Title of Project:
Professional Learning across Contexts for LESLLA Teachers:
The Unlikely Meeting of Adult Educators in Kindergarten to
Explore Early Literacy Instruction

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A. **Summary of Research Findings**

In this case study of adult English as a Second Language (ESL) educators, the researcher facilitated a six-week professional development activity around the topic of early literacy instruction. The four participants were all LESLLA (low-educated second language and literacy acquisition) teachers. LESLLA teachers work with adult immigrants and refugees who do not read and write in their primary languages. Working in collaborative inquiry, they sought to improve the teaching and learning of this unique and neglected group of ESL learners.

Now living in the U.S., LESLLA learners face a double challenge: acquiring English while learning to read an alphabetic print language for the first time. Their teachers must be reading specialists, language experts, and resettlement workers all rolled into one. This population of adult ESL learners is largely neglected by both researchers and materials developers. However, within our communities, early elementary teachers are teaching literacy and language to young new readers every day. Kindergarteners, first, and second graders (K-2) are discovering the alphabetic principle, acquiring the components of reading, and building their identities as readers and writers as they prepare for academic success. While these two contexts are strikingly different, there is much overlap.

To explore early literacy and enhance their classroom practice, the participants investigated early literacy instruction for young new readers via a study circle, facilitated by the researcher. Over several weeks they observed K-2 instruction and worked individually with young learners in a focal elementary school. They also completed assigned readings and tasks and engaged in extensive discussions and reflective journaling and sharing via a private website. The facilitator encouraged them to make connections among the practices they were drawn to and to think together about how those practices might be wisely applied to their adult LESLLA learners. By tapping into a new teaching context, the participants uncovered key literacy practices in early elementary grades and transformed and applied their learnings to LESLLA learners.

Research questions:
1. What knowledge and practices do LESLLA teachers identify as transferable to their own teaching contexts after participating in a professional development study circle designed to expose them to literacy practices with early elementary learners?
2. Of those practices that they identify, how do LESLLA teachers transform and apply the practices for their adult education contexts?

3. As they reflect on the PD and how they have applied early elementary practices, what do they articulate as key insights?

Data sources:
a. Transcriptions of study circle meetings
b. Participants' written conversations and other postings on a private website for our group
c. Interviews before and after the study circle
d. Documentation from study circle assignments
e. Observations of participants' LESLLA classrooms before, during, and after the study circle
f. Notes on observations guides
g. Field notes from our visits to K-2 classrooms

Analysis of data was achieved with the assistance of cyclical coding and constant comparison, and managed with the online platform www.dedoose.com. Importantly, the researcher frequently brought data and early analysis to her participants, who acted as a collaborative analysis team as we puzzled together over what we were seeing, learning, and thinking. Working together, they agreed on themes and ways of organizing and prioritizing the themes to deepen our own understanding.

What did we discover among those little desks and chairs? **Findings** show that participants began organizing literacy instruction differently, such as implementing morning messages and sign-ins like those they had seen in the K-2 classrooms. Such morning routines offer a way to focus attention on the day's topic and lesson, build community, and set plans for the day. Establishing sound routines was a key outcome of their experience, and participants began assigning classroom jobs to their adult learners and having predictable blocks of literacy-focused instruction, much like what was encountered in the K-2 rooms. An extended definition of literacy also emerged, one that includes math and integrates numeracy instruction into literacy focused time. For example, a morning message regarding the day's topic of health and wellness led to a sign-in activity where LESLLA learners were asked, "Do you take medicine every day?" From the tallies of students answering 'yes' and 'no', math work ensued with tasks of subtracting, adding, and creating number sentences with the symbols for greater than and less than.

In the K-2 classrooms, the adult educators learned more about using literature in instruction and began reading aloud to their LESLLA classes and teaching about text connections such as text-to-text and text-to-self connections. Participants appreciated the classroom libraries in the K-2
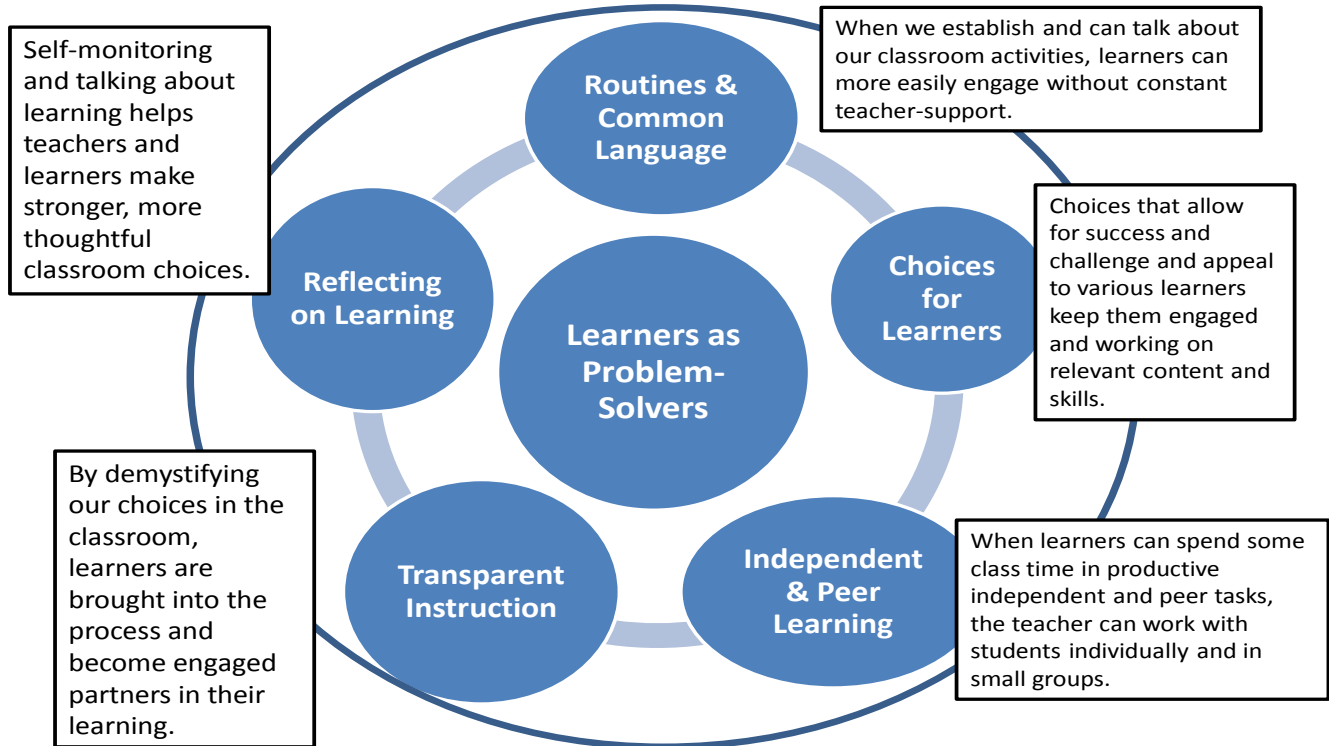
classrooms and the time for independent reading allowed to the children. While such practices are more challenging to implement in some adult education contexts, they found ways to establish small collections of independent reading material in their LESLLA classrooms and integrated time for 'read-to-self' during their adult ESL classes.

Another main finding was a heightened priority of independent learning and ways they might offer more choices and independent, individualized instruction. In the K-2 classrooms, children had an abundance of choices during a portion of their literacy block. Strong routines around this 'choice time' had been established and children worked efficiently and productively on level-appropriate tasks while the teacher provided individualized instruction to learners as she moved about the room. This ability to nurture learners' independence as learners while at the same time attending to the multiple levels of literacy in the room impressed the participants and received much attention in our discussions. Soon a variety of 'choice time' opportunities for LESLLA students appeared in participants' classrooms, and they responded to their various constraints with innovation.

Throughout the study circle, participants were asked to think deeply about the K-2 practices they were drawn to and to make connections among them. We worked together to create the visual below and added statements that captured our discoveries about our classrooms in light of our encounters with K-2 literacy instruction:

If our overall purpose is to assist our learners to become full participants in their communities outside of the classroom, then our classes need to be a place where independence and problem solving are nurtured. We can do this by attending to the following areas:

Self-monitoring and talking about learning helps teachers and learners make stronger, more thoughtful classroom choices.

When we establish and can talk about our classroom activities, learners can more easily engage without constant teacher-support.

Choices that allow for success and challenge and appeal to various learners keep them engaged and working on relevant content and skills.

By demystifying our choices in the classroom, learners are brought into the process and become engaged partners in their learning.

When learners can spend some class time in productive independent and peer tasks, the teacher can work with students individually and in small groups.

Routines & Common Language

Reflecting on Learning

Learners as Problem-Solvers

Choices for Learners

Transparent Instruction

Independent & Peer Learning

By placing LESLLA learners as problem solvers in the center, a shift in dispositions is evident. While LESLLA classes are often teacher-fronted and directed, the participants saw how a shift to more learner-centered teaching might take place, and how nurturing our learners in a new way, as problem solvers, mirrors our objectives for them outside of the classroom.

Implications for LESLLA teachers include:
1. Establish strong routines and common language for regular classroom activities. *Routines might include a morning message and sign in, calendar work, independent reading time, an 'unfinished work basket,' a 'choice box' when students arrive early, etc. When students know what to expect from their day and know the names of activities, they are better able to participate without frequent teacher-direction.*
2. Offer a regular literacy-work period where learners choose from various literacy activities. *Choices might include small group, partner, or individual tasks such as phonics and phonemic awareness activities, vocabulary matching within your topic, 'reading the room' or word wall, re-sequencing a familiar story, reading alone, reading to someone, etc. You can use this independent time to work with students who need extra attention.*
3. Begin a classroom library and make time for independent and peer reading. *Make a point to read to students and allow time for students to read to themselves and to peers often. Fill your*

library will level-appropriate and adult-appropriate materials. Use the public library to supplement your program's texts and to bring in books within your current topic.

4. Increase students' comprehension and engagement with texts by eliciting and pointing out text connections. *Text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections help learners experience stories more deeply and leads to higher order thinking skills.*

5. Find ways to integrate numeracy instruction into literacy focused time. *Take the time to write out number sentences when calculating attendance or doing calendar work. Create charts and graphs together in response to mingles and surveys. Count by 2s, 5s, 10s when handing out sheets or books. Math is a work skill and an academic skill, and it need not be divorced from literacy instruction.*

6. Get literacy off the page. *Learners who are new to print tire easily with pencil and paper activities, and often such activities do not mirror the language use students need outside of school. Instead, appeal to a wider set of learning preferences and up the energy in your room by using manipulatives, getting learners up at the white board, using iPads and Smart Boards if you have them, and keeping students moving.*

7. Explain WHY you are doing what you are doing in the classroom. *Leave no mysteries in the classroom; regard your learners as partners in the process and let them in on your thinking.*

8. One step at a time. *No need to change too much or too quickly. No doubt much of what you are already doing is working well, but perhaps could be enhanced by some of our findings. Incremental implementation of new practices is ideal for both teaching and learning.*

9. Reach out to colleagues. *LESLLA teaching can be particularly isolating, but finding fellow teachers with whom to share your discoveries and puzzles can be incredibly rewarding. Visit each others' classrooms, reach out to other contexts that might inform your work, and keep communicating about your practice.*

In addition to the enhanced repertoire of literacy activities and new ways of thinking about our LESLLA learners, this case study offers insight for professional developers in general, beyond those who focus on LESLLA issues.

Implications for professional developers include:

1. *Shared experience*
There appears to be an extraordinary benefit to not only observing others teach, but to observing others teach *together*. Every time we visited the K-2 classrooms, we did so in pairs, so that there would be at least one other person to debrief with who saw the same classroom. When we have a shared experience, we are able to debrief, unpack, and assign meaning to what we observed.

2. *Multi-level*
Just as LESLLA learners represent a range of strengths and experiences, so do their teachers. In PD such as this, the multi-levels of teachers and their experiences, program restraints, and preferences are honored. Each participant can gain from the work, and that 'gain' can manifest in many ways, from strikingly new restructuring to slight tweaks to enhance a current repertoire.

3. *License to experiment*
This study circle offered an important space and process for teacher growth. One example of teacher learning: one participant went from never having considered a particular practice (reading literature aloud to students) to seeing in action in another context, thinking about it with

colleagues, transforming it for LESLLA, trying it out, reporting back and processing with his colleagues, and by the end of our study circle he was advocating for this practice and articulating perceived benefits. To re-energize a classroom takes intent and inspiration, and this PD provided that spark.

4. *Ripple Effect*

An unexpected but pleasant finding from this PD is hearing how participants are sharing their experiences with their colleagues. While certainly the main impact rests with the participants themselves, they are not keeping quiet. Participants were engaged in an intense experience together that challenged them as teachers and scholars, and the kinds of shifts in thinking they experienced are being shared with others.

In this case study, four participants crossed contexts, moving from adult ESL education to early elementary classrooms, seeking ways to improve their instruction of adult new readers. This study circle represents a model for teacher professional development as an intellectual activity that embraces collaboration, inquiry, and exploring new contexts as powerful ways to grow as educators.

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