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Abstract

This paper seeks to expand discussions about identifying students' learning aspirations in adult English for Speakers of Other Languages classes in the United States. By critically examining the process of ascertaining students' learning goals and dreams for the future in one adult ESOL class, the author explores how an inquiry approach to this process opened space for centering students in class learning design and the implications it has for complicating researchers' understandings of forming curriculum around the reasons students expressed for coming to class. Utilizing data from a year-long practitioner inquiry project, the teacher–researcher offers a perspective on centering students' dreams and goals as curriculum and the potential it has to augment discussions of student-generated curricula in an era of increased decentering of students' perspectives in adult literacy education in the United States.

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> All what we did, I feel that we never, it's never boring to be in this class. We never on with the book or the paper in the chair. You know? We work, we conversate, we ask, "Oh, do you know what does this mean?" "No, I don't know." We ask question between us and it's really, it's really interesting. I never did this things before. It's the first time I did and I really enjoy. […] I love this […] idea, this work. It's not only classes basic to learn alphabet or to learn grammar. Here, we have great subjects with content. So that's why I'm here. (Excerpt from 5/8/18 Interview with Salima[1])

Salima, a student participating in an adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class was, at the time of the interview, a student well-experienced with English language classes both in the United States, where she was enrolled in class, and in Algeria, where she had lived and learned all her life before coming to the United States. During an interview with me, the teacher–researcher running and planning her class, she shared her learning history and what brought her and kept her coming to class. Having moved to the United States less than a year before joining our program, she had been to a few other places to try and find an English class that worked for her. As she mentions in the epigraph, our class offered something different than learning the basics of language that she had encountered in other classes. While she talks about these other classes as interesting in different ways and upholds more traditional aspects of ESOL classes (e.g., grammar and letter learning) as important in other parts of her interview, she claims that she has chosen to invest more in our class as it is interesting and more

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[1] Pseudonyms used throughout for names of students and locations.

dynamic for her. Just as much as she is learning English skills, she is interested in our class content and the people in our class, who she mentions teach her a lot and are an important reason for her enjoying class.

This quotation speaks to the possibilities of enacting a curriculum centered on what students want to learn in English class. Developing meaningful, student-centered curricula is, of course, not a novel idea in adult literacy and language teaching. Goal-setting and building from students' lives in curriculum construction has a long history in adult education classrooms and is marked as a matter of central importance in much literature on building effective learning opportunities for adult literacy students (Comings, 2007; National Research Council, 2012). In the United States, however, legislation rolled out over the last ten years has tied federal and state funding for Adult Basic Education (ABE)—a designation adult ESOL is lumped under—to workforce development initiatives (Belzer, 2007, 2017; Belzer & Kim, 2018). This has resulted in ABE programs increasingly embracing curricula more decontextualized from local sites of practice and less informed by adult literacy learners' concerns than in previous eras (Belzer, 2017). Community-based programs that remain unfunded by state and federal legislation, however, are not held to these same stipulations. They are also sites of practice that are under-researched, resulting in few empirical studies about how adult literacy learning happens in these sites and how it might differ from learning in programs where funding comes through workforce preparation initiatives (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010). This paper examines my inquiry as a practitioner–researcher in such a community-based site and highlights how my fellow co-teachers and I sought to resist what I conceptualize as a neoliberal push present in the U.S. adult literacy research discourse through our inquiries with students into their language and literacy learning goals.

I begin with an overview of how neoliberal ideologies manifest in the context of adult ESOL in the United States. With a critical orientation, I then examine how goal-setting has been conceptualized in adult literacy literature and the implications of taking a grounded view into ESOL students' learning motivations. Finally, I engage empirical data gathered from a larger practitioner inquiry project to examine how an inquiry into students' goals and dreams emerged as a learning experience in and of itself for teachers and students alike.

Neoliberal Ideologies in ESOL and Adult Literacy Teaching

Adult literacy education in the United States is often explicitly linked to financial gain for students. Literacy education is marketed to adults as a path to upward social mobility and economic stability through ascension in one's employment without much acknowledgement of structural barriers that may keep students from becoming economically stable or wealthy (Amstutz & Sheared, 2000; Hull, 1997). Increasingly, there has also been a shift in policy and funding sources toward privileging workforce competencies in adult literacy programming, resulting in a problematic over-emphasis on adult literacy students' worth as workers and curricula that focuses on a limited parameter of subject areas relevent to employability (Belzer & Kim, 2018; Jacobson, 2017; Pickard, 2016). As Belzer (2017) notes, funding for ABE has been strong for many decades in the United States, "however, that commitment comes with strings attached in that ABE must now

be tied in to the employment and training system, and success must be measured around a fairly narrow set of criteria" (p. 16). Given that adult ESOL is categorized as a subfield of ABE in U.S. research and teaching contexts (Merriam & Bierema, 2013), these conditions also apply to the field of adult ESOL and affect these sites of practice.

Investigations in applied linguistics apart from adult literacy research also problematize how English has been ascribed a high value as a world language and how language itself has become a commodity in the wake of globalization. Building from Bordieu's concept of a linguistic marketplace, Park and Wee (2012) examine the ascribed value of English on the world marketplace. They posit that, despite popular ideas about the economic value of learning English, there is not always a direct correlation between learning English and access to the resources purportedly available when one learns English. Urciuoli and LaDousa (2013) posit that language work more generally becomes neoliberal in its focus on breaking down and streamlining all aspects of learning in service of increased economic production. As they explain, "a regime in which all social practices are imagined as subject to the market predictably produces many commodified social practices, including services or intellectual products that rely largely on linguistic labor and produce a language-based product" (p. 178). Defining laborers' worth only by their perceived competencies, including language competencies, reduces people to abstract amalgamations of things that are either valuable or not. Like adult literacy programs that push learning English to become career ready, certain strains of language education across the world have proven to be inextricable from economic concerns and have the potential to recreate processes of learning that resemble commodification, which limit the learning horizon in these spaces to what is seen as valuable according to institutional standards. These parallel trends in adult literacy and broader language education present a challenge for language teachers interested primarily in meeting the expressed desires of adult students, rather than the predetermined goals dictated by funding initiatives.

A Critical Approach to Goal-Setting in Adult Literacy Research

Participatory and critical adult literacy programs offer a dialogic approach to curriculum-building focused on students' goals and interests (Auerbach et al., 1996; Ramdeholl, 2011; Wong, 2006). In a way, these approaches offer a potential resistance to neoliberal ideologies in adult literacy research by taking students' desires for learning seriously, rather than assuming that the only reason students join class is to become more marketable as laborers. Grounding curriculum in students' individualized desires for class can open space for teachers to challenge assumptions about why students join ESOL classes. As Auerbach and her fellow community-based ESOL teachers/co-authors (1996) assert, however, many students can be initially uncomfortable with an approach centered on their lives and goals. Due to the prevalence of dominant approaches to adult literacy that operate from preconceived assumptions about what adults want to learn, it can be challenging for teachers and students to begin a dialogue about what their goals are beyond prescriptive definitions of English learning. Auerbach et al. found that simply asking what students identified as their needs is not enough to generate

material for a curriculum centered around topics that extend beyond the traditional ESOL curriculum:

> Finding compelling issues in students' lives entails more than just asking students for their input: it entails moving gradually from the traditional model that learners may expect to a more participatory one, consciously listening for opportunities to build on issues of importance to students, as well as creating a structured framework for eliciting these issues. (p. 85)

What this structured framework could look like, however, has not been widely explored by contemporary adult literacy or ESOL researchers.

Goal-setting has emerged as a key aspect of teachers' practices across pedagogical orientations to identify what students want to learn in class and to help students identify their own course of learning within a class that might not speak exactly to their interests at all times (Comings, Garner, & Smith, 2007; National Research Council, 2012; Petty & Thomas, 2014). Practices of goal-setting are related to theories of adult learning. Many adult learning theorists argue that giving adult learners the opportunity to determine the direction of their learning is developmentally appropriate for adults, who opt into education experiences and have more internalized and targeted learning motivations than children, who are usually mandated to go to school (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). As such, goal-setting offers structure and direction for students and teachers alike in a context where students are very motivated to learn but may find themselves without a larger institutional/mandated structure to guide them through their further education. There are, however, few critical studies to guide adult ESOL educators interested in identifying students' language learning goals beyond discrete language learning competencies. Bringing together discussions of goal-setting and critical approaches to ESOL, I argue that goal-setting, when approached as an inquiry with students, can serve as a tool for teachers to get to know students and as an opening for teachers to build a curriculum grounded in students' multiple interests and desires for learning. Through my empirical examination storying how I attempted to initiate a curriculum built on students' unique goals and interests, I explore what happened when I took an inquiry stance with my students' learning goals to further flesh out how goal-setting and critical approaches can be melded to trouble dominant narratives about adult ESOL students' motivations for learning English.

Methodology

Primarily, I utilized practitioner inquiry, or the process of doing research on one's own practice through qualitative research methods, to guide my research design (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Juxtaposed to other ethnographic or qualitative education research, which typically entail researchers observing phenomena in educational settings as a participant or non-intervening observer, this approach asks one to rigorously interrogate not only what they are observing in the classroom but how they, as a teacher, shape what happens in the classroom (Lytle, 2000). Informed by critical feminist perspectives on knowledge generation, a central tenet of this methodology is that first person, close encounters with a teaching experience can produce unique and valuable

insights into a teaching context that third person observations claiming to be objective might miss (McGuire, 2001). Humanizing theories of research (Paris & Winn, 2014) that emphasize being open and dialogic about research with participants, centering relationships in research and interrogating emotion as a source of knowledge are also essential to how I approached my investigations (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2015; Diaz-Strong, Luna-Duarte, Gómez, & Meiners, 2014; Mangual Figueroa, 2014).

Research Context and Data Sources

Data collection centered on an intermediate adult ESOL class I lead-taught from June 2017 to May 2018. Our class was based out of a multicultural faith-based community center, called the Cabrini Center, in a large northeastern city. Though the center is affiliated with the larger Catholic parish, St. Francis, it serves people across faiths and cultural identities. My work with the ESOL class arises out of the work of my advisor who has had a research partnership with the communities at St. Francis since 2010. Through his team's established presence and my own work with the community over my four years as a research team member, I was able to develop close relationships with members of the community and worked as a researcher in numerous capacities. The ESOL program in its current iteration has roots back to 2012 and was built out of the larger partnership between the university and the community. Learners spoke a variety of languages, with Spanish being the most widely spoken language followed by French Creole, Arabic and Vietnamese, and came from a spread of countries, including Mexico, Dominica, Peru, Honduras, Algeria and Vietnam. Ultimately, eighteen students agreed to be a part of the research project and participated for different lengths of time throughout the year. Additionally, three other people worked as class volunteers for differing periods of time, two of whom identified as white, primarily English-speaking women from the United States and one of whom identified as Chicana and who spoke both Spanish and English. I identify myself as a white, U.S.-born woman who was raised speaking primarily English. I am proficient in Spanish, but I would not consider myself fluent. Class met twice a week for an hour and a half each session, in addition to pre-class extra help time.

As an ESOL program, our main commitment was to foster a welcoming and comfortable learning environment for students to practice language skills. As such, we were open-enrollment and only charged a nominal fee to cover the costs of class materials and basic staffing/facilities during our class hours. Our approach also impelled us to form an iterative curriculum aligned with the values of our program overall. Our curriculum, though with an overarching focus, was determined week-by-week based on which students were coming to class and what they expressed as their learning interests. Apart from one paid position, we were largely volunteer-run, making costs low. The Center was able to be the sole supporter of our finacial needs and allowed the program freedom in their teaching and planning.

Methods for data collection were informed by my practitioner inquiry approach and included fieldnotes written from jottings and class recordings (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011), interviews with students and volunteers, class artifacts (e.g., class work, dialogue journals writing on the board; Hammersley &

Atkinson, 2007) and reflexive memos (Ravitch & Riggan, 2011). In my data analysis, I relied first on reflexive dialogue with fellow educators and students throughout my data collection (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). In my post-data collection analysis, I looked across data and used three-cycle coding to discern further findings, first reading through the data to identify a range of themes before using second and third cycles to consolidate themes into findings (Miles, Saldaña, & Huberman, 2014).[2]

Collective Inquiry Into Class Goals as Meaningful Curriculum

Drawing from research in addition to our own experience as adult ESOL teachers, I, along with fellow volunteers who aided in planning, elected to use goal-setting as a way to identify students' aspirations beyond class. From these aspirations, we planned to design a curriculum around providing language learning that could help students realize those aspirations. Doing, so, we believed, might make learning meaningful for students in centering their interests and lives outside of English learning. Below, I detail how we arrived at this inquiry to explore how we built class learning opportunities in one fall term around finding out more about students' aspirations for the future.

Learning to Ask the Right Questions

Considering how to start a semester of iterative curriculum can be intimidating. While it is typical in many settings to know little about your students before starting a semester or class session, taking a student-centered orientation that eschews any pre-meditated structure is unfamiliar for many inculcated into a linear approach to schooling. Similar to Auerbach et al.'s (1996) previously mentioned conundrum, it had been challenging to begin a curriculum built from students' lives when we knew little about who would be coming to class in a new semester. Over my three previous years of experience at the site, I knew that while some people repeated in their attendance, we often received more newcomers than returners at the beginning of each semester. This presented a particular need to get to know students and their goals for learning somewhat quickly.

Asking students what they wanted to learn in English class, however, always proved to be an especially difficult question for students to answer. In a way, it seems self-evident. I came to English class to learn English. What else can I say? Students also often felt that they did not know how to answer the question, often telling me they could not say exactly what they wanted to share. While I thought about having students write to me in their preferred language to express thoughts that might be challenging for them to share in English, having a classroom where people spoke a multiplicity of languages made the issue of using non-English languages difficult. I could easily translate Spanish myself, but other languages required outside translators, which were difficult to accommodate given our limited financial resources. As I did not want the other students to feel as though their languages were further excluded from class, I refrained from translating into Spanish as much as I could in large group discussions and on non-essential class

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[2] Note on the tense in analysis: When I am analyzing students writing, I use the present tense as though analyzing a piece of literature. In placing it historically within our class timeline, I use the past tense. This parallels the language use in my unpacking of Salima's opening quotation.

forms where I could not incorporate other languages. This limited whole-group interactions largely to English.

A way we sought to get students' initial insight into what they wanted to learn was through a questionnaire we gave all incoming students on their first day of class. In Table 1, I include answers from the eleven initial questionnaire forms returned to me by participants from the fall and spring semesters of my data collection that illustrate the typical range of answers we have received over the years to variations on the question, "What do you want from class?" On the questionnaire, titled "Intermediate Check-In," after asking about students' jobs, families, English class history and interest, we asked "Why are you in English class?" Having modified the question from "What do you want to learn in class?" to push students to think about their motivations for coming to class, I formed this question hoping that it would yield information not only about what students wanted to learn, but about who they were and how they understood literacy learning. In class, we offered further scaffolding in any form students desired including getting assistance from a facilitator, using their phones or consulting a translation dictionary.

Table 1
Responses to "Why are you in English class?"[3]

"Because I hve many difficulties to communicate at work, and I think that the language is very important" –Gabriel
"I need improve my language" –Sonia
"I would like to write and speak very well with the other people because the lenguaje is very important" –Minerva
"I would like to learn more reading and writing" –Rose
"I would like to be berer in English when I talk. And write or read" –Teresa
"Because I want to learn English" –Rebeca
"Learn more words" –Aurora
"I like to learnen more grama like reading and writing" –Graciela
"I want to improve my English to find a better job and to communicate with other persons" –Salima
No answer –Selena, Luis

These answers are somewhat useful. In a sense, I am made aware of the specific areas of language learning people want to engage. In these responses, I also see that students have a sophisticated awareness of the different components of language often described in language classes (reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary). There remains, however, a need for further information. Many people isolate a desire to communicate, to connect: but communicate what? To whom? Many also express an interest specifically in reading and writing, but again: for what ends? Several students specifically name work as a source of inspiration for their joining class, but there is not much discussion of what about work students want to learn. Throughout the questionnaire, we offered different places for people to provide

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[3] All student writing reproduced in this article was originally handwritten. The words appear as students wrote them to maintain fidelity to their original intent.

their input as to interesting literacy activities they would like to engage in but, similar to Table 1, there was little detail expressed in these responses.

Given the proven difficulty of understanding students' goals and desires for class content through a one-time question, there emerged a need in our class to have protocols for understanding students' perspectives on what they wanted to learn beyond just an initial question. Being mindful of potential discomforts students might have with being pressed to share their more personal goals both within and beyond class, my fellow educators and I worked to balance activities that felt familiar to students where learning new words or grammatical concepts were an explicit focus in addition to inquiries into each other's lives.

Centering Goals and Dreams in the Curriculum

Having reflected on other goal-setting activities from previous semesters in addition to our findings from initial intake forms, class volunteers and I developed our inquiry into students' class goals. We elected to begin the semester with an intentional and longer-term goal-setting project to generate a collective board of dreams we could utilize for curriculum planning. In supplementing goals with dreams, I hoped to open space for people to share learning goals beyond language. While educators are often encouraged to help their students identify manageable goals that could be reasonably achieved in small steps, I wanted to expand our discussion, introducing a term that might spark dialogue about things we want to achieve that might not be realized in a short period of time. Dream imagery has long been important in liberatory and resistance discourse in the United States, particularly in African American communities, in addition to other communities of color and other marginalized communities (Imarisha & brown, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Grand visioning through discussions of dreams has been used to lay a blueprint for big ideas that might seem unattainable in a moment where situations seem dire and immutable. Though I am careful to say that the visioning in our class was different from more radical approaches to dreaming, these uses of dreams speak to the history this word might invoke and the possibilities I imagined it could spark for conversation beyond simply discussing goal-setting. I was also mindful in using the term of the way dreams have been denied for many people because of structural racism and other forms of oppression, which my experience as an adult ESOL educator has made me especially aware of. Many students in years past had recounted challenges in achieving their education dreams for a variety of reasons, including such issues as financial constraints, linguistic barriers and a lack of documentation of prior learning experiences.

With all of the potential complexities and emotions the term *dream* may bring to mind, I wanted to be sure to open a discussion about dreams that acknowledged these mixed feelings. As such, I sought to design the discussion to invite people to consider their dreams not just as they relate to English class, but dreams they had in their lives in general. I told the students that our class dreams and goals could be big or small and could have something to do with English class or not. They could also be immediately achievable or part of a longer journey. For our more open-ended approach to ESOL that lacked formal assessments and strict attendance policies, isolating our aspirations beyond the term's end seemed to

make sense. I felt that that extending our discussion of dreams beyond class could also invite students to think of English class as a resource beyond learning the mechanics of English.

Having made various visual representations of our class dreams in other semesters—mainly inspired by an activity in a well-used and loved resource, *Change Agent*—class volunteers and I decided to once more create a visual metaphor for our class dreams. In years past, this had manifested as a "class dream tree" and a "ladder to the stars" with the tree leaves and stars representing our dreams and the roots and rungs the steps we would take to nourish and realize our dreams. For this semester, we decided to make a *dream garden*: identifying our dreams as flowers and naming concrete steps we could take to get closer to our dreams in the roots. While we had certainly utilized students' dreams in creating curricula in years past, we struggled to integrate all of our students' goals collectively into one unifying curriculum. In other semesters, co-teachers had looked thematically at what students wanted to learn and planned independent units within the curriculum rather than creating one curriculum that could touch on all students' interests. In this spirit, we developed a project designed to be carried out over several days based on helping students identify what dreams and goals they wanted to share with our class.

We began our inquiry using graphic organizers that asked students to name their goals for English learning in order to gauge how students understood the concept of goal-setting. We then moved into a more structured discussion of dreams to augment our discussion and potentially invite students to share aspirations outside of class. A class volunteer, here called Willow, and I planned a lesson around Langston Hughes' poem *Harlem*[4] to start a conversation about the relationship between dreams, power, and meaning. We selected the poem for its rich imagery conveyed in few words, thinking it could be a meaningful and accessible text for students to engage with the word *dream*. Though the language was complex, it also was a short enough piece that students could look up the words and spend a prolonged period of time understanding the meanings of the verses.

Prefacing our discussion with a brief biography of Langston Hughes to situate the poem within the context of the Harlem Renaissance and the tradition of African American literary arts in the United States, we shifted into a group reading of the poem led by Willow. Afterwards, Willow made pairs of students read through and dissect the poem together, line by line. Given time limitations and where students were with English comprehension in addition to familiarity with U.S. history, we unfortunately did not dive as much into the historical embeddedness of the poem, which would have required a longer lesson with intensive vocabulary teaching. The conversation focused instead on the meaning students could make from Hughes' words and what it meant to them when they read it.

Through an in-depth and guided reading of the poem, students expressed emotional responses to the poem, focusing both on how the poem made them feel and what the concept of dreaming meant to them. To follow up the activity with space for reflection, I asked students to write about what their dreams were generally in life. Rather than using the poem to have a discussion only about dreams that were deferred for them, I wanted to build on students desires to talk

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[4] Hughes, L. (1990). Harlem. *Poetry Foundation*. Retrieved from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem

about dreaming more broadly. I also wanted to give students the chance to reflect on what their dreams were before going into an activity centered around students naming their dreams and writing out steps to achieve them. In response to the sentiments the poem elicited from students in our class activity, I wanted to further open space for sharing the feelings they had about their dreams. As such, I tagged on a supplementary question about how they might be experiencing these dreams asking, "How does your dream make you feel?"

Students' Freewriting About Dreams

Students, in their freewriting after reading *Harlem*, shared many insights about what their dreams were and why those dreams were important to them. Through their freewriting, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of what their hopes for the future might be and why those hopes are important to them. I share the work of four students to detail how students narrated their dreams for the future and what it communicated to me about what subjects were meaningful to students in their lives.

In response to the question, "What are your dreams in life?" Graciela writes: "See my two daughters graduate for school and with a good job. Me learning more English." Here the priority for Graciela's life goal seems to be for her daughters to succeed and do well and life. While she mentions her goal is to learn English, she does so below the goal for her daughter to do well and succeed. In asking Graciela to share about the goals in her life, I was afforded a different view into her priorities. Juxtaposed to the answer on her intake sheet, which focused on her learning grammar, reading and writing, her free-written response centered her daughters in her hopes for the future.

In Sonia's writing about her dreams, depicted in Figure 1, there is a similar focus on her family and a departure from her answer to the original question asked on the intake form meant to tell me more about what brought her to English class. "When I think in my dreams, not only I think in myself because I think in my kids too." For Sonia, dreams denote something more expansive, something beyond an immediate achievement and beyond herself individually. Though her dreams include visions for her own career, she inherently ties these dreams to her children. Sonia's dreams extend into the future, where she imagines a "good" job for herself and a "bigger" house in addition to a secure future for her children. Though she lists many ambitions, she also shares that there are things she has already that she is grateful for, namely her life and health. Her desire to realize her dream vision are included in this gratitude. These desires all weave together in her explanation of what she wants from her dreams, revealing how her own desires for her future are intimately related to those she loves and cares for. Though happy in life in many ways, she also feels that part of her life's work is to strive to make her life better not just for herself, but for her family. Sonia's expression of her dreams challenges neoliberal narratives that look at immigrant students' desire for social ascension free of any consideration about students' sense of why they want to change their careers or buy a new house. While she dreams of material changes in her life and career aspirations for her sons, she also dreams that her children will become "good men."

Minerva, in writing about her dreams, shares the following thoughts: "My dreams in my life is one day to see [all] my family. When I think about this make
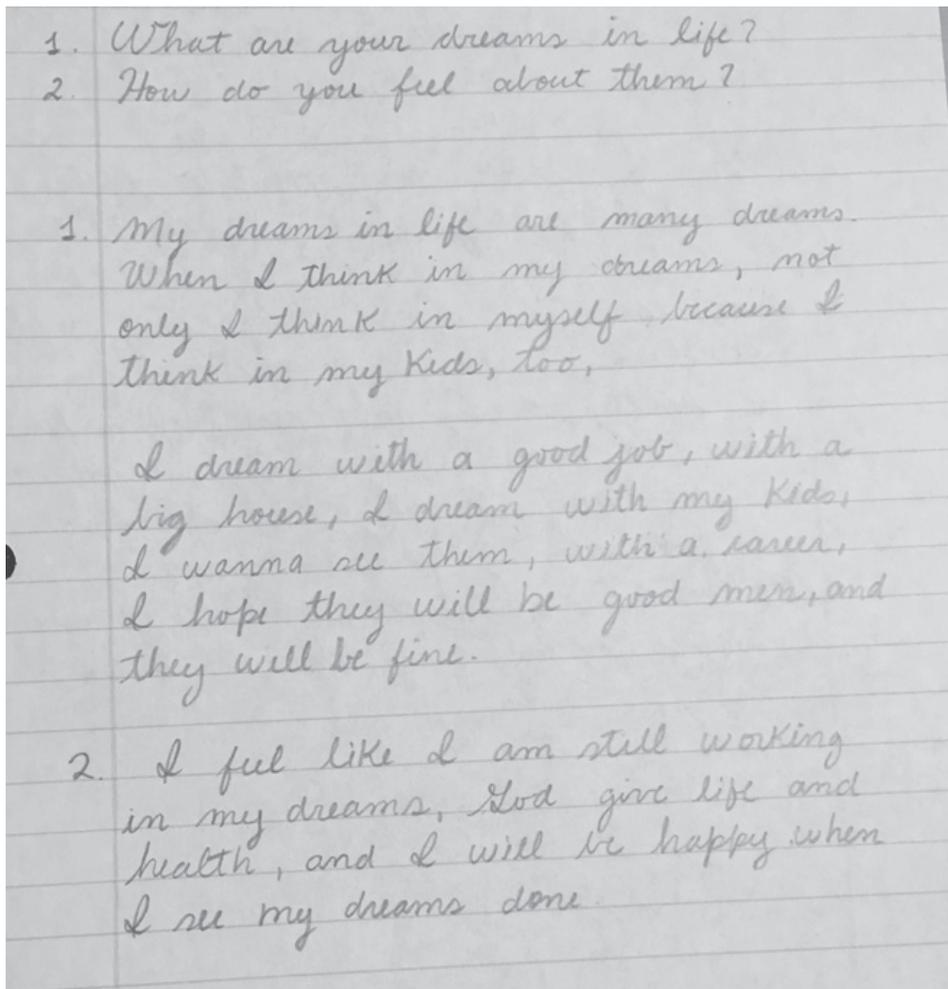
1. What are your dreams in life?
2. How do you feel about them?

1. My dreams in life are many dreams. When I think in my dreams, not only I think in myself, because I think in my kids, too.

I dream with a good job, with a big house, I dream with my kids, I wanna see them, with a career, I hope they will be good men, and they will be fine.

2. I feel like I am still working in my dreams, God give life and health, and I will be happy when I see my dreams done.

Figure 1. Sonia's dream freewrite

me feel happy." Like Sonia and Graciela, who focus on their families as essential in the formation of their dreams, Minerva focuses on her family both near and far. Alluding to the fact that much of her family is still in Ecuador, she shares a desire to see her family that is far away. English or career advancement, here, does not figure into a description of her dreams and what she wants from life. Again, echoing the dream descriptions of Sonia and Graciela, Minerva utilizes the opportunity to talk about dreams in her life to isolate goals beyond her initial statement on her intake form. Her writing allowed me to see a snapshot of her life outside of being a student learning a new language. It also surfaced important aspects of her life affected by oppressive immigration regulations in the United States that make it difficult or impossible, depending on one's immigration status, to visit family in other countries. Relatedly, this gave me pause to reflect on the complexities around immigration and how these are lived by students. I thought about how the U.S. interventions in political and economic affairs over the world make inequitable, and sometimes untenable, living conditions,

pushing people to leave a place though they might have a deep love for their community there.

Aurora, over two different days, wrote two meditations on her dreams and on the complexity of how her dreams have changed over time. Her first excerpt is shared in Figure 2. As she was writing at the end of our poetry reading activity with only a short amount of time left in class, she shared that she had a hard time thinking of a dream, expressed in her saying, "My dreams in life is to short." She goes on to share that she wants to go back to her country and see her family there. Relatedly, she expresses that her other dream is to live together, not just to see them visits. In her writing, Aurora shares that her dreams extend outside of achieving career goals in the United States. Like Minerva, she lists primarily, that she would like to return to her country to see her family again. Taking it a step further than Minerva, she also speaks of a world where she can live together with her family. She dreams of a future where her whole transnational network of loved ones can be together and she can enjoy time with them.

The next class Aurora came in and continued to write about her dreams without direction from me (Figure 3). Different from her more buoyant tone in her previous writing, Aurora shares that her big dreams for herself have changed over time, from when she was "young" and felt good. While she wanted to be a teacher originally, her goals shifted to being more focused on her daughter and how she might make a more comfortable life for her materially. Though she and her daughter lived together (something I knew from previous conversations with her and from seeing Aurora bring her daughter with her to class on most occasions), she talks about wanting to live in a house of their own, privileging their relationship as something important that she wants to maintain and strengthen through her new house. When writing about how she feels about her dream, she also expresses that "hard" work and a career change might be in her future. Again,
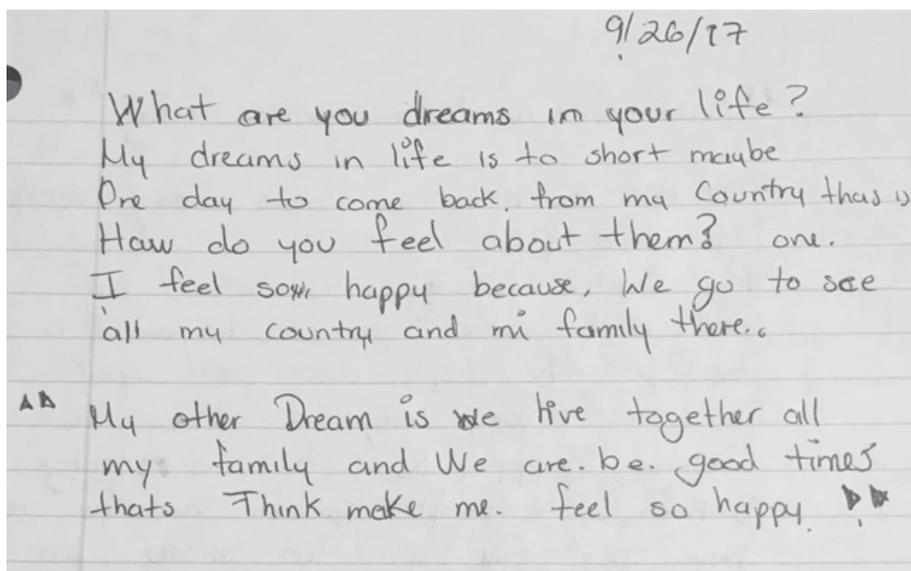

Figure 2. Aurora's day 1 dream freewrite

Figure 3. Aurora's day 2 dream freewrite

though Aurora's goal discussion here is mainly about the material changes she wants to see in her life, the reasons for that material change are centered around relationships and doing things to make her daughter's life better, as she imagines it. She wants to "make something special for [me] and my daughter." She wants to find a home with her daughter where she can nourish their relationship and offer something to her that is worthy of their specialness. She also sees this as a far-off dream, something she can attain but only after some time and changes in her job.

Together, Graciela, Sonia, Minerva and Aurora's writing about their dreams revealed new insights into the futures they are hoping to build. By asking students to write about their dreams outside of class and prefacing our discussion with a creative activity meditating on the term *dream*, Willow and I centered dreams as important aspects of many of our lives both in and out of class and both realized and not yet realized. Similarly, by building a critical reading of dreams into the curriculum, examining our dreams became an activity where students engaged language seriously and learned about conventions of English while also interrogating an issue that was interesting to them and rooted in their experiences. Through reading and negotiating meaning together, students engaged in text interpretation, an activity common in many English classes. While the readings were challenging and initially difficult for them to engage with, students were able to make sense together of what the poem was about and were then offered an opportunity to connect it to their own lives through writing. Though traditional in its appearance as a read-and-respond activity, students took advantage of the time and space to share the complexity of their dreams and the mixed emotions they might have around them. While all the women shared positive feelings of hope and happiness about their dreams, there were also some subtle undertones

of uncertainty about how to achieve them. Both Sonia and Aurora spoke of their dreams as a process, as something they knew they had to work towards but were unsure of how to realize immediately. Aurora even spoke of her own deferred dream, of her having to give up her dream of being a teacher when she had her daughter. Through our class discussion and in the written responses, we reflected on different aspects of dreaming and what dreams can look like and mean, setting us up for a longer final discussion the following class where, together, we created a collective vision of our goals.

Making a Collective Dream Visual

We built on our discussion of *Harlem* through several activities, including making our own similes about dreams, to further examine what the term meant to students. I used this discussion of achieving dreams to ask students to describe how they could envision achieving their own dreams, returning to our earlier project of naming our dreams and how we could achieve them.

I had students work with graphic organizers over the next few classes to write out which dream they would focus on and to identify steps they would take towards realizing their goals. As some students came to different days of class, they filled out goal worksheets somewhat haphazardly, whenever they could get to class and in whatever time I could make between other planned activities if they missed the original class where we had designated time for students to write out their goals for sharing on the class dream board. Over the several days following our activity reflecting on our dreams, students developed a dream board with facilitators' guidance. Pictured in Figure 4, our class dreams emerge visually as a collective: all side-by-side growing together. I also include Table 2 with the goals and the steps to the achieve the goals for easier reading of the contents in Figure 4.
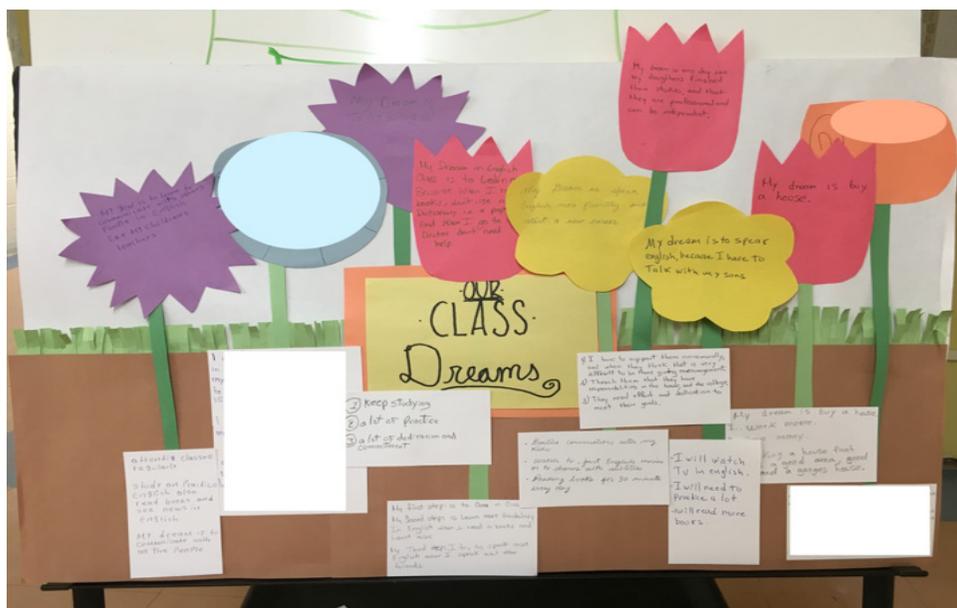

Figure 4. Class "Dream Garden"

Table 2

Students' Goals Expressed in Class "Dream Garden"

Student	Goal (Flowers)	Steps (Roots)
Graciela	My goal is to learn to write more English to communicate with all people to help others. I like to learn new things about this country because this country geve me a lot.	1) Practicing and looking for more information in books and on the internet. 2) Try to read someting every night in English like a book or newspaper. 3) Writing letters learning at least 10 words a day.
Aurora	My dream in English class is to learn more because I read books, don't use a dictionary in a paper. And when I go to the doctor don't need help.	My first step: is to come in class. My second step: is learn more vocabulary. My third step: I try to speak more English when I speak whit other friends.
Minerva	My dream is one day see my daughters finish their studies and that they are professional and can be independent.	1) I have to support them economically and when they think that is very difficult to be there giving encouragement. 2) Theach them that they have responsibilities in the house and the college. 3) They need effort and dedication to meet their goals.
Hugo	Speak English and being able to write well. I also graduated GED.	I am happy to return in English class my teacher teach me to read and she is trying to understand me. I will be my best to meet my goal I will put my best efforts and time to understand this language.
Gabriel	My dream is to be bilingual.	1) Keep studying. 2) a lot of practice. 3) a lot of dedicacion and commitment.
Selena	My goal is to learn to communicate with other people in English like my children's teachers.	Attendig classes regularly. Study an practice English also read books and see news in English. My dream is to communicate with all the people.
Rose	My dreams to get my GED and go to college that I could have a good degree.	1) And I can do a lot of practice would puzzle every time when I can do it so if I can do it everyday I will that I can learn better. 2) But for me to do that I have to read and write more so that I have to always take a book and read it every time when I go home. 3) And write to my Pen Pal every time when he or she reply to me that I could reply back to them.
Sonia	My Dream is speak English more fluently and start a new career.	- Practice conversations with my kids. - Watch TV, just English movies or TV shows with subtitles. - Reading books for 30 minutes every day.
Tomás	My dream is to speak English, because I have to talk with my sons.	1) I will watch TV in English. 2) I will need to practice a lot. 3) I will read more books.

Interestingly, despite our reflections and the more personal dreams revealed in students' independent writing, the goals and dreams students elected to share with the class were often quite different from the dreams described in their reflections. Graciela and Aurora, for example both chose to focus on specific language goals to share with the class, refraining from sharing their more private goals. Minerva's goals were more closely related to her daughter than stated in her pre-write. Generally, there is an overwhelming focus on students wanting to learn English as an essential component to their learning goals and dreams. However, sprinkled throughout, students mention a few more aspirations relating to things beyond English class than expressed in our surveys. Within students' declarations that they want to learn English, there is a tendency to center children and loved ones and dreams of attaining a higher education degree. The dream board and class discussion of dreams became a place for people to share the many facets of what they wanted, making dreams not only a starting point for our lesson planning, but a beginning inquiry into what we valued and what we wanted to accomplish together.

Discussion

Through an inquiry that took multiple class sessions and utilized a variety of inquiry approaches (including literature engagement, a whole class dialogic investigation into what the term *dream* meant, and multiple written and verbal opportunities to reflect on personal dreams), students developed a collective vision of their individual dreams. By moving beyond an initial questionnaire or interview to isolate goals, students were given space to share the many different dreams and goals they might have beyond just learning better pronunciation or improving their writing. Goals and dreams also became curriculum, serving as the basis for our first prolonged period of activity and learning together. Students' relationships with family and friends also became apparent as the main drive behind their dreams and goals, reorienting our understanding about why students wanted to learn English to being less about students' individual aspirations and more about their hopes for their whole network of kin.

As we went forward with our collective learning, Willow and I used this dream board to foster a larger discussion about what an overarching theme might be for our learning together. In planning meetings, we looked both at what students had written on the board and what they wrote about in other settings. Over several conversations both together and with other students in class, we realized that most students had touched on wanting to be able to express themselves more clearly through English. Willow and I conceived of a theme entitled *Express Yourself!* which we shared with students and explained as a way for us to focus not only on communication, but using language creatively to share insights and communicate ideas that might be hard for learners to share in English. From Tomás, who wanted to speak with his sons more easily, to Rose, who wanted to pass the General Education Development (GED) test and would need to engage essay writing and text analysis to do so, working with students to use figurative language to talk about their feelings and thoughts seemed like a fruitful direction for class. Moreover, it allowed us to continue to use poetry and other forms of language students had seemed to enjoy working with. By developing an open theme not based around a specific area of vocabulary or subject, as is common in adult ESOL

spaces, Willow and I hoped to open space to continue this spirit of inquiry; by planning a course of learning that continued to integrate poetry, art, and story-telling into our daily work of inquiry together into what English was and how we might use it in and for a variety of contexts. Willow and I also continuously re-evaluated our dreams and goals throughout the year, recognizing that these were not static ideas but hopes that could grow in conversation through changing life circumstances and shifting interests. We returned to the dream board several times as a class, leaving it available for students to look at and ponder in every class session.

In my inquiry, I wanted to open space for learners to share their insights about what they wanted from class in the hopes that it would unveil new understandings into what students hoped to learn. Through this data, I found that while students connected their desires for learning English with career goals, there was also layered complexity in students' responses. This is most notable in Graciela's final writing up of her dream: "My goal is to learn to write more English to communicate with all people to help others. I like to learn new things about this country because this country gave me a lot." At once upholding dominant narratives about the United States being a land of opportunity and English as a way to access that opportunity, despite the multiplicity of language histories present in the United States, she also centralizes "helping people" as a goal of hers to achieve through English class. Rather than being concerned with her own material wealth, she wants to work towards using her language to help others. Her voicing of her own self-defined success reminded me to appreciate the nuances of critical consciousness— thoughts echoed by other critical educators working with adult learners (Ellsworth, 1989; Guerra, 2004)—and to recommit to my own inquiry stance in understanding the binary between resistant/not resistant to neoliberalism. I also think that while my inquiry did not necessarily produce radically different narratives for why people want to learn English from the literature critiqued earlier, taking an inquiry stance to learners' goals and opening up space to talk about aspirations beyond goal-setting provided me with richer information about what students wanted from class and pushed me to think about curriculum formation that honored all of their varying and multifaceted goals.

In reflecting back on my initial impetus to engage this inquiry, I find that it did serve what I hoped its function would be, which is to offer a more authentic view of what students wanted to learn from English class. Though the goals students voiced were often related to career readiness and linked a desire to learn English with a desire to change one's working position, relationships and care for others emerged as a primary motivating factor behind students' coming to class. I also realized that this inquiry itself pushed back on assumptions prolific in adult literacy research. By taking an inquiry stance to learners' goals, we recentered the learner as the shaper of classroom activity and made clear that our stance as a program was to listen to students and to deliver a learning experience based around their collective interests. Through our process of inquiry into students' goals, Willow and I gained an appreciation for the many things happening in students' lives and how deeply important relationships were to students. This shaped our future decision-making, launching us into developing a student-centered curriculum that looked not only at students' language learning goals, but attempted to center them as a whole person beyond their language skills.

Ultimately, I hope this piece encourages practitioners and researchers to take up similar inquiries that push the field to consider the totality of adult ESOL learners' experiences and desires for learning in order to make classes more human-centered and meaningful for learners.

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