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FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

"We Expressed What We Needed, and the Center Made changes…I Think They Listened:" Exploring Complexities of Participatory Action Research in Adult English for Speakers of Other Languages Program

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In this article, we discuss challenges and lessons learned from a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project conducted in collaboration between a public university and an adult education program focusing on adult English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Over several months, university researchers regularly met with adult ESOL learners, who became researchers of their program to determine what works and what could be improved to serve them better. Simultaneously, a group of teachers engaged in an inquiry with one of the university researchers. We found PAR effective in engaging adult ESOL learners in changing their learning environment and simultaneously leading to improvement in their language skills. The project with teachers was not as successful as they saw their participation as an addition to their already busy work schedule. We ultimately found a need to ensure proper relationship building at the beginning of the project, balancing collaboration and autonomy of all participants, and navigating various time restraints when collaborating with adult ESOL learners on a PAR process.

In the United States, international migrants (immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers) constitute 13.6% of residents, of whom approximately one in four needs further development of their English proficiency and 46% speak English less than "very well" (American Immigration Council, 2021; Migration Policy Institute, 2022). English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses for adult migrants are crucial to increase their likelihood of successful participation in their new communities and American society at large. ESOL research primarily focuses on students enrolled in K-12 education (Calderón et al., 2011; Goldenberg, 2013). However, the growing adult migrant population has educational needs that differ from K-12 ESOL students. Yet, adult education, which includes ESOL, High School

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Equivalency (HSE), and other classes, is an under-researched and under-funded education sector that substantially contributes to integrating migrants into American society. The federal government provided about $675 million to states for adult education in 2021, resulting in less than 3% of eligible adults receiving services under this funding (Waldman et al., 2022). Each state and municipality add to this federal funding, but most adult education programs have long wait lists, especially for their ESOL services. However, Hofstetter & Mchugh (2023) claim that the current adult education system fails to account for differences in characteristics between U.S. born and immigrant adult populations such as level of formal education and English proficiency, despite immigrants being a significant target population for these programs. Hence, assumptions and approaches embedded in adult education may not be relevant or accessible for immigrant populations (Hofstetter & Mchugh, 2023).

In addition, the funding is usually tied to specific benchmarks, which do not necessarily measure what is most needed by adult learners. The goal of helping learners achieve an 8th-grade level of education in 1966 has evolved to a more recent focus on college and career readiness. The funding became tied to specific standardized test gains under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Mortrude, 2020). Even though the teaching methodology to deliver the standards is left to the adult ESOL programs, this often leads to "what gets measured is what gets done" (Mortrude, 2020, p. 55), meaning that the content and methods of instruction often reflect the tests rather than the complex educational needs of adult migrants. This happens despite the variety of English proficiency, formal education, and professional experience in immigrant populations, which require programs that can be tailored to their needs (Hofstetter & Mchugh, 2023). In addition to English proficiency and standard education, an understanding of systems and norms in the United States is essential to successful migrant integration. The Alliance for Language Learners' Integration, Education, and Success proposes that what gets taught and measured as success in adult ESOL programs should be tied to "economic security, educational and career advancement, health and well-being, providing for children and family, and participation in civic and community life" (Mortrude, 2020, p. 56). These measures are vital to helping new Americans meaningfully integrate and contribute to their communities. The shift would require "adult educators to think expansively about their partnerships and their services and the way they frame their value in their communities (Mortrude, 2020, p. 56)."

Methodology: Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research (PAR) is a distinctive research methodology that integrates action or change as a vital outcome of the research process, moving beyond mere knowledge acquisition (Brabeck et al., 2015; Lake & Wedland, 2018). It requires equal and collaborative engagement of co-researchers and participants (Walter, 2009). Kilroy (2011) defines participation as "the extent to which potential stakeholders have a say in

how interventions are designed and implemented" (p.127) and strives to promote a higher level of ownership by the community. PAR rejects the concept of an external expert who theorizes and offers solutions. Instead, it recognizes community members as the true experts in their own lives and actively involves the community of interest throughout the research process (Hocevar, 2023). PAR leverages the power and knowledge of insiders and the strength of inside-outside collaborations, as it includes deep and broad participation and action and accountability for social change (Fine & Torre, 2004; Torre et al., 2012). This shift of power from researchers to community members makes PAR particularly useful for social science researchers aiming to foster social change. PAR avoids a linear research model, favoring a cyclical process that incorporates opportunities for observation, reflection, and action throughout its various stages (Hocevar, 2023). In its most basic form, the PAR cycle involves the following steps: problem identification, planning, action, observation, and reflection, which are ideally repeated until progress is made in addressing the issue (Hocevar, 2023). Nevertheless, there is potential even for PAR to lead to epistemic violence if university researchers fail to question positivist assumptions (i.e., that social reality can and should be understood with generalizable or universal explanations of human behavior obtainable through objectivity) or if they view communities as working for researchers instead of alongside them (Dutta et al., 2023).

PAR is likely underutilized as a methodology due to its liberatory roots that aim to mobilize underrepresented populations to affect change in their environment (Freire, 2000; Lewin, 1946). Since the content and practices of education in the United States are shaped by neoliberalism and hegemonic structures that prioritize the status quo to maintain societal power imbalances (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Ordem, 2023), PAR could be a potent tool for change within education. When considering adult ESOL settings, there is a noteworthy relationship between neoliberalism and English as a dominant language globally and in the United States specifically (Phillipson, 2017). ESOL classes are exposed to neoliberal practices, such as the dominance of American and British culture, adherence to what English textbook publishers deem neutral textbook content (even though all textbooks have ideological underpinnings and promote values of the dominant culture) and textbooks with activities that are irrelevant to learners' lives or needs (Malebese, 2017; Ordem, 2023).

Instead, in order to maintain the interests and commitment of learners, education should incorporate the experiences and challenges they face (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). Rather than reflecting the learner's real-world needs, outcomes measured by standardized tests are tied to funding and thus contribute to the neoliberal power dynamics in adult education. The federal government's control over educational content has been maintained via regulations, requirements, and curriculum materials (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009). PAR can challenge these power imbalances and neoliberal practices by empowering learners to question their educational content and

teaching methods (Freire, 1985; Vangay et al., 2021). In turn, student input can help to prevent misallocation of resources while providing helpful feedback to teachers and administrators about their needs.

Implementing PAR in adult ESOL education can increase participants' communicative confidence and willingness to converse in English as a result of the dialogic nature of the approach (Gilhooly et al., 2017). Knowledge development is a collective act that closely aligns the values of community strength and involvement in participatory research. Building a space where marginalized learners are made aware of their power to overcome learning barriers through collective action further facilitates their education (Freire, 1985; Malebese, 2017). Promoting critical consciousness and language acquisition through problem-posing or project-based education can transform both teachers and learners while simultaneously encouraging migrant participation in their new communities (Freire, 1985; Gilhooly et al., 2017).

Current Study

Context

Each PAR process must be understood in relation to its specific contexts (Dutta et al., 2023). Lowell, Massachusetts, is historically a destination city for migrants from many parts of the world. The foreign-born population as of 2022 was 28.8%, notably higher than the national average of 13.6%, with the most common birthplaces being Cambodia, Brazil, India, Vietnam, and the Dominican Republic (Data USA, 2022; Institute for Immigration Research, 2016). Lowell is linguistically diverse, as many languages coexist within the city. However, most prevalent languages are Spanish, Khmer, and Portuguese (Lotspeich et al., 2003). Overall, migrants in this area report lower rates of English proficiency (58% not proficient in English) in comparison to state (43%) and national (46%) levels (Institute for Immigration Research, 2016; Migration Policy Institute, 2022).

Lowell has the fourth largest population of adults needing further development of English proficiency in Massachusetts (Boston Planning & Development Agency, 2019). Adult education has a long-standing history in Lowell as the first full-time center was founded in 1977 which has become a standalone location in 1993. It serves over 2,000 adults each year through day and evening ESOL, citizenship, and HSE classes free of charge to adult residents of Lowell. The program is funded mainly by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Adult and Community Learning Services) and Lowell Public Schools.

The local university has a complex relationship with the greater Lowell community, both contributing to its economic and cultural development and gentrifying parts of Lowell that subsequently become unaffordable to its diverse long–term residents and new coming immigrants alike. Nevertheless, various researchers from the university have been conducting research benefiting some of the most marginalized Lowell community members.

Project Participants and Co-Researchers

University Researchers

In the current study, the university researchers originally consisted of five female members: three university professors and two graduate students. One of the two graduate students left the project halfway due to other priorities and interests and is thus not a co-author of this manuscript. Three members are migrants themselves, who have direct experience learning English as an additional language. The other two members are both U.S.-born and have proximity to migrant communities through personal or professional experience. The first author is a White American woman with experience in PAR. The second author is a White Czech migrant who learned English as an additional language and had a career in adult ESOL as a teacher and administrator before joining higher education. She was the initiator of this project. The third author is a White woman from the United States with extensive experience conducting community-led research projects focused on improving equitable educational services within and outside the U.S. The fourth author identifies as a White, transnational, multilingual woman from Finland who lived in the United States for over two decades and taught ESOL from pre-K students to adult migrants in various public education programs. All university researchers are invested in supporting migrant communities and are committed to social justice through research and education.

Adult Learner Researchers

Initially, 30 adult learners from day classes expressed interest in participating; 17 attended the first meeting, 12 consistently attended the first half of the project, and six attended all meetings. They included migrants living in the U.S. as recently as three months and as long as 13 years, from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, consistent with recent migration trends. Their English proficiency ranged from intermediate to advanced. Adult learners often attended classes either before or after work, were responsible for providing childcare, transportation for themselves or others, and had changing class schedules as they advanced through the program. Retention dropped overtime due to conflicting commitments such as employment, transportation, childcare, and changing class schedules.

Teacher Researchers

The final group of teacher-researchers were all White women with training and experience teaching ESOL at the K-12 and adult levels. One was part-time and the rest were the program's full-time teachers. They had been teaching at the center for several years and had varying educational backgrounds. A student advocate, a Latinx immigrant woman, who had been a student in the program, also participated in several meetings.

Process

Collaboration Building: Spring/Summer 2021. The collaboration between the university and the adult education center began in early 2021 when the second author of this article, a migration scholar with experience working in adult ESOL, reached out to the leadership of the center and asked if they were interested in a research-based collaboration that would be helpful to the center in any way. When initial interest was established, she introduced a PAR format and suggested that she and some center members participate in the Critical PAR Summer Intensive by the Public Science Project (https://publicscienceproject.org/critical-par-institutes) located at the City University of New York Graduate Center (offered online that year). After several conversations with the center's director and the student advocate, an administrator who acts as a liaison between students, teachers, and administration, they decided that one part-time teacher and the student advocate, would attend the intensive institute along with the second author. The center leadership seemed genuinely interested in this process, which was apparent by the director paying for the critical PAR intensive for the center representatives. The intensive was meant to give community partners an opportunity to develop and plan a PAR project. Unfortunately, the university researcher missed half of the training due to illness, which meant that mutual understanding and a comprehensive plan of a research project were not fully developed. Still, following the training, the university researchers and the center leadership met again several times and decided on a project that would involve adult ESOL learners exploring their needs and their day-time teachers examining their instructional practices. The center leadership expressed interest in learning from their ESOL students and appreciated that the students would have an additional opportunity to practice their English during the project. Actually, they made it clear that all research activities would have to take place in English; therefore, adult learners who had recently begun learning English were unable to participate. The center leadership wanted the university researchers to conduct a separate, traditional research, with beginning students on the same topic. This decision was unfortunate, from the university researchers' perspective, because the purpose of this project was to give the adult learners' an opportunity to share their experiences at the program and to express their views. Nevertheless, it is common for ESOL instructors to insist on an English-only environment, whether because they subscribe to hegemonic language ideologies or simply misunderstand the potential of students' home languages in promoting the acquisition of additional languages (D. Housel, 2023; D. A. Housel, 2023; Swift, 2022). However, this ignores the reality where "competence in English is typically developed by adult migrants as part of a multilingual, multimodal communicative repertoire, used fluidly and flexibly, in spaces that are often heavily multilingual" (Simpson, 2020, p. 1). Both spontaneously arising (often student-initiated) and purposefully planned (often teacher-initiated) use of multiple languages for learning tasks can promote new approaches

to learning, the construction of multicultural, multilingual learner identities, and the positioning of learners as experts and active participants in the learning process (García & Li, 2014; D. Housel, 2023; Simpson, 2020). This is especially relevant for PAR projects, where the adult learner researchers are the experts on their needs.

Recruitment and Consent: Winter 2022. For approximately two weeks, the university researchers recruited adult ESOL participants in person and with the help of the student advocate by visiting classrooms, handing out flyers, and setting up an informational table in a high traffic area near classrooms. The teachers were also recruited by the university researchers, although it is not clear what kind of encouragement to participate they received from the director. Incentives for adult learner researchers include a $25 gift card to a local grocery store, and the center paid teacher researchers for each session they attended. This project prioritized co-researcher well-being by obtaining written and oral informed consent from all participating researchers. Each research group involved was made aware that they were free to participate and had the ability to withdraw at any time without consequence. The informed consent process included detailed information about the purpose and potential benefits and risks of the project. To ensure a more equitable consent process for co-researchers with less English proficiency, the consent form was in English appropriate for intermediate levels. In addition, there were meetings dedicated to addressing any questions or challenges in comprehension. Both adult learner and teacher sessions were audio-recorded with all participants' permission. The university researchers sought IRB approval from the university and qualified for exemption from IRB review as the project posed no more than minimal risk to participants.

Adult Learner Researcher Meetings: March 2022-June 2022. The adult learner meetings occurred weekly for an hour each over 12 weeks in the center's computer laboratory around several tables pushed together in the middle of the room, surrounded by computer stations by the walls. The first few sessions centered around getting to know each other and exploring what worked well for the adult learner researchers at the center and what the center meant to them. They initially emphasized the many opportunities the center provided them, including ESOL and citizenship classes, employment assistance, and other services. One adult learner researcher noted, "I feel comfortable [at the center], and I made my new friends...I like this place." Another suggested that the center "gives us the chance of life" and "For me, the center changed our lives." One adult learner researcher observed that in their home country, a free service is not typically one of quality, stating that, "When it's free, it's not good. When it's free, don't go." In contrast, they liked the services they were receiving there for free. The emphasis on appreciation during the first meetings is a crucial part of the process, developing adult learner researchers trust between each other, the institution and the university researchers. This trust allowed for further constructive critique and the possibility to express it on its premises. The focus on appreciation of the

center at first took into consideration the power imbalance among the learner researchers, the university researchers and the center. To ask the learner researchers to immediately criticize their teachers or the program would have meant ignoring their potentially vulnerable position within the project.

Even though the purpose of the project was explained during recruitment, at the beginning of the process, most adult learner researchers understood and treated the meetings as an additional opportunity to practice English. Thus, explaining the PAR process also became part of the initial sessions, and the understanding later expanded to motivations of taking agency and using this opportunity for empowerment. The university researchers provided information regarding what research is and how it can be used to understand and improve social and educational contexts. Moreover, the university researchers understood the language acquisition benefit of these meetings and incorporated explicit language instruction and feedback throughout the meetings. For example, they explained new vocabulary as it came up and reviewed it in subsequent meetings. They provided some feedback on pronunciation when it was important for mutual understanding, and over all encouraged all learner researchers to express themselves no matter their English proficiency.

As the weekly meetings continued, the adult learner researchers started sharing suggestions for improvements of their classes. Several expressed the need for language practice based on real-life or everyday English, especially conversing with native or native-like English speakers, for which they generally had minimal opportunity. They said most classes consisted of reading, writing, and worksheet work, but only a little conversation. They also expressed a desire for pronunciation feedback. At one meeting, an adult learner researcher, a teacher in her native country, suggested that ESOL pedagogy for adults requires a different approach than what is typical with K-12 students. She said: "I know they have a good program, but I think the adults is different." Since most of the teachers' experience was originally in K-12 education, it was not surprising that some utilized a similar teaching pedagogy with adult learners, which felt condescending or disrespectful to them.

By the third meeting and beyond, the adult learner researchers started talking about the importance of those who receive services having the power to shape those services to address their needs and how participatory research can be an avenue for advocating and enacting change at the center. The understanding of PAR and the adult learner researchers' motivations for the project started unfolding seamlessly. They emphasized wanting to gather perspectives from as many students as possible, recognizing that their own experiences might only represent a small subgroup of opinions. One adult learner researcher noted, "...then we need to discuss...all the students in the center."

The university researchers then presented various research methods that could be used to gather data from other ESOL students in the center. The adult learner researchers decided on two methods of collecting information. The first method or action step included a proposition that a suggestion box be placed near classrooms for learners of all levels to make anonymous suggestions for change any time during the school year. That way, the teachers and the center leadership would be getting continuous feedback throughout the school year. The second action step focused on conducting a survey. Guided by the university researchers, the adult learner researchers developed and revised survey questions and typed them on the computers in the meeting space. The survey consisted of four multiple choice and two open-ended questions about suggestions for improvement, class length, frequency, location, and the future of the adult education center (see Appendix A). This step presented them with an opportunity to learn basic computer and Microsoft Office processing skills. The university researchers prepared handouts with instruction on basic computer and Microsoft Word use. Once the survey was finalized and it was time for data collection, the adult learner researchers insisted on involving the student advocate. With her support, the adult learner researchers distributed the surveys during day classes and collected the responses from their classmates.

Over the next few meetings, the adult learner researchers input the survey data into Microsoft Excel and conducted basic analysis, mostly frequencies and themes. They all learned Microsoft Excel through this process, under the university researchers' ongoing guidance, which again included language-level appropriate handouts. Once the analysis was complete, we collectively discussed the results and prepared a report (see Appendix B) in Microsoft Word to share the results with the teachers and administration. A meeting was set up where each adult learner researcher presented a part of these findings to teachers and administration and answered questions. The adult learner and university researchers communicated with each other via text messages and phone calls in between meetings and during a final meeting, they reflected on their experiences in the projects and hopes for the future in the center.

Teacher Researcher Meetings: March 2022-May 2022. The fourth author worked directly with the teacher researchers, conducting five biweekly meetings during the spring of 2022. The purpose of the meetings was to help the teachers focus on their practice in an area they identified as needing improvement, as well as using research methods such as analyzing data from the meetings to create follow-up plans. There was also a tentative plan to combine the teacher and adult learner projects to create a joint group to work together. Following an initial brainstorming session, the teacher researchers focused on conversation instruction due to their challenges related to considering learners' differing English proficiency levels and managing classroom dynamics between talkative adult learners and those preferring to listen quietly while providing meaningful conversation instruction. They also

noted that incorporating more conversation into their classes was challenging because of all the content they had to cover, referring to the benchmarks tied to funding.

To address these challenges, the university researcher provided two formal protocols to guide the dialogue among the teacher researchers. The protocol used during meetings two and three consisted of individual goal setting for conversation instruction and reporting results and the second protocol centered on problems of practice (POPs) (Henriksen et al., 2017). The university researcher wrote the POPs based on their discussions during meetings and conveyed fictional scenarios related to conversation instruction. They reflected on what the teacher in the practice scenario could do. This protocol was used during meeting four. The fifth and final meeting with the teacher researchers consisted of a wrap-up reflection during which they expressed gratitude for the time spent discussing their practice.

Due to the school year ending, joint meetings between the teacher researchers and adult learner researchers, other than the meeting during which the adult learners shared their findings, did not take place.

Results and Discussion

This PAR project included two main collaborative components of a university with an adult education center, namely work of adult ESOL learner researchers and ESOL teacher researchers. As any PAR project, which tend to be messier than traditional structured research (Kuriloff et al., 2011), it passed through both challenging and encouraging periods, resulting in personal and communal empowerment of the adult ESOL learners, whose work led to some changes of their learning environment. It also included a lesser engagement of teacher researchers, whose benefits of participation are less tangible.

Adult Learner Researcher Component

The adult learner researchers who were initially hesitant to speak English in general and to share suggestions for improvements, felt increasingly empowered to advocate for their needs and those of other students. After agreeing on several suggestions in their group, they surveyed intermediate and advanced ESOL adult learners at the center. The survey results indicated an interest in more interactive pedagogy focused on real-life simulating conversation and feedback on pronunciation. In addition, the survey revealed that adult learners wanted more class time than what was offered by the center at the time and shared that teaching methods should reflect adult-learner centered approaches. In the end of the school year, the adult learner researchers presented these results to their teachers and the program administrators, who seemed very interested in the findings and during the adult learner researchers' presentation expressed appreciation of their work and input. After the culminating meeting, the center leadership implemented a few immediate changes based on the survey results. They included changes in class schedule to reflect an interest in more intensive instruction and

they opened a new conversation club, which was facilitated by one of the university researchers and her undergraduate students, to meet the learners' demand for more practice of their speaking skills. Several months later, an adult learner researcher informally told the university researchers that some teachers included more conversation and pronunciation practice during summer classes, presumably based on the input from the adult learner researchers. One of the adult learner researchers co-presented the project at the 2023 MATSOL conference.

At the end of the project, when reflecting on the project, the adult learner researchers expressed their gratitude for the experience, acknowledging the value it added to their learning experience. They expressed that they liked the diversity of students that participated, although they would have wanted the group to stay larger like at the beginning. They appreciated the introduction to the research process indicating that "Before we began, I had no idea what the research process was, from beginning to end." This process provided the opportunity for them to voice their opinions, "I like the weekly meetings because you can express your ideas, and sometimes we don't have the opportunity in class." By the end of the project, the opportunity to voice their opinions led to actionable change, as one adult learner researcher stated. They also reported higher confidence in speaking English with native speakers and each other, an increase in self-esteem, and appreciation of their voices being heard. They shared that "It was important that people in the community and university care about our education" and "we expressed what we needed, and the center made changes...I think they listened. "This is important as one of PAR goals is to "force us to trouble traditional notions of 'whose knowledge counts'" (Fine & Torre, 2004, p. 18) and to take seriously the insider knowledge of those who are often "at the bottom of social arrangements" (Fine & Torre, 2004, p. 18). Adult migrants typically have little say in their ESOL education and often live in anti-immigrant environments, where their presence is considered a burden rather than enrichment. This feedback and the center's actions demonstrate that PAR can effectively engage adult migrant ESOL learners in changing their learning environments and simultaneously foster language acquisition and development of other (i.e., technological or research) skills and lead to sense of accomplishment and empowerment.

Teacher Researcher Component

Participating teacher researchers did not report the same benefits from the PAR process as the adult learner researchers. They continuously positioned the project as the university researchers' domain, as revealed by repeated questions such as "Did you get the data you need?" and "Is this useful to you?" This dynamic suggests that the teacher researchers perceived the university researchers as having more authority or control over the process. Instead of viewing the meetings as an opportunity to examine their practice and advocate for their needs, the teacher researchers seemed to understand it as a traditional research project in which the university may use them as

subjects to collect data for its own purposes. In addition, they thought the resulting data might help the administration apply for more funding, which would afford concrete benefits to them, such as renovating a bathroom at the center. During the last meeting, one of the teachers remarked, "we [teachers] are not in the data collection research business... I thought [the project] would be something that [the center director] would be able to use...in her applications for her grants."

However, the teachers did engage in the meetings and willingly participated in discussions about their practice and using the protocols provided by the university researcher. They described their feelings towards these discussions as follows: "I've enjoyed them tremendously" and "This feeds my soul." Some enthusiastically tried new instructional strategies, such as using technology (voice messaging with students on the text application WhatsApp) to provide conversation instruction. To the teachers, this type of "internal improvement" was at odds with the goals of the center's administration, whom they perceived caring more about measurable outcomes. One teacher argued, "the powers that be, I don't think they're really interested so much in [the internal process of improvement]. They want to see how many people went from A to B or C or D, unfortunately." This feedback speaks directly to the negative impact of adult education funding tied to benchmarks on the content and format of instruction (Mortrude, 2020) that we discussed at the beginning of this manuscript. In addition, the teachers expressed that any "additional work" beyond the meetings was going to be a burden on them. They cited other professional development opportunities provided by the center and lack of time outside of their instructional hours as barriers to participating in the PAR process. The teacher researchers also did not show much interest in research methods such as reading and interpreting meeting transcripts to co-construct new understandings of practice within the group. For example, when asked about research and conference opportunities, one teacher expressed, "I don't mind meeting once every two weeks...the conversations that we've had I think have been great. But I think that's just as far as I want to go." The reluctance to spend time on PAR may be a result of overextension and less than ideal pay of the teachers in addition to their perception of the leadership's lack of interest in instructional change. Since the project did not continue into the following school year, we do not know to what extent the teacher researchers incorporated new practices into their instruction.

Both adult learner and teacher sessions were audio-recorded with all participants' permission. Unfortunately, the quality of recordings varied meeting to meeting with some almost not usable and that affected their analysis. Thematic analysis was utilized to determine themes from adult learner survey responses, adult learner researcher reflections, and meeting transcripts. University researchers reviewed data collected from these various

sources to familiarize themselves. Upon initial coding, key concepts were identified and then grouped into broader themes which were reviewed and refined.

Ethical Considerations

Beyond typical ethical considerations addressed in the IRB application, university researchers utilized strategies such as transparent communication and flexibility in the collaborative relationship to mitigate power imbalances. As a PAR project, the research process is created through the joint efforts of co-researchers, therefore every party involved is aware of each step in the process and can voice their opinions. There is power in how knowledge is produced, as well as in the ability and capacity to act in the role one has within the system and through relationships and networks (Lake & Wedland, 2018). Facilitators of PAR, because of their location within and awareness of the research process, have power in prioritizing and interpreting research activities (Lake & Wedland, 2018). Co-researchers were regularly assured of their permission from the education center to conduct the project, as well as the value of their insights and opinions, to encourage their feelings of comfort and autonomy. To avoid co-opting the PAR process, it's crucial to be aware and reflective of these power differences with co-researchers. Acknowledging power imbalances, maintaining open communication, and continually reflecting on who the project is actually serving can help to mitigate some of the impact of these power differences. PAR may challenge ethical practices regarding maintaining anonymity and confidentiality, especially when co-researchers critique systems they currently exist and hold little power within (Smith et al., 2021). Regardless of the intentions of university researchers, PAR projects must be guided by the desires of the co-researchers, as they are most affected by outcomes. Anonymity was not necessarily possible, or desirable, in the current project. As co-researchers choose their course of action in the project, they take on a certain amount of leadership that is called for to initiate change (Löfman et al., 2004). Allowing flexibility in collaborative relationships can also facilitate more comfort for co-researchers taking on a leadership role.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

In this section, we offer some lessons we learned from this project in hopes they will be helpful to other researchers. We believe it was a worthwhile project, especially for the adult learner researchers, as evidenced from their reflections on their participation as well as the changes in their program that stemmed from their research.

Relationship Building

This PAR project originated from one of the university researchers rather than from the adult education center. Even though there was enthusiasm in collaborating on the project, it remains to be seen whether it would have been more successful or continued longer as initially intended if it originated from

the center and its pressing needs. While the PAR project was supposed to help with the center's grant writing and funding, the availability of adult learner and teacher researchers to participate during the school year and the grant submission cycles were not sufficiently synchronistic. Even though those in charge of developing and delivering classes had an opportunity to learn about their adult learners' needs and implement some of them, it is still not clear whether the project was helpful grant-writing-wise. This may explain why the center did not proactively seek the continuation of the project in the following school year.

It is essential to build relationships and get to know all potentially involved participants and their needs prior to starting PAR and while discussing the research component, which should be an ongoing and gradual process of community engagement throughout all phases (Ochocka et al., 2010). Prins (2007) argues that relational work or bringing people together is as important as improving literacy or facilitating critical reflection. While we knew that the relationship building process should not be rushed, the biggest limitations were associated with the academic calendars in K-12 and higher education. This meant, for example, that only one part-time teacher was able to participate in the intensive PAR institute, as the full-time teachers were not available at the time due to their teaching responsibilities. Moreover, while the center director supported the teachers' participation in the project by paying them to attend the PAR meetings, it is unclear how the director situated the project beyond an opportunity for additional paid professional development. Time constraints of both the teacher and university researchers did not allow for enough meaningful relationship building and development of common PAR understanding, and its utility for the teacher researchers. Their limited availability allowed only five meetings, and it is possible that familiarizing the teacher researchers with basic tenets of qualitative research, such as analyzing meeting transcripts to identify recurring themes, might have supported them in considering the benefits of the approach for improving their instructional practice. This could potentially lead to a more effective and engaging learning environment. Additional factors lowering barriers to teacher participation might include a more integrated positioning of the PAR as a professional development opportunity provided by the center instead of the university as an outside entity with potential incentives for reward if they integrated new approaches to their teaching in following semesters. We could have also spent more time emphasizing the social justice component of PAR as it related to the teacher researchers and their work conditions. In addition, it would have been helpful for (at least) the university researchers to meet regularly with the center's administration to discuss their ongoing needs. We only managed to have informal/chance meetings after the work with the adult learners and teachers but would recommend scheduling meetings ahead of time.

Balancing Collaboration, Autonomy, and Power Dynamics

The teacher researchers were inquisitive about the adult learner researcher's part of the project and wanted to be more involved with them. While the initial intent was to have some combined sessions, the constraints of the school year and the time required by the adult learners to complete their project made this unattainable. Furthermore, the university researchers believed that providing adult learners a separate space from their teachers would enhance their ability to express themselves more freely without surveillance from their service providers. Whether the teacher researchers would have been more involved if they had collaborated with the adult learner researchers remains open.

While the teacher researchers' desire to work closer with the adult learners, could not happen, we were able to adjust our expectations better to the adult learner researchers' needs. In one instance, they were adamant about gaining the approval of individuals in positions of power at the center before taking a specific action step in their research process. Namely, they would not distribute the survey until they had approval from the student advocate. We repeatedly mentioned that the administration consented to and supported the project from the beginning, and they did not need approval for any steps in the research. We followed their lead. It's necessary to be able to fill various roles with community partners at different stages in the research process while simultaneously navigating power imbalances (Ochocka et al., 2010), At first, we advocated for them taking steps without approval, partially because while navigating power imbalances, educators have an ethical responsibility to prepare learners for potential resistance to solidarity practices, as PAR projects are inherently political and seek to challenge existing power structures (Prins, 2007). In retrospect, we see that we, the privileged participants of the research, wanted the most vulnerable participants of PAR to ignore or question positions of power, which could have theoretically jeopardized their receiving services at the center. Moreover, it became clear they trusted the student advocate and saw her less as an authority and more as an ally or their champion, which proved to be true.

Upon reflection, we wish we insisted on including lower level ESOL students in the PAR project since we have both the research-backed argument for including home languages when needed and the skills of actually integrating students of various stages of English fluency. We learned about this condition when we started recruiting and at that point did not want to jeopardize the whole project. This experience underlines the need for clear collaboration building with the community partner from the very beginning.

Time Constraints and Adult ESOL Learners Mobility

Other time constraints affected the process of the PAR project. First, it was hard to establish a time when a "good" number of adult learner researchers could attend meetings. Some came from morning classes, some from afternoon classes, and others also took citizenship classes between the

two. Many of them worked right after or before their classes, went to pick up their children from school or daycare, or depended on someone else's ride home. In addition, midway through the spring semester, some graduated from ESOL classes and moved onto the HSE classes, which had different schedules. Some original adult learner researchers got jobs and left the center altogether. The center also has open enrollment, which means that any time a seat in a class opens, they enroll a new student. Since we only recruited at one time, new adult learners were excluded from participating. This choice was deliberate as we co-created space where the learner researchers trusted us and each other. Adding new participants throughout the year could have been disruptive to this community. At the same time, it could have enriched the range of opinions, so it is an issue worthwhile (re)considering throughout similar project.

There are several recommendations to address these challenges. Allowing a flexible schedule can ensure more opportunities to meet with co-researchers. To capture the availability of each co-researcher, include meetings on various days and times to accommodate the variety of schedules. Additionally, more frequent meetings within the week can negate some of the impact of co-researchers potentially leaving if the project spans longer than they are available.

The teacher researchers' schedules were more fixed; nevertheless, they were already very full. Adding more time to their busy work and expecting enthusiastic and active participation perhaps came from the university researchers' privileged position and hopes in everyone's desire and space for considering improvement in work conditions or performance.

As university researchers, we had our own time challenges. Even though we knew that continuous reflexivity should be essential parts of the PAR project, it was difficult to meet all together regularly for reflections and adjustments as we had different class schedules and additional responsibilities at the university and in our homes. We reflected regularly after each meeting with the learner researchers but that did not always include all of us and never the fourth author who met with the teachers at a different time. We wish we had more time to reflect on the process as reflexivity helps reveal embedded "assumptions, values, orders, and sensibilities that affect the possibilities for constructing power and knowledge. Being reflexive entails becoming aware and critical of these agencies and dynamics" (Gemignani et al., 2024, p. 2). We recommend that university researcher teams build specific times for group and individual reflections into any PAR project from the beginning as these reflections should reoccur throughout the entirety of the project as part of the PAR process of observation, reflection, and action.

We anticipate similar challenges will occur in any work with adult ESOL learners and should thus be anticipated in preparation for a PAR project.

Conclusions

There are risks in engaging participatory and social justice-based projects with public institutions, as these institutions may promote the status quo unless intentionally challenged (Fine & Torre, 2004). Some research in migrant communities and other over-researched populations has been questioned for its intention, privacy, and backlash. There are instances in which traditional research can cause more harm than benefit, as social science research may not be an intervention that is needed (Tuck & Yang, 2014). PAR provides an opportunity to challenge assumptions of such traditional research and allow for an equitable and collaborative process. Values of PAR recognize subjectivity and reject research or science as the only means to validate knowledge. It is crucial not to overlook the potential for epistemic violence in a PAR project that fails to challenge post-positivist assumptions of knowledge, denying social groups the ability to form their epistemologies (Spivak, 1988).

Social science research and academia often emphasize efficiency over the crucial task of building meaningful relationships within communities. This is often due to restraints in the academic year and pressures on productivity. The pressure for productivity in academia may impede researchers from engaging in PAR projects, which require more time to implement. Moreover, features of the sociocultural setting, rather than the program or project itself, can inhibit community participation (Prins, 2007). While university researchers, teacher researchers, and adult learners invested in relationship building throughout the project, shared barriers inhibited the project's growth. Realistically, working towards social justice is recognizing the restraints that exist and striving for change regardless. Despite the restrictions established by academic calendars, funding, and certifications in adult education, PAR can take many forms, which are preferable to the postpositivist status quo (Dancis et al., 2023).

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Appendices

Appendix A. Adult Learner Researcher Survey

Appendix A consists of the survey that was created by adult learner researchers and shared with their classmates at the adult education center via hard copy.

We are a group of students at [redacted] who would like to improve our English. We believe that [redacted] is a good educational center that focuses on empowering people that want to create impact in society. We are doing a survey about what the school can do better for us. The goal is for us to use the results from this survey to work with the teachers and administration to improve our English education. If you are interested and you like to help all students, please answer these questions:

1) What changes would you like to see to improve the English classes? (You can choose as many answers as you would like)

- More conversation with other students in class
- More conversation with the teacher in class
- More conversation with native English speakers
- Have one class a week only for conversation
- More activities (Projects, presentations, etc.) in class
- More feedback on pronunciation in class
- Have one class a week just for pronunciation
- More grammar practice in class
- More vocabulary work in class
- Have one class a week for conversation and pronunciation
- More opportunities to learn basic technology/computers
- More tests/exams
- More discussion or lessons regarding life in the US
- More practice in the Lowell community
- More practice reading English
- More class subjects/topics (examples: Math: Geometry, Algebra. Science: Chemistry, Biology. History: American, World)
- More homework

2) How many hours per day would you like to attend classes? (Choose one answer)

- 1 hour
- 2-3 hours
- 4-5 hours

3) How many days per week would you like to attend classes? (Choose one answer)

- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5
- 6+

4) What type of classes do you prefer to improve your English? (Choose one answer)

- In person
- Online
- A mix of in-person and online

5) What do you think the center will be like in 2-3 years?

6) Please tell us a comment or what you think can be helpful to improve your English.

Appendix B. Adult Learner Researcher Report

Appendix B consists of the final report created by adult learner researchers and shared with teachers and administration of the adult education center via an oral presentation.

Hello,

Thank you for coming today. We have been working together for several months. We talked about the school's excellence and potential.

We agree that the school is a great place for us and other immigrants. It offers amazing services for free, which is different from where we come from. We feel at home here and we feel that everyone cares about us. We are learning a lot and are grateful for everything.

We also think there are ways the school can be even better. We created a survey for students to find out what they want most in classes and suggest that the school keeps suggestion boxes for students' ideas on every floor.

We enjoyed the opportunity to be part of this project, especially to speak English with each other and native speakers. We also liked working with computers. It was important that people in the community and university care about our education. We hope to participate again in the Fall.

37 students from Levels 3, 4, 5 completed the survey. Here are some results:

1. Most students (78 percent**) want more practice reading English**. We want to read out loud in class, discuss reading with other students and the teacher, and also have the opportunity to talk about the books we read at home. Not only reading and answering questions quietly in class.
2. 67 percent **want more conversation with teachers** in class,
3. 59 percent students want more **conversion with other students** in class AND devote **one class a week only for conversation and pronunciation**
4. **59 percent want more opportunities to learn basic computer skills.** AND have AND **More activities** (projects, presentations, etc. in class) AND Have **one class a week for conversation and pronunciation**

70% of students reported they would like to attend class for **2-3 hours per day**

(18% reported 1 hour and 8% reported 4-5 hours)

78% of students reported that they would like to attend class **5 days a week**

(10% report 1-2 days, 29% reported 3-4, 0% 6+)

86% of students prefer classes **in person**

(2% reported online and 13% reported both)

A. What do you think the center will be like in 2-3 years?

15 students responded with general positive comments (The center is a good center for education... I love the center, the center will have more good program, The center will continue to be great...an excellent program, the center will be the anthem when it comes to adult education in the USA)

4 students had no comment or did not know

2 students hope to learn more about American life

9 students hope to focus more on speaking and conversation (More conversation, More people to speak English good, More conversations with students in class and native speakers, more confidence when students speak and more capable to handle a conversation)

5 students hope there will be more programs and classes (More programs, More subjects, More computer programs)

5 students think there will be more students

6 students noted how helpful the center will be for the immigrant community (A school that will help a lot of immigrants, Bridging the gap among immigrants, the center can do better and more for immigrants)

2 students hope the center will continue to assist with jobs and career advancement

> B. Please tell us a comment or what you think can be helpful to improve your English.

29 students think speaking and conversation will be helpful

8 students responded with reading (I would like in my class a lot of reading English), 5 responded with writing, 6 responded with vocabulary and grammar, and 7 responded with listening

4 students had no comment

7 students think learning more about American life and culture would be useful (I like teachers because they have been teaching English very kindly and gently. So because of them I like English and Americans, listening with Native speakers)

2 students responded that pronunciation would be helpful

5 students responded that a variety of classes and subjects (night classes, interactive classes)

2 replied with more activities

Suggestion Box

Adult learner researchers thought to create an anonymous suggestion box that would be in a public space on each floor. The following text has been suggested:

This is a suggestion box where you can put your ideas about your learning at the center. Any time you have an idea or request, please write it down on a piece of paper and put it in this box. We hope that the teachers will read your ideas every week and use them in their teaching.