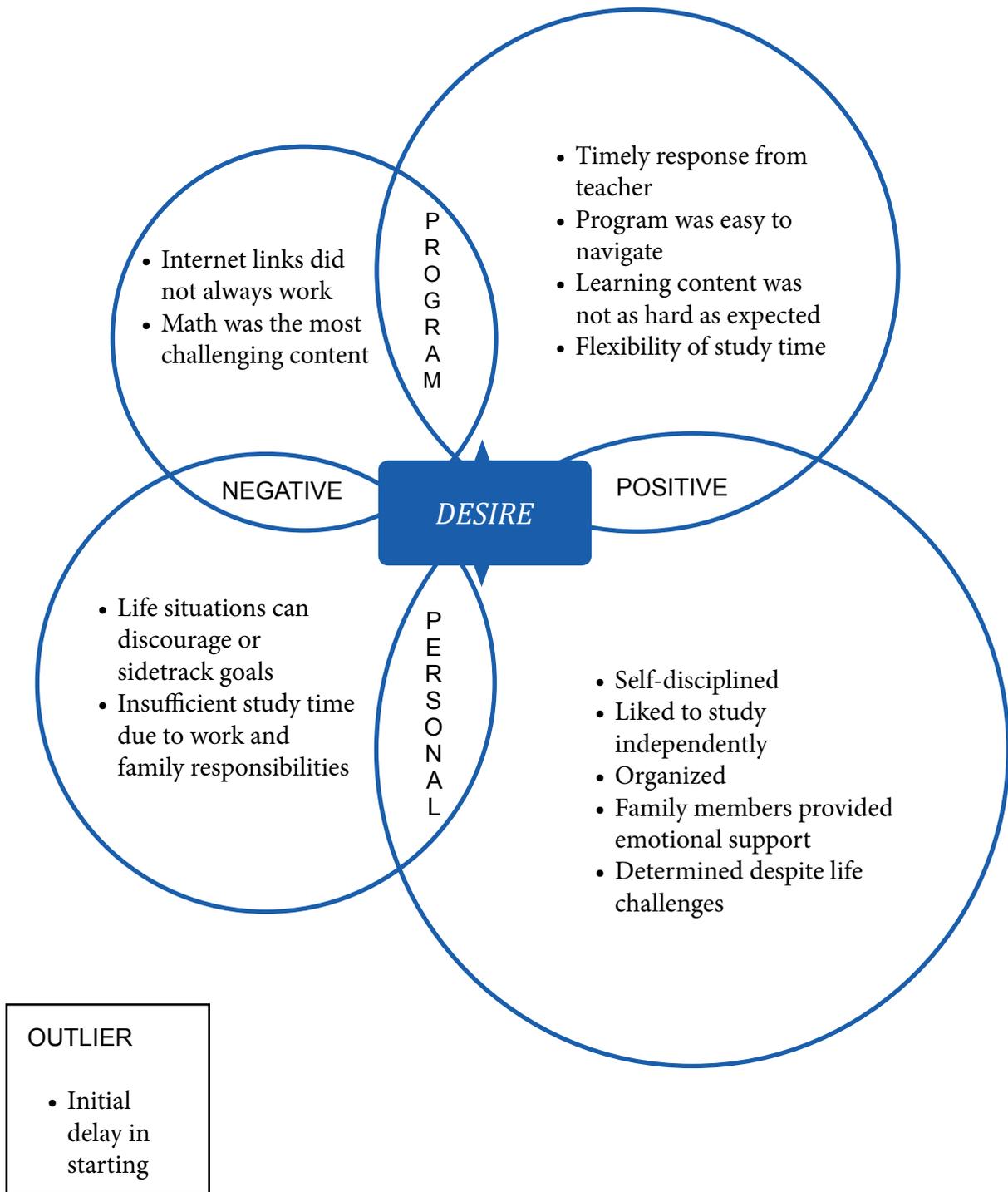
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**Table 1—Participant characteristics**

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Language	Status	Teacher
Stacy	Female	40-60	English	Graduate	Tara
Ellen	Female	40-60	English	Graduate	Susan
Hope	Female	40-60	English	Graduate	Tara
Tammy	Female	27-39	English	Graduate	Maggie
Michelle	Female	19-26	English	Graduate	Tiffany
Bob	Male	40-60	English	Dropped out	Jennifer
Tabitha	Female	40-60	English	Dropped out	Tara
Mathew	Male	40-60	English	Currently enrolled	Tiffany
Tess	Female	40-60	English	Currently enrolled	Susan
Angela	Female	27-39	English	Currently enrolled	Tara
Danielle	Female	27-39	English	Currently enrolled	Maggie
Derise	Female	27-39	English	Currently enrolled	Tara

Figure 1



## A Need to Be Needed: The Intersection between Emotions, Apprenticeship, and Student Participation in an Adult ESL Literacy Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

Adult immigrants bring rich experiences to the English as a Second Language (ESL) literacy classroom, and these experiences, which are often fraught with emotion, can influence how they participate in the learning process. In community-based classrooms, where teachers typically have the flexibility to create their own curriculum, there are many opportunities to develop innovative ways to harness students' emotions and promote student participation. One adult ESL literacy class, offered through an organization on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, takes an approach that offers students a variety of leadership roles. Findings from this study show that a teacher's consistent encouragement of students permeated throughout the classroom; when a student took on a leadership role, she, too, became an encouraging force, not only because of the mentoring she received, but also as the result of complicated experiences beyond the classroom context.

Both teachers and students bring with them complex experiences—many of which are emotionally charged—that can influence the choices they make within the classroom. Emotions have often been cited as an impediment to learning, yet current research highlights the positive role of emotions in the learning process (Benesch, 2012; Dirkx, 2008). Adult learners are a clear example of the ways in which emotions can influence learning; they have rich histories, and in a classroom where so many of the interactions are socially embedded, these experiences beyond the classroom environment can greatly influence the ways in which they participate in learning.

For adult immigrants who participate in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs throughout the United States, community-based ESL classes can serve as a place where they not only further their language skills, but also where they meet, share their experiences, and learn from their teacher and peers. In this way, the adult ESL classroom is one example of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), or a site of “mutual engagement” (Wenger, 1998, p. 73), in which adult immigrants engage in cultural and social practices of second language (L2) literacy.

In this context, funding for classes can be sparse, so classes are often multi-leveled and student attendance may vary on a weekly basis. Therefore, one of the hallmarks of the community of practice literature, the notion of “apprenticeship,” or the transference of a skill from one individual to another (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), becomes increasingly important. The concept of apprenticeship describes the relationship between “experts” and “novices,” and in the adult ESL classroom, the fluidity of members within the class creates an ever-shifting dynamic, where novice members of the class may become experts after a short time. These roles can be surprisingly complex; one may become an expert not only because of long-term attendance, but also because of the vast emotional experiences that precede their entry to a particular classroom.

As Benesch (2012) explains, “Emotions are not private, individual, psychological states, but social and embodied. Emotions connect mind and body, acknowledging language teaching and learning as not only cognitive, not only social, but also physical” (p. 133). The emotions that adult learners carry with them can influence the ways in which they participate in learning. In order to explore this intersection between emotions and participation among adult English Language Learners (ELLs), I have conducted a 10-month qualitative study of an adult ESL literacy class at Urban Settlement Organization<sup>1</sup>, a community-based organization on the Lower East Side of Manhattan (hereafter referred to as “USO”). This article represents a piece of the larger study; while the study looked more broadly at the ways in which a community-based ESL literacy class gave students opportunities to participate in reading and writing, the focus of this article is the ways in which a teacher’s encouragement, apprenticeship, and overall class design attended to a student’s emotional needs

and therefore influenced her participation in the community of practice.

This community of practice, the USO ESL literacy class, is predominantly constituted of Chinese immigrants who live in Chinatown on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Within New York City, Chinese immigrants represent a growing group in need of English literacy instruction. According to the New York City Department of City Planning, between 2000 and 2011, Chinese immigrants continued to be the second largest foreign-born group in New York City (after individuals from the Dominican Republic), with numbers hovering just above 350,000. During this time period, there was a 34% increase in the growth of Chinese immigrants, and if the Chinese immigrant population continues to grow at this pace, Chinese immigrants would become the largest foreign-born group in New York City over the next several years (The Newest New Yorkers, New York City Department of City Planning, 2013). Many Chinese immigrants, like other immigrant groups all over the United States, live in enclaves with other Chinese immigrants, and therefore have limited opportunities to speak, read, or write in English. Thus, participation in ESL literacy classes becomes a necessary component in helping these individuals to develop their English literacy skills.

The concept of participation is complex, but at its core, it emphasizes the importance of social interactions in learning (Haneda, 2008; Wenger, 1998). The USO classroom, like many other community-based programs, is not bound by a particular curriculum and therefore the teacher has the flexibility to structure the class in whichever way he or she feels is most suitable to his or her students’ needs. In the case of the USO ESL literacy class, the class was designed to emphasize student empowerment through a learner-centered

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for the name of the organization and for participants in the study.

model that focuses on five areas: writing, reading, discussion, leadership, and publication. The concept of leadership—and its intersection with students’ emotions about being a “leader”—is of primary importance in this community of learning, since it was this confluence of leadership and students’ emotional needs that helped to shape participation within the classroom.

The notion of literacy as a socially and culturally embedded practice as well as Lave and Wenger’s (1991) focus on apprenticeship within a community of practice serve as the theoretical frame of this qualitative study, since they help to better situate the role that students’ experiences outside of class, and their “emotional selves” (Clark & Dirks, 2008) in particular, play in their participation in the classroom. This literature offers a lens through which to explore how a teacher’s encouragement and apprenticeship enabled a student to positively use her emotions to become a leader within the classroom. This study therefore explores the following questions:

1. How can the use of encouragement and apprenticeship foster a sense of community within the adult ESL literacy classroom?
2. In what ways can the emotional needs of adult students shape their participation in learning?

## **SOCIAL INTERACTION AND LEARNING IN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE**

The USO ESL literacy class relies heavily on the social dynamics within the group. Current students in the class may eventually earn the title of “assistant teacher” and help the head teacher during class, and student volunteers help to lead the class each week. The students who take on leadership roles, and especially the students who have been attending class for a long time and who become assistant teachers, often serve as the “experts,” whereas the newer students are “novices,” or newcomers. This

relationship reflects Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of “Legitimate Peripheral Participation” (LPP), where “journeyfolk, not yet masters, are *relative* old-timers with respect to newcomers” (p. 56). Here Lave and Wenger articulate that learning and participation are cyclical in nature; members of a community of practice take on different roles at different times (Wenger, 1998). In adult literacy classes, where students may attend class sporadically, these roles are constantly shifting, and Lave and Wenger (1991) aptly use the term “relative” to illustrate the degree to which one might be considered an expert (or a novice) can vary greatly.

Within this social community of the classroom, where roles regularly shift, learners often find ways to participate so that they may further their literacy learning. According to Wenger (1998), participation is inherently social, and even the choice to not participate is one which continues to shape the community. He elaborates, “[P]articipation in this sense is both personal and social. It is a complex process that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging. It involves our whole person, including our bodies, minds, emotions, and social relations” (p. 56). In this regard, participation is both personal and emotional; it is not only reliant on the opportunities within the class to participate, but it is predominantly dependent upon the individual and the experiences they carry.

## **Participation and Investment in Literacy Learning**

The relationship between the social interactions within literacy classes and students’ participation in learning is clearly documented in the literature on first language (L1) students (Davenport, 1984; Kazemak, 1999; Prins, 2006). Within the literature on L2 students, studies have focused on how their lives outside of class influence investment and participation in general L2 classrooms. Haneda

(2005) discusses the idea of participation and argues for an understanding of learners' engagement in language learning as directly related to their lives outside the classroom. In her study of two native English speakers in a Japanese literacy class at a Canadian university, Haneda utilizes the community of practice literature to explore the ways in which adult learners' communities and experiences influence their investment in writing in Japanese. She stresses that adult learners participate in a variety of communities, only one of which is the classroom.

The idea of a classroom community was studied extensively by Prins (2006) in her investigation of the social purposes of participation in a literacy program in El Salvador. The author found that social interactions were critical in understanding how men and women engaged in literacy learning. In a more recent study conducted by Prins, Toso and Schafft (2009) within the Northeastern United States, the authors explored the ways in which family literacy classes for native English speakers helped impoverished women gain a sense of well-being. The authors concluded that the supportive relationships with peers and with teachers, the excuse to leave their home, and the focus on their own learning were all factors which constituted the "social dimensions of women's participation" in literacy programs (2009, p. 343).

## Emotions and Learning

The social aspect of participation is often heavily reliant on a learner's needs and emotions. As Dirkx (2008) explains, "[I]n one form or another, emotional issues never seem very far from the surface in adult learning contexts. The social and relational nature of these contexts often fosters, elicits, or implicitly encourages learners to give voice or expression to this underlying affect or emotion" (p. 9). While the adult education literature has paid greater attention to emotions, the literature on emotions and adult ELLs

is more limited. Benesch (2012) argues that prior literature has explained the significance of emotions in the classroom but has primarily examined theory and not practice. She calls for studies which describe "the look, sound, or feel of classrooms in which emotions were, in fact, attended to" (p. 48).

Considering the importance of in-depth examinations of classrooms where emotions play a key role in learning, this article will explore both a teacher and a student's experience in the USO class, where emotions were, in fact, attended to, and participation in leadership roles was also heavily reliant on emotions. As described above, prior ethnographic research clearly delineates the ways in which students' participation in literacy learning is often directly related to the classroom community itself. The studies also illustrate the connection between learners' lives outside of school and their investment in language learning within the classroom. The above research provides a strong foundation for linking student participation to emotions, but more in-depth research is necessary to understand the ways in which students' "emotional selves" (Clark & Dirkx, 2008) can influence their participation in the classroom, particularly when there are a variety of leadership roles and opportunities for participation within a given context.

## METHODS

### Background

USO is a community organization that offers child care, preschool, housing assistance, mental health services, college and career preparation, crisis intervention, senior services, arts events, afterschool programs, and English classes to its community members (USO, 2014). The organization was founded as a settlement house in 1886, and it has continued to serve the immigrant community on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. USO is also part of the

Chinatown-Lower East Side “Literacy Zone,” a New York State-designated area of community literacy support due to its large number of individuals with limited English language proficiency (USO, 2014).

Among the approximately 350 participants in the USO family literacy program in 2008-2009, the majority were female and more than half of the students were between the ages of 25 and 44 while a little less than half were between the ages of 45 and 59. There were also approximately 30 students who were over 60. At the time this data was collected, there were anywhere from 10 to 20 students in the USO ESL literacy class, which met weekly for two hours and was taught by Dr. Fless, an administrator and professor at a local university. Her affiliation with USO began when she started teaching a course at her university, “Literacy in Action,” which encouraged undergraduate students to volunteer at local adult literacy sites. Her writing course at USO was developed with the goal of student empowerment. As a result, the class is learner-centered and enables students to write weekly, share their experiences, and publish their work. Each week, students write on whatever topic they wish. They then submit their writing to Dr. Fless, who makes surface edits to the students’ writing, types up their work (along with the “Literacy in Action” student teachers), and photocopies and distributes it to the class to read each week. Each class is then led by a student leader who asks each student with writing in the packet to read their work aloud. After each piece of writing is read, the student leader (with the help of Dr. Fless) facilitates a discussion. At the end of the school year, samples of the students’ writing are compiled into a book, *The Literacy Review*, which is distributed for use as a text to adult literacy programs throughout the city.

Leadership is one of the hallmarks of the ESL literacy class; Dr. Fless created leadership roles at several levels within the class. There are two student

roles: assistant teacher and class leader. The assistant teachers are students within the ESL literacy class, many of whom have been attending class for a long time. They are designated by Dr. Fless and assist her with the class discussion; however, they have no role in providing writing feedback to the other students. Student leaders are the second leadership role within the class; they are the students who volunteer to lead the class each week. The student leaders also help guide the discussion and ask each student with writing in the weekly packet to read their work.

### **Role of the Researcher**

From 2004 until 2007, I was a volunteer teacher and curriculum coordinator in an adult ESL program in New York City. Through my work with this program I came to know Dr. Fless and *The Literacy Review*, which I often used as a text in my ESL literacy classes. The USO ESL literacy class model, because of its focus on leadership and student publication, has always stood out as a unique endeavor and one which merited further study.

Upon beginning my research with USO, I made it clear to both Dr. Fless and the students in the class that I intended to maintain a role as a participant observer, which Van Lier (1988) describes as one who “takes part in the interaction as a teacher, co-teacher, or learner” (p. 40). In this role, I assisted the teachers and the students in any way I could, whether with individual questions on their writing, an explanation of a particular concept, or to facilitate a discussion. I also stepped in as a “helper” to assist students on days when a teacher or student teacher was absent.

### **Participants**

In this study, a combination of case studies and classroom ethnography was used. Case studies allow for a close description of individuals, and this enabled me to look broadly at the class as a whole and then move to a narrower view, examining literacy learning

from the individual students' and the teacher's perspectives. The majority of students who attended the class were Chinese women, and I learned through initial questionnaires that the majority had attended school in their home country through at least middle school. The age of the students in the class ranged from 20-70, and several of the older students in the class reported that they had interrupted education as a result of the Cultural Revolution, the political movement that took place in China from 1966-1976.

In order to encourage participation in the study, I distributed questionnaires to students during the second week of class. The questionnaires were designed to gather information about students' prior educational experiences. The four focal students in the larger study were chosen (on a volunteer basis) based on their range of ages and educational experiences. The case studies presented in this article focus on one of these students, Vivian, as well as Dr. Fless.

Vivian, 57, has been living in the United States, and New York in particular, for 19 years. She has been studying English since 2001, and at the time of data collection, she had been in the USO literacy class for two and a half years. Born and raised in Pudong, in Shanghai, her first language is Shanghainese, though in school she learned Mandarin. As the result of the Cultural Revolution, Vivian had to leave school at the age of 14, and when the Revolution was over, she had to work and was unable to return to school.

Dr. Fless is also in her late 50s; she is from an Irish-Catholic family and is a native English speaker who has been teaching writing to native English speakers at the undergraduate level for many years. Her doctorate is in English and American Literature, and while she is not trained as an ESL teacher, her devotion to the USO ESL literacy class, a project that is voluntary, is due in large part to her personal connection with the students.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Case studies were most appropriate for exploring the language teaching and learning experiences of Dr. Fless and Vivian, as Seliger and Shohamy (1989) note, "[s]ince we know that each individual may have their own idiosyncratic pathway to developing language competence, case studies are also able to show how the development of individual language acquirers may be different from that described for groups" (p. 125). Case studies, therefore, also enabled me to examine the experiences and perspectives of Dr. Fless, someone who was instrumental in Vivian's path to developing not only language competence but also leadership within the classroom community. This in-depth focus on the individual helped me to paint a more vivid picture of both Vivian and Dr. Fless's experiences both beyond and within the context of the classroom.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of students' participation in the ESL literacy class, in addition to participant observation, two semi-structured interviews and artifact collection (students' writing, emails, and weekly handouts) were implemented from September 2009 through June 2010 (the complete duration of the class).

Interviewing was critical to this study, since it enabled me to first uncover and then to draw connections between students' writing development and their experiences in the USO ESL literacy class. I developed the interview questions thematically around Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, and Hodge's (2007) four aspects of life that influence adult literacy: prior experiences, current life circumstances, identity, and future goals. Seidman's (1998) discussion of interviewing—where storytelling is a way of making meaning—was also instrumental to the design of interview questions and analysis. Since interviews help the researcher to capture the participants' authentic voice (Seidman, 1998), their story can be told through their own eyes rather than through the

eyes of an outsider. Interviews were conducted at both the start and the end of the year, and because they were semi-structured, they allowed space for students to share their own experiences. I also devised follow-up questions based on responses from the first set of interviews.

As a participant observer within the class, I could witness the changes within students, the teacher, and the overall class during the 10-month period. I took extensive field notes and collected the students' writing each week; I also collected emails exchanged between the teachers. I also audio-taped and transcribed the interviews. I then analyzed the data using grounded theory and thematic analysis. Riessmann's (2008) work on narrative analysis informed much of the analysis. I explored the content, rather than the narrative features, of students' stories. Themes were drawn for each student from the interviews, observations, and writing. Strauss and Corbin's (1998) research on grounded theory enabled me to code and organize the data, revealing the two most prominent themes: encouragement and apprenticeship. These two areas were not only hallmarks of the class; they also helped both student and teacher harness emotions in a positive way.

## FINDINGS

### **Vivian: Encouragement and Apprenticeship as Keys to Participation An Emotionally Turbulent Past and Present.**

When Vivian was 14, she was forced to leave school and work as a farmer, and by the time the Cultural Revolution had ended, Vivian was 18, and it was too late for her to return to school. Instead, she took a job at a telephone company in Shanghai as a telephone operator, a job she held for 14 years and then was promoted to be the leader of a group of operators for six years. Vivian was very proud of this accomplishment and she spoke of her former

employment with great enthusiasm. However, as soon as she began to discuss her life in the U.S., her face darkened. When I asked Vivian why she came to the United States, she said, "Because my husband came to here. I just follow." Vivian often spoke of her first experiences in the U.S. with disgust, as she felt she was entirely dependent on others. She told me that she initially attended ESL classes to gain independence and to take care of her son, whom she felt she had neglected because of her low level of English and general confusion about the laws in the U.S.

Because when I come to here, I don't know any words in Cantonese, any words in English, so, and it's difficult. I don't know anything so I'm abused by my family before. Like my mother-in-law. They hit me.

Vivian struggled with a range of emotions as she eventually took the steps to learn English. Once she learned enough English to pass her citizenship test, obtaining a job became a top priority because of finances. She took a factory job, where she started to learn Cantonese. In 2001, Vivian injured her hand while on the job, and around the same time, the factory closed. She began to receive disability and she started to attend ESL classes more regularly. She eventually began attending classes at USO in 2006.

Vivian's emotional struggles continued throughout her time as a student in USO, and they peaked during the year I observed the class. Some of her earliest essays during the year alluded to these issues. In October, she wrote a three-part series of essays entitled, "DIY Health Reform." In the third part of the series, it became clear that she was having personal difficulties. She writes:

Worries and tension lead me to insomnia. I suffer from this, and a sadness that won't go away. Sometimes I have a troubled breast, sometimes anger swells in me, and sometimes I feel an onrush of shame. Memories come crowding into my mind, and many, many

“Why? Why? Why’s”? pop up...I take a scientific approach to stress management, in that I don’t rely on my memory. I write it down. This way, I have one less thing at the back of my mind, and a perfect record of whatever I need to remember. I am not alone in this world; people always help each other.

In January, when we were on break from the writing class, I received an email from Dr. Fless alerting me that Vivian had been admitted to one of the city hospital’s psychiatric wards because she had had a breakdown. Vivian felt extremely powerless while in the hospital, and Dr. Fless and the head administrator of the family literacy program at USO advocated on her behalf to ensure that her stay in the hospital was necessary.

**The Power of Encouragement and Community.** As Vivian’s emotional health eventually improved, the support and the community that USO provided became even more significant for her. In one of our later interviews, she described how the USO ESL literacy class community makes her feel, especially in contrast to her life in China and her life among her family members in the U.S.:

This class, every week I write something, every week I receive encouraging words. I think I’m not stupid, I’m smart. I know myself. But my parents never say...they never say encouraging words for me, so I think in this class, America is different culture. The teacher, the good friend, they will say the positive words for you. And I do something good they will remind me. But in China, in my family, I didn’t receive that words. Never received that words.

The welcoming community in the USO ESL literacy class motivated Vivian to participate, especially after she returned from the hospital, and this is unsurprising since support is a common motivating factor for many women in both L1

and L2 adult literacy programs. Prins et al., (2009) explain, “supportive relationships with peers and with teachers, the excuse to leave their home and the focus on their own learning were all factors which constituted the ‘social dimensions of women’s participation’ in literacy programs” (p. 343). For Vivian, a key component of her participation was the encouragement of others, which came in various forms: in the other students’ and teachers’ verbal and written feedback, and in Dr. Fless’s recognition that Vivian was an active contributor to class. Vivian describes the importance of the teachers’ feedback for her:

Teachers’ comments is important. Is very important. Sometimes I feel I cannot... I read my essay again and I read my teachers’ comments again. I feel I cannot stop. I have to do – I think I can. Because the teacher can help me. That’s give me energy and uh – and I think I have to do.

As Vivian explains, she often feels that she “cannot,” but the teachers’ words encourage her to continue writing. She is energized by their desire to help.

**Apprenticeship and Healing.** In late December, Dr. Fless decided to formally recognize Vivian for her effort in class and appointed her to be an assistant teacher alongside two other students. Vivian took this role very seriously and felt it was a tremendous honor. One day, Vivian and I were talking after class, and Vivian told me that Dr. Fless gave her power. When I asked her how, she replied, “as an assistant teacher.”

Dr. Fless inspired Vivian and the other students in the class to write more and work harder, and once Vivian became an assistant teacher, she practiced these skills with others. She adopted Dr. Fless’s words of encouragement in how she interacted with the newer students. She says:

All the students, they don’t want to come to

the writing class, because “we don’t know how to writing every week.” I say, “you can write everything!” “Today I see a black cat.” You can write.

In Vivian’s role as an assistant teacher, she took her leadership role seriously, offering words of support and encouragement both at school and at home. As she explained, the role of assistant teacher gave her “power.” This was in direct contrast to how powerless she felt when she was a youth in China, forced to abandon her education, later when she arrived in the U.S., and again when she was admitted to the hospital.

As described in Barton et al.’s (2007) framework as well as in the literature on adult literacy students (Benesch, 2012; Dirkx, 2008; Greenberg, 2007; Prins et al., 2009), the complex emotions that are a part of student’s prior and current experiences greatly influence their learning in the classroom. In Vivian’s case, many of her experiences outside of class burdened her emotionally, and the “family” she developed at USO became one of the biggest supports for her. This emotional bond made her want to participate even more since she received positive reinforcement from both Dr. Fless and from her peers, and in her role as an assistant teacher, she felt like a necessary part of the community. Further, Dr. Fless’s mentorship influenced her goals. In our second interview, she told me she wished to write a book about her experiences. Vivian therefore recognized the importance of emotional support and felt encouraged by both her peers and her teacher to share her painful stories with those around her.

### **Dr. Fless: Encouraging Others through Apprenticeship**

#### **An Empathetic Approach to Teaching.**

Dr. Fless, although she is a full-time instructor and administrator at a local university, is highly committed to the USO ESL literacy class, and she

attributes much of this to what she describes as shared experiences with the students:

My parents were not immigrants, nor were their parents, but the Chinese immigrants I work with in the writing class reminded me of my own traditional, blue-collar, Irish-Catholic family...I was the first person in my family to attend college, and I found it much more of a struggle than most middle-class students did. I even dropped out for several years. Also, when I was 25, our house burned down. My siblings—age 23, 21, 17, and 10—escaped, but my parents (who were in their 40s) did not.

I guess what I’m saying is I understand and appreciate struggle and I’m drawn to people who are the opposite of entitled, people who have experienced difficulties in life *and yet* struggle to improve themselves and their lot.

As Dr. Fless explains, she understands the struggles of her students because she too has struggled. She is drawn to their motivation (in spite of a difficult past) and recognizes that she can help to improve their situation.

#### **Engaging Others through Encouragement.**

Dr. Fless’s desire to help was evident in both her teaching philosophy and her written feedback. She felt that the USO ESL literacy class met the students’ needs by providing them the space to not only read and discuss their work, but also to share and exchange ideas and rely upon one another in a more intimate setting. In this way, she envisions the writing class as a community of learning:

The students write, read their writing aloud, and discuss everyone’s writing—both content and style. In addition, they become a support group for one another, not only regarding communicating in English but in every aspect of life that they share. I believe this holistic approach is fairly unusual, and I know it

wouldn't work unless the writers had also taken or were also taking more conventional classes in grammar. But once the students have reached a certain level, I believe the approach of "Writing What We Want," [the title of one of the USO books of writing] reading and discussing among a range of other writers, is most effective in fulfilling the students' literacy needs—and more, their human need for a supportive, encouraging, affectionate community.

As Dr. Fless discusses in the above excerpt, the USO literacy class was not simply a class; it served as a support group for many of the students, which is consistent with Davenport's (1984) findings with L1 adult literacy students in writing groups.

In addition to a supportive classroom environment, Dr. Fless always began her written feedback with words of encouragement, and she was especially supportive of Vivian, whom she knew struggled outside of class and relied upon Dr. Fless's support perhaps more than the other students. In response to one of Vivian's early essays, Dr. Fless wrote:

You are a great model for your classmates, and your contribution to discussion, as well as your excellent writing, is greatly appreciated!

This feedback motivated Vivian to keep writing. In December, Vivian began to write "thank you" letters. This genre persisted throughout the year, and the content was often similar. In these letters, she thanked Dr. Fless, the student teachers, and me for encouraging her and the other students to ask questions and to write with regularity. Specifically, Vivian wrote, "[you] nourish the talent in us."

In March, when there was markedly low attendance in the class, Dr. Fless turned to Vivian to help her to motivate students to attend class again. Vivian contacted students, and as a result, many

students returned to class. Dr. Fless was very grateful for Vivian's help, and she both privately and publicly recognized her efforts. In response to one of Vivian's essays about her hospital stay, Dr. Fless wrote:

You made a big difference in the lives of individuals and the life of the ward. You did the same thing this week for our class, Vivian, encouraging students to return and write. You are truly a force for good in the world. You have my thanks, as well as the thanks of your classmates and ward mates.

Dr. Fless also presented Vivian with a bouquet of flowers in front of the class, recognizing not only the weight of written words of encouragement, but also the importance a public display of gratitude could have for an individual who had never felt appreciated.

**Fostering Apprenticeship.** While Dr. Fless did not explicitly acknowledge the expert/novice dynamic within the class, she recognized that the newer students needed encouragement from the more experienced students. Thus, she instilled this concept of apprenticeship in the minds of the student volunteers and the assistant teachers. In one of our interviews, she noticed that the students began to encourage each other in a way that was similar to how she had been encouraging them. She explains:

They [the students] are also quick to discover the best aspects of the piece and praise them aloud. Some of them remind the class of the writerly virtues of their classmates. They often explicitly say that another student is a very good writer and/or they would like to learn from them.

Dr. Fless therefore passed on to her students that leadership is not a one-dimensional construct: by offering positive feedback to one another, a community is created that nurtures and supports the diverse needs of its participants.

## DISCUSSION

Emotions are not often deliberately focused on within the classroom, yet the findings from this study show that small changes within a classroom can create a community that focuses on students' emotional needs in a positive way. The USO ESL literacy class offers an example of a teacher who was not only aware of her students' emotions but who also created a community of learning where the availability of leadership roles gave students valuable opportunities to participate in learning, especially when they felt they were not needed outside of the classroom.

The existence of leadership roles within the USO ESL literacy class and Vivian's enthusiastic adoption of her role as an assistant teacher are illustrative of Haneda's (2008) argument for the significance of "providing ELLs with appropriate participatory and learning opportunities in the classrooms" (p. 58). Further, they reflect the findings of Toso, Prins, Drayton, Gnanadass, & Gungoor (2009) that leadership opportunities can increase adult students' investment in literacy classes. While initially Vivian was a novice in the class, especially in the company of the more fluent students, she shifted into the role of expert once Dr. Fless appointed her as an assistant teacher. As the "expert," she shared the encouragement she had received so often from Dr. Fless and the class members with others and tried to motivate them to write and to lead. In this way, Vivian recognized how integral encouragement was to her own learning process and tried to motivate the other students as well.

Vivian's interrupted education and subsequent negative experiences – both at home in China and in the U.S. – made her feel insecure, isolated, and depressed. Dr. Fless's kind words, the sense of community that the classroom provided, and the existence of leadership opportunities within class gave Vivian a sense of purpose and a sense that

she was needed. Dr. Fless, perhaps because of her own personal struggles as a young woman, also recognized the importance of encouragement and positive emotions within the classroom. Through her actions and her words, she helped to create a class that imbued in students not only a sense of community, but also gave them an opportunity to participate – and lead – when many had not felt empowered to do so in the past.

## CONCLUSION

As evidenced by the prior studies on adults' participation in literacy learning, a major source of students' investment in learning is their need for social interaction (Prins, 2006; Prins et al., 2009; Skilton-Sylvestor, 2002). Often adult education classes afford students the rare opportunity to focus on themselves (rather than on their spouses or children) and to build relationships with others (Prins, 2006). Vivian exemplified this. She attended class the most consistently and felt she needed the USO literacy class on multiple levels; in particular, because of her own emotional needs, she valued the encouragement and community which the class provided. Thus, learners may shift into the role of "expert" or "novice" not only because of their expertise or knowledge based in a particular area; they may be driven to take on leadership roles because of their experiences outside of class. Both Vivian and Dr. Fless brought complex pasts, replete with complex emotions, to the classroom. These experiences subsequently shaped not only the class design, but also the ways in which students participated.

Practitioners within the field of both L1 and L2 adult literacy would benefit from a greater understanding of students' experiences beyond the classroom context; writing assignments could be tailored to encourage students to write on prior and current experiences that have influenced their educational and personal development. Further,

various opportunities for student leadership, like a rotating opportunity to volunteer as an assistant teacher, or the pairing of more advanced students with novice students to focus on assignments, might also be introduced. These opportunities will help students to feel that they, like the teacher, occupy a necessary place within the classroom. Future research also needs to explore these opportunities by looking closely at the kinds of leadership roles available to students in both L1 and L2 adult literacy classrooms

and by examining the ways in which students' experiences—and the subsequent emotions—beyond the classroom environment influence their level and type of participation. Additionally, future research should explore the ways in which fostering encouragement and community can better meet students' emotional and academic needs, thereby encouraging them to become more active participants in their learning. ❖

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*Steps Forward  
and Back  
in Adult  
Numeracy  
Teacher  
Professional  
Development:  
A Reflection  
on a Teacher  
Workshop  
Experience*



### ABSTRACT

In this project, a university team of teacher education and mathematics professors conducted eight professional development sessions for General Educational Development (GED) teachers in the area of mathematics teaching. Topics included concretely modeling mathematics concepts in algebra, number sense, geometry, and differentiating instruction in classrooms of varied levels and ability. The team concluded that teacher confidence levels did increase. Finding differentiation in resources for teachers of adults was difficult. Providing hands-on mathematics manipulatives was valuable to the teacher participants.

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While recent STEM education initiatives have funded and focused on K-12 math instruction and math teacher preparation, few resources have been devoted to the professional development of teachers of adult numeracy learners. Teacher numeracy knowledge may not be at a level needed to create effective learning experiences. “Typically, teacher volunteers in one [General Educational Development] (GED) program can have a bachelor’s degree in any area and participate in only one day of tutor professional development in teaching mathematics” (R. McIntosh, Executive Director of Akron’s Project Learn and GED Chief Examiner, personal communication, October 5, 2010). In a report reviewing United Kingdom and international research and related literature on adult numeracy, one of the six key points cites that some teachers’ “inadequate subject knowledge is a continuing concern” (Coben, Colwell, Macrae, Boaler, Brown, & Rhodes, 2003, p. 7). Researchers contend that adult numeracy instructors do not follow good teaching practice principles due to lack of professional development activities (Gal, Ginsburg, Stoudt, Rethemeyer, & Ebby, 1994, in Nonesuch, 2006b, p. 7).

Without a firm foundation in math content, content knowledge may more likely be procedural rather than conceptual. Ginsburg, Manly, and Schmitt (2006) stressed the importance of conceptual understanding in adult numeracy learners. Procedural numerical knowledge emphasizes the learner memorizing the steps of a mathematical procedure, such as multiplying two two-digit numbers or adding two fractions with unlike denominators. Conceptual numerical knowledge calls for learners to understand the meaning behind how numbers behave. “Conceptual understanding also permits one to be free from relying on memory for all

methods and procedures. One can think about the meaning of the task and ‘construct or reconstruct’ a representation that both illustrates what it means and suggests a method for solution” (Ginsburg et al., 2006, p. 23). Conceptual understanding in mathematics has recently received increased attention through the work of Deborah Ball and her efforts to define and measure mathematical pedagogical content knowledge: the knowledge one needs to effectively teach a content area (Ball, 2000, 2002; Ball, Hill, & Bass, 2005).

Modeling with manipulatives helps to develop and assess conceptual understanding by creating these visual representations referenced above. Mathematical manipulatives are tools purchasable or created by the teacher that can help to model a problem or, in a concrete manner, a mathematical concept. For instance, multi-digit multiplication can be modeled with base ten blocks. Addition and multiplication can be modeled with algebra tiles. Nonesuch (2006a) discussed that an adult’s feelings need to be taken into account regarding using the manipulatives. The learner can be reluctant if they feel the tools are “childish.” Nonesuch says teachers can develop ways to break through the resistance.

The director of Project Learn, a community-based GED preparation program housed within a large, urban public library, approached the professors from the College of Education in our group, asking us to consider offering a professional development program for his math instructors. We added a math professor to the project, and the GED program added several other smaller programs to the proposal, which was funded through a state math/science teacher professional development initiative. Our participants met with us eight times over the course of a year: two consecutive

evenings in March, May, July, and September. Our goals for the workshop were: (a) increase teachers' own mathematical conceptual understanding; (b) increase teachers' math confidence/comfort level; (c) increase teachers' knowledge of differentiation strategies; and (d) increase teachers' knowledge of manipulatives to use in teaching. We administered a math content pre-/post-test containing 15 items and a pre-/post-assessment regarding confidence, knowledge of differentiation strategies, and attitudes towards teaching math and various aspects of the workshop. Also, at the end of each pair of monthly meetings, we formatively reflected on the sessions using 3-2-1 assessment data: "3 Things I Learned Today, 2 Things I Still Want to Know More About, and 1 Thing I Do Not Understand."

### **WORKSHOP STRATEGIES**

During the eight sessions of the workshop, besides collecting knowledge and confidence data, we focused on demonstrating mathematical concepts by modeling them visually and kinesthetically using manipulatives. We began in March with operations on numbers demonstrating addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of whole numbers, fractions, and decimals using base ten blocks. At the end of these two sessions, we discovered informally how much anxiety the participants displayed just about these concepts, reflected, and adjusted the remainder of the workshop accordingly. In the second set of sessions in May, we demonstrated algebraic modeling and solving using tools such as hands-on equations and algebra tiles. We discussed strategies for managing several levels of students in one class by using differentiated activities and sorting by ability level. In the third set of sessions in July, we shared methods for demonstrating geometry relationships using tools such as Patty Paper. Our participants

also received classroom sets of manipulatives funded through the grant. All participants were challenged to develop a station activity to share at an additional session at a Family Math Night. The Family Math Night was advertised at the GED program, was held at the local public library, and had a good showing of adult GED students and their children. In the fourth set of workshop sessions in September, we reviewed math and differentiation concepts while collecting final data.

### **OUTCOMES**

While this is a reflective article regarding our experience, we used data we collected throughout to aid in our reflection and instructional decisions. Twenty-two GED teachers participated in our professional development program. The mean number of years that these teachers had been teaching GED preparation was 3.45 years. (The standard deviation was 4.48 years.) The range was 0-18 years. Fifteen out of 22 participants had two years or less of experience. Nineteen of 22 had six years or less. Five of the participants were unable to be present on the final day, limiting our post-data collection to 17. We discovered that the high turnover of those in the field is a challenge in maintaining a long-term professional development program.

### **Mathematical Conceptual Knowledge**

The 31 mathematical concept knowledge items on the pre-/post-assessment were patterned from the items on the Learning Mathematics for Teaching Project from the School of Education at the University of Michigan. The items go beyond the basic procedure of solving problems and require the test-taker to select answers based on an understanding of representations through manipulatives, understanding when some rules based on a solution are a coincidence, and/or

understanding the thought process that a teacher must go through to clear misconceptions. While the mean score increased from the pre-test to the post-test (15.96 to 16.3), a dependent t-test found no statistically significant difference.

We reflected on the non-statistically significant data and proposed that there are many factors that may have made it difficult to create a mathematically significant improvement. First, the transitory nature of the career of the GED teacher (an average of a little over three years of experience) means that there is little permanence in their work and, therefore, possibly little attention to personal and professional improvement of skills. Secondly, many of these teachers do not have much prior knowledge in mathematics, less than that of a typical middle school or high school math teacher.

In one comment on a post-assessment administered on the last day after the math test was given, one participant reflected, “Couldn’t get the test questions again. Need more direct instruction to pass test.” We found this to be an eye-opening comment from a GED teacher, who teaches adults and who may frequently say the same thing to his/her own participant. The nature of the educational environment in the GED world is that understanding takes time and procedures are quick. The workshop goals were not to create participants who could generate answers quickly through procedures, but to have the participants understand bigger relationships between integers, fractions, decimals, and/or variables. There was obvious participant frustration for not “getting it” in time for the post-test. The workshop facilitators were just able to scratch the surface of conceptual understanding in eight sessions with those showing limited mathematical foundations.

## **Confidence/Comfort Level**

On both the pre- and post-assessment, participants were asked how confident they felt teaching the five major areas of mathematics content (as defined by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Principles and Standards, 2000): numbers and operations, algebra, geometry, measurement, and data analysis and probability. These are also the five major areas of mathematics content addressed on the GED exam. The pre- and post-comparisons are shown in Table 1. Based on these outcomes, we found the participants successfully increased confidence in all areas including data analysis and probability, which was a topic that was not well-addressed. We believe that spending time devoted to mathematics topics in-depth led to the greater confidence overall. The GED test was modified in 2014 adding more depth to math topics such as algebraic factoring, solving, and graphing. Therefore, if this program is replicated, GED math teachers may actually be even less confident.

## **Differentiation Strategies**

Besides addressing ways to introduce mathematical concepts, we also addressed techniques for differentiated instruction. The pre-assessment included items that looked for prior knowledge of differentiation techniques. Data from the pre- and post-assessments showed growth in the area of knowledge of differentiation techniques. Comments from the final session indicated that the participants saw the usefulness of implementing groups in their classes, which is an application of differentiation. For example, six participants responded that they have applied strategies or revised them based on new knowledge, when asked “How has your understanding of differentiation changed since participating in the professional development?” For

example, one replied, “I’ve learned how to group students based on the way they learn/see things. Not to teach to your comfortability (sic) because a student may not understand your way,” and “I am more likely to differentiate my lessons. I don’t think my understanding has changed but you taught me how to do it.”

### **Use of Mathematical Manipulatives**

The topic that emerged most frequently from the participant comments regarding instruction pertained to using manipulatives to teach mathematics. One participant commented, “This professional development has given me more ideas to teach math and make it more fun for students, as well as to help students who need a different way to learn math. I use technology more and games.” Another said, “I have used more hands-on materials to explain the topics that students aren’t grasping.” Several participants cited the “hands-on tools,” particularly with regard to algebra, in response to the prompt, “The most beneficial portion of the professional development was...?” Another cited “learning about the ‘why’ in math, using manipulatives,” and another said, “Emphasizing small groups, making me more willing to try different approaches and reminding me that many resources are available.” One instructor said, “I am grouping students differently.”

### **WHAT WE LEARNED (CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS)**

After spending the year with the GED teachers, we have made the following conclusions and recommendations:

- In the months that we implemented this project, the turnover of teachers was larger than expected. We learned that consistency in the GED instruction is difficult to maintain

and, therefore, it affected results.

- The amount of contact time (a summative 32 hours) with us was not enough to make an impact on content knowledge. However, the grant conditions created obstacles for working with these non-traditional teachers since they were only able to meet in the evening, and they were not motivated by graduate credit hours. If given the opportunity to replicate this experience, we would seek a funding source that could compensate the GED teachers better and more directly for more contact time.
- While most of the GED instructors struggled with the middle school-level math concepts, a small number were reasonably comfortable with them. Yet, we received the content knowledge scores in aggregate, which did not enable us to make adjustments. If given the opportunity to replicate this experience, we would conduct our own exit slips, independent of the evaluation consultant’s data collection, so as to adjust the instruction and truly model differentiated instruction.
- We found it challenging to find differentiation resources for the GED teachers. We chose a book designed for teachers in grades 1-8 (Bender, 2009). Resources regarding differentiating in adult learning situations are greatly needed, particularly due to the composition of typical classrooms.
- Self-reported confidence in mathematics increased in the GED teachers that participated in the workshop. We were pleased to see this effect.
- We were grateful to be able to purchase the math manipulatives for the GED classrooms with the grant funds. Each classroom received

a hands-on algebra intervention kit, a base ten blocks starter kit, a set of fractions bars and a fraction bars book, a hands-on equations class set and instructional video, and a set of patty paper. Training with the teachers regarding the use of the manipulatives was crucial to having them be used in the GED classrooms.

- We have discussed follow-up data collection with the GED teachers to see if the materials and strategies are still being used and to what degree. More research in this area is needed.

Our experience showed that GED teachers have a need for professional development in mathematical

modeling (which encourages mathematical conceptual understanding) and differentiation strategies. More professional development in math for GED teachers is needed. Mathematics professional development may increase content knowledge and knowledge of teaching strategies, but the greatest achievement may have been the increase in the GED teacher confidence in math. As the teachers' confidence grew, their openness to ask questions and willingness to participate in conversations about the mathematics also grew. Addressing the teachers' anxiety and/or confidence in math is necessary as part of any professional development program for GED math teachers. ❖

**Table 1**—Rate how confident you are teaching content.

Content	Pre-Assess Mean (n=22)	Post-Assess Mean (n=17)
Numbers and Operations	4.05	4.24
Algebra	2.86	3.35
Geometry	2.68	3.29
Measurement	3.18	3.65
Data Analysis and Probability	2.68	3.25

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*There are three developmental stages described based on ways of knowing.*

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*As learners move from being instrumental knowers to social knowers to self-authoring knowers, they experience perspective transformations.*

for their own sense of value and self-worth. Overriding questions at this stage include “What do you think I should know?” and “Am I meeting your expectations?” As in the previous stage, learners frequently see knowledge as information needed to fulfill social roles and meet the expectations of authority figures such as teachers or employers; knowledge is something that comes from authority figures. Education, at this stage, is about what a person is: “I’m accepted because of what I know or can do.”

The third stage is self-authoring knowers. In this stage, one becomes attuned to one’s own personal values and internal authority. Considerations move from concerns with pleasing external authorities to developing a sense of internal authority, a personal identity that provides a basis for critiquing one’s own performance. Self-authoring learners increasingly become concerned with what they want to learn as opposed what they think others want them to learn. Learners become aware that knowledge stems from their curiosity, and they take a sense of responsibility for their own learning. They begin to understand that their life is being enriched by what they learn. Their conceptualization of education at this stage moves from what they are to what they can become through learning and education.

Drawing on the work of Mezirow (2000) and others, the author postulates that transformative learning occurs as people move from one of the above stages to another. Drago-Severson (2014) explains that transformative learning consists of “increases in a person’s cognitive, affective and interpersonal capabilities which develop abilities to take broader perspectives and better manage the life’s complexities” (p. 3). Thus, as learners move from being instrumental knowers to social knowers to self-authoring knowers, they experience perspective transformations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The data for this study were based on progressive qualitative interviews with eight women over the 14 months they were enrolled in a diploma program at their place of work. The average age of the learners was 42 with a range from 27 to 58. Most of the participants were married and had children. Seven of the women were born in West Africa, and one was born in the Caribbean.

They had lived in the United States an average of 20 years; all eight women were nonnative speakers of English.

The interviews focused on the participants’ learning experiences and how they transferred their learning from the classroom to work and other aspects of their lives. Of particular emphasis was ascertaining why the women were

enrolled in the diploma program and what they hoped to gain from doing so. Data analysis was conducted by identifying emerging themes regarding motivations for and expectations from learning.

## FINDINGS

Three general themes emerged from the data regarding motivations to participate in the diploma program. The first theme was practical goals (i.e., increased work opportunities). All of the women expressed that they anticipated that attending the diploma program would yield practical results. Examples of these practical goals included improved communications skills on the job and increased opportunities for promotion in the company as a result of obtaining their high school diploma. The second theme was timing. Timing of their participation in the diploma program was a major issue for all of the women in the study. The women indicated that their participation in the program was related to the needs of their children and families. The third theme was leadership aspirations as parents and workers. The women wanted to assume a leadership role in their families. This was frequently expressed as a desire to help their children learn and succeed in life. Participation in the diploma program helped them move from a role of dependency to one of leadership in their families.

## DISCUSSION

These three major themes were further analyzed in terms of the developmental model described above. The women were interviewed over the course of their enrollment in the program. During that 14 month time span their motivations for attendance changed. The changes correspond with changes in their ways of knowing as they transitioned from instrumental knowers to social knowers to self-authoring knowers.

The author provides many examples of quotes from the women to illustrate these changes. For example, one woman transitioning from instrumental to socializing ways of knowing expressed the desire to obtain her diploma not just because it offered increased opportunities, but because it was a symbol of personal accomplishment. One result of her learning was the ability to ask questions and speak her mind and not be afraid of being looked down upon for misspeaking due to her lack of command of English. In another example, a participant expressed that her understanding of school had changed. At the beginning of the program, she wanted to attend because it was good for her at work and it helped her be a better role model at home with her

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*Of particular emphasis was ascertaining why the women were enrolled in the diploma program and what they hoped to gain from doing so.*

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*During that 14 month time span their motivations for attendance changed.*

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*The women wanted to assume a leadership role in their families.*

children. While in the program, this woman developed an appreciation for the process of school. Learning for her was equated with practice, practice meant developing competence, and competence resulted in respect from teachers and employers. She felt like people no longer looked at her as if she was “stupid.”

The author also provided examples of women transitioning from socializing way of knowing to self-authoring way of knowing. One participant was initially concerned about how others saw her (socializing way of knowing). As time progressed in the program, however, she became increasingly aware of herself as a success story, one that she hoped would inspire her children. She felt like she was growing into the kind of person she wanted to be, someone who had finished school and could dream of more for herself and her children.

## CONCLUSION

The constructive-developmental model presented by the author is a framework for understanding the women and their ways of knowing. The three stages each represent ways of knowing that describe learners at different stages and times in the program. Transitioning from early stages to later stages shows development over time. Each stage represents a different way of thinking about oneself and their concept of the nature and purpose of learning. In order to transition from one stage to the next, the women had to undergo a perspective transformation; they had to see themselves differently in relation to education and learning. This perspective transformation is the essence of transformative learning as described by Drago-Severson in the article.

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*In order to transition, the women had to see themselves differently in relation to education.*

*Gary J. Dean*

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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## BOOK REVIEW



## “Sit & Get” Won’t Grow Dendrites: 20 Professional Learning Strategies That Engage the Adult Brain By Marcia L. Tate

2012; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition; Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, CA  
192 pages, 20 chapters, paperback, \$34.95 (New)

**H**ow do adult educators ensure that their facilitations maintain a healthy balance between active engagement of learners and retention of the content being explored? What specific strategies stimulate brain cognition or a desire to participate? *Sit and Get Won’t Grow Dendrites: 20 Professional Learning Strategies that Engage the Adult Brain* by Marcia L. Tate offers answers to these questions. As its name suggests, the book rejects the notion that consistent stimulation of the brain and, by extension, effective learning can occur in a setting where adults receive information passively. As such, its purpose is to describe 20 methods of delivery that grow dendrites, or memory cells, and facilitate long-term retention. Tate begins with adult learning theories that outline the conditions under which adults learn best. She then discusses learning strategies related to these theories. She concludes with sample professional lesson designs and practical tips. Like its previous version, the book is geared towards adult educators in various contexts.

Throughout her work, the author echoes the belief that recall, retention, and other key outcomes of effective learning are directly proportionate to the levels of active engagement that adult learners experience. Active engagement, she contends, is dependent on the presence of specific conditions, unique to these learners. This perspective is firmly situated in the context of both traditional and contemporary adult learning theories. Her outline of adults’ ideal learning conditions in the first section, for example, includes an emphasis on knowledge co-creation, prior knowledge and experience, collaborative learning, and reflection. Such emphases mirror elements of Knowles’ (1980) conceptual framework of adult learning as

*Reviewed by*  
*Kayon K. Murray-*  
*Johnson*

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well as elements of self-directed learning, transformational learning, and experiential learning theories.

In building on the foundation of these “best” conditions, Tate offers distinct strategies that embody them in the second section of the book. Strategies range from brainstorming, games, and humor to mnemonic devices, storytelling, and technology. They form the core content of the book, and she offers a holistic approach by exploring not only the “what” or definition of each but also the “why” and “how.” The “why” of a strategy offers diverse theoretical frameworks that provide a solid rationale; the “how” includes multiple learning activities that are specific and complement the strategy. Each strategy description concludes with a section that allows readers to reflect on its application to their teaching or learning.

The book’s strengths are content, organization, and layout. Its content is diverse, relevant, and practical in several ways. First, the author uses varied theoretical frameworks from research on the brain, on adult learning, and on learning styles. She clusters theories from these different areas of study and uses them to provide evidence for the potential effectiveness of each learning strategy. Because each one is framed in diverse theories, it reads as foundational to any effective facilitation, thus appealing to practitioners, program planners, and designers alike. This is also useful as an educational tool for many who facilitate adult literacy programs, but who are new to the field or may not be formally trained in adult learning principles.

Second, Tate provides over 150 specific activities that complement her strategies and closes with detailed lesson plan samples. While these are diverse and steeped in the theories, they are also written in such a way that readers can build on or omit aspects that may not relate to their contexts. These resources may prove invaluable particularly for the adult basic instructor looking to improve instruction with a wide range of fun, practical, and creative activities. They would also, by extension, benefit ESL or adult literacy learners who often struggle with tensions related to writing tasks or returning to a formal classroom environment.

Third, the author adds to the conversation in the field surrounding “[Knowles’] pedagogy to andragogy continuum” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p.87) – noting that many of the strategies originate from K-12 spaces. Despite these strengths, Tate did not allude to cross-cultural training/teaching issues, which might have been useful given

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*The book’s strengths are content, organization, and layout.*

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*Tate provides over 150 specific activities that complement her strategies and closes with detailed lesson plan samples.*

growing contemporary work on culture and non-Western ways of knowing in adult learning and ever-increasing ethnic and racial diversity within adult basic education programs.

The author skillfully models several of the adult learning strategies she advocates in the way the book is organized and laid out as well as in her writing style. Written in first-person narrative and interwoven with fun and lively accounts of her adult facilitation experiences, the language of the book is clear and simple; its tone is conversational. Though her target audience is adult educators, it seems the author avoids assuming that readers are *au fait* with the field's vocabulary because she explains most of these thoroughly. In addition, she uses open and closed questions to stimulate critical thinking and reflection, drawing on readers' lived experiences and inviting them to respond with ideas from their own contexts. Tate adds variety by including her own use of each strategy; she also caters to visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile modalities by using textual information, visual illustrations, reflection writing, and other physical exercises.

Tate's objectives included describing brain compatible strategies and their associated theoretical frameworks, activities, and lesson designs - all of which are successfully met by the close of the book. The book's contents are precisely limited to these objectives, making it an even more fulfilling and enjoyable read. I highly recommend it not only to instructors who facilitate learning in adult basic education programs but also across diverse adult learning contexts.

*Kayon K. Murray-Johnson*

Texas State University

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*She uses open and closed questions to stimulate critical thinking and reflection, drawing on readers' lived experiences.*

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## BOOK REVIEW



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## **Dyslexia Decoded: What It Is, What It Isn't, and What You Can Do About It** **By Sue Dymock and Tom Nicholson**

2012; Dunmore Publishing, Auckland, New Zealand  
145 pages, paperback with accompanying CD, \$29.99 (NZD)

The aim of this beautifully designed and reader-friendly book is to provide “a useful and practical resource for educators and employers” (Dymock & Nicholson, 2012, p. 7). Sue Dymock and Tom Nicholson, university professors and reading researchers from New Zealand, give a fine presentation of the important issues facing adults with dyslexia as well as their teachers and employers. The authors’ presentation is firmly grounded in the most current research on dyslexia and other reading difficulties, and avoids what the authors call the “science fiction” that can surround the field of reading. It is one of few resources that provides a truly practical approach to the assessment of reading problems in adults as well as to the interventions that are most appropriate and effective for them.

The book covers a range of topics vital for working with adults with reading problems. Dymock and Nicholson define dyslexia and put forth a “simple” cognitive model of reading and reading disability that guides the development of appropriate interventions. Next, the authors focus on assessment methods and tools as well as discuss teaching reading and writing skills to adults with dyslexia and other reading problems. Also, the authors point out in a poignant way the toll reading disabilities can take on self-esteem, self-aspiration, education, work, and survival skills.

Before each chapter of this book is a list of “Key Messages” that summarize the most important points, along with a range of resources. The chapter on defining dyslexia includes an adult dyslexia checklist that points out both the strengths and weaknesses associated with the reading disability. The focus is not strictly on problems; there is an acknowledgement of the strengths of dyslexic individuals that can be exploited in interventions. Dymock and Nicholson take the time to dispel

some of the common misconceptions about dyslexia, remaining firmly grounded in the scientific literature. There are simple, sensible steps for assessing reading problems that can be used by teachers and tutors that do not require a doctoral degree to interpret. The assessments are extremely practical, with a laser-like focus on the instructional needs of adult learners. There are helpful guides to decision-making and the use of assessment results. The chapters on instruction include resources for working on basic reading and writing skills, reading comprehension, and narrative and factual writing. Suggestions are appropriate for a range of adult learners from beginners to college students. The teaching ideas are readily put into practice and many of the suggestions place an emphasis on workplace needs and applications. Also, there is a nice emphasis on the use of technology as a method for helping to compensate for and accommodate the problems dyslexia presents to students.

There are some limits to the usefulness of this resource. There is scant attention paid to multisensory instruction, an intervention method that has demonstrated its worth with children and young adults (Shaywitz, Morris, & Shaywitz, 2008). Educators might want to supplement this resource with material such as the Wilson Reading System (<http://wilsonlangauge.com>), which provides wonderful basic training in the use of multisensory instruction with adults. In addition, a great deal of the practical research referenced in *Dyslexia Decoded* was conducted in New Zealand and is very specific to New Zealand governmental institutions and policies. The relevance for teachers or employers outside New Zealand is limited at best. Finally, the accompanying CD provides some nice illustrations of the concepts and resources present in the book, but is not a vital component and does not add much value to the overall product.

In conclusion, *Dyslexia Decoded* is written in a simple and straightforward, but not simplistic, manner. It is highly readable and accessible to both professionals and those without a significant background in reading or adult education. Dymock and Nicholson draw on their extensive research and clinical experiences as well as some real common sense to give educators and employers realistic, compassionate, and practical ways to help adults with reading disabilities.

*Mary S. Kelly*

Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University

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*The assessments are extremely practical, with a laser-like focus on the instructional needs of adult learners.*

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*Dyslexia Decoded is written in a simple and straightforward, but not simplistic, manner.*

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## WEB SCAN



*Reviewed by  
David J. Rosen*

*Newsome  
Associates*

## Online Tools for Photo Storage

**W**hy store learning-related photos online? Images are powerful tools for learning a range of subjects: English language, math, science, writing, and others. They are great for English vocabulary development. For example, ask your students (you may need to show them how to use their cell phone digital photo feature) to take pictures of things that are words they want to learn. Students can then upload each picture with a caption including the word, part of speech, and definition. Ask them to group their photos in folders such as “Local Market Foods,” “Trees and Flowers in My Community,” “Children Playing,” “Visiting My Public Library” or “Community Service Agencies.” This helps students build vocabulary and community knowledge as well as to learn digital filing strategies. A favorite strategy to encourage writing comes from ESL instructor Susan Gaer at Santa Anna College in California. She asks students to take a picture of something important to them that is hanging in their closet, perhaps something they brought with them from their home country. Then she asks them to write about what it is, why it is important, and what memories it evokes.

Practices like these reinforce that adult learning is connected to family and community. Adult learners in Massachusetts, for example, have made “virtual visit” web pages with photographs they took at a local labor history museum, a nearby computer store, and a neighborhood community health center. You could take your students on work-exploratory field trips where, if the workplace allows it, they can take pictures of the work process and then create a presentation for other students about what they have learned about certain kinds of work.

Ask your science students to search the web for good microscopic images of white and red blood cells or one-celled animals such as the amoeba or paramecium or to find images of deep ocean geographical features; then they can label, sort, and file these images. Students can use saved images for their slide presentations for English, writing, science, or math.

As a teacher, you could develop image-based formative assessments and find and store the images online so you could access them from your classroom, office, or home. For example, to assess English vocabulary, you

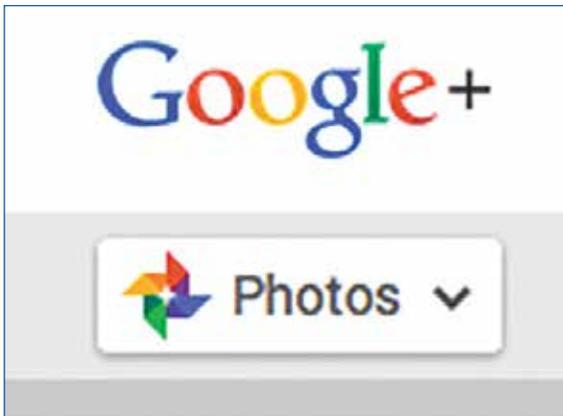
could develop assessment items that had a photo followed by multiple choices of the word or its definition.

Most of the image storage apps point out that they are also a good idea for backing up images stored on your computer.

Here are a few of the better-known, free, online storage spaces.

## 1. Google+ Photos (formerly Picasa)

<https://plus.google.com/u/0/photos> or <http://picasa.google.com/>



Picasa, a free photo storage service, is now a Google+ feature. With it, you can upload photos from your computer or smart phone, enhance them, create animations from five or more photos, and display photos on a computer or smart phone.

## 2. Flickr

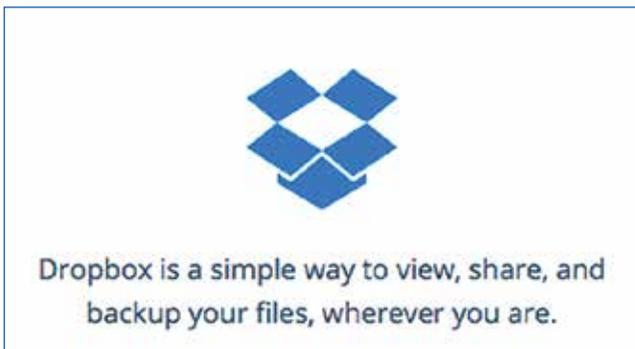
<https://www.flickr.com/>

Flickr offers 1,000 GB of free storage, enough space for more than 500,000 photos. Flickr is an international online community of shared photo collections in which individuals, organizations, or a teacher and her/his students can upload and share photos. Flickr has partnered with the Library of Congress: “1. To increase access to publicly-held photography collections, and 2. To provide a way for the general public to contribute information and knowledge.”



### 3. Dropbox

<http://dropbox.com>



Dropbox is a well-known online “cloud” storage service. Many teachers set up file folders and store documents there. Some use it to develop an online presence that students can access from a computer or other Internet-accessible device in order to get classroom assignments, lesson extensions and enhancements, or “make-up” lessons after missing class. Dropbox can also store photos. Dropbox basic is free for the first 2 GB of space, which should be fine for documents and a few photos. Dropbox Pro is \$9.99/month for 1,000 GBs.

### 4. Shutterfly

<http://shutterfly.com>

Shutterfly offers unlimited, free, online photo storage. For a fee, it can provide paper or canvas prints, photobooks, cards, posters, or calendars made from your stored photos. It is accessible from a computer, iPad, iPhone, Android phone, or Kindle Fire.



### 5. Snapfish

<http://snapfish.com>

Snapfish offers unlimited, free, online photo storage for members who maintain active participation. It can provide print photo products such as photobooks, cards, calendars, and more.





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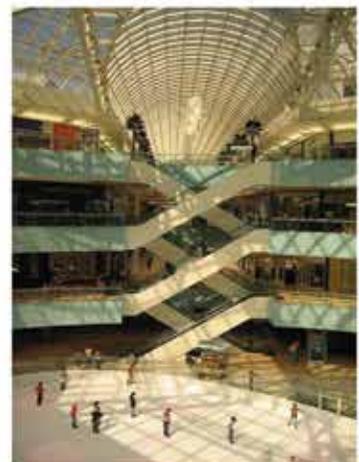
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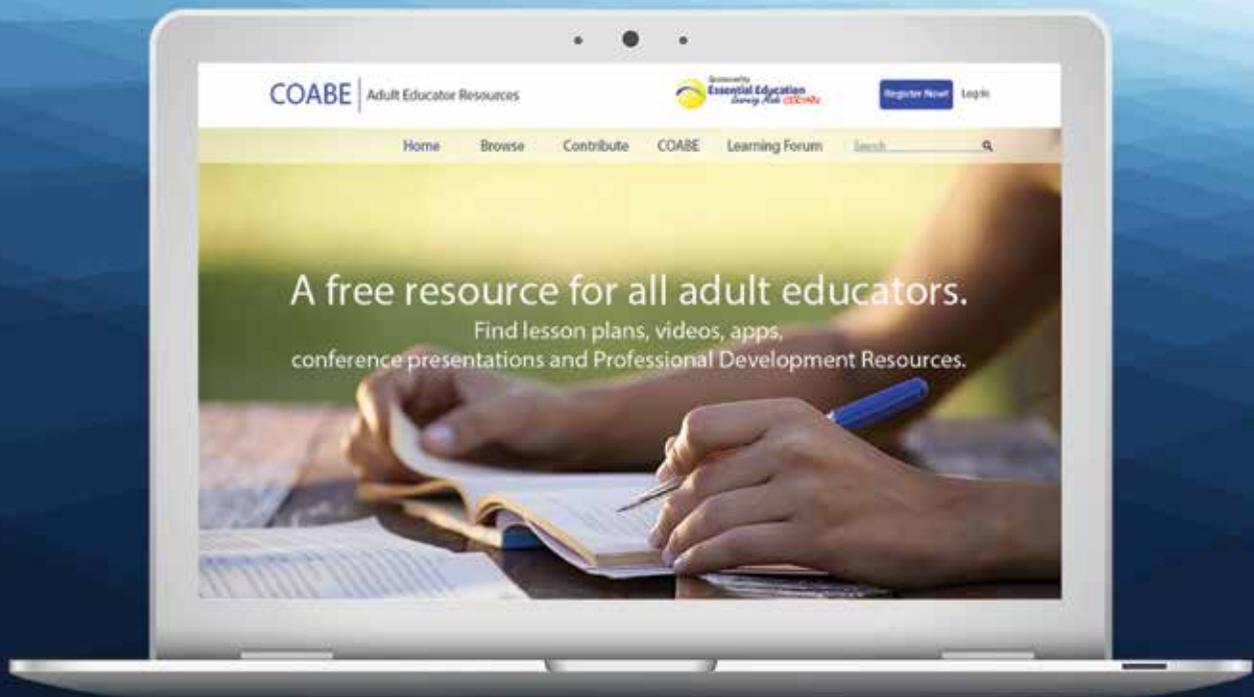
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