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Professionalism Prevails in Adult Education ESL Classrooms

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### Authors

Brown, Megan C.

Bywater, Kathleen

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## **Professionalism Prevails in Adult Education ESL Classrooms**

The purpose of this report is to explore the issue of professionalism of adult education ESL educators and uncover any inequities. The arc of this exploration describes the history of adult education, the current state of adult education ESL professionals, and the direction in which ESL adult educators appear to be heading. The results illustrate a positive trajectory of continued growth in training. Additionally, this article identifies challenges, such as part-time teacher status, and successes, such as a highly educated workforce, throughout the field.

### **Introduction**

In the field of education, there are challenges and successes at every level, and adult education is no exception. Adult education is often an enigma to those outside the field as well as to the education arenas that bookend it: comprehensive K-12 institutions and community colleges. This lack of awareness has created a challenging dynamic for adult educators; the polarization is possibly most evident in adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. While many adult schools are part of the local school district, there is often great disconnect between the curriculum of K-12 ELD classes and adult education ESL classes, resulting in adult education programs' operating, in most cases, in a vacuum. This vacuum is a testament to the lack of awareness of and focus on adult education that has existed for a long time.

### **Looking to the Past**

The federal government has been involved with adult education for more than 200 years. "At the turn of the century, evening schools in California were well-established as elementary schools and vocational schools and as centers for Americanization, as they were called at the time" (California Department of Education, 2005). Adult education classes originally focused on *Americanizing* new immigrants. "At the state level, evening schools for adults, part-time education, citizenship/Americanization classes for the foreign-born and the Chautauqua experience were fore runners of the State/Federal adult education movement" (McLendon, n.d.). Despite these early efforts, it was not until the early 1960s that the focus turned to adult literacy and poverty. This concern by the Kennedy administration later led to President Johnson's passage of the

1964 Economic Opportunity Act (P.L. 88-452), which created the first Adult Basic Education program as a state grant. This state and federal partnership brought focus to the importance of educating adults. However, it wasn't until 1981 in an amendment to the Adult Education Act (P.L. 97-35) that focus on ESL programs began.

Today, our focus in adult education ESL programs has shifted away from the original focus of the Americanization of students. Our current adult education ESL classes seek not only to teach students about American culture and the language used, but also to prepare them to live as self-reliant individuals. Content-based education and literacy came into the forefront, shifting the methodology used by teachers. In 1992, the *English-as-a-Second-Language Model Standards for Adult Education Programs* was published, helping to legitimize these programs (California Department of Education). Despite this effort, a disconnect between K-12 education and adult education, and then adult education and community colleges, has grown.

### **The Issues of Today**

This polarization is only one of the current obstacles for adult education ESL programs. Many of the teachers are part-time employees, often without the security of tenure. This can create an environment wherein workers have limited knowledge about the system in which they teach. "By the very nature of their part-time-ness, they are not able to participate in team meetings, staff development, or to be on hand to discuss issues in the professional practice of teaching and learning with full-time colleagues" and they often "remain under-recognized and largely unsupported by institutions" (Jameson & Hillier, 2008). Whereas K-12 educators are often single-site, full-time employees, adult educators are often working in various locations, commuting from site to site to survive financially. As Ed Morris, executive director of the Division of Adult and Career Education for Los Angeles Unified School District and a 24-year adult education veteran, says, "How do you offer full-time assignments for a part-time student body?"

Another challenge for adult ESL professionals is that many of the classes are remotely situated, geographically dispersed in an effort to be as far-reaching as possible. Overseeing such programs can be challenging in widespread geographic areas where administrative resources are scarce. Location sites for classes are varied, from homeless shelters and prisons to factories and K-12 campuses. Conversely, some urban settings try to meet the needs of large student populations with different problems from those of their rural counterparts, such as multiple cultures represented in one classroom and limited offerings in densely populated areas.

There is also a perception that adult education is an unnecessary entity, especially in our current financial crisis; in reality, adult schools are more necessary now than ever before.

Every year, almost two million immigrants come to the United States from all over the world to seek job opportunities and better lives for their fami-

lies. Thirteen million adults faced challenges of both language and literacy in 2006. But low literacy levels, as well as a lack of high school education and English language skills, severely hinder up to one million of these immigrants in their attempts to earn family-sustaining wages. The need and demand for ESL services far outstrips the supply of programs and qualified teachers. Moreover, research clearly shows that the rate of citizenship increases with education attainment. (National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008).

School districts sometimes do not understand the importance of adult education and want to reconfigure their budgets to use the funding to offset their K-12 school costs. Part of this problem is the perception that secondary classes for adults are unneeded and that ESL programs can be effectively managed by other nonprofit sources in the community. In discussing how adult education programs can bridge the gap between K-12 education and adult education, James Dawson, director of Riverside Adult School with 20 years of adult education experience, explains, "I believe this can be accomplished, and is at many adult schools, through concurrent (credit make-up) programs, drop-out recovery programs, articulation with existing K-12 vocational programs, and cooperative relationships with programs such as Even Start and Head Start." Understanding that adult students, particularly adult ESL students, are often the parents of the children in the school district is key to understanding the value of adult education programs. California's legislature declared that "the more a parent or guardian is involved in the education of his or her child the better the child will perform in school" (California Department of Education, 2008).

### **Discussion of the Research**

The issues of part-time teaching positions, geographic location, and the disconnect between local school districts and community colleges and adult schools has influenced the perceived professional status of adult education ESL teachers. To better understand the current perception, and the reality of adult educators, a purposeful, network sampling, in the form of a survey, was generated and distributed throughout California; the results negate the very foundation of those perceptions and illustrate a rather different picture (see Appendix).

Although adult education programs are perceived as less-than-stellar programs, with less-than-top-notch teachers, a full 62% of adult education teachers surveyed hold a master's degree or higher. Of those surveyed who are not adult educators, 68% believe that adult educators have a minimum of a bachelor's degree with a teaching credential (either K-12 or adult credential), emphasizing that adult educators are required to have at least the same amount of education as their K-12 counterparts. Among the respondents, 73% of people surveyed, including educators (K-university) and noneducators, indicated that the value of adult education curriculum is "highly valuable," compared with only 2% of respondents who found the curriculum to be of "little value." Even with the lack of possibilities to achieve tenure or full-time status, nearly 50% of

adult education teachers surveyed have been in the profession for more than 10 years, indicating longevity in the field.

In discussing survey participants' understanding of the level of professionalism of current adult ESL educators, the majority of responses indicated that adult ESL educators have a "professional" standing in the following areas: classroom management, motivation to participate in professional development, appropriate attire used by teachers, and understanding the needs of adult learners. Of the responses, 60.3% express an understanding that classroom management is at a "professional" level among adult education ESL teachers, with 28.6% indicating their belief that adult ESL teachers are "very professional." Half of respondents suggest that adult ESL educators have a "professional" level of motivation to participate in professional development. In discussing the appropriateness of the attire used by adult ESL teachers, 53.8% defined attire as "professional." And 88% of respondents indicate that adult ESL teachers' understanding of the needs of adult learners was favorable, with 51.8% defining it as "professional" and more than 36.2% as "very professional." From these results, it can be inferred that the reality of adult education ESL teachers is that they are professional despite the perception that adult educators routinely encounter. In fact, the overwhelming majority of responses suggest that adult education ESL teachers take their jobs quite seriously, with 47.5% of respondents expressing that they believe these teachers take their jobs "seriously" and 35.5% expressing that they take their jobs "very seriously."

This research provides a conditional conclusion that a vast majority of adult educators are highly educated, skilled, and informed about their profession, valuing the work that they do, as indicated by survey results across professions. However, the limitations of this research consist of the lack of representation of adult schools in every district throughout California. This research represents a sampling of adult school professionals, as well as those in other areas of education and outside of education altogether.

### **Looking to the Future**

Although the current status of adult education ESL educators in California is professional, there is room for improvement. One improvement being made is the redesigning of the adult education teaching credential. The current requirements for the English as a Second Language Adult Education teaching credential as outlined by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing Office (2009) are as follows:

A Bachelor's degree or higher completed at a regionally accredited college or university and completion of 20 semester units or 10 upper division semester units in one of the following: Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL); Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL); English; Languages other than English; Bilingual/bicultural studies; Teaching Reading; Speech.

However, because of the higher need to teach English language learners

during the last 10 years and the specification of teaching methodologies in this field, the Adult Education Advisory Panel has proposed a revision to the current requirements for teaching adult education ESL, the purpose of which is to include additional, relevant education and experience. However, these recommendations are still in the consideration phase of the change process (Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2009). As Morris says:

There seems to be a philosophy that says, "If you can speak it, you can teach it" and that is simply not the case. The credential requirements are not demanding of professional expertise. So, while we look at making the requirements more stringent, it's important to keep them in balance. The requirements have to be relative to the payoff in the end, which is often-times part-time work.

Dawson says, "Credentialing requirements are OK, but often rarely make someone a better teacher. If the additional requirements are subject specific, in this case teaching English to English language learners, then I would be in support of it."

While there is room for improvement in the credentialing requirements, we need to remember that

California's credentialing process for Adult Education teachers is designed to maintain educational quality. Many other states do not require a specific Adult Education credential for their teachers. ... Others rely on a volunteer corps that receives little or no professional development. (Darche, Nayar, & Downs, 2009, p. 35)

The current state of the economy could, in fact, bode well for the comprehensive state of the professionalism in the field. With the lack of funding that adult education is facing, hiring new applicants is limited in many programs, if positions are available at all. For those few open positions, only the most qualified applicants will be considered. Potentially, the community of adult education ESL professionals will have increased skills because these newly hired professionals will bring their knowledge and experience to their programs.

There are also a variety of professional development opportunities for adult education ESL teachers, many at no cost to the educator. One organization providing such services is CALPRO (California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project). According to its 2008 State Needs Assessment Survey, 63.3% of respondents were ESL/EL-Civics teachers; of those respondents, 60.1% had attended a CALPRO workshop (CALPRO, 2008). These professional development organizations are vital to the improvement of the field of adult education ESL, providing research-based services to emphasize and enhance the professionalism of the field.

### **Conclusion**

While some believe the perception of adult education ESL educators is unfavorable, there is substantial evidence to the contrary. Adult education serves

a distinct and important purpose in our communities, providing a service to those who are not a part of the educational institutions that teach our youth or enable adults to earn a college degree. The importance of adult education is enhanced by the quality of its programs and professionals. While the future of adult education may be in transition, its necessity is evident. And adult education ESL professionals will continue striving to provide the best educational experience to all who walk through their doors.

### **Authors**

*Megan C. Brown has dual master's degrees in TESOL and Theater Arts. She is the EL-Civics coordinator for Riverside Adult School and, after having taught all levels, now teaches Advanced ESL with a focus on higher education preparation. Her research interests include developing language acquisition practices through the use of fine arts.*

*Kathleen Bywater holds an MA in TESOL and is a program coordinator at Riverside Adult School. She has taught all levels of ESL, has been the ESL program coordinator, and has been involved in numerous curricular development and professional development projects for the past 15 years. Her research interests include the development of effective practices for transitioning students to career technical and higher education.*

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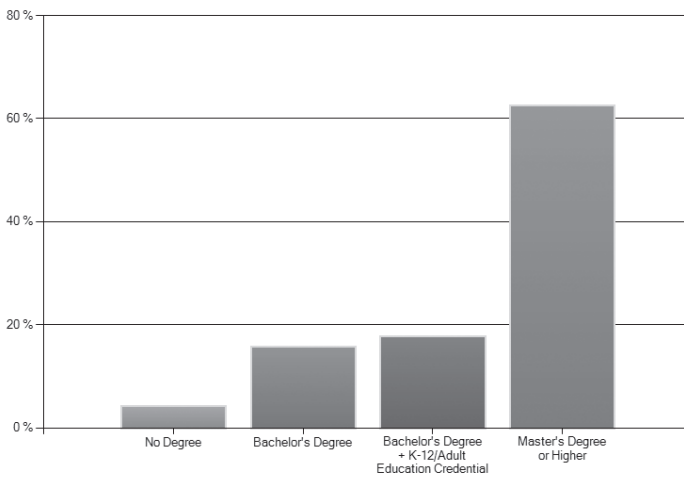
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## Appendix

### Adult Education ESL Professionalism

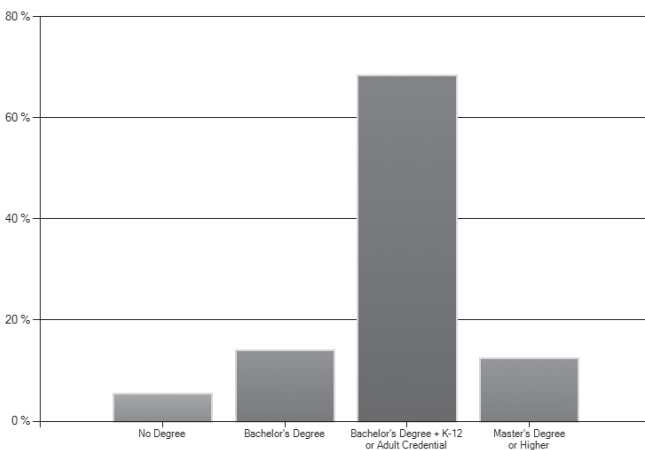
#### Question 1

**If you are an Adult Education teacher, what is your level of education? (If you are not an Adult Education teacher, please skip to Question 2.)**



#### Question 2

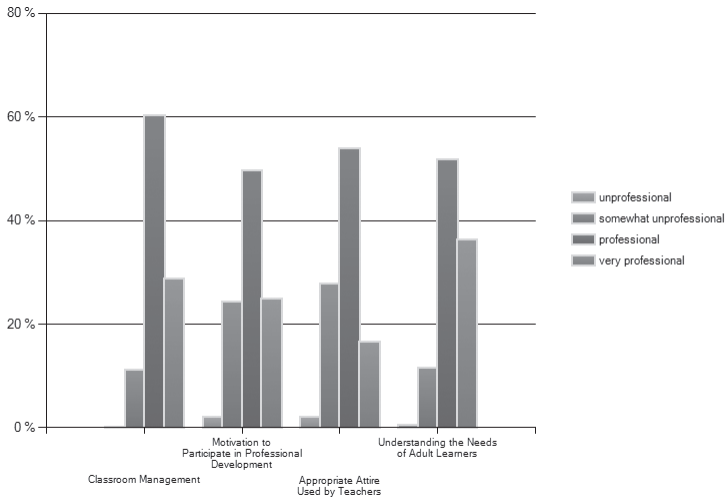
**If you are not an Adult Education teacher, what is your understanding of Adult Education ESL teachers' educational backgrounds?**





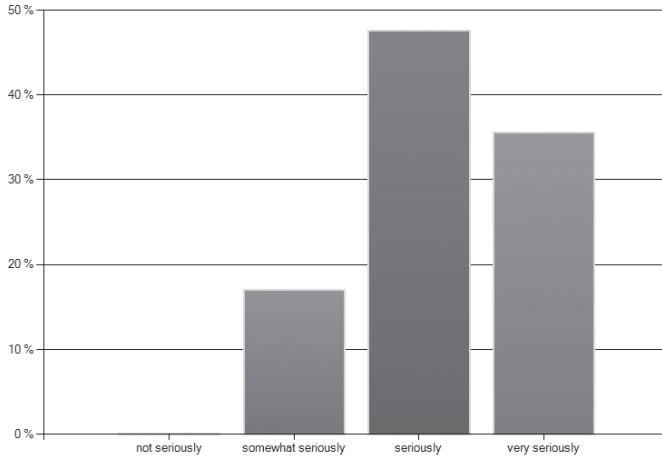
### Question 3

**What is your understanding of the level of professionalism of current Adult ESL educators?**



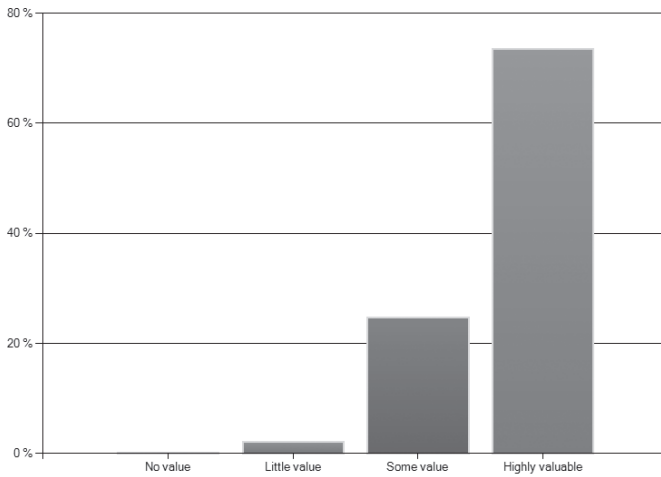
### Question 4

**How seriously do you think the majority of current Adult Education ESL teachers take their jobs?**



**Question 5**

**What is your impression of the value of the curriculum in Adult Education ESL classes?**



**Question 6**

**If you are not involved in Adult Education ESL programs, what is your profession? (And then please skip to Question 9.)**

**Answer Options**

**Response Count**

81

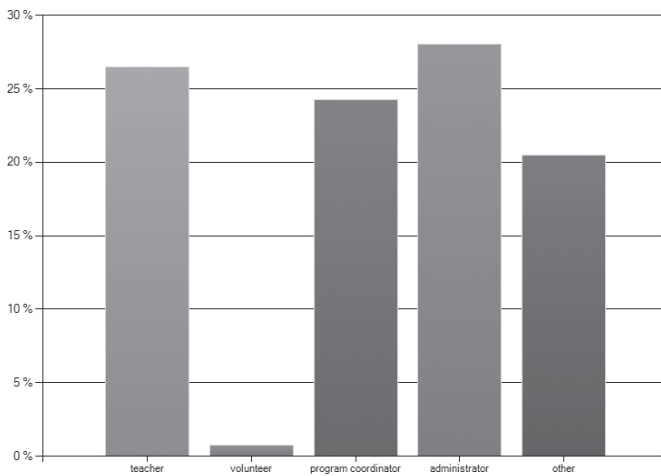
*answered question*

81

*skipped question*

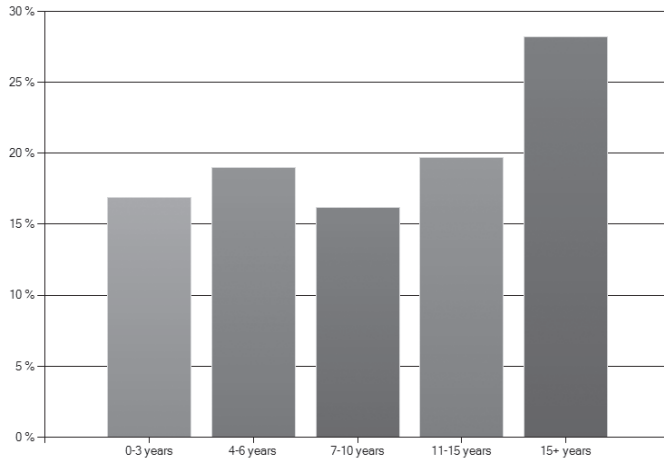
**Question 7**

**If you are involved in Adult Education ESL, what is your position?**



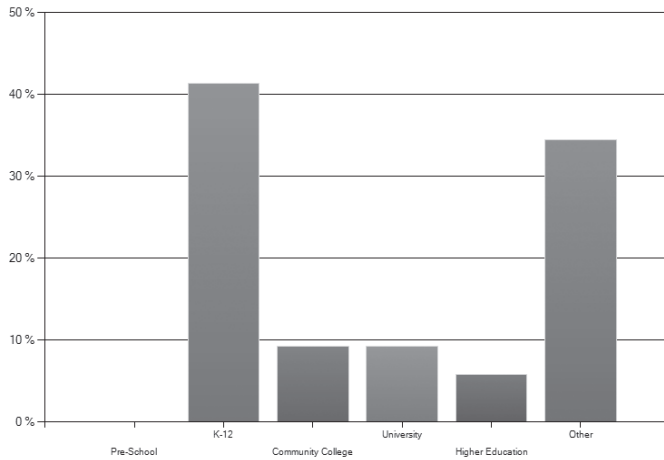
**Question 8**

**How many years have you worked with Adult Education ESL Programs? Please include all experience as a teacher, volunteer, program coordinator, administrator, etc.**



**Question 9**

**If you do not work with Adult Education but are involved in education, in which of the following settings do you work?**



**Question 10**

**For purposes of regional data gathering, please tell us your zip code.**

**Answer Options**

**Response  
Percent**

**Response  
Count**

ZIP/Postal Code:

100%

*answered question*

*skipped question*

**0**