

No 'Adult' Left Behind:
Comparing Experiences in ESL & GED Classrooms

Aaron Teeter

Spring 2011

It would be easy to begin this paper spouting statistics to explain the dire circumstances that surround the problem of adult education. For example, I could tell you that one in three adults cannot read this sentence. I could elaborate that an estimated 33 million adults are illiterate. This finding suggests 1 in 5 adults in America lacks sufficient literacy skills to meet daily needs in their families, their workplaces and their communities (ProLiteracy, 2009). I might point out that low adult literacy and education are connected to nearly every socio-economic issue in the United States.

After hearing statistics such as these, it would seem fitting to discuss adult education and how it might alleviate some of the educational burden felt by many adults. However, adult education has become a skeleton in the closet. Most current education reform is slanted towards children, which is needed. However, a cycle of illiteracy or low education will be unlikely to be broken unless some programs are available for adults. Currently, Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) is a huge umbrella that houses several different programs under it. Two of these programs, English as a Second Language (ESL) and General Equivalency Degree/Diploma (GED), are particularly important towards the bettering of life circumstances.

For my research, an exploration of how the two programs, ESL and GED, compared to one another in a similar institution. In this case, it was a local community college. The purpose of this research was to examine how humanizing practices affected the adult students' experience in the two classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research suggests that educational framework based in humanizing pedagogy is effective in adult classrooms. This educational theory asks educators to understand the viewpoints of adult learners and have a dialogue-driven, flexible classroom. This principle is used often when

working with lower-level literacy learners. This is a much different approach than what is used with children.

Salazar conducted a three-year ethnographic study “designed to investigate factors that impact the academic resiliency of Latina/o students in a high school in Northern Colorado” (2008: 344). Her study focused on humanizing pedagogy in ESL classrooms. Salazar utilized several methods to gauge the “presence or absence of humanizing or dehumanizing practices within the school” (2008: 345). She began with analysis of primary documents, which included the ESL mission statement, program goals and a proficiency document created by the school district. She then interviewed administrators as well as the ESL teachers at the school using a semi-structured technique. Additionally, Salazar conducted observations in the ESL classrooms.

Salazar also looked for humanizing practices with the students. She explains that “humanizing practices were conceptualized” using literature that described humanizing pedagogy (2008:346). While Salazar’s study deals with a high school environment and mainly ESL issues, and my research project was located in adult classrooms, there are some key issues presented by Salazar that are important. I used her study as a model to follow to explore if humanizing practices were present in the adult ESL and GED classroom that I observed.

Rogers supports Salazar’s position stating that “most adult education classrooms rely on literacy instruction that is decontextualized and comes from a scripted program rather than from adults’ lives” (2004:275). While Rogers is speaking about literacy in an adult basic education classroom, the comparison is easy to see that the possibility that GED classrooms may need to be structured more like ESL classrooms.

Rogers cites Vella’s view of “building on social-constructivist learning theory” and posits several principles for effective adult learning (Rogers 2004). These principles include dialogue

between the students and teachers, movement as students as decision makers and the importance of building relationships. All of which may be integral parts of the adult classroom.

Kurtts, Hung, Keener, Lovelace, Gore and Humpal performed a similar study, examining an adult literacy program. Using semi-structured interviews, she and her colleagues, inquired about participants' experiences in the program (2010). From the collected data, the researchers looked for patterns that evolved from the focus group interactions. The verbal responses yielded three aspects: (1) expected life changes on a personal level; (2) learning needs; and (3) program improvement (2010).

Most participants verbalized an expected positive life change which translated into better employment opportunities. This was defined as upward mobility. Participants identified barriers experienced in the program that affected both their learning needs and changes needed within the program—most monetarily and resource-based. I was interested in Kurtts' work because of the questions she chose to ask the participants in focus groups.

Lambert uses the phrase upward mobility in her study to build a questionnaire that “can be used to assess adult immigrants' goals for...learning English, their self-concept as ESL learners and their definitions of success in ESL acquisition” (2008:163). Upward mobility, according to the ESL participants was achieved by three different avenues: (1) to get a better job in the United States; (2) to help my children at school; and (3) to talk to my children's teacher (Lambert 2008:166). The want to better self and life circumstances seems to be an issue prevalent in the literature.

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learning according to the individual rather than a standardized program, was much more likely to retain students and propel them towards successful completion (2008). This supports the frame of humanizing pedagogy.

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METHODS

This paper is based on an ethnographic research project conducted to compare adult students' motivations, experiences with literacy and definitions of success in General Educational Development (GED) classrooms versus English as Second Language (ESL) classrooms in a rural community setting. Literacy education can assist adult learners with learning new skills that can empower individuals to better their life circumstances. This concept is the framework behind classrooms tailored for GED and ESL education. The purpose of this research is to understand how ESL and GED programs assist (or hinder) adult learners.

Research Design

This study utilized an ethnographic case study design to gather information from participants in a GED and an ESL classroom. A local community college was used that housed both GED and ESL programs which serve on the home campus as well as satellite sites. This location was chosen because of the close proximity and my familiarity with the program and was granted access.

Ethnographic case study has the ability to tell the truthful story from the perspective of the participants. The strongest benefit to ethnography is using the participants' own words to

garner the whole story. This inductive qualitative process allows a personal narrative to be heard rather than just the raw data from a quantitative process. Ethnography may reveal nuances and subtleties that other methodologies might miss. There may be a limitation when it comes to generalizing the information to another population since the sample is small. However, the goal is a more complete understanding of a particular situation.

Sample

The participants in this study included six ESL or GED instructors, nine ESL or GED students and the AEL administrator. According to the data provided by the Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) administrator, the umbrella of AEL covers Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE), GED and ESL. The GED program encompasses approximately 19% of the adult students while the ESL section is comprised of 14% of adult students. As expected, all of the ESL students were non-native English speakers. About 75% of the ESL class' native language was Spanish. However, the GED students were all native English speakers at this time. I observed in two GED classrooms of the college's seventeen sites and in three ESL classrooms of the college's four sites.

Data Collection Strategy & Management Procedures

I collected data in different ways. After receiving permission from the college's AEL department, I examined primary documents collected from the program physical site and website, including advertising for both programs. I studied the print material (brochures/pamphlets) and explored the curriculum for similarities/differences and educational focus.

My next step was to examine the Content Standards and policy for GED and ESL programs as set forward by the state of Missouri. I researched the process that adult students

traverse through and looked at what the state goals for GED and ESL programs entailed. This included the testing and assessment procedures as well as recidivism rates.

I was introduced as an observer prior to class beginning and sat in the back. I observed both the GED and the ESL classroom over two month period while taking notes. This interaction included level of attention spent by instructors answering questions, how often students inquired for more instruction, availability of curriculum and number of returning students.

With their consent, I conducted qualitative interviews with adult learners. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions and probes. Information was gathered related to the experiences the students have in the classroom as well as how literacy affects their lives outside the classroom. Examples of the questions asked included:

How did you find out about the program?

What about the program has helped you most?

What do you like best about the program?

If you could change the program, what would you change?

Has not being able to comprehend stood in the way of something you wanted to do?

For the coding process, I examined the interview notes and my observations for similar ideas that reoccurred within each program. I then searched for the meaning behind each evolved pattern. For primary document analysis, I wanted to find how both programs were structured and what resources were garnered, and then to compare the two programs to see how they were similar.

Representativeness and Generalizability

This study may be generalized by the curriculum and Content Standards as addressed by the State of Missouri since these guidelines should be representative of GED and ESL programs

across the entire state. However, the experiences and expectations of the students in this college's GED and ESL program will have limited generalizability when compared to the experiences and expectations of other GED and ESL sites in the state of Missouri. The students and instructors interviewed and/or observed in this study may or may not be representative to other adult students across the state.

Validity and Reliability

Validity was sought by using triangulation. The examination of primary documents, data from the semi-structured interview and the notes from my observations were examined for consistency of events. Patterns were scrutinized to see if they emerged from all three areas of data gathering.

Reliability was sought in by reiteration of the data. I took notes during my observations in the field and recorded events as they were unfolding. During the interview process, I asked the participants to reflect on certain events in the classroom to see if their understanding matched my own interpretation. All interviews were recorded for accuracy.

Ethics of Research

This study meets the expectations for ethical research because it satisfies the following conditions: The research does not involve any protected or vulnerable populations. The research is on individual or group characteristics or behavior or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, etc.

The research does not pose more than minimal risk to participants. Minimal risk is defined as risk that may be experienced in daily life or a routine physical/psychological exam. Further, there may be possible benefits of participating in this study. These benefits may include

having the participants' opinion heard about literacy issues and may aid in the understanding of GED/ESL classrooms.

Participation in this study was voluntary; refusal to participate involved no penalty. Each participant was free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time without prejudice. Furthermore, a decision to participate or not to participate did not influence in any way the participants' placement in the AEL program at the college.

All information was kept confidential. A number was assigned to each participant as the only identifying marker and no names were recorded. All records were kept private. In any report that may be published, no information will be included that would make it possible to identify a subject. Each interview was tape recorded on audio tapes for transcription, and all participants were aware of the presence of the recorder. After transcription, the tapes were destroyed.

RESULTS

Primary Documents Analysis

Textual analysis of primary documents, which included the mission statement of the college, the state of Missouri Content Standards, information gathered from the AEL program's website and pamphlets and data collected from the published statistics of the AEL department, was implemented to determine the structural frame for both programs on both the state and local level.

The examination of Missouri's Content Standards for AEL programs showed several similar areas of concentration. These standards were originally created to provide a uniform framework for the different sites across the state. Both GED and ESL programs integrate

academic course work with “life skills needed to be a successful member of society.”¹ The Content Standards discuss the concept of stakeholders, as defined by the state of Missouri as “people or segments of society who have a deeply embedded need for people to perform in certain ways.”² This document lists examples such as employers, members of the medical profession, members of the legal profession, police, and other similar occupations. This seems to be the driving need for AEL programming according to the state—create functioning members of society, perhaps not for themselves, but for society as a whole.

Both GED and ESL programs and classrooms are framed in multi-tiered levels. These levels will show a “logical progression for students as they move through the various phases of the curriculum of a program.”³ Each level contains goals and objectives for the adult student to meet before moving to the next level. It is here that the two programs diverge into different agendas.

For ESL students, there are six levels that all aim to increase abilities for non-native speakers in the areas of interpersonal communication, life skills and culture. According to the state, the ESL program should focus on the fundamentals of reading, writing, speaking, and listening for the adult who is a non-native English speaker. The expectation of the program is that the student will be able to participate fully in society using English as the means of communication.

Many students in the ESL program I observed actually held college degrees from other countries or currently attended college but needed to work on English for daily use. It is estimated that children in elementary school, who learn much faster than adults, will need five to seven years to learn English well enough to compete in an academic setting (such as the doctor’s

¹ See Content Standards p. 1, www.dese.mo.gov, Retrieved February 17, 2011.

² See Content Standards p. 3, www.dese.mo.gov, Retrieved February 17, 2011.

³ See Content Standards p. 5, www.dese.mo.gov, Retrieved February 17, 2011

office or legal setting). English is especially difficult to learn as a second language since its basis is many other languages. This may explain why there are so many entering upper-level students in the ESL program.

At the local level, ESL is structured to give more individualized instruction. There are four teachers, and extra help, in the classroom where the class begins. After individualized work for about an hour, the group breaks into three sections (with two levels to a section). The rooms still have about a 1-to-3 ratio for teacher to student. The rooms are filled with light and students greet one another warmly.

Originally, the state measured ESL funding by contact hours. That system has been changed and now measurement of progress is the system in place—which can be good and bad. Linda, the head ESL instructor, explains that “ESL is similar to public education. Some students need more time to complete because of their abilities or outside opportunities (e.g. job, child care)” (interview with author, March 31, 2011).

At the local level, GED classrooms are primarily self-directed. Students gather workbooks and sit at the provided tables to work at their own pace. The GED lead instructor informs me that the program helps the students individually as needed; the students merely need to ask for assistance. In the time I spent in both of the GED classrooms, on separate occasions, not one question is posed by students. One instructor is present at the front of the room, playing solitaire on the computer and handing out practice tests to those who have completed their workbook.

Analysis on the statistical data provided to the state by the local AEL program, it is apparent that both the ESL and GED program begin with similar structure and resources (see Table 2). According to the Content Standards, the programs have similar goals; one program's

focus is primarily on language acquisition (ESL) than the other. The statistical information in Table 2 is similar in the beginning but differs greatly in results. The amount of student that complete the programs (ESL=115; GED=63) and the recidivism rate, which reports how many students return to the program, varied greatly for end results.

Structural differences that might explain the statistical data of completion rates and recidivism evolved through observation and instructor interviews. Though, the two programs began in the same point with all teachers and aides requiring Missouri AEL certification, there were core differences in the implementation of the two programs. Firstly, the education level of the teachers in the classroom. The ESL classroom had three of the four instructors with an education degree (four year or higher) whereas the GED classroom instructors has Associate's degrees. Humanizing pedagogy, probably because of the level of education, was practiced in the ESL classroom. There was a huge increase in human interaction in the ESL classroom. The entire time I observed in the GED classroom, no one asked a question or really even spoke to one another. Finally, from the student interviews, I was able to discern that most of the class had a higher education in their native country. Three of the seven ESL students I interviewed had university degrees in their homeland. Obviously, GED students do not have a high school diploma or they would not be in that program. Table 3 elaborates on some of the differences and similarities I noticed in the program while observing and conducting interviews in a side by side comparison.

Expected Life Changes

The interviews with the ESL students revealed two major patterns. Similar to the study conducted by Kurtts, et al., students stated that they wanted to change their life for the better (defined by the study as 'upward mobility'). Many students were involved in another type of

education, such as community college, and wanted to work on their English speaking skills. All the ESL student interviews conducted shared what their version of the American dream entailed, which led to the concept of a better life. For most, this included an education and employment, or the self-described "job of my dreams."

Yana, an advanced-level ESL student currently attending classes at the community college in the nursing program, explains how this hope for upward mobility:

We did not have the same chances in the Ukraine. My family came to America to look for jobs. I read English very well..and write well too. But...speaking is difficult for me. There are so many rules in English...and so many do not make sense to me. I have to speak English flu..fluently to be able to get my job as a nurse. There are so many possibilities open now...I do not ...do not know how I could do this [sic] things without..program.

(Interview by author, April 14, 2011)

Others, who were mostly new immigrants without an education, spoke of learning to read, speak, and write English to be able to function in American society within areas of daily living such as the store or their children's school. Luiza, a beginning-level student, briefly describes how she hopes to function at the end of her program:

I...speak no good...can't hear [understand] my babies' school... teacher. I want that. Pedro [son]...tell what [translate]...woman says. Need...myself. (Interview by author, March 31, 2011)

Appreciation and Gratitude

The second pattern that emerged from the interviews with the ESL students was the appreciation of the program and the gratitude towards the instructors. Even when asked what they would change about the program, if they had an answer, it was to meet more times a week

to be with their teachers. Maria, an advanced level ESL student, describes her experience in the program:

I heard about this program from a friend of mine. I was a dentist in Columbia and are...am...going to university here. I can read and write English very well but I have trouble with speaking. I have been here 3 months and cannot believe how great the teachers and the students are to me. (Interview by author, March 31, 2011)

Another participant, Ila, a mid-level ESL student offers an example of why she finds then instruction in the program supportive:

Lisa [teacher] is wonderful. She find me book that is Ukrainian and English translation. I am more comfortable in my class. Several different people [nationalities] but we learn together and help one another. I was scared and ...quiet...what word?...shy and now I talk out loud in class while we are in group...all because of Lisa. (Interview by author, April 14, 2011)

GED Experiences

Two GED students were interviewed and later pulled their transcribed interviews. I was able to garner a short interview with one of the instructors. I found her insights concurrent with the observations I had written about in my field notes. Ann, one of the GED lead instructors, spoke about the years of service:

I've been here 9 years. Before here, I worked in Clinton @ Pathways. Now..that was an experience. Since everyone, the entire community to could come in for classes..you had to worry about the outside...they could come into classes. So, I had to watch for contraband. Uh, I actually had clients that stole the balls, rolling balls out of mice [computer]...cause

they thought they could smoke 'em and get high. Things were a lot more interesting there.

(Interview by author, April 14, 2011)

When asked about the self-directed concept of the GED program, Ann elaborated further:

A lot of people come into the GED program and expect their hands held. Sigh. They are mad because they cannot get help or tutors [only under the 6th grade—in program get tutors]. We figure they should be able to work on their own 8th-9th grade and above. Some never return after the first day, but I can't really worry about them. I am not wasting time with extra help and books if they aren't going stay. I know you have been in the ESL room. I think they are coddled but I guess they have to since those people don't even know English. What a waste of money. (Interview by author, April 14, 2011)

Conclusions

Looking at the two programs comparatively, it seems that even though they began with similar structure and resources, the ESL classes may be more likely to assist adult learners towards completion of its program, possibly due to structural framing. This classroom was more prolific in all areas I observed or analyzed. The ESL classrooms I visited all practiced humanizing pedagogy, probably due to the educational level attained by the teachers. Frequently, the teachers would change direction, or try new curriculum based on student needs. This student-driven focus, centered on dialogue and interaction, seems to contribute to the success of this program. Another factor that cannot be ignored is that many of the students in this program have some education, and will help those less educated to maneuver the curriculum. This group dynamic utilizes strengths based practice and seems to be thriving.

The flip side of this coin is discerning what GED programs might do to locate similar success rates with students. The GED program I observed operates under the state's guidelines

with six week self-directed classes; however, many of the students in the GED classes may have dropped out of public school because of difficulties with learning. GED classes may struggle with these same issues that had students leaving school, which will impact the completion rate and recidivism.

An assumption of which I entered this study, that the non-native speakers would feel pressure or disdain because of their immigrant status, was shown to be erroneous. In fact, the opposite was true. The students in the GED classes had their status reinforced from the status quo perspective. The classes were filled not only with less educated student but also less educated teachers, who may have not been trained in humanizing practices. At the end of the study, I observed students who still seemed overwhelmed and frustrated by the educational process. Unfortunately, many were able to do little to find the upward mobility discussed earlier in this paper; they were still seen by society, and even more importantly, by themselves as the poor and uneducated, seemingly unworthy of help.

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Table 1 Salazar's Indicators of Humanizing Practice

<i>Indicators of Humanizing Practices</i>	<i>Indicators of Dehumanizing Practices</i>
Incorporate a student-centered approach aimed at developing critical consciousness	Incorporate an inflexible teacher-centered approach
Increase academic rigor through a focus on higher order thinking skills	Focus on assimilating students and their families into mainstream culture
Build trusting and caring relationships among teachers and students	Gear academic expectations toward rote memorization, skills, and drills
Value and build on students' background knowledge and life experiences	Subscribe to the belief that students' heritage languages and cultural backgrounds are obstacles to learning
Acknowledge and capitalize on students' cultural and linguistic resources to improve teaching and learning	Superficially incorporate students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum
Strengthen students' ethnic and linguistic identities to support bilingualism and biculturalism	Remain unaware of the importance of students' sociocultural identities on their academic learning
Inclusion of familial contributions	Prohibit heritage language use
Challenge the role of educational institutions and educators in maintaining an inequitable system	Disregard familial contributions as not conducive to the academic achievement of students
Advocate transformational and revolutionary approaches to improving the education of culturally and linguistically diverse learners	Uncritically follow that status quo that maintains low expectations for culturally and linguistically diverse learners

Source: Salazar, 2008, p. 346

Table 2 Local Program by Numbers

	ESL	GED
Students	122	136
Sites	3	17
# of instructors	4	4
Completed/Projected (May 2011)	115	63
Recidivism	93%	43%

Table 3 Differences/Similarities in Programs

ESL	GED
All teachers/helpers Missouri AEL certified	All teachers/helpers Missouri AEL certified
Instructors with Education Degrees	Instructors with AA degrees
Humanizing pedagogy practiced	Rigid, conformed rules
Students work individually and in groups	Self-directed instruction
Student/student and student/teacher interaction	Little interaction between students/teachers
Students tend to be higher educated in native land	Students may have experienced trouble in school—less educated

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This study utilized an ethnographic case study design to gather information from participants in a GED and an ESL classroom. A local community college was used that housed both GED and ESL programs which serve on the home campus as well as satellite sites. This location was chosen because of the close proximity and my familiarity with the program and was granted access.

Ethnographic case study has the ability to tell the truthful story from the perspective of the participants. The strongest benefit to ethnography is using the participants' own words to

garner the whole story. This inductive qualitative process allows a personal narrative to be heard rather than just the raw data from a quantitative process. Ethnography may reveal nuances and subtleties that other methodologies might miss. There may be a limitation when it comes to generalizing the information to another population since the sample is small. However, the goal is a more complete understanding of a particular situation.

Sample

The participants in this study included six ESL or GED instructors, nine ESL or GED students and the AEL administrator. According to the data provided by the Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) administrator, the umbrella of AEL covers Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE), GED and ESL. The GED program encompasses approximately 19% of the adult students while the ESL section is comprised of 14% of adult students. As expected, all of the ESL students were non-native English speakers. About 75% of the ESL class' native language was Spanish. However, the GED students were all native English speakers at this time. I observed in two GED classrooms of the college's seventeen sites and in three ESL classrooms of the college's four sites.

Data Collection Strategy & Management Procedures

I collected data in different ways. After receiving permission from the college's AEL department, I examined primary documents collected from the program physical site and website, including advertising for both programs. I studied the print material (brochures/pamphlets) and explored the curriculum for similarities/differences and educational focus.

My next step was to examine the Content Standards and policy for GED and ESL programs as set forward by the state of Missouri. I researched the process that adult students

traverse through and looked at what the state goals for GED and ESL programs entailed. This included the testing and assessment procedures as well as recidivism rates.

I was introduced as an observer prior to class beginning and sat in the back. I observed both the GED and the ESL classroom over two month period while taking notes. This interaction included level of attention spent by instructors answering questions, how often students inquired for more instruction, availability of curriculum and number of returning students.

With their consent, I conducted qualitative interviews with adult learners. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions and probes. Information was gathered related to the experiences the students have in the classroom as well as how literacy affects their lives outside the classroom. Examples of the questions asked included:

How did you find out about the program?

What about the program has helped you most?

What do you like best about the program?

If you could change the program, what would you change?

Has not being able to comprehend stood in the way of something you wanted to do?

For the coding process, I examined the interview notes and my observations for similar ideas that reoccurred within each program. I then searched for the meaning behind each evolved pattern. For primary document analysis, I wanted to find how both programs were structured and what resources were garnered, and then to compare the two programs to see how they were similar.

Representativeness and Generalizability

This study may be generalized by the curriculum and Content Standards as addressed by the State of Missouri since these guidelines should be representative of GED and ESL programs

across the entire state. However, the experiences and expectations of the students in this college's GED and ESL program will have limited generalizability when compared to the experiences and expectations of other GED and ESL sites in the state of Missouri. The students and instructors interviewed and/or observed in this study may or may not be representative to other adult students across the state.

Validity and Reliability

Validity was sought by using triangulation. The examination of primary documents, data from the semi-structured interview and the notes from my observations were examined for consistency of events. Patterns were scrutinized to see if they emerged from all three areas of data gathering.

Reliability was sought in by reiteration of the data. I took notes during my observations in the field and recorded events as they were unfolding. During the interview process, I asked the participants to reflect on certain events in the classroom to see if their understanding matched my own interpretation. All interviews were recorded for accuracy.

Ethics of Research

This study meets the expectations for ethical research because it satisfies the following conditions: The research does not involve any protected or vulnerable populations. The research is on individual or group characteristics or behavior or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, etc.

The research does not pose more than minimal risk to participants. Minimal risk is defined as risk that may be experienced in daily life or a routine physical/psychological exam. Further, there may be possible benefits of participating in this study. These benefits may include

having the participants' opinion heard about literacy issues and may aid in the understanding of GED/ESL classrooms.

Participation in this study was voluntary; refusal to participate involved no penalty. Each participant was free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time without prejudice. Furthermore, a decision to participate or not to participate did not influence in any way the participants' placement in the AEL program at the college.

All information was kept confidential. A number was assigned to each participant as the only identifying marker and no names were recorded. All records were kept private. In any report that may be published, no information will be included that would make it possible to identify a subject. Each interview was tape recorded on audio tapes for transcription, and all participants were aware of the presence of the recorder. After transcription, the tapes were destroyed.

RESULTS

Primary Documents Analysis

Textual analysis of primary documents, which included the mission statement of the college, the state of Missouri Content Standards, information gathered from the AEL program's website and pamphlets and data collected from the published statistics of the AEL department, was implemented to determine the structural frame for both programs on both the state and local level.

The examination of Missouri's Content Standards for AEL programs showed several similar areas of concentration. These standards were originally created to provide a uniform framework for the different sites across the state. Both GED and ESL programs integrate

academic course work with “life skills needed to be a successful member of society.”¹ The Content Standards discuss the concept of stakeholders, as defined by the state of Missouri as “people or segments of society who have a deeply embedded need for people to perform in certain ways.”² This document lists examples such as employers, members of the medical profession, members of the legal profession, police, and other similar occupations. This seems to be the driving need for AEL programming according to the state—create functioning members of society, perhaps not for themselves, but for society as a whole.

Both GED and ESL programs and classrooms are framed in multi-tiered levels. These levels will show a “logical progression for students as they move through the various phases of the curriculum of a program.”³ Each level contains goals and objectives for the adult student to meet before moving to the next level. It is here that the two programs diverge into different agendas.

For ESL students, there are six levels that all aim to increase abilities for non-native speakers in the areas of interpersonal communication, life skills and culture. According to the state, the ESL program should focus on the fundamentals of reading, writing, speaking, and listening for the adult who is a non-native English speaker. The expectation of the program is that the student will be able to participate fully in society using English as the means of communication.

Many students in the ESL program I observed actually held college degrees from other countries or currently attended college but needed to work on English for daily use. It is estimated that children in elementary school, who learn much faster than adults, will need five to seven years to learn English well enough to compete in an academic setting (such as the doctor’s

¹ See Content Standards p. 1, www.dese.mo.gov, Retrieved February 17, 2011.

² See Content Standards p. 3, www.dese.mo.gov, Retrieved February 17, 2011.

³ See Content Standards p. 5, www.dese.mo.gov, Retrieved February 17, 2011

office or legal setting). English is especially difficult to learn as a second language since its basis is many other languages. This may explain why there are so many entering upper-level students in the ESL program.

At the local level, ESL is structured to give more individualized instruction. There are four teachers, and extra help, in the classroom where the class begins. After individualized work for about an hour, the group breaks into three sections (with two levels to a section). The rooms still have about a 1-to-3 ratio for teacher to student. The rooms are filled with light and students greet one another warmly.

Originally, the state measured ESL funding by contact hours. That system has been changed and now measurement of progress is the system in place—which can be good and bad. Linda, the head ESL instructor, explains that “ESL is similar to public education. Some students need more time to complete because of their abilities or outside opportunities (e.g. job, child care)” (interview with author, March 31, 2011).

At the local level, GED classrooms are primarily self-directed. Students gather workbooks and sit at the provided tables to work at their own pace. The GED lead instructor informs me that the program helps the students individually as needed; the students merely need to ask for assistance. In the time I spent in both of the GED classrooms, on separate occasions, not one question is posed by students. One instructor is present at the front of the room, playing solitaire on the computer and handing out practice tests to those who have completed their workbook.

Analysis on the statistical data provided to the state by the local AEL program, it is apparent that both the ESL and GED program begin with similar structure and resources (see Table 2). According to the Content Standards, the programs have similar goals; one program's

focus is primarily on language acquisition (ESL) than the other. The statistical information in Table 2 is similar in the beginning but differs greatly in results. The amount of student that complete the programs (ESL=115; GED=63) and the recidivism rate, which reports how many students return to the program, varied greatly for end results.

Structural differences that might explain the statistical data of completion rates and recidivism evolved through observation and instructor interviews. Though, the two programs began in the same point with all teachers and aides requiring Missouri AEL certification, there were core differences in the implementation of the two programs. Firstly, the education level of the teachers in the classroom. The ESL classroom had three of the four instructors with an education degree (four year or higher) whereas the GED classroom instructors has Associate's degrees. Humanizing pedagogy, probably because of the level of education, was practiced in the ESL classroom. There was a huge increase in human interaction in the ESL classroom. The entire time I observed in the GED classroom, no one asked a question or really even spoke to one another. Finally, from the student interviews, I was able to discern that most of the class had a higher education in their native country. Three of the seven ESL students I interviewed had university degrees in their homeland. Obviously, GED students do not have a high school diploma or they would not be in that program. Table 3 elaborates on some of the differences and similarities I noticed in the program while observing and conducting interviews in a side by side comparison.

Expected Life Changes

The interviews with the ESL students revealed two major patterns. Similar to the study conducted by Kurtts, et al., students stated that they wanted to change their life for the better (defined by the study as 'upward mobility'). Many students were involved in another type of

education, such as community college, and wanted to work on their English speaking skills. All the ESL student interviews conducted shared what their version of the American dream entailed, which led to the concept of a better life. For most, this included an education and employment, or the self-described "job of my dreams."

Yana, an advanced-level ESL student currently attending classes at the community college in the nursing program, explains how this hope for upward mobility:

We did not have the same chances in the Ukraine. My family came to America to look for jobs. I read English very well..and write well too. But...speaking is difficult for me. There are so many rules in English...and so many do not make sense to me. I have to speak English flu..fluently to be able to get my job as a nurse. There are so many possibilities open now...I do not ...do not know how I could do this [sic] things without..program.

(Interview by author, April 14, 2011)

Others, who were mostly new immigrants without an education, spoke of learning to read, speak, and write English to be able to function in American society within areas of daily living such as the store or their children's school. Luiza, a beginning-level student, briefly describes how she hopes to function at the end of her program:

I...speak no good...can't hear [understand] my babies' school... teacher. I want that. Pedro [son]...tell what [translate]...woman says. Need...myself. (Interview by author, March 31, 2011)

Appreciation and Gratitude

The second pattern that emerged from the interviews with the ESL students was the appreciation of the program and the gratitude towards the instructors. Even when asked what they would change about the program, if they had an answer, it was to meet more times a week

to be with their teachers. Maria, an advanced level ESL student, describes her experience in the program:

I heard about this program from a friend of mine. I was a dentist in Columbia and are...am...going to university here. I can read and write English very well but I have trouble with speaking. I have been here 3 months and cannot believe how great the teachers and the students are to me. (Interview by author, March 31, 2011)

Another participant, Ila, a mid-level ESL student offers an example of why she finds then instruction in the program supportive:

Lisa [teacher] is wonderful. She find me book that is Ukrainian and English translation. I am more comfortable in my class. Several different people [nationalities] but we learn together and help one another. I was scared and ...quiet...what word?...shy and now I talk out loud in class while we are in group...all because of Lisa. (Interview by author, April 14, 2011)

GED Experiences

Two GED students were interviewed and later pulled their transcribed interviews. I was able to garner a short interview with one of the instructors. I found her insights concurrent with the observations I had written about in my field notes. Ann, one of the GED lead instructors, spoke about the years of service:

I've been here 9 years. Before here, I worked in Clinton @ Pathways. Now..that was an experience. Since everyone, the entire community to could come in for classes..you had to worry about the outside...they could come into classes. So, I had to watch for contraband. Uh, I actually had clients that stole the balls, rolling balls out of mice [computer]...cause

they thought they could smoke 'em and get high. Things were a lot more interesting there.

(Interview by author, April 14, 2011)

When asked about the self-directed concept of the GED program, Ann elaborated further:

A lot of people come into the GED program and expect their hands held. Sigh. They are mad because they cannot get help or tutors [only under the 6th grade—in program get tutors]. We figure they should be able to work on their own 8th-9th grade and above. Some never return after the first day, but I can't really worry about them. I am not wasting time with extra help and books if they aren't going stay. I know you have been in the ESL room. I think they are coddled but I guess they have to since those people don't even know English. What a waste of money. (Interview by author, April 14, 2011)

Conclusions

Looking at the two programs comparatively, it seems that even though they began with similar structure and resources, the ESL classes may be more likely to assist adult learners towards completion of its program, possibly due to structural framing. This classroom was more prolific in all areas I observed or analyzed. The ESL classrooms I visited all practiced humanizing pedagogy, probably due to the educational level attained by the teachers. Frequently, the teachers would change direction, or try new curriculum based on student needs. This student-driven focus, centered on dialogue and interaction, seems to contribute to the success of this program. Another factor that cannot be ignored is that many of the students in this program have some education, and will help those less educated to maneuver the curriculum. This group dynamic utilizes strengths based practice and seems to be thriving.

The flip side of this coin is discerning what GED programs might do to locate similar success rates with students. The GED program I observed operates under the state's guidelines

with six week self-directed classes; however, many of the students in the GED classes may have dropped out of public school because of difficulties with learning. GED classes may struggle with these same issues that had students leaving school, which will impact the completion rate and recidivism.

An assumption of which I entered this study, that the non-native speakers would feel pressure or disdain because of their immigrant status, was shown to be erroneous. In fact, the opposite was true. The students in the GED classes had their status reinforced from the status quo perspective. The classes were filled not only with less educated student but also less educated teachers, who may have not been trained in humanizing practices. At the end of the study, I observed students who still seemed overwhelmed and frustrated by the educational process. Unfortunately, many were able to do little to find the upward mobility discussed earlier in this paper; they were still seen by society, and even more importantly, by themselves as the poor and uneducated, seemingly unworthy of help.

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Table 1 Salazar's Indicators of Humanizing Practice

<i>Indicators of Humanizing Practices</i>	<i>Indicators of Dehumanizing Practices</i>
Incorporate a student-centered approach aimed at developing critical consciousness	Incorporate an inflexible teacher-centered approach
Increase academic rigor through a focus on higher order thinking skills	Focus on assimilating students and their families into mainstream culture
Build trusting and caring relationships among teachers and students	Gear academic expectations toward rote memorization, skills, and drills
Value and build on students' background knowledge and life experiences	Subscribe to the belief that students' heritage languages and cultural backgrounds are obstacles to learning
Acknowledge and capitalize on students' cultural and linguistic resources to improve teaching and learning	Superficially incorporate students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum
Strengthen students' ethnic and linguistic identities to support bilingualism and biculturalism	Remain unaware of the importance of students' sociocultural identities on their academic learning
Inclusion of familial contributions	Prohibit heritage language use
Challenge the role of educational institutions and educators in maintaining an inequitable system	Disregard familial contributions as not conducive to the academic achievement of students
Advocate transformational and revolutionary approaches to improving the education of culturally and linguistically diverse learners	Uncritically follow that status quo that maintains low expectations for culturally and linguistically diverse learners

Source: Salazar, 2008, p. 346

Table 2 Local Program by Numbers

	ESL	GED
Students	122	136
Sites	3	17
# of instructors	4	4
Completed/Projected (May 2011)	115	63
Recidivism	93%	43%

Table 3 Differences/Similarities in Programs

ESL	GED
All teachers/helpers Missouri AEL certified	All teachers/helpers Missouri AEL certified
Instructors with Education Degrees	Instructors with AA degrees
Humanizing pedagogy practiced	Rigid, conformed rules
Students work individually and in groups	Self-directed instruction
Student/student and student/teacher interaction	Little interaction between students/teachers
Students tend to be higher educated in native land	Students may have experienced trouble in school—less educated

