Building From Connection, Care, And Curiosity: Towards A Critically Student-Centered Adult English For Speakers Of Other Languages Pedagogy

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Abstract
This dissertation examines the literacy and language practices educators and adult immigrant learners engaged to make sense of English in a community-based English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class. By taking a grounded approach to understanding adult immigrant students’ collective literacy and language meaning making, the author argues for a focus on approaches to adult ESOL that build from students’ lives and inquiries. Specifically basing her analysis in the sociopolitical context of the US, the author explicitly calls for a pedagogy that resists persistent xenophobic and nativist national trends by supporting the wellbeing of students and honoring their intellectual legacies. Utilizing data collected from a year-long practitioner inquiry study, the author details her process of mediating her own perspectives on language teaching with those of her students to formulate an approach that represented both students’ interests and teachers’ commitments. Through an analysis of her own teaching and students’ learning, the author posits a model for critically student-centered teaching in adult ESOL settings that foregrounds connection, care, and curiosity. The author postulates that by seeing students’ relationships both in and out of class as sources of learning, by making concerns about students’ welfare central to class learning, and by approaching learners as fellow language investigators, adult ESOL teachers can provide a learning experience founded upon what students want from their English classes and supportive of students’ endeavors beyond language learning.

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BUILDING FROM CONNECTION, CARE, AND CURIOSITY: TOWARDS A CRITICALLY STUDENT-CENTERED ADULT ENGLISH FOR SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES PEDAGOGY

Emily Rose Schwab

A DISSERTATION

in

Education

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2019

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the students who have taught me to be the educator I am today. Your kindness, patience, and love of learning has shaped what I know about education and this dissertation would not be here without your insight. It is your brilliance that I hope to honor in this dissertation.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation was only possible through the support offered to me by my mentors, colleagues, family, and loved ones.

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Finally, to my loved ones, friends, and colleagues: there are too many of you to name here. I am afraid if I start naming you individually, the list will go on longer than my dissertation. Please know the care and comfort you have provided me through homecooked meals, late night assuring phone calls and texts, chapter readings, and karaoke breaks was the reason I made it through my graduate studies. My love and gratitude are infinite for you all.
ABSTRACT

BUILDING FROM CONNECTION, CARE, AND CURIOSITY: TOWARDS A CRITICALLY STUDENT-CENTERED ADULT ENGLISH FOR SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES PEDAGOGY

Emily Rose Schwab

Gerald Campano

This dissertation examines the literacy and language practices educators and adult immigrant learners engaged to make sense of English in a community-based English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class. By taking a grounded approach to understanding adult immigrant students’ collective literacy and language meaning making, the author argues for a focus on approaches to adult ESOL that build from students’ lives and inquiries. Specifically basing her analysis in the sociopolitical context of the US, the author explicitly calls for a pedagogy that resists persistent xenophobic and nativist national trends by supporting the wellbeing of students and honoring their intellectual legacies. Utilizing data collected from a year-long practitioner inquiry study, the author details her process of mediating her own perspectives on language teaching with those of her students to formulate an approach that represented both students’ interests and teachers’ commitments. Through an analysis of her own teaching and students’ learning, the author posits a model for critically student-centered teaching in adult ESOL settings that foregrounds connection, care, and curiosity. The author postulates that by seeing students’ relationships both in and out of class as sources of learning, by making concerns about students’ welfare central to class learning, and by approaching learners as fellow language investigators, adult ESOL teachers can provide a
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

My dissertation paper depicts a year of my teaching and learning in an adult English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)\(^1\) class at a Philadelphia faith-based community center, here called the Cabrini Center. Through my work, I interrogate and bring together different concepts across literacy studies to uniquely consider what adult ESOL pedagogy and practice look like in a community-based setting. To begin my investigation, I share a critical moment that shaped my dissertation framing from research I conducted under my advisor, Gerald Campano’s, larger Community Literacies research project before I began collecting my own dissertation data.

A critical incident

In the middle of my second year of graduate school, a new student named Senait\(^2\) joined the adult ESOL class I taught as part of a research partnership between my advisor and a local, faith-based community center. She identified as an asylum seeker who was still in the process of settling her immigration status, having fled the country she was born in several years before with her then infant. As one of the students most recently arrived in the neighborhood and as the only person in our class who came from east Africa speaking primarily Amharic, she came into a class with no one to share her other languages with and no one she knew. Though quiet in class, she was eager to interact

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\(^1\) Here, I use the term English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) rather than English as a Second Language (ESL), despite both being used in adult literacy research and policy. While it is still common to use ESL in US adult literacy contexts, I choose ESOL to recognize the many languages students bring with them and avoid using numbers to describe language as researchers I rely on trouble the notion that language is a bounded, countable entity. While this is still a limited term as it assumes one standard form of correct English, I use ESOL as it is most commonly used in the literature and references a specific experience of non-English speaking, adult multilinguals opting to learn a new language (English).

\(^2\) Pseudonyms used throughout.
and get to know new people, eventually becoming friendly with most people in class and coming every week.

A few weeks into our term, the director of the center, who knew Senait well and had been working with her in her resettlement, asked if I could take some extra time to work with Senait. Senait had expressed interest in sharing her story with others in an effort to realize her dream of being a human rights advocate and we thought together, we could work on writing out some pieces she would want to eventually share. I agreed, grateful to have the opportunity to get to know Senait better and take on a new writing project with a student. Before class on a cold February afternoon, Senait and I gathered in the center’s basement while her son played upstairs. There, Senait and I worked together to identify what parts of her story she wanted to share: what was she ready to talk about and what did she want people to know? Senait decided to focus on her experience being held in a detention center in rural Pennsylvania for several months with her son. She emphasized the inhumane conditions, wanting to share the injustice she experienced at the hands of US immigration officials. I thanked her for sharing her experiences with me, expressing my desire to be there for her in any way she wanted as she continued to navigate the process of resettling in the US. At the end of our session, just as class was beginning, we decided to continue meeting in our pre-class workshops to form some pieces of writing.

After a brief, silent writing activity students engaged as they came in to class, I began our whole group learning time by asking people to share class news. This was a practice introduced to me by my fellow research team member and mentor, Alicia Rusoja, and was something I was having a hard time instituting as a routine in my own
class (this practice is elaborated on in our co-written 2015 chapter: Ghiso, Rusoja, & Schwab, 2016). In class news, students have the opportunity to share stories in front of the whole group about something going on in their lives with the larger class. If a student decides to share, the class facilitator writes their story on the board to provide a written account for all of us to read through and learn from. I had watched Alicia do it numerous times but was still building the skill of waiting through awkward silences for people to share and providing encouraging prompts to get learners going. I was especially anxious about the activity as the week before, people had been less than enthusiastic about sharing. After I asked students if they had any new things happen in their lives this week, I expected the same prolonged silence I had heard the week before. Instead, Senait spoke up, sharing that she had recently had her ankle bracelet removed from her time in an immigration detention center. Though she had been released for some time, she was required to wear an ankle bracelet monitoring her movement until just a few days prior. I wrote the story on the board, moved and surprised she wanted to share this deeply personal and painful story with the class. This moment blossomed into others, sparking people to share events that happened in their lives.

At the end of class, after activities that deviated from our Class News discussion, I asked students what they had learned as an exercise in reflecting both on what students had enjoyed about class and what they felt they had taken away from class. A long-time student named Teresa raised her hand and shared that she had learned from Senait’s story. Teresa and I first met each other in the second term of my teaching at Cabrini. Since that time, I had gotten to know her and her family quite well, inviting them to participate in other research projects attached to my advisor’s partnership with the center
and supporting Teresa in some translation between Spanish (her primary language) and English in personal affairs. Teresa elaborated, saying that one time, she was walking on the street with her friend and was approached by a woman with an ankle bracelet asking for help in buying something from the corner store. The woman had told them that she could not leave her house, which concerned Teresa’s friend. As Teresa and her friend were both from families of mixed immigration status, her friend urged them to leave and not get mixed up in whatever was going on with the woman in need of help to avoid getting in trouble themselves. Teresa expressed regret that she had not helped, upon hearing Senait’s story. Teresa also expressed gratitude for Senait sharing her story and saying again that it was the most important thing she learned in class. While it was common for us to have conversations where students brought in their own perspectives and experiences to make sense of class material, usually they remained related to the things we were reading or learning about together. For the first time, I experienced the potential of class news and felt our classroom community shift, as students elected to bring in their own experience and topics of concern to class as a source of learning.

In reflection after class, this moment stuck with me as it was one of the most student-driven discussions about a critical issue I had experienced in class, after nearly two years of teaching at Cabrini. Though I had read about, been mentored into and attempted to enact a critical pedagogy, I always struggled with bringing up social justice issues in a way that felt meaningful to students; something I considered essential to a critical teaching practice. Not wanting to impose my own vision of what I interpreted as relevant social justice issues — especially as a white, non-immigrant woman in a teaching context where students were all immigrants of color — I tended to take students’
lead in lesson planning. In co-designing learning experiences with fellow teachers, we attempted to center students’ identified areas of interests, which usually did not include themes related to equity or inquiries into issues of power, while still providing some readings and activities that centered such issues. Why did this exchange between Senait and Teresa happen? What conditions had been in place in order for this conversation to take place? What alchemy of student interests, relationships and timing came together to enable this dialogue?

While I, of course, did not settle on an easy answer to any of my questions, several years later, certain aspects of this moment are put into relief and become clearer. For one, Senait and I had established a rapport prior to this conversation. Despite her not knowing many people in the class, we had established a connection through our out of class work together, in which she had expressed her interest in being an advocate for immigrants’ rights and discussing her experience in a detention center with others. Teresa and I also had a long-standing, caring relationship, grown over several years of working on various projects together. Teresa also had relationships with many people in class, as she was a longtime parishioner at the church and participant in activities at the Center. This constellation of relationships created a community built on multiple points of interaction, not solely isolated to class, where we had gotten to know each other in many different ways. Not only were these relationships complex, but their multiplicity also allowed us to have a certain degree of closeness. In different ways, we had demonstrated that we cared about each other not just as teacher and student, but as people with emotions and life circumstances that affected our experiences in class. I believe this moment also happened because students were encouraged to follow their own inquiries in
class. Senait’s sharing, Teresa’s response and my internal reaction all were things that happened because students were given both space and support to shape class through their experiences and directions to class.

Our classes progressed after this moment not necessarily changed by it, but certainly informed by it. Senait and Teresa became closer as friends, working together more often. Class news became a more entrenched routine, with people feeling more interested in sharing as the weeks went on. Shifting life patterns and world happenings affected our learning, however, disrupting some of our established norms and ways of interaction. Senait and Teresa, like many students, started attending more sporadically as the term went on. Teresa came infrequently to manage multiple family obligations and other community activities, Senait decided to move on from English class after a term to take GED classes in pursuit of higher education. Both would come back at different points, checking in and returning to class when they could as they expressed an interest in continuing to learn English and be in our class. Our learning was also fundamentally shaped by shifting sociopolitical contexts with both Senait and Teresa affected in distinct ways by an unjust immigration system and a climate marked by overt violence against people of color and immigrants. Senait eventually left Philadelphia, following the traumatic events surrounding the 2016 presidential election. Teresa stayed, continuing to come to class throughout my data collection, having obtained a more secure immigration status. Though our learning was not linear and was difficult to measure in terms of language acquisition, I do believe the relationships we created and the things we learned from each other were substantial and provided us a new way to make sense of our surrounding worlds.
Developing an inquiry

My strong reaction to this class exchange came after several years of teaching adult ESOL, during which I constantly wrestled with the question of whether I was providing my students with the best and most just learning experience possible. Having entered the literacy field with a desire to address systemic oppression perpetuated, in part, through education inequity, Freire and other critical pedagogues who made resisting systemic oppression the foundation of their literacy teaching practice were foundational scholars in my pedagogy formation. In practice, I also found that taking this approach in an ESOL context was challenging for me as a white woman who grew up speaking primarily English. The historically assimilationist endeavor of ESOL has long been central to projects aimed at eradicating marginalized languages and language varieties from immigrant communities and communities of color in the name of maintaining white, Anglo supremacy (Crawford, 2000; Ochoa, 2008; Sanchez, 1995). By teaching this subject as a white US-born woman, I was in a way, inherently perpetuating this cycle of white native English speaker educating new Americans into an imagined uniform linguistic and cultural community. I was also aware that by designing my classes around interrogating and addressing these longstanding assumptions about Dominant American English (DAE) and its relation to systemic oppression, I could very well reinscribe my

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3 I use Dominant American English (DAE) when referring to what is called standard English in other contexts. DAE, a phrase coined by Paris (2009), underscores the power that standard English maintains in the US as a privileged language used to marginalize other varieties of English spoken in the US. I use DAE when discussing an imagined correct English language norm discussed in policy and in certain realms of language and literacy research. I continue to use English in moments when discussing students’ engagement with language as we were, in class, making sense of a variety of Englishes together and that was the term most often used by students in our class to discuss the language they were learning together.
power as an authority in the classroom by pushing students to address topics they might show little to no interest in given that they came to class for the express purpose of learning English, not taking on social action and critique. While I was sure I could never completely eradicate power differentials between my students and I, I wanted to do the most I could to honor what students wanted from class while also staying true to my own commitments to help work towards a language education system that challenged the privileged status of DAE and valued a diversity of languages and literacies.

When I turned to research in graduate school to further nuance my pedagogical understandings and see what scholars were advocating in adult ESOL teaching, I found little documentation of the sociocultural aspects of adult ESOL learning I was so interested in and struck by. In my many deep dives into research databases and library stacks, the bulk of research in adult ESOL I encountered was mostly concerned with language acquisition isolated from sociopolitical contexts and any social justice agenda undertaken by the researcher. While there is a tradition of scholarly writing about critical and community-centered approaches to adult ESOL dating back to the 1980s and 90s (Auerbach, 1993; Auerbach et al., 1996; Canagarajah, 2008; Gonzalez & Ildikó, 2000; Morgan, 1998), the broad swath of contemporary adult ESOL education research does not engage these perspectives and focuses primarily on language learning separate from discussions of power and socio-politically informed learning content. A review of relevant literature finds predominant approaches to adult ESOL are largely devoid of specific attention to how adults voice what they want from their ESOL classes, despite a history of research in the broader adult literacy field recognizing the importance of focusing on the interests and literacy practices of students (Ananyeva, 2014; Auerbach,
A recent funding and policy push to support workplace readiness initiatives has further moved the field away from focusing on students’ unique learning desires and more on their value in the US economy and how they learn specific concepts determined by industries (Belzer & Kim, 2018; Jacobson, 2017; Pickard, 2016). Furthermore, studies find that adult ESOL programs are severely underfunded and that there are few full-time positions for educators in the field, leaving many teachers stretched thin or working on a volunteer basis (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Perry & Hart, 2012; Sun, 2010). This combination of forces makes producing grounded, longitudinal research difficult, with scholars pressured to study within frameworks that are palatable to funders and practitioners limited in their time to conduct their own investigations and reach across institutional boundaries to conduct collaborative research and inquiry groups.

Despite a lack of funding and support for adult ESOL research initiatives in the US, there remains a need for scholarship that depicts the learning happening in these spaces and the learning that happens outside of language acquisition. As events of the late 2010s (the era of this dissertation’s data collection and writing) underscore, xenophobia and racism are persistent and essential themes affecting adult literacy students’ lives in the US. Hateful rhetoric, violent action, and harmful policy decisions enacted in the name of curbing immigration in the era of Trump are manifestations of centuries’ old attitudes and ideologies present in the US that exclude and oppress immigrant communities of color perceived as racially and ethnically deviant from US, white, Anglo norms. Adult ESOL programs, long a front in US assimilationist projects (NeCamp, 2014; Sanchez, 1995; Wan, 2014), are uniquely implicated as sites of US identity
contestation as related to language, ethnicity, and race. Researching and teaching in these spaces can be understood, like all teaching (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994), as an inherently political act requiring contextualized study and pedagogies that respond to these realities.

Building on the legacy of critical literacy scholars in adult ESOL, I argue that we need models of critical and student-centered approaches to adult ESOL that match the actuality of teachers’ and students’ lived experiences and also challenges the dominant focus on learning DAE as a means of assimilation and increased economic productivity. I also contend that part of this work is developing clearer distinctions between the varied locations where adult ESOL occurs through grounded, ethnographically informed research. I offer my dissertation as one such grounded examination of how adult immigrant students and teachers in an ESOL setting come together and make meaning of English. As my dissertation work demonstrates, while students often indicate a desire to get a better job or access US institutions through English class, other factors not accounted for in research often influence learners’ decisions to attend and remain in class. My data also show that students’ literacy resources inform students’ interactions with literacy and language learning that makes utilizing decontextualized learning approaches problematic. Through scrutinizing my own practice, I have also found that trying to teach to students’ unique learning interests while maintaining a critical lens can be challenging due to the confines of my own perspective and a learning environment with bounded time, limited resources, and variable student attendance. Ultimately, I use my data and analysis to posit one vision of how critical and student-centered approaches might be mediated in service of a pedagogy that supports immigrant adults in learning the English they want to know, while also honoring the rich knowledge they already hold.
Research Questions

I designed my research questions in pursuit of providing a thorough description of a US community-based adult ESOL classroom in addition to my own attempt to build a curriculum incorporating multiple student and teacher perspectives on literacy and language. My guiding research questions read as follow:

1) What language and literacy learning practices circulate in a community-based, adult ESOL classroom?
   a. What literacy practices and legacies do students bring with them? How are they utilized and valued in class both by students and educators?
   b. What literacy practices and legacies do educators bring with them? How are they utilized in class?

2) What happens when I, as a teacher in this setting, work to develop curriculum informed by critical language and literacy pedagogy along with my students’ and fellow teachers varied and unique perspectives?
   a. How do I center each of my students’ distinct interests in curriculum design while also being mindful of students’ changing interests and shifting class attendance?
   b. How do my own, my students’ and my fellow teachers’ understandings of literacy learning change over time mediating these differences?

In my first question, I asked a seemingly obvious question too often not asked about adult literacy learners. Utilizing literacy practices, a concept meant to bring attention to the multiple ways people use literacy in unique and contextualized situations (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Heath & Street, 2008), I attempted to highlight students’ literacy.
knowledge present in one adult ESOL learning space. I also purposefully included co-teachers in this investigation, recognizing that we all are learning together in this space and that teachers’ own literacy and language learning histories necessarily inform our curriculum formation.

My second question, in the tradition of practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), asked a question about my own intervention as an educator and opened space for me to track what it actively looked like for a teacher to mediate multiple frameworks for literacy education in their practice. Through this question, I interrogated what student-centered and critical mean in addition to the underlying goals both approaches indicate. I also used this question to explore a pedagogy resistant to ideologies present in adult ESOL programs that privileges a focus on making ESOL students better workers over meeting individual learners’ interests and needs.

**A critical framework for adult ESOL research**

Essential to my study is theoretical groundwork that privileges a critical perspective on literacy and language teaching in service of providing the best possible learning opportunities for adult immigrant students. As a white, non-immigrant woman committed to doing research with largely immigrant learners of color, the potential for me to reproduce damaging and deficitizing narratives about the students that were in my class is ever-present — even beyond the conducting of my research — and is something I must engage at all points of my study. I begin with my theoretical framework, which I constructed to push my thinking about where knowledge comes from and what knowledge is both in research broadly and within discussions about language and literacy learning. I use my theoretical framework to acknowledge and honor the scholars of color
who have laid the groundwork for critical and anti-oppressive approaches to education research and construct a guide for the formation of my findings. As such, I bring together intersectional feminist theories of knowing, sociocultural literacy theory, and critical sociolinguistics as a starting point for considering what a community-centered, adult ESOL curriculum might look like.

**Starting from experience: Feminist perspectives on knowledge generation**

Essential to my research orientation are theories of knowledge generation conceptualized by intersectional feminists. Resisting historically dominant notions of how knowledge is created, feminist scholars, especially feminist scholars of color, have developed theories for making sense of the world through one’s identities and experiences. Intersectional feminist scholars have long encouraged those in the academy to think seriously about how one’s identities, both chosen and socially imposed, inform the way one makes sense of the world; challenging widespread myths that academic research ought to be from an imagined neutral point of view (Alcoff, 2000; Harding, 1993; C. T. Mohanty, 2003). Within the field of feminism, however, white feminist scholars often reinscribe damaging racist ideologies by insisting that there is a universal woman’s perspective. This normalizes a white perspective as universal and in doing so, follows in the patriarchal logic feminist scholars sought to disrupt (Rowe & Russo, 2012; Vaz & Lemons, 2012). Scholars of color have resisted the universal category of woman, theorizing this assumption erases the experience and knowledge of women of color by denying that intersecting social identities and oppressions shape our knowing (Anzaldúa, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991; Lorde, 2007). The theoretical groundwork provided by women of color feminists opens space for locations of knowledge generation to be reconsidered
and pushes researchers to think more seriously about where we seek data and analysis of the issues we research. As a white woman scholar using the work of women of color as a theoretical foundation, I want to be especially mindful of how I build on and honor the scholars who provided this groundwork. Theories of solidarity and working in partnership across difference towards equity guide me in thinking about how to be reflexive about my positionality and the types of questions I ask in research so that I actively resist attempting to co-op and call my own work done by women of color (Behar, 1996; hooks, 1994; Rowe & Russo, 2012). I see my research not as a product that I am solely responsible for producing, but as a coming-together of my learning gleaned from readings by and conversations with individuals and communities that have made the path for my current analysis.

Epistemic privilege is a specific concept basic to my framework that emerges from feminist theories of identity and its relationship to knowledge. I use epistemic privilege to mean the assertion that people marginalized by dominant institutions have unique and perhaps more authentic perspectives on concepts growing from their marginalized identities (Campano, 2007; S. P. Mohanty, 2000). Though the scholars I engage in this aspect of my framework understand that absolute truth is a slippery and potentially dangerous idea, some scholars also have found room for identifying more authentic perspectives and objectives in pursuit of building more socially just worlds. Moya (2002) offered an overview of postpositivist realism, or the philosophical iteration of this concept: “Underlying the postpositivist realist epistemology is a conception of objectivity which avoids the aporias of essentialist and (ironically) postmodernist epistemologies by opposing error not to certainty but rather to objectivity as a theory-
dependent, socially realizable goal.” (p. 27). Moya went on to argue that some observations are more “reliable” than others (p. 6). Working together with this idea is Mohanty's (2000) concept of “cognitivist conception of experience” that "enabl[es] us to see experience as source of both real knowledge and social mystification” (p. 43).

Education scholars have brought these theories into their research, conceptualizing how students have undervalued and sophisticated perceptions of their own experiences embedded within the world (Campano, 2007; Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013; Dutro, 2009).

These theories of knowledge generation through experience allow space for students’ conceptions of their own learning to be seen as just as valuable, if not more, than perspectives offered by researchers. Understanding that experience can be the starting point for developing reliable knowledge about the world is also particularly useful when we are attempting to theorize from experience to recommend potential actionable change, as is the case with much qualitative, education research. In this project, I aimed to engage adult ESOL learners’ perspectives in what they envision as important in their learning to form the basis for my findings. I also engaged my own and fellow co-teachers’ outlooks on learning, recognizing that our perspectives shape class interactions and that our views on teaching offer valuable insights. In this way, feminist perspectives on knowledge generation anchor my research by privileging the perspective of those most involved in adult ESOL in imagining what a meaningful adult ESOL pedagogy might be.
Defining literacy as a social practice

My research is also dependent on sociocultural literacy theories. Such an orientation allows for examining the multiple ways people make sense of the world through text and expand what we mean by literacy in adult literacy settings. Essential to a broader definition of literacy is Street’s (2003) contention that an “autonomous”, or more rigid, limited understanding of literacy, “is simply imposing western conceptions of literacy on to other cultures or within a country those of one class or cultural group onto others” (p. 77). An autonomous literacy is not a natural definition of literacy but is one constructed by Western scholars with a particular, print-centric notion of literacy. Street (2005; 1993) built on this framing to trouble the term illiterate, highlighting how the classification has been used to label non-Western societies as less advanced or intelligent; negating the knowledge and ways of communicating these societies engage and creating a false category of a literate person based along problematic autonomous lines of literacy.

Scholars taking a sociocultural approach in research see literacy as embedded in communities and unique to different contexts rather than a discrete set of skills one must learn in a prescribed way (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Street, 2005; The New London Group, 1996). By taking this perspective in literacy research, we understand that literacy is a social practice, uniquely tied up in one’s identity and communities (Street, 2005). The conceptualization of “literacy events” (incidents where text is integral to a social interaction) and larger “literacy practices” (broader ideologies around literacies communities/societies have) similarly help provide new language and frameworks specifically for researching and naming literacy through a sociocultural lens (Heath & Street, 2008). Literacy studies also spotlight different modes of literacy, broadly defining
texts beyond being a visual code for spoken language and further opening space for highlighting the complexity of codes and literacy practices that circulate in the world (Kress & Leeuwen, 2001).

Barton and Hamilton (2000) further fleshed out discussions of what it means to take a sociocultural approach to literacy in their examinations of “situated” literacies, offering basic precepts for thinking about localized literacy practices thoughtfully and holistically. In addition to seeing literacy as a set of “social practices […] mediated by written texts”, they found that there are “different literacies associated with different domains of life”, that power hierarchies present in the world inform which literacy practices might be more “dominant” than others, that “literacy practices are purposeful”, that they are “historically situated,” and that they grow and change overtime (p. 8).

These assertions emphasize how literacy is shaped by not only localized communities but also larger sociopolitical and economic forces. Within this delineation, there is space for these practices to change. Though a researcher may document certain ways of being literate in one moment, those ways morph and look different over time and from person to person.

While community-based literacy practices are well-documented in literacy studies, autonomous definitions of literacy continue to flourish and as such, have bearing on what is understood as literacy learning in different contexts. As Brandt and Clinton (2002) explained, naming literacy as a technology that holds power does not reify literacy as an autonomous practice. They argue that “its status as a something is what has made controlling literacy so alluring to the powerful. The independent potentials of literacy give it much of its value. They make literacy an inevitable ground of ideological
struggles and fill the technologies of literacy with the complicated history of those struggles” (p. 355). Here, Brandt and Clinton encouraged literacy researchers to consider the intersections of dominant literacy understandings within localized literacy practices, troubling strict distinctions between global and local literacy definitions. It is in examining these moments where dominant understandings of literacy affect localized understandings and recursively reshape literacy definitions in these localized contexts that we might interrogate the power autonomous literacies exert in the world. In adult literacy research and practice, these intersections are especially salient. Adult literacy programs in the US are often positioned in popular discourse as existing to eradicate adult illiteracy, a phenomenon decried by many as a social ill in need of remedy (exemplified in the following articles: Rogers, 2013; Strauss, 2016). While I do not want to undermine the seriousness of adults’ lack of equitable access to education, posing a problem as a crisis must be accompanied by a critique of the systems that position these adults as less skilled. Understanding how adult literacy learners can be understood as having a wealth of literacy resources despite dominant discourses that label them as illiterate becomes essential for researchers and practitioners undertaking a sociocultural approach to adult literacy.

**Critical understandings of sociolinguistics**

Related to sociocultural perspectives on literacy that see literacy as being more than simply decoding a text are critical theories of language learning that see all people as having multiple linguistic resources that go beyond traditional definitions of language as a verbal code. Critically-informed theories of sociolinguistics challenge the idea that language has static, immutable rules as it is taught in most mainstream language
classrooms and connect language learning to issues of power (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Hornberger, 2003; Rymes, 2013). Concepts such as translanguaging and code meshing have illuminated how people shape and reshape language through daily interactions and through using their multiple resources to communicate and make sense of the world, offering new perspectives on what it means to know a language and what it means to measure language competency (Canagarajah, 2013; García & Wei, 2013).

Relatedly, linguists incorporating critical theory and poststructuralism into their analysis ask scholars to think about language as ideological and shaped more by sociopolitical forces rather than inherent grammatical features (García, Flores, & Spotti, 2016; Kroskrity, 2000). Critiques of languages as bounded categories call attention to the colonial history of language taxonomy and categorization, revealing how language hierarchies have been used to define certain ethnicities as less than according to where they fit on language trees in relation to dominating countries (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007). Together, these theories point not only to the constructed nature of language rules and systems, but also to how these constructions are rooted in historical projects of oppression and domination.

Like critiques of autonomous and ideological literacies, critical sociolinguists also recognize the material consequences of bounded language categories and how they are contemporarily used to perpetuate sociopolitical hierarchies. Researchers have tracked how people from certain racially and ethnically marginalized backgrounds are further oppressed through language policies that punish them for perceived linguistic deviation from dominant languages (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Leeman, 2004; Rosa, 2016). While discussions of linguistic competence are often separate from race under the premise that
language acts independently from other forms of identity, these scholars argue that people are often labeled as linguistically incompetent because of their deviation from whiteness rather than any incorrect use of language. Categories of linguistic correctness, then, become another way to further deny people of color inclusion and equal footing in systems defined by white supremacy.

Ideologies of English supremacy as related to white supremacy in the United States are particularly important for my study investigating ESOL teaching in the US. Projects to teach DAE have long been components of government and private-sector efforts to assimilate non-Anglo people into an imagined American culture defined by whiteness and English dominance (Bale, 2008; Macedo, 2000; Wan, 2014). These assimilation endeavors, though appearing to be welcoming to incoming immigrants, have been linked to xenophobia and desires to protect Anglo hegemony in the US. English proficiency in the US has subsequently become a measure for dominant institutions to quantify whether or not someone belongs in the US, an important ideology to contend with when thinking about teaching ESOL in the US to immigrant students. It is the work, then, of researchers and practitioners with commitments to resisting these hierarchies, to challenge English supremacy norms and open space in ESOL classrooms and research literature for immigrant students’ linguistic resources to be recognized and built on in discussions about ESOL pedagogy and policy.

**Establishing a field of adult ESOL literacy research**

With guidance from my framework, which understands literacy and language learning as informed by both localized ways of being literate and broader sociopolitical influences, I argue that as education researchers, we need to pay closer attention to adult
ESOL learning as a field in its own right. While there is a robust body of research investigating ESOL education in the US and another investigating adult literacy, there is relatively little consideration of what it means to be at the intersection of the two. In US education settings, adult ESOL is typically a category subsumed under adult literacy. In TESOL research, adult ESOL is similarly a sub-category of interest under the broader educational linguistics umbrella. Bringing both ESOL and adult literacy conversations together not only amplifies the resources available to understand how adult immigrant learners make sense of and utilize English, but also establishes that learners’ literacy and language practices are inextricable in adult ESOL settings. As adult students are making sense of a new linguistic code, they are also encountering new approaches to literacy, pulling from their own language and literacy practices to make sense of and utilize English.

Outlining a field of adult ESOL literacy also includes a recognition that adults have different learning experiences depending on the different geopolitical contexts in which they are learning. Discussions of English as a foreign language (EFL) and ESOL within countries where English is the dominant language are dramatically different, though sometimes not delineated clearly in research (Mathews-Aydinli, 2008; Murray, 2005). Immigrants learning English while living in Anglophone countries must often contend with xenophobia and inequitable systems of immigration on top of the challenges of learning a new language (Auerbach, 1992; Cooke, 2008; Simpson, 2009). Simpson (2009), in his discussion of the need for criticality in language education, spoke to this lack of attention to adult ESOL learners in English-dominant countries:
Of all the branches of ELT, adult ESOL—English for Speakers of Other Languages—suffers the most from marginalization. In the UK, and increasingly in other English-dominant countries, ESOL is regarded in policy as a training rather than an education, positioned as a skill in service to other areas, disciplines, and the economy, rather than a bona fide area of study in its own right. (p. 430)

Simpson went on to explicate that this deficiency is directly tied to oppressive structures within the UK (United Kingdom) that target immigrants. In the US, xenophobia and racism similarly affect the experiences of adult learners. Since the establishment of European rule in North America, non-Anglo and especially non-white immigrants have been subject to violence through vigilante and state incited acts, including but not limited to exclusionary immigration mandates, forcible deportations, hate crimes and labor exploitation (Betancur & Herring, 2012; Portes & Rumbaut, 2014; Wan, 2014). As can be seen in history textbooks and daily news headlines alike, virulent, xenophobic language and action has always pervaded US popular discourse and continues to dominate how immigrants are positioned and treated by US institutions and individuals.

As of this writing, Donald Trump sits as president. While a volume could be written about his and his associates’ political ascension and the tide of white support that enabled his rise to power, it is important to recognize that this moment is a manifestation of years of anti-immigrant sentiments festering in the national consciousness. The political context will be complicated and engaged throughout my writing, but for now, it is sufficient to say that the oppressive conditions experienced by adult immigrants in the US fundamentally inform the need for ESOL teaching that supports learners in a variety of aspects of their life, including their wellbeing and security in an often hostile country.

Even within discussions of adult students learning English in Anglophone countries, further nuancing is needed to acknowledge the systemic differences in adult
education from country to country. As a subsumed category of adult literacy in the US, federal sources of funding for adult ESOL come through adult literacy legislation (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010). Adult ESOL students resultingly must contend with the characteristic lack of funding for adult literacy programs and the numerous pressures that limit students’ ability to participate in classes. In describing adults in US ESOL classes, researchers have highlighted learners as diverse in terms of national, racial, cultural and class identity in addition to varying widely in terms educational and work backgrounds (Cooke, 2008; Murray, 2005). Students are at every stage of life and have a wide array of goals for their learning, making for both unique challenges in fully addressing students’ range of experiences with and desires for learning in addition to rich opportunities for building curricula from students’ lives. As researchers have noted, the complex and intersecting identities of adult literacy learners must be attended to in research to more fully appreciate how learners navigate and approach their learning (Gadsden, 2007; Hull, Jury, & Zacher Pandya, 2007). Though formed in discussions about children, Campano and Ghiso’s (2010) description of immigrant students and others from marginalized perspectives as cosmopolitan intellectuals is useful in conceptualizing the extensive diversity in ways of knowing present in ESOL classrooms. In line with research that acknowledges the epistemic privilege of marginalized perspectives, Campano and Ghiso argued that immigrant students and students of color have a uniquely broad knowledge base to theorize from because they traverse many distinct social worlds, directly in opposition to deficitizing assumptions that position them as less adept at education than their US-born and white peers. This lens can be applied to adult immigrants as well, who, in crossing national boundaries, engage a broad range of institutions and cultural
norms in many different ways that have presented them with transnational perspectives on education, work and life more generally.

**Learner-centered adult ESOL pedagogies**

Research about teaching adult ESOL above all else proclaims the need to focus on what adults want from classes when envisioning a meaningful learning program for students. Popular approaches to adult literacy have always underlined the need to center students in shaping curriculum and in the design of class activities to maximize the potential for agency that students have over their own learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). More than young children, who have little choice as to whether they attend school, adults in literacy classes largely choose to enter these classes and are assumed to be suited to learning programs where they have control over their learning and class design. In a way, this idea of a learner-centered pedagogy is attuned to issues of power distribution. Asking learners what they want to learn and building class experiences around those desires takes students’ interest seriously and puts them in a position of power within the classroom. But this label can be deceiving. Learner-centered pedagogies, as with any prevalent teaching approach, are enacted in many different ways and for different ends that do not always honor the theory’s original intent. When one considers the breadth of orientations to literacy that exist in adult literacy conversations, tensions emerge in the blanket use of student-centeredness within pedagogies that claim to be advocating for learners’ rights to a quality education. While a learner-centered approach seems like an inherently critical pursuit in its de-centering of the teacher, closer examination shows problematic assumptions are often made about what students want to learn which in turn shapes class and program structure.
**Student-centered teaching towards literacy needs**

Building curriculum from what students express they want to learn is a common practice in adult literacy across teaching approaches. This often manifests in teaching to students’ perceived *needs*. Taking solely a needs-based approach without a critical lens or any deep inquiry into what students in a specific context actually want to learn, can result in limiting curricula to teacher’s and program’s perceptions of what students *need* based on their assumptions about students (Belcher, 2006). Building from assumptions about what students’ literacy needs are allows for standardized tests and measurements to stand in as driving forces behind curriculum development, despite research that shows students’ self-proclaimed learning goals are usually related to personal and contextualized concerns (Milana & McBain, 2015; Tighe, Barnes, Connor, & Steadman, 2013). The dominant system of awarding funding tends to measure adult literacy programs’ success depending on how students score on these tests and move through different levels of adult literacy (Belzer, 2007; Tighe, et al 2013). As such, programs relying on this funding may be pushed to teach the skills tested in a way that leave students along with their complex knowledges and desires for literacy learning flattened to static, narrow measurements.

Still, many programs that focus on perceived universal skills claim a certain student-centeredness in their approach. This is illustrated in a brief authored by Vinogradov (2016), entitled “Meeting the Needs of Today’s Adult English Language Learner” from LINCS (Literacy Information and Communication system), a widely used and reputable online resource for adult literacy practitioners provided by the US Department of Education “to expand evidence-based practice in the field of adult
education” (“About LINCS”). In this brief, the author asserted that rather than focus on “life skills English”, adult ESOL educators need to move with the larger adult education field “to consider students’ goals in longer terms” (Vinogradov, 2016, p. 3). Considering students’ longer-term goals is important because ESOL teachers “play a major role in preparing learners for postsecondary opportunities, career training, better paying jobs, and deeper, more rewarding community involvement” (p.3). While initially discussing students’ goals in more open terms, the author quickly limited students’ possible motivations for coming to class. In a matter of words, students’ goals move from the imagined multiplicity to discrete categories revolving around further schooling, economic ascension and civic engagement. Vinogradov went on to state that ESOL classrooms must be made “more engaging and rigorous” (p. 3) to help students achieve these goals. Ultimately, Vinogradov identified three core areas of rigorous instruction for adult ESOL that included “academic language”, “language strategies”, and “critical thinking.”

While the aim of providing adult ESOL students with a more rigorous curriculum is admirable, it is problematic that rigor is defined by competencies that ignore broad categories of literacy. The arts, social connection and cultural relevancy are all excluded in this model of rigorous instruction. Relatedly, there is little discussion of the histories students might bring with them and how those histories might be utilized in ESOL learning. While perhaps subsumed under the broader categories, research in sociocultural literacy points to the limitations of looking at literacy as a set of skills apart from local contexts and relationships. Still, this framing could be seen as student-centered. Vinogradov claimed that this rigorous teaching is in pursuit of helping students achieve their goals, seemingly putting students’ interests in the forefront of theory development.
The author also advocated collaborative, project and inquiry-based curricula, all of which revolve around students working together to make sense of a contextualized problem using and building their language repertoires. While this approach in many ways emphasizes listening to students and treating students as knowledge co-constructors, I also believe it does not go far enough. By keeping students’ goals to a few restricted classifications, educators are still encouraged to think of adult literacy education as providing discrete skills related to academic and print-based literacy. With these parameters, creative exploration of language is discouraged and meaningful issues to students can be obscured by the declared urgency of meeting students’ needs.

**Learner-centeredness in critical adult literacy pedagogy**

For those with an interest in providing a justice-focused education, centering students means understanding what they want to learn about in addition what affects students’ lives and what they might want to change about their surrounding conditions. Participatory and critical adult literacy programs offer an approach to curriculum building focused on students that is more dialogic and ongoing throughout a learning experience (Auerbach et al., 1996; Ramdeholl, 2011; Wong, 2006). In resistance to dominant approaches to education where teachers are seen as dispensers of information filling students with knowledge — what Freire terms a banking model of education — students are engaged dialogically by teachers in pursuit of investigating and taking action on relevant issues in students’ lives (Freire, 2000).

Due to the prevalence of banking-like models of education across levels of study, it can be challenging for teachers and students to begin a dialogue about what students want from ESOL classes beyond prescriptive definitions of English learning (Ghiso et al.,
The work of designing a student-centered curriculum becomes ongoing and iterative, responsive to students’ changing interests and reflective of new insights educators glean about what their students want from class (Auerbach, 1996). Teachers must listen to students deeply to attempt to find inquiries around which to build curriculum. In a critical approach to adult literacy, students are engaged as co-designers of class activities and learners are expected to give their input about all aspects of class to ensure that the teaching reflects how they want to be learning (Auerbach, 1992; Auerbach et al., 1996).

Despite critical pedagogy being fundamentally focused on equity and students’ ways of knowing, critical teachers are not immune to the pitfalls of a banking model. By attempting to move students through dialogue to accept a more participatory approach, educators can impose their own beliefs on students in an attempt to mold them into what they imagine a “critical” being to be. Guerra’s (2004) critique of critical pedagogy mediated through his empirical research with adult ESOL students speaks to the problems that arise when definitions of criticality are thought of too rigidly. In his work, Guerra troubled a linear journey to “critical” consciousness and instead, offered a new framework:

I want to introduce the notion of a nomadic consciousness to highlight the fact that no one among us ever achieves such a heightened state of consciousness that we no longer have any place to go. At best, most of us engage in social practices and experience social conditions that lead to various forms of consciousness—naïve, nostalgic, contradictory, and critical, among them—that follow no predetermined sequence. (p. 10)

While critical pedagogues have always attempted to balance teacher and student knowing as driving factors in curriculum formation, Guerra pushes us to think about how we
experience critical consciousness not as a complete alteration in our perspective on the
world, but in different ways throughout our lives and through relationships within and
beyond classrooms. Here, Guerra expresses a critique shared by many (Ellsworth, 1989;
Ramdeholl, 2011; Souto-Manning, 2014): that strains of critical pedagogy which seek to
define critical consciousness as a perceived end point are unachievable. Though we all
have varying levels of awareness about issues depending on our socially and internally
constructed identities, no one person can ever completely understand the world and all its
intricacies. The best we can hope for is to grow together in our perspective sharing and
know our limitations for comprehension. When teachers take a stance that students’
inquiries and dialogues can shape their own understandings of what it means to read the
world critically, new horizons for critical student-centeredness can be explored.

Connection, care, curiosity: A critically student-centered framework for adult
ESOL

Building on critical theoretical foundations that emphasize the social dimensions
of literacy and the potential for adult ESOL pedagogy to work on the side of justice, I
offer a framework that emphasizes ESOL students’ humanity beyond their identity as
language learners and the potential for mutual growth between teacher and student. To
work towards an ESOL practice that addresses the multiple needs and interests of adult
ESOL students, I propose a (re)focus on relationships, care and inquiry in adult ESOL
teaching. While the discrete skills students learn are important and should be a central
consideration in classroom planning, I argue that a good deal of what happens within
ESOL classrooms is not solely about language acquisition and warrants attention
alongside language learning goals. Connection, care and curiosity are at the core of what
compels students to join ESOL classes in the first place and are facets of students’ lives and learning approaches that should be nurtured in class. Together, a focus on these three areas can privilege mutual growth between teacher and student and provide a basis for program formation and learning assessment that nourishes learners and educators rather than punishes or discourages them. At the same time, while named as a critical framework, I also understand that critical is a negotiated concept that only has meaning in contextualized situations. Using data collected through my research with adult learners in addition to the work of others who have laid a foundation for this vision, I support these claims through illustrations of why these three areas are important to adult ESOL learners and how they affected our classroom learning environment. Ultimately, this framework advocates lifelong learning by sustaining learners and educators through navigating inequitable and too often dehumanizing systems that shape life in the US.

**Connection: Relationships as integral to the ESOL classroom**

![Image](Cabrini_Center.png)

*Figure 1.1: Salima writing sample*

I pull an excerpt from a student’s writing in Figure 1.1 to begin a discussion about connection. Written in response to a community magazine call for pieces
commemorating the Center’s fifth year anniversary, a student recently immigrated from Algeria, here called Salima, chose to write about the people she met in class as most impactful on her experience at the Center. Though she had not been in class long at the writing of this piece, Salima noted the connections she built with other people as one of the most essential aspects of the Cabrini Center that make it a place to “enrich your knowledges.” This sentiment was echoed by numerous students in our class and is similarly emphasized by literacy researchers who conceptualize literacy as a social practice (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Street, 1995). These scholars posit that relationships and networks of relationships are essential to any literacy learning endeavor and ought to be centered in literacy classrooms. From students’ reasons for joining class to the activities they stated they enjoyed the most, relationships with others was a consistent motivation for students’ and teachers’ participation in our Cabrini ESOL class. Fostering dialogue and student interactions are central to most theories of what constitutes high-quality language learning. Some of this research focuses on how classroom interactions promote language acquisition (e.g. Hellermann & Cole, 2009; McKay & Schaetzel, 2008; Sert, 2015), while some consider how class dialogue and relationships can be sources of students’ linguistic, social, and political knowledge sharing (Baynham, 2006; Freire, 2000; Wong, 2006). My examination of relationships in adult ESOL classrooms focuses on how centering connections with others can respond to students’ expressed interests to get to know new people and strengthen existing bonds while also seed possibilities for organic, critical conversations in class. By utilizing activities that allowed students to get to know each other and by teaching lessons that opened possibilities for students to grow other relationships in their life beyond the
classroom, our connections between each other emerged as an important source of knowing and a desired area of growth.

A danger I want to avoid in looking at relationship building in adult ESOL classrooms is the erasure of students’ communities beyond the classroom. In certain examinations of community in ESOL classrooms, relationship building is seen as primarily orchestrated by the teacher in service of connecting students who are identified as negatively detached from larger US society as newcomers to the US without extensive, local social networks. As Martin (2001), a teacher-researcher advocating for dialogic, relational teaching highlights: “[C]ontrary to the prevailing image of adult literacy students, many of the people in my classes already belong to a community aside from the one we make in the classroom” (p. 24). While upholding the importance of adult literacy educators providing conditions where community can be built through students relating to one another and sharing their knowledge, Martin also squelches popular tropes that identify adult literacy learners as lost, without a strong sense of connection to larger society. An approach to ESOL teaching that critically engages relationships recognizes that students come with a lifetime of experiences in relationship building and that in ESOL, students and teachers can learn together how to strengthen relationships through language and literacy engagement. Though many students want to join ESOL classes to form new relationships, these are supplementary to students’ existing social networks and ability to form social networks.

Critical adult literacy pedagogies center both students outside relationships and intra-class interactions as essential to building a meaningful, student-generated curriculum (Auerbach et al., 1996; Martin, 2001; Vella, 2002; Wong, 2006). Within this
framework, classroom community is something carefully cultivated through constructed
dialogic learning opportunities. It is also mindful that the classroom community is one of
many students may be a part of and welcomes those communities into the classroom.
Overall, the connection component of a critically student-centered adult ESOL pedagogy
recognizes and utilizes the social aspects of learning that adult students value and the
knowledge that can be constructed through a multiplicity of relationships.

**Care: A focus on students’ wellbeing and teacher action**

*For the adult class maybe you have problems, or tired because you coming from a job.*

*The teachers, they need to be more patient with each person.* (Interview excerpt from
Graciela on 11/21/17)

![Figure 1.2: February 2018 Excerpt from Selena’s notebook](image)

These two quotations about patience to me, flagged an important theme that arose
in my data around care. In both excerpts, I asked students what they thought was
important for teachers to do with students. In the first excerpt, I asked pointedly what
Graciela wanted to share with other adult ESOL educators. She responded that being
“more patient”, above all else, was an important virtue to have. Rather than writing
students off as unable to learn or somehow resistant to learning, Graciela wanted teachers
to remember that students live lives outside of classes that affect their well-being, that
shape how they absorb material in class. Selena built on this, saying that conversation is
especially difficult for her, in response to a question about what she finds challenging in various adult education classes she attends. She went on to say that “the most important this I learned is that you [referring to me] have a lot of patience with us”; echoing Graciela’s sentiment. In both cases patience not only refers to biding time, but also having a certain understanding of students’ lives and caring enough to give them time and support to process their language learning. Rather than a teacher who dismisses the things students find challenging or one who gets frustrated by their lack of attendance or being tired in class, they posit that a teacher needs to care about more in a student than just how well they are learning English. At different points throughout the term, this theme of patience came up repeatedly, as did the importance of care both between teacher and student and between students themselves. More than just connection with others, moments where care — exhibited through words of comfort, extra time to discuss issues that arose as important, sharing of resources with fellow classmates — was demonstrated proved to be a key part of our learning experience and classroom environment.

Ethics of care have been espoused by many pedagogues as a missing component in understandings of good teaching. Emphasizing concern about the wellbeing of learners over how they perform academically, education researchers calling for more caring approaches to teaching have called for a radical overhauling of K-12 schools to challenge productive notions of learning. Rarely, however, have notions of care entered discussions about adult ESOL. As such, though countless teachers and researchers enact ethics of care in their work with adult literacy learners, there is little research that explores what care looks like in these spaces and their impact on class learning. To
define what I mean by care, I borrow from critical feminist theorists and pedagogues, developing an understanding of care that is at once rooted in listening and action.

Black feminists and other feminists of color have theorized iterations of caring as central to marginalized women’s epistemologies across identities (Thompson, 1998). In Black feminist thought, as Collins described (2008), caring becomes not just the act of expressing affection or comfort, but making changes and attempting to do things to make life better for those you care for. The history of theorizing care within these circles makes glaring some work of feminist pedagogues that ignore race and ethnicity in their conceptualizations of care. As Thompson (1998) found in her critique of care research in education, there is a tendency for scholars to ignore race and other intersecting identities’ impact on how teachers enact care. Using womanist conceptions of care as an example of how a race-conscious lens can refocus discussions of care, Thompson spoke to the importance of care rooted in resistance to white supremacy. Relatedly, Valenzuela (1999) spoke to the importance of care in the lives of Mexican and Mexican American students’ in the US, utilizing data gathered at a Texas high school. She argued that a seeming lack of care on behalf of teachers marked the experiences of the students she observed. To do and be well in schools, Valenzuela asserted that students must feel that their teacher cares about them as a whole person — including their cultural and linguistic heritages — more than their performance in school. While Noddings was not as attentive to intersecting identities such as race or ethnicity, as Thompson identified, her conceptions of care are foundational in the field of education and useful when paired with critical scholars more inclusive of identity in analysis. Noddings (2005) critiqued the US education system for its lack of attention to relationships, finding that many popular
educational approaches privilege developing children into good workers to the detriment of other aspects of their development not easily measured through mass testing but fundamental to their sense of self and connection to those around them.

Research in humanizing pedagogies, stemming from Freirean notions of critical pedagogies, similarly call for a focus on care in teaching (del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Fránquiz, 2012; Fránquiz & Carmen Salazar, 2004). Originating in concepts of love employed by Freire, care in critical education, like approaches to care identified as mainly influenced by feminism, centers on a theory of action. In critical education, notions of care and love are cited as the basis for meaningful relationships and any sort of action. As Freire (2000) stated, “As an act of bravery, love cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it must not serve as a pretext for manipulation. It must generate other acts of freedom otherwise it is not love” (p. 90).

Bringing together different schools of thought on care, I argue that care, when enacted in a manner that privileges listening and thoughtful consideration of one’s positionality and reflection on definitions of care, is essential for adult literacy educators to be conscious of and encourage in their own classrooms. The inequitable conditions most adult ESOL learners live and learn in requires a focus on how students are faring both in and out of class. Integrating critical care into the fundamentals of teaching also requires that educators consider how they might express that care within and beyond class. Furthermore, students’ contributions to a caring classroom are fundamental to a pedagogy that centers care. Beginning with this focus, my findings explore how my students’ and my care for one another facilitated particular interactions and learnings in class lost when care is excluded from frameworks of rigorous teaching.
Curiosity: Moving beyond “need-based” curriculum

The final area I highlight is a focus on thinking critically about the subject matter students are actually interested in learning and why. The photo in Figure 1.3 depicts notes my co-teacher took from a class conversation about our spring term’s culminating project. As a class, we asked students to each pick a question to investigate further based in something we had learned in class together but had perhaps not deeply explored. One of the components of our project was to name why were interested in investigating our question.

Figure 1.3: Board writing

In our discussion, I expected students to name practical reasons for investigating questions, knowing that many students had explicit goals they were working towards: for example, “I want to learn more about the GED because I want to get my GED”, or “I want to learn more about US banks because I want to get a loan to buy a house.” Though these were offered as examples by the facilitator in our presentation of the activity, the
first learner to volunteer an answer shared that he was interested “out of curiosity”; a phrase initially unfamiliar to him in English, but one he agreed, through negotiation and translation, captured his reasoning. Many students agreed and we moved forward, I with a renewed appreciation for the obvious idea that intellectual curiosity alone was a good reason for asking a question.

Often, as ESOL teachers, we think about our work in class as serving goals we identify as important and see learning in class as needing direct payoff and immediate implications in our students’ lives. This is reinforced through the widely utilized texts and approaches to ESOL which assume and promote a general set of life and language skills needed to succeed in the US. To counter this prescriptive focus, I propose an emphasis on students’ curiosities, including those that might not immediately result in tangible material changes, but offer a nourishing of students’ intellectual interests and critical concerns about the world. I am careful to note that this is not a particularly radical idea. Fostering student inquiry is not new for adult ESOL educators. In fact, the very report I examined and critiqued earlier advocated that educators follow students’ lines of inquiry in curriculum design (Vinogradov, 2016). Vinogradov, however, also described an example of an inquiry curriculum that proves the difficulty of enacting a standardized inquiry-based program. As the author described:

A ‘line of inquiry’ is another way to organize ELA instruction that goes deeper and allows students to explore a meaningful topic more fully. […] Digging into such a line of inquiry over several lessons requires more and closer reading of informational texts and frequent use of academic language, and demands critical thinking as students work in teams to answer interesting questions.” (p. 11).

They then describe an example of an inquiry-based curriculum, provided for free access online through a Minnesota public school system. Upon investigation, it becomes clear
that the curriculum is built around inquiries pre-designated by the curriculum designers. While these might very well have been constructed by a class of students, they are presented for use by any interested learner or potential teacher, obscuring the essential quality of critical inquiries: that they are tailored to specific contexts and students’ interests.

Zacher Pandya (2012) confirmed the dangers of attempting to standardize inquiry in her study of a prewritten inquiry-based curriculum disseminated by McGraw Hill. The most serious issue she raised is the potential for inquiries to be silenced because they do not follow the pre-prescribed steps outlined in the approved inquiry process. Critical approaches considering issues of equity and power tend to make room for those more difficult questions. Participatory adult literacy pedagogies encourage teachers to work with students to develop action projects based on issues arising in their lives through their learning (Auerbach, 1992; Auerbach et al., 1996; Cooke, Winstanley, & Bryers, 2015), using Freirean understandings of dialogic meaning-making and action to support their curricular decisions. Taking a critical stance alone, however, does not ensure that inquiries will be tailored to individual students’ interests. There remains the earlier-mentioned potential problem of the teacher assuming the role of liberator, responsible for imparting an enlightened consciousness onto their students in the name of moving toward social revolution. If a teacher’s definition of what is emancipatory is narrow and impermeable to student influence, some inquiries could be deemed not attentive to social justice issues or issues of power and therefore not worthy of investigation.

Seeking a balance between teacher and student interest, I argue for making space for students’ curiosities; however diverse, however related to justice and however long-
lasting. To ensure that students’ individual learning desires are respected and honored, teachers have a responsibility to create learning experiences based around students’ expressed desires. Hearkening back to Campano and Ghiso’s (2010) concept of immigrant students as cosmopolitan intellectuals, ESOL teachers also have a responsibility to acknowledge and support the brilliance of immigrant learners and their wide-ranging knowledges and hunger for learning, informed by their transnational and intercultural knowing. When students’ interests are different and perhaps in conflict with other members of the class, designing a curriculum around a central issue can be challenging, especially when time is limited to a handful of hours every week, as is the case with many adult ESOL classes in the US. Maximizing space for students’ questions and intellectual explorations, then, becomes a central concern for teachers and was a central concern of mine in this project.

**Overview of chapters**

I foreground my exploration of how connection, care and curiosity played out in my year of data collection with a literature review of adult literacy’s historical legacy in the US and the specific way ESOL fit into the broader project of educating adult learners deemed lacking in basic reading and communication skills. Through an examination of some of the common ideologies pervasive in adult literacy, I not only name the damaging mindsets I seek to resist, but the hopeful pedagogies I hope to honor. I next move into a description of my methodology, where I not only describe my data collection tools and a deeper context of my teaching site, but dive into an analysis of my own positionality and how it influenced my research and theorizing. Following my methodology are three data chapters. In the first, I dive into how I and my fellow learners conceptualized and
initiated a critically student-centered curriculum. I then story how our co-learning, after the initial stage, shaped and re-directed curricular directions. My final data chapter speaks to two final culminating alternative assessments we completed as a class, each quite distinct from the other and each relating the complexities and possibilities of re-imagining what a demonstration of knowledge-gained can look like in an adult ESOL setting by centering narrative.
CHAPTER TWO: HISTORICIZING ADULT ESOL RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN THE US

I situate my work in the nexus of critical approaches to adult literacy and ESOL pedagogy. As my research and theorization is largely formed through a grounded analysis of what happened in our class learning over the year of data collection, providing a larger sociopolitical legacy creates a framework for what forces loomed over our class as we learned together. Following in the footsteps of critical literacy researchers who have conceptualized how politics and social change plays out in education research and practice, I look at how conversations about adult immigrants learning English have coincided with periods of increased immigration and nativist backlash in political and public discourse. Through my examination of the sociopolitical legacy of adult literacy and ESOL education in the US, I argue that adult immigrant students have historically been a primary target of both Americanization and other assimilationist efforts to produce a uniform, educated and Dominant American English (DAE) speaking workforce; shaping predominant pedagogical conversations to be focused on learners’ English language acquisition free from sociopolitical context. At the same time, educators and researchers attune to issues of power and equity have resisted these efforts and sought to engage ESOL as a critical endeavor, pushing back on dominant language ideologies through their teaching and theorizing. I end analyzing the current focus on increasing employability in adult literacy research and the potential role a critical intervention might offer. In tracing these legacies, I ultimately present a need to study adult ESOL learners’ and programs’ experiences more specifically to better understand how to provide equitable and responsive learning opportunities for learners accessing these programs.
Histories of adult literacy and ESOL

Adult literacy researchers have found that while there is a breadth of research about adult ESOL education, there is not a united field that looks robustly at what it means to be an adult ESOL student in Anglophone contexts. Relatedly, researchers have noted that there are few studies historicizing adult ESOL teaching the US (Murray, 2005; Norton, 2006; Simpson, 2009). As discussed in the introduction, adult ESOL is approached more often as a sub-category of adult literacy and ESOL conversations rather than an area of concern in its own right. Subsequently, adult literacy and ESOL have parallel conversations that infrequently intersect but share similar concerns. In both instances, a key aspect of adult ESOL learners’ categorization — either being adults or being ESOL learners — are treated as secondary and there tends to be less interrogation of what it means to be both. By tracing the roots of adult literacy and adult ESOL in the US specifically, I emphasize the interconnectedness of these fields as well as their points of divergence to better understand how adult ESOL learners have been constructed in education research literature and how approaches have been developed and influenced through political moments, laying a foundation for the work of ESOL educators in the US today.

Americanization and adult language education in the US

Concerted, widespread efforts to provide educational training for adult immigrants date back to the early 1900s (Bale, 2008; NeCamp, 2014; Sanchez, 1995; Wan, 2014). This first noted and concerted effort at educating adult immigrants was initiated in response to a major wave of immigration that began in the late 1890s and lasted into the early 1900s. Immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe in addition (to
a lesser extent) to immigrants from Asia and Mexico came to the US in numbers previously unencountered in the country’s history (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). With these waves of immigration came xenophobic and racist responses from Anglo leaders and populations, who viewed these immigrants as distinct from acceptable lineages of European ancestry historically dominant in the US (Bale, 2008). Aside from imposing quotas and outright bans on non-European racial groups that limited immigration from regions outside northwestern Europe, politicians and social reformers sought to stave off a perceived cultural invasion through Americanization efforts (Sanchez, 1995; Wan, 2014). In classes offered through schools and community organizations, adult immigrants were taught the mythologized American culture and English language. Examinations of course material, policy decisions and speeches from the era reveal the aims of these Americanization programs to mainly be teaching English and life skills, according to a perceived Anglo-Saxon set of cultural values. As Cubberley, the head of Americanization efforts in California during this era, quoted in Sanchez (1993), stated about immigrant communities, “Our task is to break up these groups or settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as part of our American race, and to implant on their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and popular government” (p. 95). Eradicating non-English languages was directly related this assimilation, as Bale found: “The most important goal of Americanization was not just that students acquire English but also that English should serve to replace the home language” (p. 35).

Proposed education programs for adult immigrants were a component of the larger Progressive Era, a period of the early 1900s noted for its social reform. Many
programs claimed to take an asset perspective towards immigrant education in resistance
to rising nativist tides, asserting that they were most concerned with the wellbeing and
support of adult immigrants. These programs, however, often took on assimilationist
approaches in some iteration, championing a model built on seeing immigrants as
valuable contributors to US society in need only of learning and adapting US societal
norms and educational competencies. (NeCamp, 2014) Adults specifically seemed a
group of special interest within this framework. As laborers and heads of households,
adults directly participated in the economy and held sway over their children. Though
youths were certainly seen as subjects of Americanization reforms, adults, for the first
time were recruited en masse for Americanization programs and imagined as a primary
focus in the fight for a homogenous, white, Anglo US (Bale, 2008).

Another explicitly political aspect of these Americanization projects is the
construction of students as autonomous and socially disconnected rather than embedded
in complex networks and deeply connected to others. Wan (2014) pointed out that this
manifested in literacy curricula and pro Americanization propaganda by linking
achievement to the individual student, rather than their community. By marking and
lauding moments of singular social ascension, the larger, amorphous group of immigrants
was noted for its perceived inability to work hard and assimilate into American life
successfully while American individualism was reinscribed as a virtue. Immigrants were
also imagined as an important source of labor who could be made more profitable to US
businesses through English classes. Wan encapsulated the agenda of these
Americanization programs neatly in her writing about how citizenship was constructed
through political speeches, lesson books and teaching guides:
These literacy lessons and their implicit arguments for a particular construction of citizenship invoked a number of other narratives that circulated around American citizenship, aside from the ability to self-govern—pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, the cultivation of a worker/employee-oriented sensibility, openness of American society to all, and individual responsibility. These messages were carried through literacy training via lessons that addressed, explicitly and implicitly, work habits and ways that American citizens should act in a workplace context. And while immigrants benefited from these lessons in order to find jobs and gain economic stability in the United States, these same habits of citizenship also greatly helped industry by, ideally, producing obedient, industrious workers who were grateful for their opportunities. (p. 61)

Through these classes, immigrants were presented with a view of being American that centered on being a good worker and an obedient, productive member of society.

Education opportunities for immigrants simultaneously positioned them as in need of fundamental adjustment to make them readier to assume the role of participant in US civic and economic life. Americanization, then, was in service not only of students’ own benefit, but the benefit of American business and the economy.

Educating adult immigrants was also part of a broader adult literacy education effort undertaken in the Progressive Era. In contrasting the experiences of white, US-born adults in adult literacy programs called the Moonlight Schools with those of immigrant adults in Americanization programs, NeCamp (2014) provided a rich account of how two different approaches developed that positioned students as differently capable based on their race, ethnicity and country of birth. As she contended, adult immigrants were often automatically assumed to be not only non-English speaking, but illiterate despite perhaps being literate in other languages and localized community practices. White adults in literacy programs in Appalachia, largely of Anglo descent, were seen as illiterate because of a systemic failure. Building off Olnek’s work on the symbolic action of Americanization, NeCamp argued that an “us/them binary” was created through these
two approaches, “[I]mmigrants as a group were figured as illiterate, and white native-born citizens were depicted as literate” (p. 85). As the white students of the Moonlight School were seen as having the potential to be fully literate, learning programs were largely more intellectually engaging in addition to contextualized and built from students’ lives. Americanization programs, however, were more structured and pre-determined along lines of what their native-born educators deemed important to learn. Paralleling contemporary debates described earlier between student-centered and more standardized approaches, NeCamp found that skill-and-drill approaches to literacy instruction were favored for immigrants, versus a more holistic and context-informed instruction favored for US-born, white, adults labeled as illiterate.

Though these trends could remain located in historical memory, authors have argued that this era fundamentally informed approaches to adult literacy education today (Necamp, 2014; Wan, 2014). Whereas there were few formalized and codified approaches to adult education prior to this era, the increased attention paid to adult literacy necessitated unique attention to adults’ learning styles and ways of being literate. Moreover, as NeCamp convincingly argued, the more standardized, professionalized approach forwarded through Americanization efforts won out in adult education research over more iterative approaches advocated through programs like the Moonlight schools. While more contextualized literacy teaching continued beyond this era, it was not taken up nationally as a popular approach in policy or academic circles for several decades.

**Developing an adult ESOL agenda in the later twentieth century**

The 1980s saw a resurgence of interest in adult ESOL practitioners, students, and programming, with what was perceived as a new wave of immigration and a new wave of
nativism. While similar to the 1900s boom in its high numbers of immigrants relative to adjacent historical eras, this next wave of immigration was noted for being largely comprised of people from Latin America and Asia rather than from Eastern and Southern Europe (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). Reasons for this spike in immigration were multiple and complex, the US’s own imperial influence being a notable and less publicly acknowledged force inducing people to migrate. US military and economic intervention precipitated untold violence in certain parts of the world, specifically in southeast Asia and Latin America during the 1960s and 70s, prompting several mass migrations (Gill, 2004; Hunt & Levine, 2012; Walia, 2013).

Despite the US’s own implication in inducing this wave of migration, immigrants were met with the same hostility and suspicion as those from the 1900s in political and public discourse. As Gerken (2013) found in her review of immigration policy and rhetoric around this wave of immigration in late twentieth century, many politicians talked around issues of race when discussing immigration and, instead, took issue with immigrants’ perceived refusal to assimilate. She noted,

[T]his seemingly race-neutral language about multiculturalism, assimilation, and the melting pot was used to keep up the pretense that concerns about immigration were not about race or racist anxieties but about immigrants’ willingness and ability to behave a certain way and adhere to the expectations of the general population. (p. 3)

A supposed lack of DAE knowledge was seen as indicative, within this xenophobic discourse, of immigrants’ unwillingness to integrate into the US’s social fabric, resulting in the English-only movement (Crawford, 2000; del Valle, 2003; Tatalovich, 1997). Multilingual communities and activists, however, pushed back on these assertions, calling out English-only and other nativist ideologies as racist and exclusionary. As these
communities pointed out, this wave of immigration being largely people of color affected its portrayal and reception in a different way from the earlier 1900s wave (Johnson, 1997). Questions of these newcomers’ ability to assimilate were called into question, with underlying understandings being racially marked as *nonwhite* would make that assimilation impossible.

Education became a major front for this contestation over American identity, with bilingual activists pitted against English-only reformers in national campaigns like “English for the Children” and less publicized local disputes (Crawford, 2000). While these campaigns echoed earlier Americanization efforts, assimilationist advocates in the 1900s were met with different resistance than those in the 1980s and 90s. Juxtaposed to the earlier twentieth century, the field of education research had grown and matured in the years between the first wave of immigration and the second wave. Whereas there was little consideration of bilingual teaching as a useful approach in schools during the early 1900s, 1960s Civil Rights era activists from multilingual and immigrant communities had pushed educators and education institutions to consider how schools could embrace the breadth of students’ languages in instruction (del Valle, 2003; Nieto, 2015). Though certainly not universally adopted, there was more awareness during this second era of what it meant to be a multilingual learner and an advocacy agenda built around including multiple languages in schools.

Simultaneously, adult literacy theorists championed critical approaches in the 1960s, developing pedagogies from popular education and other anti-oppressive work to catalyze a conversation about how adult literacy could provide students with further methods to critique and enact change in the oppressive systems they lived within (Freire,
2000; Horton, 1998). In the US, many of these critical literacy teaching programs were community-based, located in sites that go underexamined in education research (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Wells, 2014). Nonetheless, their legacies live on in activist groups and are part of the history of US critical adult literacy education.

Relatedly, researchers began to develop more complex images of adult literacy learners in the late 1970s and 80s. Researchers began to consider the social contexts in which adults deemed illiterate existed and began to challenge the deficit orientations many took to describe adults who were unable to decipher and compose text according to normative definitions of reading and writing (Fingeret, 1983; Kazemek, 1990; Rose, 1989). Nuanced definitions of adult literacy learners emerged from this work that examined what resources adults labeled illiterate pulled from to make sense of the world around them. Considerations of the social inequity and oppressive institutions that adversely affected adults identified as illiterate became figured into conversations and pushed adult literacy practitioners and researchers to think more thoroughly about the sociocultural contexts of adult literacy.

While interest in critical and bilingual education developed for youth in schools and critical perspectives on adult literacy became more popular, interest in critical adult language teaching did not arise in research literature until the 1980s. As adults were seen to be already competent in the languages they were raised speaking, little attention was initially paid to how non-English languages might be used in classrooms to help adults make sense of new languages (Pitt, 2005). Similarly, though adult ESOL was subsumed under adult literacy programming, specific literature speaking to the need for a critical adult ESOL pedagogy was slower in coming to prominence. With the perceived new
wave of immigration and resulting rekindling of interest in language education for immigrant adults, pedagogical approaches were proposed that included attention to this multilingual awareness and the parallel rise in critical approaches to teaching literacy (Auerbach, 1992, 1993; Smoke, 1998; Van Duzer & Florez, 1999). Predictably, learning programs and pedagogies echoing Americanization efforts persisted, positioning adult immigrants as having poor literacy and language skills that needed to be addressed through English classes (Auerbach, 1992). While this debate was not new, as NeCamp noted in her depiction of the Moonlight schools versus Americanization projects, immigrants were notably more centralized in discussions of community-centered and emergent approaches than in earlier eras.

Auerbach wrote extensively about critical approaches to adult literacy, especially homing in on critical multilingual learning. I use her 1992 text *Making Meaning, Making Change* as an exemplar of this curricular material given that Auerbach identified her work being in a critical tradition, citing Freire as the foremost influence on her work. A dual curriculum guide and discussion of her and her fellow adult educators’ curriculum formation at the UMass Family Literacy Project, she used her own experience as a source of data and put it into conversation with then contemporary language and literacy research. After an analysis of different curriculum creation processes she and her colleagues engaged, Auerbach provided a list of findings regarding what she saw as most essential about a participatory pedagogy:

- When the content of ESL literacy instruction is related to students’ lives, both the quantity and quality of their reading and writing increase significantly.
- If reading, writing, speaking, and grammar are integrated, rather than being separated as isolated skills, students are able to perform conceptually and linguistically more sophisticated tasks. [...]

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- Interest and engagement are greater when students are involved in determining the content of the curriculum. […]
- Students are interested in a broad range of issues and literacy uses beyond functional or survival topics. […]
- The quality of students’ reading and writing increases when they are presented as social collaborative processes rather than individual ones. […]
- Attendance, retention, and students’ responsibility for their own learning increase when they are involved in decision-making. […]
- Use of the first language can be a powerful tool for second language literacy and conceptual development. […]\(^4\) (p. 127).

These principles encapsulate the essential qualities of what she argued a participatory classroom can look like for adult ESOL educators. For one, Auerbach emphasized the need to make class learning “related to students’ lives” and to engage learners as shapers and determiners of their own curriculum. More than focusing on “functional or survival topics,” she found that students in her program wanted to engage a variety of issues in their language learning class. As she explicated in other parts of her book, many literacy programs in the 1980s and 90s purported to teach the most essential communication skills to provide adult immigrant students with the linguistic tools needed to navigate life in the US. This led, as she described, to a restricting of curriculum to basic language competencies, obscuring other just as urgent topics students were interested in learning about and discussing. When students were given control over their own learning, they were more likely to feel motivated to attend class.

Another important set of findings Auerbach named is the importance of students utilizing the wealth of literacy and language resources they bring with them in addition to those of their co-learners. She suggested that students learn best from each other; identifying that “collaborative processes” provide generative literacy learning

\(^4\) Italics appear as in the original, bullets added my interjection.
opportunities. She also recommended using non-English languages in class as meaning making tools and as social tools to connect more easily with others, noting their use as “a powerful tool for second language literacy and conceptual development.” Juxtaposing her approach to programs that sought to fill gaps in students’ knowledges, Auerbach emphasized how students bring a wealth of competencies to class in addition to a desired direction for learning. Auerbach also wrestled throughout her writing with her positionality, discussing her desire to avoid positioning herself as the critical expert in the room; positing that collaboratively developing lessons and class materials with students offered a potential remedy to these tensions. Relating her context’s findings to evidence provided from literacy and language research, Auerbach presented her insights to other practitioners and researchers, offering a framework for future inquiries located across different sites of practice.

The latter half of the twentieth century saw significant changes in adult language teaching alongside the rise in immigrant learners present in the US. Mimicking adult language education in the earlier wave of immigration, a renewed interest in educating immigrant adults accompanied what was seen to be an increase in immigration. While standardized language education was more challenged for immigrant students than in the earlier 1900s, plenty of programs still followed a basic language teaching program that did not reflect adult students’ wealth of languages and literacies. A dialogue in research about adult ESOL learners began, considering not just the most effective way to teach students English, but the most effective way to meet what students identified as their needs and learning goals.
Adult ESOL as a front for reinscribing and resisting nativist ideologies

Through a historical examination of past waves of immigration and defining moments in adult ESOL research, it is evident that perceived spikes in immigration accompany increased interest in adult ESOL education. With each wave and accompanying rise in nativist sentiment echoed in political and popular discourse, researchers, educators, and activists reacted in different ways to produce new conversations about how best to teach adult immigrants English, reflecting larger political discussions about how immigrants are positioned in US society. Only in the second era did conversations move to include explicit considerations of how ESOL might be a place of honoring and building on immigrant students’ knowledges rather than solely as assimilationist instruments for transmitting white, Anglo-Saxon values and language onto immigrant populations. Auerbach and others began to inquire as to what it might mean to decenter lifeskills and English language learning within adult ESOL classrooms in pursuit of a just learning practice that honors adult immigrants’ vast literacy histories and their interests in subjects beyond basic language learning competencies. This conversation, however, was cut off with the onslaught of multiple converging political, economic, and social forces. I trace this convergence in the following section.

Contemporary research in adult ESOL education

The data collected for this project can be understood as occurring within yet another era of heightened xenophobic and racist political and social action — namely the era of the 45th president — that is distinct from but also inevitably shaped by previous eras of heightened foci on adult ESOL teaching during perceived immigration booms. The landscape of adult ESOL education today, despite occurring in such a violent era for
immigrants where discussions about immigration policy are central in national media and political debates, lacks a coherent research agenda. Instead, US adult ESOL research continues to flounder in between adult literacy and ESOL, with some research touching on the specific experience of being an adult ESOL learner but always in response to either adult literacy or ESOL research. After a review of the research conducted in the last five years on adults learning English in the US, I found a dominant theme to be a focus on teaching ESOL for increased employability; a familiar echo from the early days of ESOL’s past. I examine how this focus has played out in adult ESOL policy and research in addition to promising critical areas of research that resist this drive towards a focus on workforce competencies.

**Policy focus on workforce competencies**

Over the past decade, there has been a shift in adult literacy policy and funding sources toward privileging programs that focus on workforce competencies, most notably in the creation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which houses one of the most influential adult education initiatives in the country, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) (Shin & Ging, 2019). These policy changes have resulted in what some identify as a problematic over-emphasis on adult literacy students’ worth as workers and courses of learning that focuses on a narrow parameter of subject areas (Belzer & Kim, 2018; Jacobson, 2017; Pickard, 2016). While adult literacy has always been marketed to adults as a path to upward social mobility and economic stability without much acknowledgement of structural barriers that may keep students from being economically stable or wealthy (Amstutz & Sheared, 2000; Hull, 1997), this
A hyper-focus has, as Belzer noted, has “narrowed” adult literacy research and policy concerns “to a specific set of tasks and purposes related to employment” (2017, p. 16).

In a critical discourse analysis of WIOA, Shin and Ging (2019) found that through AEFLA, “a more product-oriented approach is instituted; tighter coordination is established between adult education programs, training services, and employers; and increased accountability measures are tracked by the NRS [National Reporting System]” (p. 13). Extending and fortifying the regime of high stakes testing that has proven contentious and oppressive in K-12 public schools (Au, 2008; Valenzuela, 2004), recent turns in major sources of adult literacy funding have incentivized adult education programs to utilize popular standardized tests and buy into a national accountability system to measure their and their students’ value. Which stake holder in adult literacy will gain the most from this arrangement is unclear. As Shin and Ging discussed, “[L]earners too may benefit from AEFLA under WIOA, in the form of increased employment opportunities in locally in-demand fields and higher earning potential” (p. 13), however “this marriage between public and private remains unequal because, despite the potential benefits, the financial profits of producing highly employable adults takes priority over the protection of adult learners’ rights to lead a dignified life.” (p. 14) Shin and Ging posited that corporations are not always as benevolent as they might make themselves seem in adult literacy research, that perhaps they cannot be trusted to be partners in education as their interests will always outweigh those of the workers they employ or even exploit. As WIOA was instituted in 2014, how the policy will actually shape adult ESOL education is unclear, but its symbolic power is evident in representing
a decades’ long move towards imbricating adult literacy endeavors with workforce readiness.

**Flattening of adult ESOL students’ identities**

Though discussions in policy are not necessarily representative of the research happening in adult literacy, researchers have, in many ways, shaped and taken forth this call to tailor adult literacy programming in service of preparing learners for a modern workforce. A review of adult literacy scholarship over the last five years demonstrates that discussions of how to help students improve their employability is almost ubiquitous. This is not without reason, from a student-centered perspective. Many learners identify joining adult literacy programs to get better jobs or be paid better in their current ones (Tighe et al., 2013). Nonetheless, this myopic focus could, in a way prefigure and resultingly curtail students’ learning agenda by limiting why students come to class as solely related to improving their economic status.

Moreover, in writing about adult ESOL learners in the US, there is a great range in the literature as to what this term indexes. While researchers have taken up increasingly contextualized investigations of where and how people learn English, the way we understand adult ESOL learners’ experiences has not nuanced with this increased differentiation. From adult ESOL learners in community colleges, to intensive, immersion English language programs at private universities to volunteer-run programs out of libraries, there is little differentiation as to how being an adult ESOL learner in these spaces might make for radically different experiences difficult to compare between each other. Adult ESOL learners are also rarely disaggregated by immigration status, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, gender or other identity categories. ESOL learners are
discussed as a monolith, despite the breadth of research that speaks their heterogeneity (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Eyring, 2014). While there is certainly literature that takes these identity categories into account, they are fairly thin and have not considered how intersecting identity categories might impact learners’ experiences. This further obscures the nuances of what adult ESOL learners come to English class for and by extension, reinforces adhering to narrow views on what approaches might be appropriate for engaging them as learners.

**Critical legacies continued but decentralized**

Scholars that take up a critical sociocultural framework and examine the embedded experiences of adult ESOL learners and educators highlight alternatives to standardization and imagine teaching that fits the unique experiences of learners and educators in these spaces (e.g. Carlock, 2016; Larrotta, 2009; Larrotta & Serrano, 2011; Perry, 2013) These approaches continue to advocate curriculum that is centered around issues that students identify as important. Additionally, researchers posit that dialogic teaching and curricula-building approaches allow students to utilize their prior knowledge in a way that brings meaningful social and political topics into the ESOL classroom more than purely grammar and vocabulary-focused curricula (Ghiso et al., 2016; G. Park, 2011; Simpson, 2011). However, these perspectives are significantly less pervasive in research literature and occur oftentimes out of conversation with each other. While there is research in ESOL that examines how adult students in the US interact with language teaching methods informed by complex critical theories, they largely do not consider what it means that the students being engaged are adult learners in the US. Rather they are looked at as ESOL students and seen as models for other ESOL students, across age
ranges and contexts. ESOL research grounded more firmly in adult literacy research does pay more mind to how students’ positionality as adult immigrants in the US affect their learning, however these pieces are few and far between relative to studies with adults by TESOL researchers. This leaves critical conversations about adult ESOL at a standstill: marginalized by dominant approaches and stretched thin across conversations that span distinct areas of research.

**Adult ESOL in the US as a mirror of its history**

Across research investigating adult ESOL learners’ experiences in the US, there appears to be an increased focus on learning needs that, like eras bygone, emphasize learning dominant forms of English and literacy skills for participation in the economy. Though not explicitly reinforcing ideologies aimed at perpetuating white and Anglo supremacy, the parallels between workforce preparation and assimilationist projects in adult ESOL education are glaring. Both claim that learning English is a necessity all adults must have to fully access the economic power available to them. US society across decades has also continually been marked by incredible income inequality along racial and ethnic lines that can be attributed to a multiplicity of structural factors, yet popular discourse remains consistent in claiming adult literacy education as a vehicle for equity. Adult immigrants, as direct participants in the economy and civic life, are special targets of these initiatives. While children are certainly included in these projects, adult education has been persistently and explicitly discussed as an endeavor directly related to shaping a useful workforce. By holding fast to the idea that adult literacy programs exist primarily as vehicles for marginalized learners to attain economic and social mobility, the possibility for critical conversations in research about why inequalities between
immigrants and white non-immigrants might persist despite students learning English are greatly diminished.

The perpetuation of discourse that positions adult literacy education as a resolution to income inequality and unemployment is especially frustrating given the breadth of critical work questioning these inequalities ESOL educators and researchers have undertaken. Though it is hopeful to think that providing education alone can upend systemic oppression, critical educators and theorists have emphasized that education must be a tool through which to critique these dominant discourses and lay the groundwork for an upending of unjust societal institutions. Teaching approaches to ESOL that take on creative projects and subject matter that might not directly encourage employability are discouraged when economic ascension is the primary justification for adult literacy programming.

This expression of frustration is not to say that there are no adult ESOL efforts being done today to challenge these predominant foci on workforce literacy. There is still contestation over what the purpose of adult literacy education ought to be, whether the focus should be on more prescriptive notions of literacy or whether definitions of literacy should be more focused around sociocultural ideas of literacy. Research has shown that depending on the level of involvement — whether funder, teacher, program manager or student — perspectives on “success” in an adult program vary (Belzer, 2007). For funders, administrators and other powerful players in adult literacy education contexts, a program’s worth is often measured through students’ performance on standardized tests and students’ achievement of certain measurable goals along prescriptive definitions of literacy. Other researchers have found that goals of students
and educators are often more nuanced and based around personal, localized issues, but are less represented in dominant adult literacy conversations (Tighe et al, 2013; Milana and McBain, 2015). Figuring out ways to spotlight these tensions between institutions and the people that enact their policies, then, becomes a matter of importance for adult ESOL researchers concerned with the direction in which the field is currently being pushed.

**The need for a new critical adult ESOL pedagogy**

If, as past patterns illuminate, nativist resurgences in political and public discourse raise interest in and affect discussions of the teaching of English to adult immigrants, what might be the damaging effects of this contemporary period of heightened and venomous immigrant characterization? While a move towards a critical approach and centering students’ perspectives was of great interest in the 1980s and 90s, today’s adult literacy policy focus on workforce competencies has moved away from this focus, much to the detriment of the field (Belzer, 2017). I argue that a responsible curriculum for adult ESOL research conducted in the US must include a resistance of these workforce competencies by listening closely to students and reclaiming critical approaches to teaching as relevant and necessary. It is not enough to only be resistant towards overtly racist ideologies that position adult immigrant learners as deficient because of their lack of English language knowledge. A limiting of funding to adult literacy programs that promote workforce competencies has the potential marginalize students’ intellectual wealth and limit the education to which adult ESOL students have access. If adult immigrants are only understood as worthy of language education opportunities because of their potential value as laborers in the US economy,
assimilationist models prevail and adult ESOL teaching becomes complacent, if not instrumental, in using English to marginalize immigrant adults.

I argue that adult ESOL researchers and educators can combat this limiting and attempting of homogenization by listening closely to what students want from ESOL classes and doing their best to center students’ interests at all points in curriculum formation. This entails educational researchers looking more closely at the nuances in experiences of adult ESOL students learning in different contexts across the US. In my dissertation work, I use my empirical investigation as a beginning of this conversation by looking at how adult ESOL students express their learning goals for ESOL in addition to their learning processes.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGIES

In my attempt to more holistically understand the learning that happens and can happen in an adult ESOL space, I utilized theories of practitioner inquiry informed by ethnographic approaches to data collection to inform my project design and methods. I also drew from approaches to qualitative research that center humanizing and ethical approaches to research. Below, I unpack how I mobilize these terms and the way they took shape in my investigation.

Methodology

In my methodology, I bring together multiple approaches that privilege self-reflexivity and embed questions about how to situate research within sociopolitical contexts into the process of research. In my effort to do work that centers the opinions and insights of immigrant students of color alongside my own as a white, US-born ESOL teacher, I find that these orientations to data collection allowed me to be the most critical of my own positionality and encouraged me to theorize from the location I occupied. While these approaches came from my impulse to link social justice work with research, they also provided the most rigorous approaches to answer the questions I was asking.

Inquiry as stance

I took up practitioner inquiry, or the process of doing research on one’s own practice through qualitative research methods, as my primary research methodology. Interweaving with my theoretical frameworks that trouble notions of where knowledge can be generated from, I employed practitioner-inquiry as an action research approach utilizing an inquiry spiral to generate questions and directions for research. Juxtaposed to
other ethnographic or qualitative education research, which typically positions researchers observing phenomena in educational settings as a participant observer 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. Practitioner-inquiry scholars have argued that close encounters with a teaching experience can produce unique and valuable insights into a teaching context that third person observations more removed from the context might miss (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). In utilizing this methodology, I not only produced research tightly focused on a specific context, but I also explored those messy comings-together of practice and theory in a way that might be useful for other educators and scholars.

An essential aspect of practitioner inquiry is a commitment to constantly questioning one’s practice. Though one line of inquiry may lead to a resolution, new questions will always emerge through thoughtful reflection on data collected through one’s everyday practice. Cochran-Smith and Lytle are essential scholars in the field of practitioner inquiry who have written about “inquiry as stance” and theorized this process extensively. The process of inquiry as stance entails looking at problems and conundrums in sites of learning not as obstacles to teaching, but as beginning points of investigation and dialogic investigation (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). As they contended, undertaking inquiry as stance in education research not only centers the knowledge of people most involved in the field, but does so in reaction to dominant ways of doing education research that privileges “objectivity” and scientific understandings of research:
Inquiry as stance is not a theory of action based on the logic of how leaders frame educational problems and their strategies for implementing solutions to those problems. Rather, inquiry as stance is grounded in the problems and contexts of practice in the first place and in the ways practitioners collaboratively theorize, study, and act on those problems in the best interests of the learning and life chances of students and their communities. […] That means that inquiry as stance is neither a top-down nor a bottom-up theory of action but an organic and democratic one that positions practitioners’ knowledge, practitioners, and their interactions with students and other stakeholders at the center of educational transformation. (p. 124-3)

In this definition of inquiry as stance, the teacher-researcher knows the context well enough to identify lines of inquiry rooted in the problems of the specific site and community within that site. This stance also implicates a focus on social justice, as its preoccupied with generating research that immediately acts in the “best interests” of people being served in education. Action, in this approach, is not only a choice to attempt to improve education through the act of research, but also is also essential to the process of theorizing: “knowledge-making is understood as a pedagogic act that is constructed in the context of use, intimately connected to the knower, and, although relevant to immediate situations, inevitably a process of theorizing” (p. 133).

The emphasis of localized and embedded ways of knowing in practitioner inquiry is not to limit it to research done solely for practitioners within their sites of practice. While many practitioners certainly employ this methodology to effect change within their contexts, there is a place for practitioner inquiry within academia. As Anderson (2002) found, there is a need for theoretical research within education that values what teachers already know and find frustrating about strains of education research that does not acknowledge the messiness of their day-to-day teaching:

Practitioner research does not seek to replace traditional approaches to knowledge generation, dissemination, and utilization. […]. Clandinin and Connelly (1995)
have argued that outsider knowledge is often experienced by teachers as a ‘rhetoric of conclusions’, which enters the practitioner’s professional landscape through informational conduits that funnel propositional and theoretical knowledge to them with little understanding that their landscape is personal, contextual, subjective, temporal, historical and relational among people. (p. 23)

Offering a different perspective from more traditional qualitative approaches to education research, practitioner inquiry comes from the messiness of these different intersections of personal and relational entanglements. It seeks to offer a way to theorize through them and develop ways of doing research that embraces the complicated nature of trying to make change in a dynamic setting where one has a personal investment: the reality for so many practitioners involved in education. Also, rather than trying to argue for a replacement of methodologies that take a more observational approach without an action focus, practitioner inquiry offers simply a different perspective from more traditional qualitative research. Given what I was interested in studying and the site that emerged as my study location, practitioner inquiry made the most sense as a methodology. Additionally, I wanted to interrogate my own positionality and action within a site aware that in empirical research, the positionality of white researchers often goes untroubled. Practitioner inquiry emerged as the methodology that would provide me with the best research design guide to ask these questions.

**Ethnographic approaches to practitioner inquiry**

Practitioner inquiry, in its call for sustained and grounded investigations of education issues, is intimately related to ethnography. While definitions vary and are contested (Hammersley, 2018) and methods can look different depending on the site, ethnography can be understood as an investigation through longitudinal observation into the lived social worlds of people belonging to a specific culture operating within a
specific site (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In traditional ethnographic research, duration and time spent at a site can vary depending on what is being investigated, but usually requires a lengthier period of time spent observing phenomenon. Within practitioner-inquiry, researchers are necessarily embedded in their site, similar to an ethnographer, given that they develop their questions and research design from a place or community where they are already actively working and participating. While researcher positionality differs within these methodological approaches — ethnographers typically aim to observe social happenings in their “natural” setting, interrupting the site as little as they can beyond their participation in different aspects of the community (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) — both ethnographers and practitioner-researchers engage reflexive practices to trouble familiar, daily interactions in developing insights about what is happening in their given site of investigation. Additionally, ethnographic methods are especially useful for generating socioculturally-informed understandings of language and literacy learning given ethnography’s focus on storying of localized social phenomena and problematizing taken-for-granted societal conventions (Heath & Street, 2008).

As I was committed to doing research with an ethnographic focus, I purposely chose to do my dissertation research at a site where I had been teaching for some time and in a teaching field in which I had sustained involvement. From 2014-2017, prior to my year of data collection, I was present at the site through various capacities as a researcher on Gerald Campano and María Paula Ghiso’s Community Literacies research team. Aside from organizing and participating in specific projects designed by the team, I also attended a variety of events at Cabrini at the invitation of community members that went beyond the individual projects we organized, from helping at community health
fairs to accompanying a family to a college talk to having dinners and birthday celebrations with families to attending masses commemorating different important events at Cabrini. Through prolonged and multifaceted involvement in the Cabrini community, I gained insight as to what was happening in multiple aspects of the parish community and had the opportunity to build relationships with people that lasted the four years I was involved at the site.

**Critical approaches to research**

Beyond working at the Cabrini Center just to facilitate an ethnographic grounding for my research project, I prioritized working with community members and staff at the Cabrini Center to build genuine relationships slowly over time and through a multiplicity of activities because I was compelled, through my research, to do work in partnership with immigrant communities and communities of color. Being a white woman born with papered citizenship status in the US, raised speaking mainly DAE English, I was especially mindful of power dynamics at play as I established my presence at the Center. I was careful about what projects I engaged and what research questions I asked, prioritizing building relationships and doing work in solidarity with communities over solely doing research. Theories of humanizing research (Paris & Winn, 2014) and ethical approaches to community-university partnering (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2016) were especially useful in framing my study and offering guidance on doing research that addressed issues of justice and took action towards realizing better educational opportunities in pursuit of justice. These approaches are in resistance to research approaches, including ethnography, that have participated in the exotification and further oppression of marginalized groups of people. This tendency of research is notably
critiqued by Smith (2012) in *Decolonizing Methodologies*. While Smith specifically described work done on indigenous communities, researchers have a long history of perpetuating damaging narratives across groups of people deemed “other” by white, Eurocentric definitions of normativity.

These critiques highlight pitfalls to be mindful of as a white researcher working in communities of color. Given my positionality as a white woman working in a community of color I knew that inherently, I would have limited perspectives into issues of racial and linguistic marginalization; a central concern of my work. This lack of understanding went hand-in-hand with a historical over-valuing of white voices in the academy that has contributed to the aforementioned damaging representation of marginalized communities in academic research. My identity as a teacher and researcher — roles that can be seen as knowers and dispensers of information rather than listeners and co-learners — also shaped my interactions, given that I was partially seen as the person in control of the classroom and a university-based academic collecting data on what was happening in our class. To address these differentials, I employed various measures to check my assumptions and do research that was representative of my commitments to action and partnership, outlined below.

**Dialogue and listening as relational methodology.** Connected to my overall argument about the inclusion of care in adult ESOL classrooms, I find that ethically engaging in an action-focused methodology like practitioner inquiry is reliant on the care researchers demonstrate through the relationships they form. Building close relationships with study participants runs contrary to the advising of qualitative methodologists, who demand researchers keep an appropriate distance from the people they work with.
Researchers taking critical, decolonial and feminist lenses have troubled these lines between researcher and participant, pushing researchers to view participants not just as subjects of study, but fellow humans and co-inquirers (Diaz-Strong, Luna-Duarte, Gómez, & Meiners, 2014; Griffiths, 2009; Mangual Figueroa, 2014; Smith, 2012). Just as theories of epistemic privilege open space for experience and identity to be sources for theorizing, these approaches assert that being intimately involved in a setting with authentic investments is a fruitful place to do research from. Rather than an issue to overcome, “being too close” can be seen as a strength that needs its own set of methods to set parameters of study (Diaz-Strong et al., 2014; Mangual Figueroa, 2014).

Inviting dialogue is an essential aspect of building relationships with participants. Though I had central research questions I was interested in investigating, I most basically wanted to story the happenings in an adult ESOL classroom and let what happened with students and teachers speak to questions I investigated. I left my questions purposively open-ended and used conversations I had with students and fellow teachers to shape the direction of inquiry. Space for dialogue was created through time I put into getting to know students and fellow teachers in addition to my openly inviting others’ opinions into the shaping of class. Relationships form when the researcher makes themselves vulnerable and brings their experience and reflections into conversations with their research partners and participants (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). This open, bidirectional sharing can allow for researchers’ histories and experiences to be interrogated and mined for questions, resisting the tendency to make participants the only subjects of study.

**Mutuality in ethical community-university partnering.** Theories of ethical community-university partnering are similarly founded upon relational research
approaches to research. Having worked on the Community Literacies project run by Gerald Campano, María Paula Ghiso, and Bethany Welch, their conceptualizing of community-university partnerships was formative in the development of my approach to doing work embedded within immigrant communities (Campano et al., 2016). Related to the discussion earlier of research that has worked to marginalize communities, research by university-based academics in communities is often one-sided and exploitative of community resources. Within their norms for developing research projects that are ethical from project formation to product, there is a focus on equity, namely seeing all people involved as being uniquely knowledgeable and respected for what they know and giving opportunity for all involved to voice their opinions on research design and questions (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2015).

I pull out norm number four, “Research on/with/for the Community Should Benefit the Community”, as a focus for conceptualizing mutuality that was especially important for my research. Community-based organizations addressing issues of equity and the people that comprise the base of these organizations often have different and sometimes seemingly contradictory goals when it comes to forming partnerships with universities (Campano et al., 2016). The work of mutuality in designing research projects with communities is then to find points where interests can overlap and research can not only produce knowledge that attempts to be ethical in representation, but can also provide immediate benefits for people through the research itself.

I wanted to be especially cognizant of this in my research. Knowing the long time-scale of university publishing and the amount of time it took for research to translate into change beyond academia through my own experience, I wanted there to be some
immediate, tangible benefit for the people who participated in my research, even if the research produced did not benefit them directly. Through a series of conversations with the director of the Center over 2016-2017, the year prior to my dissertation research, in addition to ongoing conversations with different community members, I conceptualized the crux of community benefit for my project to be fostering the sustaining of ESOL programming at the Center. Sustainability in community-based literacy programming built through community-university partnerships has proven to be a core issue for many involved in such partnerships (Cella & Restaino, 2012). In community-based literacy classes where university students are essential in programming or projects, students’ graduation in addition to the limitations of students’ involvement to terms shorter than year-round community work can result in problems for maintaining programs for long periods of time.

Prior to my year of dissertation study, I had been an integral member of the teaching team, but staff hired through the Center were responsible for managing the program overall. As part of the extension of mutuality, I offered to oversee the program from summer 2017 through 2018. To ensure that my exit would be smooth for the Center staff and community members, we also decided that I would mentor a Center staff member over the year to take on the position of coordinating and continuing the ESOL program after I left. Through this mentorship, I would help transition the program from being reliant on university students and researchers to being run by community and staff members at Cabrini. In addition to the direct work of planning and teaching ESOL classes, I also spent the year conceptualizing with staff members how the ESOL program could continue to be a community resource open to the changing needs and desires of
students; inquiries that were at once important to my research and to the community’s work.

**When to research and when not to research.** In mediating my multiple roles at Cabrini as researcher, educator, friend, and colleague and the relationships that I built across these roles, I negotiated multiple levels of relationships that gave me different insights into the work I was doing. Knowing that through close relationships with students and colleagues, I was often privy to information that might be private or out of the bounds of my project, I conceptualized how I could invite people to be a part of the project and how I could assess information shared with me for its inclusion in my research or not. Having run the ESOL project as a sub-project of the Community Literacies (CL) project, many learners and staff members at the Center were familiar with university research procedures prior to beginning my own subproject and had signed consent forms to be part of the CL research project. Given the then recent changes in the political climate following the election of Donald Trump and the ensuing rise in violence and fear-mongering directed towards immigrant communities, I wanted to be especially thoughtful about processes of consent and centralizing people’s signatures and contact information. Thus, with approval of IRB, I moved to a consent process that did not require a signed consent form. Instead, I shared a letter, approved by IRB, with students and had a discussion with them about my research and asked if they wanted to be involved in the project. This I always did after several weeks of students being in class for the following reasons: I wanted students to engage the consent process as a conversation with me; I wanted to have time to establish communication with them to have more open conversations; and I wanted to forgo a signed consent process to further
disconnect students’ identities and information from my writing about them to protect those who might be undocumented.

I also recognized that formal, IRB approved procedures for consent were not enough to delineate what was researchable in my context. I also needed to be thoughtful and critical of what information I included in my research that people shared with me. Decolonial critiques of qualitative research argue that there are protected knowledges and subjects that should be exempt for research: that not all stories are told to be retold and shared with others (Tuck & Yang, 2014). In that spirit, some information shared with me both in class and out of class was excluded as I deemed it particularly sensitive, though important to our interactions. While I do allude to some of those moments, I elect to gloss over the details and share enough to explain the gist of the interaction without in-depth analysis of what was shared.

Context

Multiple levels of context, from the larger context of the world to the city in which I taught to the immediate context of Cabrini, were essential in shaping the data I collected. In the last chapter, I detailed how global and national histories and contemporary world events shape my research and approach. Below I highlight more immediate contexts.

Adult literacy in Philadelphia, PA

As mentioned in the introduction, this study took place in Philadelphia, a city with a long history of widespread, adult literacy initiatives. From adult basic education to workforce readiness, the city government has long championed adult literacy programming, notably through the Office of Adult Education (OAE). Founded in 1983
as the Mayor’s Commission on Literacy, the Office of Adult Education has served as a hub for the numerous community-based adult literacy programming initiatives in the city. As of 2018, Philadelphia had a population of an estimated 550,000 adults who the OAE identifies as “adult, out-of-school Philadelphians, age 16 and up, whose literacy skills as defined above are too low to pass employment or college entrance tests” (The Office of Adult Education, n.d.). This designation encapsulates adults with a range of identities and target adult literacy classes, including adult basic education, high school equivalency/GED program and ESOL classes. The OAE estimates that 80 such programs exist in the city.

Given the numbers and breadth of adult literacy programs in Philadelphia, centralization of resources and information for practitioners and students has proven to be a challenge, specifically in adult ESOL programming. This is illustrated through my experience participating in an OAE adult ESOL group. Before 2017, there was little information about adult ESOL programming in Philadelphia inclusive of non-school based programs. To resolve this issue, the OAE in partnership with the Office of Immigrant Affairs, conducted a city-wide survey to gather geographical information about where ESOL classes are located to share with prospective students and other interested parties (The Office of Adult Education, 2017). Through this survey, the OAE developed an “ESL roundtable” to connect educators and administrators across locations. As the coordinator for the Cabrini program, I went to several meetings with other educators at the OAE offices. These meetings provided me insight into what other educators in the city were experiencing. Many educators, some who had long been teaching ESOL in Philadelphia, noted they had had little opportunity to see what was
happening city-wide prior to this consortium. This decentralization is an important aspect of the context, speaking to the general lack of unified, standardized oversight for community-based ESOL programs that classify K-12 public schooling (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Cooke, 2008). While oversight came for programs through their funding sources, the lack of a unifying mechanism to guide these programs is a unique feature of community-based ESOL programs relative to other systems of education that rely on centralized offices to monitor quality and support for learning programs.

**Cabrini ESOL classes**

My primary site of data collection was the faith-based community center I worked at for the four years with my advisor, written about here as the Cabrini Center. Though the Center is part of the larger St. Frances Cabrini Catholic community that also includes a parish and an independent mission school, the Center is non-denominational and serves people across a spread of religious affiliations. The Cabrini Center was founded in 2013 with a mission to foster cross-cultural engagement and learning across difference; a mission it works towards through a variety of programming. The people that make up the community span a range of ethnic, racial and linguistic backgrounds including active groups that identify as African American, Filipino, Vietnamese, Latinx, Indonesian, and European-American. Since 2010, Gerald Campano and María Paula Ghiso have lead a research team partnering with various communities investigating the different literacy practices circulating at St. Francis. Through working with the community to identify different desires for literacy learning, the team has led various projects that build literacy
programming responsive to the community’s interests and rich cultural diversity across the multiple institutions that make up the St. Francis community.

ESOL programming in the St. Francis community spans a range of time, formats, and involvement from Penn research partners. Information gathered from community members indicate that community leaders at St. Francis have taught adult ESOL classes dating back to the 1970s. By the time the CL team began partnering with St. Francis, adult ESOL classes, however, were not being provided. Through conversations with community members, Latinx families indicated that ESOL classes were something that the community as interested in, sparking a Saturday family ESOL class for Latinx parents and young children (Ghiso et al., 2016). The iteration of the ESOL program I participated in was built in 2014, through a reconceptualizing of the Saturday-only program. To make the class more responsive to the interests of community members, who noted a desire for more frequent English classes for speakers across a range of languages and cultural affinities, we changed the class schedule to be twice weekly and ran in partnership with Cabrini staff. Partnering with Cabrini Staff was intentional both to expand our teaching capacity and to open a new line of partnership in the form of Cabrini staff/researcher relationships and resource sharing.

From the beginning, we decided that the ESOL program should fit students’ needs and be centered around their experiences, cultures, learning desires, and larger goals beyond class. This manifested in a decision to not use text books and take, instead, an iterative approach founded upon participatory ESOL pedagogies, introduced by Alicia Rusoja (a then senior research team member and long-time community-based activist and educator.) Moreover, we wanted the class, like the original conception of the Cabrini
center, to be an open and inclusive space where people felt comfortable practicing English rather than a program that heavily monitored and corrected people’s language use. As such, we were explicitly eschewed the idea that there was one correct way to speak English, were not English only and sought volunteers and co-facilitators who were multilingual so that all of students’ linguistic resources could be supported and engaged. In line with this approach, we also adapted an open-enrollment policy that took shape as it became clear students showed up throughout the year looking for English classes and, in the spirit of our welcoming approach, we did not want to deny them entry.

**People participating in my research**

Data collection lasted from June 2017 – June 2018. The bulk of data was gathered through the intermediate class I taught twice a week for an hour and half. The class, though mostly adults over the age of 18, spanned a wide range of ages, languages, and ethnic groups. Over the year, twenty students and three volunteers/co-teachers who helped plan and execute class, agreed to participate in the study. While I had more students in my class, some chose not to participate or were not part of the class long enough to engage the consent process earlier outlined. As mentioned, after knowing students for a few weeks, I went through a careful process of inviting students to be part of my research project that made clear their class participation was not predicated on joining my study. The majority of the students in my study identified as being from Mexico and other Latin American countries. The remainder of students identified as

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5 In discussing how students identified ethnically and racially, I chose to describe students as they described their identity to me. Students most typically identified with a country of origin or region within a country rather than a larger racial group like Latinx or Asian. Though these were important categories of identity that inevitably shaped our worlds and were discussed at points, I
being from Vietnam, Dominica, Indonesia, and Algeria. Most students spoke primarily Spanish, while others spoke primarily Vietnamese, French, French Creole, and Arabic. Several students also identified various indigenous languages as part of their linguistic repertoires. As described in earlier sections, I identify as a white woman who was raised speaking English in the US. Two of the other volunteer facilitators working in the classroom identified similarly as white, primarily English-speaking women and the third teacher identified as a bilingual Chicana. Two co-facilitators and I spoke Spanish, which we utilized in class to communicate with students when it made sense. While many students came as frequently as they could, it was often difficult for students to attend consistently. New students joined the class almost weekly, as the program was open enrollment, which made the class and participation in the study especially dynamic.

In addition to being lead teacher for the class, I also worked as the head coordinator for the entire program starting in the summer of 2017. Responsibilities for this role included managing and training volunteers, helping out the facilitators of the beginner class with curriculum planning and overseeing logistics of running the program. This opened further opportunities for data collection in planning meetings and other programming that happened beyond the twice weekly classes. I most frequently met with Bridget, who was, at the time, a new staff member working fulltime at the center and served as the main logistics coordinator on the Cabrini end of the partnership and for whom I served as a supervisor. Bridget and I met once a week for about an hour to check-in about program planning logistics and consult about how classes generally were

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typically identify students using language and nationality distinction as they identify themselves in that way.
going in addition to bigger picture discussions about what we wanted the program to offer beyond English. Willow — an ESOL volunteer in her second year at the site — and I met often as well, usually every other week or so, as she wanted to help plan our classes in addition to providing weekly in-class co-facilitation. Willow’s history of working in creative writing programs and in other adult literacy tutoring organizations shaped our conversations and curriculum formation. Yared and I would meet after the classes she co-facilitated to review what happened and reflect on next steps. As she only periodically participated in class through early November 2017, her involvement in this project was more limited, but still fundamental to the project’s formation, as she had worked in the class for a year prior to my dissertation data collection. She provided rich insight as a thought-partner informed by years of living and working in Philadelphia at different immigrant advocacy organizations. Through all of these out-of-class meeting times, co-facilitators and I mulled over important questions and discussed how to meet challenges, taking an inquiry approach in all of our discussions. We also developed friendships, sharing conversation over food and drink, laughing and comforting each other through the various emotions we encountered throughout the year. These meetings, formal and informal, were important moments of processing and provided me with new directions for class design and research.

**Reflecting on my identity as a teacher researcher**

In my work doing adult ESOL teaching and research, I have generated two major portfolios consolidating and documenting, in different ways, inquiries I had about my teaching practice. To reflect on my positionality and commitments as a practitioner-researcher, I referred back to these reflections to trace my journey as a literacy educator
and researcher and be more explicit about what I was bringing to research in terms of my positionality and teaching history.

**Before coming to Cabrini**

I began my reflection with a review of a portfolio created at the end of my first year of teaching adult ESOL at RIFLI (Rhode Family Literacy Initiative). I was offered the eight hour a week job through my friend, a fellow AmeriCorps member who worked, as I did, in early childhood and family bilingual literacy library programming. While my training, experience, and background was in Spanish/English bilingual settings, I had little experience working with adults and no experience teaching specifically ESOL.

Having taken many classes in college on the coloniality of English and having focused on the negative implications of English-only policies in US classrooms in my culminating thesis, I was aware of the relationship between ESOL programs and assimilationist projects. Through these courses, I also confronted my white, native English speaker identity in specific ways I had not before, understanding my implications in the systems of white supremacy that marginalize communities of color and immigrants. This made me apprehensive about teaching in an English-only setting. In a way, I felt almost like a sell-out cashing in on my social capital as a white, native English speaker to make extra money. Despite my misgivings, ultimately, I made the decision to take the job. I reasoned that I could apply my learning from my bilingual work with young children and tweak it to work with adults. Though more of a happening of circumstance rather than a conscious choice, I dove into a teaching path that would define my career in community-based literacy.
What I expected to experience in an adult language learning classroom and what actually happened were quite different. In signing up for teaching I did so thinking (embarrassingly) it would be easier than my work with young children. In my mind, we would follow a prescribed progression and move logically through the steps of learning English. While I had an awareness of English-only policies and their damaging effects on children, I did not have a sophisticated awareness about English-only approaches’ effects on working with adults. Relatedly, though familiar with play and inquiry approaches for young children, I was not familiar with these approaches for adults, thinking they would not translate to an adult ESOL setting where the learning goals were more cut-and-dry than an early literacy classroom. The class I ended up teaching was a beginner class run out of a library after operating hours. Two other classes besides my own met in the open-floor space: a citizenship class and an intermediate class. In a separate room, children of the adult students met with a teacher for homework help and early literacy programming. Students in my section were largely Chinese, Cambodian, and Armenian-speaking. Though I had a few volunteers who could help with translation, I personally did not share languages with any other students besides English. To place students in levels, we used a test from CASAS, an adult literacy testing organization. As a lead teacher, I was also responsible for managing all attendance data, intake forms, testing administration, and last-minute logistical problems. At first, teaching in this context overwhelmed me, in part because my expectations were so different from my reality. Though students tested into my class and presumably shared the same language level, there was a vast difference between peoples’ comforts in English speaking. Some communicated through spoken language very easily, while others struggled to understand
seemingly all questions I asked them. I also had no knowledge of where to start. My parent organization took a student-centered, iterative approach to curriculum development, meaning that there was no core book and no prescribed curriculum direction. I took to Googling the fundamentals of English and making my own at home worksheets, that often confused students and were structured poorly. Every week I had to plan left me anxious and ashamed that I so cavalierly undertook this endeavor with no prior training. What was I doing?

When I joined RIFLI, I also joined a teacher-induction pilot project funded in partnership with a grant administered by a larger education research group, which kicked off a month or so after I started teaching. Through a mixture of online classes, independent professional development, and structured mentorship, I was offered multiple opportunities throughout the year to engage with different research-based teaching approaches. While helpful, the courses and professional development I found, at times, frustrating, given the lack of connection to my context. I remember many-a-night, after getting home from teaching at nine, spent half-heartedly engaging with online modules that seemed to have little to do with the realities of my classroom. My mentoring relationships, however, proved most interesting and useful. Though our interactions were sparse given our disparate schedules and locations for teaching, we met periodically in mentoring pairs and in larger groups with my overarching organization and the partnering research institution. I learned very practical skills, from how to structure a year-long iterative curriculum around student-identified themes, to where to find useful and high-quality materials to supplement my own at home creations (which had provided the bulk of my materials prior to developing mentoring relationships). I also became familiar with
student-centered approaches to teaching, an explicit focus in both the online courses and in my mentoring.

More a collection of my lesson plans and teaching materials, my portfolio reflects a variety of experiments with different approaches to ESOL. From phonics, to collaborative learning, to half-baked commitments to CASAS learning standards, my lessons cover a range of topics and foci. As my lessons continue, I notice they become more orderly and more tailored to students; mentioning people by name in my planning for small group work and offering some differentiation for students depending on what I perceived as their learning interests. I also moved from lightly outlined lessons to lessons with specific skills in focus and corresponding learning goals informed by CASAS.

What I notice missing is any mention of my philosophy, what I think is important for students to be learning and why. Though I was thoughtful about the people represented in the worksheets I created and copied, making sure there was racial and ethnic diversity in the material presented in addition to stories and anecdotes that related to students’ daily lives, languages and cultures, I largely utilized CASAS and other lifeskills learning standards to isolate goals for learning. While I was able to collect information about what students wanted to learn through simple surveys, I did not dig deeper. I took the baseline of information I could get from initial surveys and went from there, forming thematic units based on responses I received to surveys. While this was due in part to the level of English in class and where I was at generally with my teaching, it also represents a typical approach to English teaching (outlined in earlier chapters). I had yet to understand student-centered teaching as an ongoing inquiry; an approach I would build as a more experienced teacher working with critical approaches to adult
ESOL. I had also not found a way to connect my ESOL teaching practice to social justice aims other than trying to teach things that students wanted to learn. While I was aware of my white, native-speaker identity and took certain steps in class to address it (being careful not to overcorrect students, centering students in lesson plans), I did not have time or energy to devote to a deep inquiry into my identity and practice beyond my paid hours.

This is not to say that this idea for an inquiry was not there. I remember being unsettled, feeling like I did not really understand what brought my students to class. I knew I relied on standards to fill in the gaps, when I felt like there was more I could tap into with my students. This unexplored tension remained, staying with me through graduate school as I began to explore sociocultural and critical approaches to language and literacy teaching.

**Working at Cabrini**

Though I went to graduate school a novice teacher, I had the opportunity to grow and develop my teaching practice as a graduate student working on the CL research team. My portfolio from EDUC 669, a class focused on practitioner inquiry as a research methodology, documents a new phase in my grappling with my teacherly identity. Different from my first-year teaching portfolio which was mostly a gathering of documents, my inquiry portfolio charts my thinking and conceptualizing of my role as a teacher. In this inquiry I became especially self-reflexive about my own educator identity, inquiring into what it meant to be an untrained teacher leading a community-based adult ESOL classroom. I was also processing a lot of new perspectives I gained about what it meant to teach adult ESOL through a lens that looked at language learning
as a more fluid, less precise path, troubling the very definitions of what language was and how it came to be taxonomized and standardized. In this processing, I was beginning to understand how the separating and codifying of language was itself an extension of colonialism. Relationships, as echoed in my methodology and findings, became a significant focus in my research as it emerged to me that relational teaching allowed me to know my students and their goals for learning better. Below, I excerpt a passage from my final culminating project, considering what was important to me as a teacher and what I gathered, through an analysis of student work, self-reflections and inquiry conversations with fellow co-facilitators, came through as the drive in my teaching.

In my own research, I found that the most profound findings came only after I got to know people genuinely and they got to know me. My conversations with [a fellow teacher and research participant] were rich only because I told her information about my own experience while I was asking about her experience as a beginning community-based educator. Insights my students shared with me about community happened only because we had a history of inviting student experience and thought into the classroom and because I brought my own experiences into the classroom to invite them further. Though there are certainly tensions when you form relationships in research that are complicated and provide ethical dilemmas, those tensions are essential to humanizing research that works towards social justice (Figueroa, 2014). These relationships are especially important, I have found, in practitioner research. This should not be surprising to me, as I came to a similar conclusion during my first reflection for this class. But now, I think I’d like to edit my first statement. Rather than: love for the people I am working with – both as colleagues and as students – is what has driven me to continue working and keep pursuing better ways to be an educator; I am a better educator and researcher when love and care for the people I am working with is centered and valued. (Excerpt from my Practitioner Inquiry final portfolio project, May 2016)

Here, there is a blossoming not only of my awareness about the role of care, but about my conceptualizing of what I did as a community-based educator. Community-based, in my teaching philosophy, was not purely about being in an out-of-school setting in a location outside of typically sanctioned classroom spaces, but was something I sought to cultivate
and center in my teaching and data collection. Knowing what students wanted to learn and how they wanted to learn also naturally came through when care and relationships were centered in my practice. My nascent inquiry into care and relational teaching emerged here, laying a foundation for my dissertation investigation.

**Bringing together reflections on my teaching journey**

Analyzing my two different portfolio experiences demonstrates the ongoing and embedded nature of my final inquiries and findings across my experience in adult ESOL. This reflection, though initially done as a demonstration of my inquiry journey for the readers of this dissertation, surprised me through the process of writing. The cyclical nature of my inquiries demonstrate the profundity of the questions and the need for their engagement in research. Also interesting to note is that though repetitive, my inquiries take different shape across my experience. I begin with questioning how I form a student-centered curriculum, moving in my second inquiry project to consider how relationships inform my curriculum building in a specifically community-oriented and student-centered space. These inquiry spirals brought me to my dissertation as I considered deeper questions about the intersection of my own perspectives on teaching with my students’ and my co-facilitators. Where do our true desires for learning begin, when what we have been told we should want to learn dominates so much of the conversation? What does it mean to care about your students and want what is best for them, even if what they are saying is best for them is something you might not agree with? How, as a white teacher, do I center critiques of dominant language ideologies while also providing students with the English language education they want?
Data collection

Data collection began in the summer of 2017. As I got to know students and the
year went on, different approaches to data collection became more relevant and useful. I
document those changes throughout my description of methods. Recordings were mostly
transcribed by me, with a handful of items sent to Rev.com for transcription.

Methods

Methods for data collection were informed by ethnographic research and
practitioner research. Knowing that students would be difficult to contact out of class, I
was careful to collect a breadth of data during and before class that I could use to
triangulate my findings (Creswell, 2012). I outline here the different methods I employed
to gain a perspective on my teaching and students’ learning in class.

Observational fieldnotes. I began the year documenting our class by taking
observational fieldnotes I wrote up after class sessions from jottings I took as I taught
(Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). I utilized this procedure over the summer of 2017- fall
2017 as I was easing students into the research process and did not want to record
students until they were comfortable with the project and my research. In relying only on
my notes, however, I found that I had a hard time remembering nuances in conversations.
Being focused on teaching made it challenging to pay attention to all the different things
going on beyond my individual interactions with students. As I had planned to do class
recordings if it made sense for what I needed in my research, I eventually began taking
class audio recordings in February 2018 through the end of my data collection in May
2018. This allowed me to capture class conversations and record bits of dialogue that I
might have missed taking more detailed notes on as I taught.
**Class artifacts.** Documents and other artifacts that came through and were created in class were an essential ethnographic method that I utilized to collect data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Examining these artifacts are crucial in observing literacy practices and have a long history of being used in literacy research (exemplified in the work of Campano, 2007; Dyson, 1997; Heath, 1983). Three different types of artifacts emerged as particularly important in my data collection, detailed below.

**Conversation notebooks.** Keeping conversation notebooks (also termed dialogue journals in other research) with students is a typical practice for educators in adult literacy classrooms (Kim, 2005; Peyton & Staton, 1996). Alicia Rusoja introduced the practice to me in our first year of teaching together at Cabrini, conceptualizing the process as writing back and forth with students in a sustained format captured in a notebook. Over the summer, I wrote to students before every class, using the first twenty to thirty minutes of class as writing time for students to respond to my response. I changed this practice in the fall, keeping writing to Thursdays only. Students seemed to enjoy this practice, often requesting their notebooks if they had missed several classes so that they could respond to me right away upon returning. Across the twenty participants, I collected over 175 written student responses to my equal number of prompts and responses within the dialogue journals.

**Student work in class.** I also collected students’ responses to in class activities, taking photos of worksheets they filled out in class and sometimes photographing writings in their notebooks. Photographs of significant board writing are also included here. Writing on the whiteboard was a key point of interaction in class, as I used it in all my leading of whole group discussions to note what we were talking about for learners
who were more comfortable reading than listening in addition to providing a connection between verbal and written codes of language.

**Materials from outside of class.** Beyond the materials generated for and within class, other written materials also found their way into class via students, facilitators or others who had used the room before us and left materials that people perused. These literacy artifacts (Heath & Street, 2008) often sparked conversation and provided a catalyst for important interactions in class. These artifacts include informational fliers, children’s school work, papers from work, worksheets from other adult literacy programs and texts or videos received from family or friends. By examining these artifacts, I was able to see the different encounters with literacy students were having beyond class and how they might inform students perspectives on learning in class.

**Curriculum and program planning resources.** Related to student generated artifacts, I also examine material we utilized and generated in curriculum-building and programming. The worksheets, literature and lesson plans used in class serve as helpful reminders about class structure and can offer a perspective on how we envisioned class and learning paths in class.

**Interviews.** I conducted audio-recorded, open-ended interviews with five students and one facilitator. These five students attended class frequently over sustained periods from two months to several years. Though I issued class-wide invitations via an in-class announcement to participate in interviews, these five participants were the ones who ended up responding positively and also happened to be some of the students who participated most intensely. In line with my approach to inviting people to be a part of the study, I only invited people to be interviewed after months of being in class. I did this
as I wanted to have a good rapport with students before inviting them and also wanted to be sure they opted into the interviews without feeling coerced. To make the interviews feel like they were not taking away from class time, I scheduled the interviews for our pre-class period, when many students came in early for extra help or more work time. Though I originally wanted to do two interviews with students who were interested in being interviewed, this was often not possible as people stopped coming to class or did not have time for additional interviews. I was initially worried about students feeling comfortable doing interviews in English, thinking I might need to bring in translators. Many students, however, expressed to me that they preferred doing the interview in English, using the exchange as a way to practice their English more. In this way, interviews became a source of self-reflection on their learning goals, reflection on the class and co-inquiry into what was important about class and what we were actually learning together. Doing interviews after several months of students’ involvement also provided valuable insight for my practice in addition to insights into my research.

**Reflexive writing.** I kept a variety of reflexive writing practices. Over the fall term, I wrote brief reflexive memos at the end of my fieldnotes. As the year went on and some of my responses started taking shape into emerging findings, I also wrote more comprehensive reflexive memos later in the year. These allowed me to be thoughtful about rethinking and adhering to my conceptual frameworks as happenings in class pointed to themes that intrigued me and came up unexpectedly throughout the year (Ravitch and Riggin, 2013). A lot of my reflection was also conducted through conversation with participants and co-facilitators, with out of class discussion time
serving as important sites of processing for in-class interactions (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014).

**Data analysis**

In my data analysis, I wanted my findings to be anchored first and foremost in my site of practice. I began this analysis dialogically during my year of data collection with various co-inquirers, including students in my class, co-educators, volunteers at the Center not involved in ESOL classes, academic mentors and graduate school colleagues who talked through my data dialogically as I was first collecting it (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). Himley’s (1991) theorizing of “deep talk as knowing” and Simon, Campano, Borderick and Pantoja’s (2012) advocating of multi-voiced and dialogic methodologies offer specific reflections on how dialogic reflection functions as an important mode of data analysis in practitioner inquiry. While my writing and analysis was not heavily dialogic with others, my data collection process was. In class conversation I generated many directions for future findings. My weekly meetings and continued contact after data collection with my fellow co-educators were also essential in processing my data and what I was thinking about in my writing.

After my data collection period, I entered an intensive phase of data analysis, which included a deep reading of texts I had collected over the year along with re-listening to recordings of class sessions and reviewing fieldnotes. Given the breadth and variety of data, I was at first overwhelmed with how to approach developing my findings. Theories of post-qualitative research were especially helpful for me in kick-starting this process, as they allowed me to rethink how I went about coding and parsing out my data. St Pierre (2017) found that contemporary approaches to coding fail to grasp the
complexities of data collected, relying on conceptions of knowing disconnected from context. By overemphasizing coding, there is a false belief that knowledge can be discretely and neatly parsed out because the data is self-evident when read, catalogued and counted carefully. In post-qualitative approaches to data, as in intersectional feminist critiques of what knowing entails, there is no removed location from which to research (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014).

I, however, do not claim to take up a purely post-qualitative approach. For one, the theories upon which post-qualitative research relies are quite complex and require years of engagement to fully understand and employ (St. Pierre, 2017a). This density of theory in post-qualitative research is also thought to be problematic, potentially reinscribing the same exclusiveness post-qualitative researchers claim to disrupt in their theorizing (Gerrard, Rudolph, & Sriprakash, 2017). Instead I take learnings from this field to consider approaches to analysis beyond coding to supplement my data sense-making. I also look to other ways of forming findings about qualitative data that predate overly rigid approaches to coding qualitative data (Hammersley, 2018). Like post-qualitative researchers, ethnographers taking a grounded approach to understanding their data conceptualize putting data in conversation with existing theories as an ongoing, iterative process. Hammersley and Atkins (2008) provide a helpful capitulation of the relationship between theory and analysis in data interpretation:

[Theorizing] ought to involve an iterative process in which ideas are used to make sense of data, and data are used to change our ideas. In other words, there should be movement back and forth between ideas and data. So, analysis is not just a matter of managing and manipulating data. We must be prepared to go beyond the data to develop ideas that will illuminate them, and this will allow us to link our ideas with those of others; and we must then bring those ideas back to test their fit with further data, and so on. (p. 59).
Trying to form ideas primarily from great amounts of data collected over a substantial period of time requires flexibility, deep reading and re-reading of data. Theories ought not to dictate findings just as findings must speak back to theories. A key part of my analysis occurred through writing, as I attempted to put disparate pieces of data together in conversation because I had coded them similarly, but realized they were telling me a different story than my initial codes belied.

In this way, I conceptualized my data analysis as a bit messier than several discrete rounds of coding. I began my data sense-making by documenting my affective responses and first noticings about emerging themes in a journal (Harste & Vasquez, 1998). In re-reading my students’ conversation notebooks, I recapitulated our written conversations in narrative and identified important themes I noticed from our writings. I also re-listened to several class sessions, immersing myself in class happenings and, for the first time, deeply listened to my own voice and interactions in class months after speaking. As I re-read and re-listened, new insights popped out at me and themes began to emerge. Though I had initial analyses from my year of inquiry, new findings came into relief with distance. While I did not abandon early findings, I nuanced them in my return to reading more academic theory. Through my journaling, coding emerged as a useful tool to make sense of some of my data that was transcribed and written out (Miles et al, 2013). I utilized several rounds of coding, after those developed from my initial re-reading, to think and rethink through what the data was telling me and what, of the many stories I found as relevant, I thought made sense to share.

Below I have included the codes I developed as they appear in my final dissertation writing. As I read my data I considered certain questions that helped me
identify themes, based on my research questions: How did students narrate their decision to join class? What were their visions for the effective teaching and learning of English? What were my and my teachers’ commitments to teaching and learning as expressed in classroom interaction and program design? In taking an emergent approach, I also tried to look for themes I was not anticipating. Through these questions three general areas of connection, care and curiosity emerged as important factors in learners’ motivations for joining and staying in class that crossed over with my own perspectives on ESOL program and curriculum design. Within these broader themes that I highlighted as recurring and important, I developed sub-codes to note the different contexts I was seeing them occur. Through my coding, it also emerged that these three areas were overlapping and interrelated, as several moments across data sources were doubly or triply coded with the over-lapping factors.

- Motivations
  - Goals
  - Hopes
  - Dreams
- Literacy histories
  - Cultural
  - Schooling
  - Language repertoires
  - Faith
  - Family
  - Work
  - Other adult literacy
- Students’ concerns
  - Equity issues
  - Family
  - Work
  - Community
- English learning challenges
  - Time
  - Exhaustion
  - Childcare
I used these codes to identify what I saw as repetitive themes that spoke to my questions and the emerging insights that came from my data. I used moments where codes layered (for instance, when emotion coded over classroom interactions), to make sense of how connection/care/curiosity could be complicated. It also allowed me to track how, across data, these themes emerged as intertwined and essential to varied aspects of class. In the spirit of practitioner inquiry and a desire to avoid making statements about best-practices,
I also am careful to use my codes and patterns I noticed to speak to future wonderings and theorizations rather than codes for absolute truth.

**Exiting**

Exiting my research context was complicated. While I had planned my exit as a teacher from the site over a year prior to my leaving in an effort to have a smooth transition and end to my research mindful and respectful of my participants (Mangual Figueroa, 2014), my exit was less than smooth due to a conundrum of circumstances. In the spring term, though we began with many students who had returned from the fall term, by the end of the final term we had very few students showing up consistently due to a variety of issues (something I’ll explore in later chapters). As such, when it came time to say good-bye, there were few people to say good-bye to. Though I maintained a connection to the site and the educators there through my year of writing, I was unable to stay connected to most students in my data collection, as they had moved on beyond class and our point of connection was severed. This made member-checks after my year of data collection challenging as I had no forum to approach students and little way to contact them. Phone conversations were possible, but difficult with language barriers and phone number records being incomplete.

I relied on follow-up conversations with key participants and on triangulation through my data sources as forms of checking the validity of my findings. In the meetings I had with participants after the year of data collection, they confirmed my findings and offered nuance on what I had begun to write. Triangulation manifested as cross-checking what students wrote to me in their notebooks with what they discussed in class and in their class work. I also presented my research at Cabrini after my defense to
share my findings with teachers in the programs and students interested in attending. While I was initially distraught that my relationships were curtailed by students leaving, this is also not unusual in adult literacy teaching settings. This frequent movement also became important to my findings development, providing me with fresh inquiries about what exiting and being in relation means.

**Conclusion**

Inquiry pervaded not only my research design, but every aspect of my teaching, interactions with participants, and data analysis. It was also fundamental in ensuring I took a strength-oriented approach to the immigrant students I worked with, avoiding deficitizing approaches that would use research as an opportunity to name what is wrong with the population being researched. When I encountered problems with my research, taking an inquiry approach allowed me to reposition what could be seen as an issue needing to be resolved into a point of investigation. An inquiry approach also provided a basis for me to think about my data process more iteratively and critically, in line with my theoretical and pedagogical orientation. By surrendering to the realities of what happened throughout the year, rather than finding fault with myself or my participants for why my study did not work out the way I anticipated, unforeseen lines of investigation developed that challenged basic conceptions I had about how ESOL classes ought to be taught. My research and theoretical orientation are, in this sense, inseparable. My resulting findings capture this coming together and provide take-aways from a year of learning.
CHAPTER FOUR: INITIALIZING A CRITICALLY STUDENT-CENTERED ESOL CURRICULUM THROUGH COLLECTIVE INQUIRY

I have other classes of English, but for beginners English, but I prefer this one because I think that we learn more here. 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.

(5/8/18 Interview with Salima)

I love to learn different languages because I like to communicate with people, I like to know how the people live, how the people think, the customs. The language sometimes, that's what I'm saying now to the kids [I work with] […] you need to be proud of yourself because you speak two languages, especially when your language is English, the first language, and the second one is Spanish. They saw me like, hm, she's crazy or something. Maybe later they will understand why.

(11/21/17 Interview with Graciela)

Emily: One more question. Do you have anything you want to share with other English teachersthat are teaching adults? Like me? Like at other places? What else would you share? What do you want teachers to know about teaching, specifically adults, English?

Teresa: Just ask for the students what they need or what they like to learn. Specific.

(2/22/18 Interview with Teresa)

Students’ perspectives on what they want to learn in class

I start this chapter with words from students about their experience learning in class, speaking to what brought them to class and what they found meaningful about participating in class. All three quotations speak to different aspects of why students came to ESOL in the first place, why they think learning other languages is important and what kept coming them to class. All three also identify patterns I noticed throughout the year and in my data examination, offering a starting point for initiating a critically student-centered pedagogy for adult ESOL built from the learning goals and interests of students. Using their thoughts, I frame this data chapter that examines how we sought to identify what students wanted to learn about in class and why.
I begin with Salima, who shared with me different perspectives on her varied experiences in adult ESOL classes to make sense of her priorities as an adult ESOL student. Throughout our conversation, she reflected on both her time at the Center and in other classes she had explored. Having recently moved to the US from Algeria less than a year before joining our class, she had attended several different adult education programs to find an English class that worked for her. As she mentioned in the first half of her quote, our class offered something different than learning the basics of language, like “alphabet or to learn grammar” mentioning “we have great subjects with content.” She says, “I prefer this one because I think that we learn more here” when comparing her experiences in “beginner” classes versus her experiences in our class. While she talked about these other classes as interesting in different ways in other parts of her interview, she claimed that she has chosen to invest more in our class as it was more dynamic for her and covered compelling themes. In one way, this speaks to her finding a class that is right for her in terms of linguistic foci. For some students, focusing on the mechanics of English is interesting and useful, as Salima notes at other points in her interview. For her, she is most interested in talking about issues and ideas that capture her attention. Different from the focus on memorizing isolated linguistic rules without meaningful subject matter, she sees our class as focusing primarily on what we are talking about rather than how we are talking about it.

In her rumination on what brought her to class and why she pursued learning multiple languages, Graciela, who spoke Spanish and English and identified as being from Mexico, reflected on her learning in a broader social context, connecting knowing different languages to knowing different people. While she acknowledged learning
English as important, she also highlighted that being multilingual was what she thought people should aspire to, given the multiplicity of opportunities that abound with each new language learned. In this highlighted instant, she specifically brought in her experience as a classroom assistant in a bilingual school, where she had been working for two years. In the first sentence, she shared, “I love to learn different languages because I like to communicate with people.” Communication in ESOL teaching has been conceptualized in numerous ways, from speaking “correctly” along narrow definitions of grammar, to being able to ask for and receive information in service of navigating English dominant institutions, to co-constructing meaning. For Graciela, she equated communicating with getting to know other people and their ways of life: “I like to know how the people live, how the people think, the customs.” Here she identified learning from other cultures and ways of seeing the world as fascinating to her. She also put language and culture in the same realm, positing that to know people is to know different ways of speaking, thinking and operating in the world.

She drew out these implications in the second half of the quotation, connecting her own reasoning for wanting to learn multiple languages to the learnings from youth she worked with as an aide in a bilingual school. She recalled telling them, “you need to be proud of yourself because you speak two languages, especially when your language is English, the first language, and the second one is Spanish.” Elaborating on this idea later in our conversation, she went on to explain that she saw learning two languages for children as especially important in the US as so many children of primarily Spanish speaking people she knew had trouble communicating with their largely Spanish-speaking parents because they spent most of their day communicating in English.
Through tracing the ways that knowing or not knowing multiple languages played out in
different aspects of people’s lives, she spoke to the importance of valuing all the
languages people know and viewing them as a resource. Her description of interacting
with children at her school job also shows how Graciela spoke back to dominant US
language ideologies that position English as superior to Spanish, as detailed in earlier
accounts of Americanization efforts and forced non-dominant American English
language erasure in the US. Recognizing the power these ideologies hold, she mentioned
that kids look at her funny, “like, hmm, she's crazy or something” when she tells them
that it is great to know Spanish and English. Yet she persisted in imparting this to youth
she worked with, seeing the implications of non-English language erasure playing out not
just in school, but in families and communities she knows. Though she was in English
class, Graciela alluded that she was not there to learn English because it is any more
important than the other languages she speaks; rather she positioned it as one of multiple
languages that exist in the world. Knowing multiple languages, as she sees, augments
your options for interactions and learning about the world through others.

Teresa’s quote rounded out this beginning contemplation, stating simply how she
thought teachers should work with adult learners. A long-time student in the Cabrini
ESOL program, having participated in different iterations of the ESOL class on and off
since Penn first partnered with the Cabrini community, she had an extensive view of the
class and additionally varied experiences across different adult education programs in
Philadelphia. Informed by her many years of being an adult language learner, she
directly said, “Just ask for the students what they need or what they like to learn.
Specific.” Not only should they ask students, but they should be “specific”, listening
closely to what students want and need from class. Teresa invoked a needs-based approach to adult literacy, in a way reinforcing dominant paradigms for adult literacy education that encourage to certain English language essentials all adults should have to live and work in the US. She did, however, put wants and needs in the same phrase, saying “what they need or what they like learn” together as equally important. Despite naming that adult learners have certain needs, she also implored adult educators to think about what students “like to learn”, naming learning interests as an import point of consideration for teachers in designing their curricula. In this way, she frames the classroom as a place where students can nourish multiple aspects of their learning, depending on how they name what they are looking for in class.

The need for a contextualized view of students’ goals and desires for English class

Salima, Graciela, and Teresa all emphasized the need for teachers to design a curriculum around what students want to learn and what they find interesting. While centering adult literacy curricula on what students want to learn is not a new idea, this phrasing of wants and interests in addition to need is important to note. When programs focus on predetermined needs of adult ESOL students such as job preparedness and ability to navigate English dominant institutions — things that adult learners very well may identify as important to them in their learning — there is little room to consider what other learning goals and aspirations students might have beyond the preidentified learning realm. English for specific purposes (ESP) and survival English classes have been identified as popular approaches to adult ESOL and have also been critiqued for their reliance on assumptions about what adult ESOL learners are capable of or interested in doing with their lives (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985; Belcher, 2006; Warriner, 2007).
Presuppositions about the language adults need at work can lead to curricula that position adult ESOL learners as low-wage workers, limiting the language they learn to language that will serve them only in the jobs they already have rather than jobs that might pay more and treat them more fairly (J. S.-Y. Park & Wee, 2012; Warriner, 2007). Cooke (2006), in her analysis of 75 interviews with adult ESOL learners in the UK, found that teachers' views of students’ learning goals were often incomplete and only related to the language skills they lacked. This, she found despite a national focus in the UK on student-centered teaching and a national curriculum where developing individual learning plans with learners was a core practice. As she noted, in addition to things researchers already have postulated about adults learning English needing individualized support in ESOL classes, “we also need to consider their lives outside the classroom” in addition to “their past experiences” and “their aspirations.” (p. 69). Knowing language needs alone is not sufficient for teachers to provide curricula that speaks to the multiple futures students may imagine for themselves.

With considerations in mind about the need for more detailed views on students’ lives, aspirations and interests beyond ESOL, I analyze data collected over the initial periods of our fall and spring terms to examine how my fellow co-educators and I went about identifying curricular directions from students’ interests. In this chapter, I will document what happened when I took an inquiry stance to learning about what students want from class through activities that asked students to identify their goals for class and their dreams for the future; utilizing a typical adult literacy classroom activity to explore how it might be used to examine students learning goals beyond the learning of English.
Approaches to initializing student-centered curricula in adult literacy research

Having taught in a student-centered adult literacy program prior to working at Cabrini, I was familiar with the practice of building an iterative curriculum around what students wanted to learn. Individual learning goal-setting was one way my mentors had recommended I start this work with students and was something I brought into my practice to learn about what brought students to class. Through setting individualized learning goals from students’ own assessments of their language needs, I had worked with students in terms past to set their own learning goals rather than relying on predetermined standards. In research on adult literacy, students setting their own learning goals is identified widely as a useful activity to help students imagine their future learning trajectory and provide teachers with a guide to help students realize that trajectory (Comings, Garner, & Smith, 2007; National Research Council, 2012; Petty & Thomas, 2014). Many adult learning theorists argue that giving adult learners opportunity to determine the direction of their learning is especially 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). Given the decentralized nature of adult literacy education in the US, goal-setting can also offer structure for students and teachers alike in a context where students are very motivated to learn but find themselves without a clear system to guide them through their further education.

Working with students to identify learning goals, however, does not mean that a critical or meaning-centered curriculum will follow. As Cooke (2006) alluded to in her discussion of adult students’ experiences in the UK, ESOL programs that claim to be
student centered can limit what they see as students learning goals to language acquisition benchmarks removed from learners’ larger contexts. Turning to participatory and critical adult literacy pedagogies, another direction for developing student-centered curricula emerges built from dialogic engagements with students’ language learning goals and interests (Auerbach et al., 1996; Ramdeholl, 2011; Wong, 2006). As Auerbach and her fellow community-based ESOL teachers/co-authors (1996) asserted, many students can be initially uncomfortable with an approach centered on their lives and goals. As they noted, 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. They 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:

“[F]inding 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 looks like, however, has not been widely, empirically explored by contemporary adult literacy or ESOL researchers.

Recent scholarship by Motha and Lin (2014) has also pushed ESOL educators to consider the multiple ways students’ desires for learning language might be shaped by factors coming from sources outside of the learner. As they discussed, desires for learning English are often interrelated to larger systems of power that influence what students claim to want in their language learning. From global white supremacy, to
English hegemony to state defined linguistic correctness, certain discourses permeate society so totally that the possibility of voicing a true desire does not exist without recognition of those discoursed. How to unpack these desires with students, however is not so clear:

It would do a disservice to English learners for ELT professionals to try to redirect or redefine desires of English learners away from English, and it would be hypocritical given that we ourselves participate in the industry. To assume that TESOL professionals of any linguistic identity know better than their students what is best for them would be, at best, presumptuous. (p. 353).

What Motha and Lin ultimately called for is a deeper interrogation of these desires and an awareness on the part of the educator that desire free from oppressive influence is not always discernible.

Without a deeper exploration in research of what arriving at student-identified issues might look like, teachers attempting to form a critical, student-centered curriculum might fall into the same trap that more traditional programs fall into, namely of limiting students’ goals to predetermined areas of learning based on the teacher’s perspective. Educators across different pedagogical approaches can overlook students’ perspectives in pursuit of what they deem appropriate end points for students. Discussions of what students want to learn from class can become a means for students to arrive at teachers’ or programs’ identified learning goals rather than students’ learning goals as they conceive of them, even when teachers have the best intentions and attempt not to overly influence students’ decision making. For educators most concerned with language acquisition, this might mean encouraging students to select and achieve language learning goals in pursuit of becoming a better English speaker over goals that pertain to realms beyond communication. For critical pedagogues, this might manifest in teachers pushing
certain topics considered justice and action-oriented over more concrete language goals or subjects not deemed compelling that students might identify.

Being mindful of the problems with relying solely on the goal-setting or issue-identifying model to define how I approached developing curricular directions to serve students’ desires for learning, I nominated to meld the two approaches by taking an inquiry stance to students’ learning goals. In my context, this meant beginning our terms with a several-class long project that encouraged students to identify what their learning goals were and how class might help them arrive at those goals. To build this inquiry, my fellow co-facilitators and I designed several activities exploring the meaning of learning language and students’ goals not only for class but life more broadly, centering students’ self-reflection across multiple forms as venues for this inquiry.

This also, in a way, helped me to grapple with the messiness of students’ language learning desires. Like Motha and Lin, I recognize that desire and aspiration for language learning is complex and not something free from the influence of powerful discourses that might shape how students narrate their decisions to join class. I was also especially aware of the white critical teacher trap or the problematic idea that I could get to some authentic view of what students wanted from class if we engaged in enough discussion deconstructing the nature of language. Who was I to say that students were not telling me what they truly desired? Inquiry with students into how they imagined their goals and dreams felt like the best course of action to open space for students to tell me what they wanted to about their aspirations for the future. In the following sections I investigate how I carried out this inquiry in our fall term and the directions it led us to for our curriculum.
Learning to ask the right questions

Trying to identify what students wanted to learn in class was difficult to ascertain because of the nature of the query itself. In other terms, when I asked students, “What do you want to learn in English class?”, students responded in a way that let me know the question seems self-evident. We came to English class to learn English. What else can we say? Even when students had particular answers about what they wanted to learn, they also often felt that they did not know how to answer the question, some telling me they could not say exactly what they wanted to share as it was difficult for them to communicate in English. 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 interpret 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 forms where I could not incorporate other languages. This limited whole-group interactions largely to English. As such, I found myself constantly experimenting with different approaches to asking what students wanted to learn and why.

One way I sought to get students’ initial insight into their goals for learning was through a questionnaire we gave all incoming students on their first day of class. In the table below, I include answers from the nine initial forms returned to me by participants from the fall term that are also representative the typical range of answers we have
received over the years to variations on the question, “What do you want from class?”

On the form, 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1: Responses to “Why are you in English class?”²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Because I have many difficulties to communicate at work, and I think that the language is very important” - Gabriel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I need improve my language” - Sonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I would like to write and speak very well with the other people because the lenguaje is very important” - Minerva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I would like to learn more reading and writing” - Rose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I would like to be berer in English when I talk. And write or read.” - Teresa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Learn more words.” - Aurora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I like to learnen more grama like reading and writing” - Graciela</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer – Selena, Luis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These answers were useful in a sense. For one, I was made aware of the specific areas of language learning people wanted to learn about. In these responses, I also saw that students have an awareness of the different components of language often described in language classes (reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary). Connection with others through language appeared as a common goal. There remained, however, a need for further information. Many people isolated a desire to communicate, to connect: but

² All student writing reproduced through print was originally handwritten. The words appear as students wrote them to maintain as close a representation
communicate what? To whom? Many also expressed an interest specifically in reading and writing, but again: for what ends? Several students specifically named work as a source of inspiration for their joining class, but there is not much discussion of what about work students wanted to learn. Throughout the questionnaire, there were different places for people to provide their input as to interesting literacy activities they would like to engage in but, similar to the above table, there was little detail people expressed in these responses.

**Collective inquiry into class goals as meaningful curriculum**

Through reading the answers from the initial intake form, my assumption informed through years of prior experience was confirmed. Simply asking learners what they wanted from class was not enough to build a student-generated curriculum. Reflecting on successful activities from previous terms, I and my co-planner for the term, Willow, elected to begin the fall term with a more intentional, longer-term goal setting project to generate a collective board of dreams we could utilize for curriculum planning. In years past, I had created visual representations of students’ dreams, inspired by an activity provided in *Change Agent*[^1] a useful and well-loved adult literacy resource created by adult literacy students and practitioners. I developed different metaphors each time we did the activity to represent dreams or goals visually, but the essence remained the same. Students identified their goals for either learning in class or outside of class and then identified concrete steps to making those goals a reality. In leading the activity, I tried to encourage students to think of how they could pull on our class resources to

[^1]: Change Agent publications can be found here: [https://changeagent.nelrc.org/](https://changeagent.nelrc.org/)
achieve their goals; using the collective visual to spark a class discussion about how we could band together as a class community to help each other achieve our goals.

Introducing new terminology

For the fall, I elected 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. Choosing to use the term “dream” rather than goal, a decision I had made in years past, I hoped to augment our conversation to include discussions about students hopes for the future beyond class. 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 conversations about things we want to achieve that might not be easily achievable in a short period of time. Dream imagery has long been important in liberatory and resistance discourse in the US, 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, especially in my experience as an adult ESOL educator. 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 might bring to mind, I wanted to be sure to open a discussion about dreams that acknowledged these mixed feelings. As such, Willow and I designed our reflection to be done not only in whole group discussion, but through individual writing and small group work. We also decided to communicate as openly as we could that there was no limit or preconceived parameter as to what these dreams needed to look like. Our class dreams and goals could be big or small and could have something to do with English class or not. They could 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 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.

More than in years past, I wanted to utilize this activity as the basis for our curriculum. While we had certainly utilized students’ dreams and goals in making curriculum in years past, we struggled to integrate all of our students’ goals collectively into one unifying curriculum. In other terms, co-teachers had looked thematically at what students’ goals were and planned independent units within the curriculum rather than creating one curriculum that could touch on all students’ interests. We had also tried to move through the activity quickly, setting aside only a few days to identify students’ dreams and goals so that we could quickly generate directions for learning based on students’ interests. Instead, we approached the creation of our dream garden as an
inquiry in and of itself, following in line with our larger impulse to take an inquiry stance as to what students wanted to learn.

**An unexpected turn**

After a few introductory sessions where we got to know each other as a class through different activities and began to talk about the idea of what language is, reading a poem and article about indigenous languages in the US to spark a discussion, we presented the activity of goal-setting. Beginning with basic graphic organizers to gauge how learners understood goal setting and what their initial goals might be, we moved into a more structured discussion of goals, moving in to using the term dreams to augment our conversation. Alongside our discussions, I wanted to continue to open space for students’ insights and opinions to be brought into class in ways that had been generative in the past. This I hoped would allow me to get to know students better and also provide further fodder for our discussions of what we might identify as our dreams and goals for the future. Accordingly, we instituted a weekly routine of writing in our conversation notebooks and sharing class news on Thursdays. On this particular Thursday, I had planned an activity where we would engage a deeper inquiry into what the word *dream* and what the word *goal* meant to students after our notebook writing and news sharing. Our class news conversation, however, yielded a different direction for inquiry on that day, detailed below:

These are the notes from Class News [that I wrote on the board]:

Sonia: I’ve been sad about the news about the earthquake in Mexico and the hurricane in Puerto Rico. And more in other places, like Japan. In my country, Perú, they are worried about earthquakes because it’s a seismic zone.
Rose: 1) A hurricane passed through my country and I can’t get in touch with them. I have family in St. Thomas too, and I still can’t get in touch with some of the them. My nephew lives in the US and cannot get in contact with his mom on St. Thomas.
2) I am going to [a local college] to talk about something like DACA related to immigration. I am going to be the speaker.

As Sonia shared her news, she had more to say and clearly had a lot of concerns and thoughts about what has been happening in the world. We talked for a minute about what faultlines are and what seismic plates are. I also was sure to express my regret and sadness about the news, saying that we could help people find resources if they needed any help sending money to places affected by the most recent disasters. I am not sure how many students may have family members affected by the disasters and I didn’t want to pressure anyone to talk about it, but wanted to make clear that people knew I was available to talk to if anyone had any concerns or worries. After Sonia shared, Rose wanted to share her news, first sharing about the hurricane (doubly upsetting as she shared similar news about a different hurricane last week) and then sharing the news about her speaking at [a local college]. (Fieldnotes, 9/22/17)

Multiple important things happened here that shaped our class directions in ways I could not have foreseen. Sonia, a student who had just start classes two weeks before and was not involved in other activities at the Center, expressed her worry and fear for others in our class news. As a student from Perú, she shared that she had not been directly affected by the natural disasters that occurred in that week, but knew others in our class had. Sharing her feelings of sadness and regret for others in the room, she opened space for a class conversation about these disasters, where others more directly affected by these events might have been reluctant to bring them up. Sharing her solidarity in her worry about her own home country and using Class News to express those feelings, Sonia brought the immediate reality of the world into our class. Rose continued the conversation, sharing about her own experience waiting for news from countries where her family lived that were affected by the hurricanes. Rose had talked about the hurricanes often to me in her conversation notebook and in pre-class conversations, but
not as much with the whole class. Together, Sonia and Rose’s news grounded us in the
world we live in today: an unexpected and needed grounding before our discussion of our
hopes and dreams for the future.

Moreover, Rose shared about an upcoming event she was participating in that also
touched on relevant issues in learners’ lives. As a staff member at the Center, Rose was
connected to many different colleges, especially parochial schools, from the greater
Philadelphia area who often visited and worked with the Center in different capacities.
As such, she was invited to speak at a local college during a day-long gathering
discussing immigration. Having planned for this speech for some time and co-written it
with other staff at the Center, Rose wanted to use our class as an opportunity to practice
reading her speech, in which she detailed her experiences as an immigrant woman who
identified as being from Dominica and also identified as being black. Having known
Rose for some time, I knew that reading out loud was often difficult for her and that it
was something she wanted to practice. I was nervous for her in her speech-giving, as she
was reading in front of a class of unfamiliar peers. While she knew some people, most
other students in class were new to her. I had no reason to doubt that people would be
open and caring with her, but the element of not knowing the group’s dynamics made me
nervous. At the end of the reading, it was clear however that her peers were supportive
of her and encouraging of her sharing; that this risk Rose took paid off not only for her,
but the whole class. Below are fieldnotes that discuss what happened after she shared:

Everyone clapped […] at the end and she was smiling. I hope that she felt ok
about it. I asked people to give her tips after she read, thinking it could be a good
time to get feedback and maybe some support on her speech giving. Worrying
that it could be awkward and that no one would say anything, my fears were
quickly squashed, Aurora offering that Rose should breath and talk slowly. Sonia
offered similar advice, saying that she should speak slowly and take her time. (Fieldnotes, 9/22/17)

In this class news sharing, Rose was able to not only share her personal concerns and worries she was currently experiencing, but move forward on her language learning goals and connect that action to her personal experience. Despite my apprehension for her, students came together to support Rose and offer their appreciation of her attempt. They also provided guidance in how to move forward, helping to coach Rose in her reading.

This moment ended up taking a large chunk of class. Though seemingly unrelated to our process of goal and dream imagining, which I had carefully planned with other classroom facilitators, this moment became foundational for our future work together collaboratively imagining our dreams. As a new student, Sonia was able to build connections with other students through her expression of solidarity with others who might be experiencing hardship in class. Rose used the forum of class news to build off of Sonia and bring forth multiple concerns she was grappling with in her life, melding her literacy learning journey with her concerns about her family and well-being. This inquiry turn also brought to the forefront issues students were affected by and wanted to discuss further in class. In reflection, this was a pivotal moment in class. Class continued that day, after our conversations had run their course and we shared together what we found challenging in English class and what we hoped to learn in the future; laying groundwork for collaboration together in naming and imagining future learning dreams and goals.

**Engaging a multi-faceted reflection on our dreams**

To facilitate a more in-depth discussion about dreams and build on the momentum of our class coming together through our extended class news, Willow and I planned a
lesson around Langston Hughes’ poem “Harlem,” where Hughes offers a poetic reflection on dreams and their relation to 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 time really understanding the sentences meaning. 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. Willow lead the first session, given her experience teaching poetry and creative writing. After reading the poem, she made pairs of students to read through and dissect the poem together, line by line. Having noticed in our first three classes where we read poetry with students that figurative language was difficult to interpret given the multiple levels of sense-making students were engaging, we were careful to scaffold these learning activities through interactive, student driven comprehension activities. Given time limitations and where students were with their English familiarity in addition to familiarity with US 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. We focused instead on the meaning students could make from Hughes’ words and what it meant to them when they read it.

Initially, this piece was challenging for students given the complex vocabulary and language usage. However, students eventually were able to make meaning together, connecting the feeling of a dream deferred with pain. After students shared their interpretations of their lines with the whole class, I asked them 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 open space for learners to talk about their dreams, generally, and share how they were feeling about them. I imagined that some might be frustrated, feeling that their dreams though present, were not fully realized. Given the emotional response the poem might have elicited, I wanted to open space for students to share 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 their dreams.** Of the students present in class at the time of our writing reflection on “Harlem”, four — Graciela, Sonia, Minerva and Aurora — had opted into being participants in the study, with each of the four’s writing in response to my extra question deepening my perspectives on their dreams. In response to the question, “What are your dreams in life?” Graciela shared the following: “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 mentioned her goal is to learn English, she mentioned so following the goal for her daughter to do well and succeed. This is especially poignant given her answer on her intake sheet, which focused on her learning grammar, reading and writing. In asking Graciela to share about the goals in her life, I was afforded a different view into her priorities that did not necessarily obscure her original listed goals for class, but provided me more information about what her desired future looks like.

In Sonia’s entry about her dreams, there was 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. As depicted in Figure 4.1, Sonia wrote about how she has “many dreams.”

Figure 4.1: Sonia’s day 1 dream freewrite

As she stated, “When I think in my dreams, not only I think in myself because I think in my kids too.” Troubling the idea that her dreams for the future can be isolated to her own achievements, she found that her children are a driving force in all considerations she has about the future. Her dreams included visions for her own career, but she linked those desires for changes in her employment to making a better life for her and her kids. She

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8 Select student writings appear as images. This was done when I felt conveying them as typed transcriptions made them difficult to read or did quite not capture the essence of the artifact.
imagined a “good” job for herself and a “bigger” house in addition to a secure future for her children. Though happy in life in many ways, she also felt that part of her life’s work is to strive to make her life better not just for herself, but for her family.

Moreover, while she dreamt of material changes in her life and career aspirations for her sons, saying “I wanna see them, with a career” she also dreams that her children will become “good men.” Her distinction here connoted a different desire for her children from her dreams for their career. Wanting her children to be “good men” indicated, to me, that she hoped her children will try their best to impact the world and those around them positively. This requires a kind of education that encourages reflection and thinking about the world from others’ perspectives. In this way, she alluded to the importance of more humanistic and critical education in naming how she hoped her sons might develop. Finally, she related her dreams back to herself, saying “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.” Here, I see Sonia acknowledging that while she has certain autonomy, saying “I am still working in my dreams”, she also acknowledged that some conditions are out of control, like “life and health.” In a way, she recognized that while her dreams are achievable by her, these dreams are contextualized within the parameters of the world we live in, where conditions are not always predictable. Sonia, through her writing, used the language of dreams to share what motivates her and what she hopes for the future. Through reading about her hopes, I also learned about what she might be interested discussing in class. Family relationships, philosophical questioning of what it meant to be good, learning about the process of buying a home: through her sharing, multiple points of inquiry present themselves.
Minerva, in writing about her dreams, shared the following thoughts: “My dreams in my life is one day to see [all] my family. When I think about this make me feel happy.” Like Sonia and Graciela who focused on their family as essential in the formation of their dreams, Minerva focused on her family both near and far. Alluding to the fact that much of her family is still in Ecuador, she shared a desire to see her family that is far away. English or career advancement, here, did not figure into a description of her dreams and what she wants from life. Again, echoing Sonia and Graciela’s dream descriptions, Minerva utilized the opportunity to talk about dreams in her life to isolate goals beyond her initial statement on her intake form and 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 US that make it difficult or impossible, depending on your immigration status, to visit family in other countries. The seeming basicness of her request, only “to see [all] her family”, gave me pause to reflect on the complexities around immigration and how they are lived in students’ lives. I thought about how US intervention in political and economic affairs the world over make for 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 on the complexity of how her dreams have changed over time. 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 went on to share that she wants to go back to her country and see her family there. Relatedly, she expressed that her other dream is to live together, not just on visits. Contrary to popular discourse that imagines ESOL classrooms as gateways for assimilation into a monolingual and monocultural US society, Aurora’s dreams for her future are transnational. Like Minerva, she listed primarily, that she would like to return to her country to see her family again. Taking it a step further than Minerva, she also spoke of a world where she can live together with her family. Beyond geopolitical borders, she dreamt of a future where her whole network of loved ones can be together and she can enjoy time with them. Time spent in enjoyment of her family is her main concern, not time spent according to definitions of productivity or success.

The next class Aurora came in and continued to write without direction from me. After writing in her dialogue journal, she wrote more about her goals for the future in the back of her dialogue journal, pictured in Figure 4.3.

**Figure 4.2:** Aurora’s day 1 dream freewrite
Different from her more buoyant tone in her previous writing, Aurora shared that her big dreams for herself have changed over time, from when she was “young” and felt good. While originally she wanted to be a teacher, her goals shifted to being more focused on her daughter, “But now all mi life change.” In the moment of her writing, her focus was “make something special for my and my Daughter.” 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 said, “now my wish is make something special for my and my Daughter that is a buy a place when we can live together.” Here, Aurora, privileged their relationship as something important that she wanted to strengthen through her new house. When writing about how she felt about her dream, she expressed that “I feel sure to do but, maybe take me long time because need to work, but [I] decide to do.” Like Sonia, she expressed that in order for these dreams to
come true for her and her daughter, there was a long road ahead involving unknown amounts of work. Her belief in her own agency to make these dreams happen came through, however, saying “I feel sure to do” and “[I] decide to do,” indicating that though the road may be hard, she is committed to this path. Again, though Aurora’s goal discussion here was mainly about the material changes she wanted to see in her life, the reasons for that material change were centered around relationships and doing things to make her daughter’s life better, as she imagined it. She wanted to “make something special for [me] and my daughter.” She wanted to find a home with her daughter where she could nourish their relationship and offer something to her that is worthy of their specialness.

This change in her writing, to me, also marked a shift in Aurora’s use of the word “dream.” From a piece written about visiting and living with her family in Mexico punctuated by exclamation points to a more somber and detailed writing about her dreams to buy a house for her and her daughter, who already lives with her in the US, Aurora shifted her use of the word to indicate that one dream is maybe more achievable than the other. This resignation Aurora indicated affected me, thinking of the things I take for granted as a person who is part of a multi-generation, documented European-American family who lives close to and has easy access to her family. Along with reading Minerva’s text, I was reminded of the importance of framing discussions and class activities to be open and mindful of the multiple experiences students might have around a certain topic. The importance of fostering this openness, as Aurora reminded me in her shift, also must be inclusive of people who do not want to share certain experiences. I considered how, like class news and conversations, we might invite in
learners’ experiences without coercing anyone into sharing difficult memories or memories not shareable to a larger class.

Together, Graciela, Sonia, Minerva, and Aurora’s writing about their dreams reveal 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,” we centered dreams as important aspects of our lives both in and out of class and both realized and not yet realized. By using literature and writing activities as a vehicle for this engagement, examining our dreams also became an activity where students examined language seriously and learned about conventions of English while simultaneously drawing from their experiences as learning material. In this way, our inquiry did not detract from students’ language learning goals and also built space for creating a classroom centered on critical inquiry and student-generated learning.

Students took up the invitation to share about their dreams, sharing about what they wanted for the future and the complexities of those hopes. 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 felt they had to work towards. Aurora even spoke of her own deferred dream, of her having to give up her dream of being a teacher because of changes in her life. Underlying students’ trepidations about achieving their dreams, there was often a tinge of ambivalence about the future; that perhaps certain things are not possible. Perhaps it is not possible to reunite extended families that live across borders and are separated by geopolitical borders imposed by institutional powers. Perhaps work that pays fairly will always be elusive and housing
prices always too high to realize dreams of owning a large or better home. In their
individual writing, students acknowledge the messiness of dreams; that they might not
always come true despite how hard you work. Their critical grappling with this questions
speaks to the importance of giving students space to privately to reflect on what their
hopes and dreams might be. It also provided me with considerations about how I framed
future assignments and discussions about family, employment, and students’
socioeconomic status. Discussing dreams in supplement with goals then emerged as a
way for students to talk about their hopes for the future alongside their awareness that the
world was not always fair or set up for the realization of dreams. In this way, our first
critical inquiry emerged not only as it pertained to students’ learning, but my own as a
teacher.

**Making a collective dream visual.** Over the next few class sessions, I had
students write out which dream they would focus on and worked together with them to
identify steps they would take towards realizing their goals. As some students came to
different days of class, they filled out goal worksheets 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 4.4, our class dreams emerge visually as a collective: all side-
by-side growing together. I also include a table with the goals and the steps to the
achieve the goals in Table 4.2 for easier reading. Two students (Rose and Teresa) whose
goals are not included on this picture in the dream chart as they added theirs at a later time are also included in the table.

Figure 4.4: Class dream garden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Steps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 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 gave 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 |
| 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. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Goal and Dreams</th>
<th>Steps to Achieving Goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selena</td>
<td>My goal is to learn to communicate with other people in English like my children’s teachers.</td>
<td>Attend classes regularly, study and practice English, also read books and see news in English. My dream is to communicate with all the people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>José</td>
<td>Speak English and being able to write well. I also graduated GED.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>My dream is to be bilingual.</td>
<td>1) Keep studying 2) a lot of practice 3) a lot of dedicacion and commitment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>My Dream is speak English more fluently and start a new career.</td>
<td>- Practice conversations with my kids - Watch TV, just English movies or TV shows with subtitles - Reading books for 30 minutes every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minerva</td>
<td>My dream is one day see my daughters finish their studies and that they are professional and can be independent.</td>
<td>1) I have to support them economically and when they think that is very difficult to be there giving encouragement. 2) Teach them that they have responsibilities in the house and the college. 3) They need effort and dedication to meet their goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomas</td>
<td>My dream is to speak English, because I have to talk with my sons.</td>
<td>1) I will watch TV in English, 2) I will need to practice a lot, 3) I will read more books</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teresa  |  My dream is buy a house  |  My dream is buy a house.  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1) work Moore.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2) save mony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3) looking a house that it has a good area, good price, and a gorges house</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 stated in their reflections. Graciela and Aurora, for example both nominated to focus on specific language goals to share with the class, refraining from sharing their more private dreams. Similarly, Minerva’s goals were more closely related to her daughter than stated in her pre-write. Generally, there is a focus on students wanting to learn English as essential components to their learning goals and dreams, which I had seen in previous surveys collected from students. 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.

What was most signaled to me in this reading of students’ dreams was that students were putting English in its place. ESOL classes were not seen as the place to work towards other dreams that did not relate to learning English. Rather, English was English and what they wanted to share as their dreams in the context of a collective class remained isolated to English. Students’ critical read of the world and the sense of injustice they may feel about it was not of concern in this moment and were, possibly, not best addressed in English class. That being said, having taken an inquiry stance, the nuance behind what students say they wanted to learn English for came through and
signaled to me how I might understand more subtext in their goals beyond how they read superficially. Rather than reading Sonia’s dream to “start a new career” as indicating a need for rote workforce readiness, I saw that goal embedded within her larger dreams for her sons. Aurora’s dream to “learn more” so she does not need to use “a dictionary” all the time tied into her dream to be more independent and financially established with her daughter. Aurora’s dream to “learn more” so she does not need to use “a dictionary” all the time tied into her dream to be more independent and financially established with her daughter.

Graciela’s voicing of her own self-defined success especially reminded me to appreciate the nuances of critical consciousness. As she stated, “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 US being a land of opportunity and English as a way to access that opportunity and demonstrate loyalty to the US, she also centralized helping people as a goal of hers to achieve through learning English. While English is reified as a language that can be used to “communicate with all people,” her ultimate goal is to learn English so that she might “help others.” I also read this as Graciela seeing herself with knowledge and assistance to share that could benefit others who know English. While one as a critical pedagogue could read this and see an internalized ideology that needs correction, I see the workings of “nomadic consciousness” Guerra (2004) described and wonder how I might take Graciela’s multiple perspectives on seeing the world seriously. In this way, I recognize that Graciela might at once be critical of US imperialism and colonial language policies, while also embracing of dominant ideologies that circulate about the relationship between English and an imagined American identity. How might I teach in a way that supports students in questioning their own assumptions about
language hegemony in the US, while also honoring that some of these ideas about needing to learn English to function in the US feel true and lived in the lives of students? How might I better understand how my students see the world and provide multiple opportunities for them to share their opinions so that I have a rich understanding of their worldview rather than relying on momentary utterances to dictate how I see them and how they see the world? Overall, these students’ final iterations of their goals pushed me to re-commit to my own inquiry stance in understanding the binary between resistant/not resistant to dominant literacy and language learning paradigms.

**Initiating a collective curriculum from our class goals**

Through an inquiry that took multiple sessions and utilized a variety of approaches — including literature engagement, a 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. My task then became to think about how I might formulate a curriculum respectful of students’ stated language learning goals and also inviting of their critical perspectives. 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.
New insights into students’ critical read of the world were also illuminated through our initial several week inquiry. Students’ sharing during the class news inquiry spiral and their independent reflections illuminated to me the critical directions students might want to take the class and also signaled to me that they felt invited to bring in concerns not directly related to English. While I had understood critical teaching as directly tackling critical issues through structured class activities and interactions, the moments where I felt the most critical work happening was in these moments where students brought up issues themselves and directed class as they saw fit. While students’ dreams they identified for the class dream board touched on some of these themes, I realized that while our identified dreams and goals certainly might guide our class direction, leaving space every week for the unknown to arise was also essential in making our class feel like a space where students could bring up issues about equity and justice that concerned them.

As we went forward with our 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 across 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 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 earn her GED 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 for us to continue this spirit of inquiry; 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.

**Revisiting our inquiry**

Another aspect of continuing our inquiry was re-evaluating our dreams and goals throughout the year, recognizing that these were not static ideas but imagined futures that could grow in conversation through changing life circumstances and shifting interests. As Canagarajah (2008) noted in his discussion of researchers’ sociocultural perspectives on why and how people learn new languages, “motivations can be contradictory, multiple, and changing” (p. 217). Accounting for how students’ changing life circumstances might affect how people approach their learning, we left the dream board out in every session for students to revisit and also had built-in periods for reflection and re-evaluation of our dreams at the beginning of our new spring term. Though our spring term re-evaluation was also to incorporate possible newcomers into the class, our class largely consisted of returning students, making re-evaluation the prevalent theme in our discussion. This re-evaluation was true not only for students, but for my co-facilitators and I in the design of our inquiry into dreams with students. Having seen that students
opted to write about English language learning goals more explicitly in our fall dream garden, we initiated our re-evaluation by asking students to reflect on and rename their dream, and then identify a goal within that dream that they might want to work towards for our time in class together over one term.

While most students’ goals were similar in the reassessment, there were a few students who overhauled their goals substantially. Teresa’s second examination of her dream offers one image of how students did this work and what these revised goals communicated to us as educators. On the day that we were re-evaluating our dreams, I brought back out our old dream board and had reflection worksheets prepared to prompt students’ reflection on their dreams from the spring term. Teresa came in early to that class, joining Rose who often came at least an hour before class. As Teresa would need to leave in the middle of class to go to another, I worked on filling out the worksheet with her so that she might participate in our next dream board iteration.

Teresa wrote in her dream from the previous term (as pictured in Figure 4.5) and proceeded to discuss with me how her focus has shifted. As prices in the neighborhood were becoming more and more expensive with a rising tide of gentrification, Teresa shared that it had become too expensive for her to consider buying a home around Cabrini. As her children were enrolled in the school and she was a long-time member of the larger Cabrini community, she wanted to continue to live in the neighborhood. At one point, Rose popped into the conversation, sharing her own experience as homeowner in the neighborhood. Rose offered advice about building up credit as Teresa shared insights she had learned about through researching how to get a loan and buy a house. The conversation meandered through a variety of themes, including changing racial and
ethnic populations in the neighborhood, “2-minute houses” (Rose’s term for newly constructed homes that seem to pop up overnight), predatory home buying and exploitative landlords (Fieldnotes, 1/30/18).

![Handwritten page showing Teresa’s goal re-evaluation.]

Figure 4.5: Teresa’s goal re-evaluation.

As they spoke I took notes, writing her dictation of what she ultimately wanted to focus on this term as seen in green in Figure 4.5.

After our conversation, Teresa nominated to shift her attention to getting her GED, isolating that as her new goal for the term. She, along with several other students, made this shift, re-orienting our class to focus on English language arts (discussed in more detail in the following chapter). Through this conversation, Rose and Teresa also together reflected on the effects of gentrification in their lives and contexts; focusing on the outside forces that were unfairly keeping Teresa from realizing her dream of home ownership in her long-loved neighborhood. Understanding how Teresa reshaped her goal to be responsive to the inequitable conditions surrounding her, I saw that the opportunity to reform aspirations could be a useful practice to signal to students that not meeting a
goal is not synonymous with failure. Setting goals or naming dreams in the context of class can be problematic for the reasons highlighted at the beginning of this chapter. By incorporating goal-setting focused around students’ deficits in language knowledge, failure to bridge that deficit could be viewed and internalized by students as a further deficit. Similarly, the practice of goal-setting or centering dreams in the curriculum can lead to the same problems if there is no critical revisiting of these aspirations and students’ progress in class is somehow judged by their realizing these objectives, however broadly-focused they may be. Centering students’ perspectives in shaping class material, then, means knowing that these dreams and goals cannot ever be fully known. They must be treated as the malleable and context-affected things they are.

**Beginning with connection, care, and curiosity**

In taking an inquiry stance into students’ goals and dreams, I aimed 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 wanted to learn. My inquiry did not necessarily produce radically different narratives for why people want to learn English from those reasons already discussed in adult literacy research. Taking an inquiry stance to learners’ goals and opening up space to talk about aspirations more broadly beyond goal-setting, however, 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 variable goals. Taking an inquiry stance on learning about what students wanted from class also ultimately proved a resistance to the trend in adult literacy of de-centering students’ perspectives from shaping curricula (Belzer, 2017).
Through students’ identified goals that pertained to themselves individually, connection emerged as central to our goal-setting. Students’ goals emerged as meaningful only in the context of their relationships with others. Goals to get new jobs and learn English for work took on significance as they emerged as goals for the entire network of people leaners were connected to. As we centered more open-ended inquiry in class routines through class news and conversation notebooks, students drove class direction further to focus on the new connections they built between each other. Communities both in and out of class became significant to our class study through these early sessions, setting a tone for interactions that would continue throughout our learning time together.

Hand-in-hand with this attention to connection in goal-setting and emerging class dynamics, care between students, between teachers and students and between our class and the world became evident as key motivators for students coming to class and shaped our learning direction. Through the class news inquiry spiral, students began to demonstrate the care they had for one another; Sonia expressing her solidarity with people, including other learners, affected by natural disasters; learners providing Rose with thoughtful and encouraging feedback on a speech she practiced with the group.

Relatedly, care was a key consideration in the class activities we designed and facilitated. Students were invited to share their dreams and goals in multiple ways, given ample time to reflect and engage terms before selecting the goals they ultimate shared with the larger class community. Students were also given space to reform their goals periodically throughout class, allowing them to redefine what achievement might mean for them and think of learning in class as a journey rather than a failure or success.
Patience, in this way, was centered as a basic aspect of our class and students were approached as the complex beings they are. Our care as teachers then became about working with students to express that we cared about all aspects of their lives and that any part of them was welcome in our learning.

The digging we did into what students wanted to learn was also essentially driven by our valuing of students’ curiosity about the world. Recognizing that students came to class with something they wanted to learn, my fellow co-facilitators and I approached learners as sources of curriculum. We also formulated our inquiry as teachers as an inquiry for students, welcoming students to be curious about themselves and think reflectively about what they wanted from class through our multiple levels of reflections. This valuing of curiosity also extended to students’ intellectual questions beyond learning English. By taking a multipronged approach to understanding what students might want to learn in class, students’ broader questions about the world were invited in to class and students were approached as people with interests apart from learning a prescribed version of English.

Together, these three areas arose as commitments both for teachers and students. While specific goals around improving English generally or getting a job or augmenting one’s credentials were the isolated goals students named, our inquiries revealed numerous other factors centered around connection, care and curiosity that drove students and made learning meaningful in class. That they were present in these early stages of our learning journeys also speaks to how fundamental they were to our classroom environment. In the next chapter, I will examine what our learning journey looked like after this initial inquiry, examining how our richly diverse class community continued to generate new
perspectives on how students learned in community and how we made sense of language together.
CHAPTER FIVE: LEARNING TOGETHER: USING LIVING LITERACY HISTORIES TO MAKE MEANING COLLECTIVELY OF ENGLISH

Rose: I have a one-on-one tutor teacher, she help me in between, but being around a lot of groups, it make you be better, than one-on-one with a teacher.

Emily: How do you think that works? Why? Why do you think that is? […]

Rose: It…it work better because […] if right now you say a question and then the question you said, it’s a group of us, sometimes he don’t know it, she don’t know it, and then maybe you know it. It’s better that they can.. that you can express with them whatever you know and they can express with you what they know.

Emily: Mmm. I love that. So we learn from each other.

Rose: Mhm, so we learn from each other.

(11/16/17 Interview with Rose)

Salima: In this classroom, I saw that everyone has his own level. That's what make our room, our mix. I have some problem […] to understand what the person say sometimes and for example, there are other people who have problem with reading, others with writing and we are all there together to learn more and to improve our level. […] 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.

(5/8/18 Interview with Salima)

Students conceptualizing their learning processes

In each of these quotations, students share how they understand themselves to learn language both in and out of class. Having explored in the last chapter how I began inquiries with learners, I move into an examination of how our learning took shape in class beyond our initial inquiries into what students came to class to learn. I use these students’ thinking to begin the conversation and frame the concept of making meaning from living literacy legacies.
In the first quotation, Rose drew on her varied experiences as an adult literacy learner in different settings to talk about what is useful for her in learning English. While she appreciated her work with a one-on-one tutor, she stated that “being around a lot of groups” can “make you be better, than one-on-one with a teacher.” When I asked her why, to explicate further, Rose answered with a scenario, describing a phenomenon that happened often in our class: “[I]f right now you say a question and then the question you said, it’s a group of us, sometimes he don’t know it, she don’t know it, and then maybe you know it. It’s better that they can…that you can express with them whatever you know and they can express with you what they know.” Almost daily, this interaction that she described happened between students. For her, this multiplied options for support. If you do not know something, odds are your neighbors do. I went on to restate what Rose said, emphasizing what a great point I thought she made, confirming what she said as being, essentially, “So we learn from each other.” Rose agreed, nodding her affirmation and verbally confirming “Mhm, so we learn from each other.” In the most basic sense, Rose shared what made our class so special. Students saw each other as having linguistic and literacy resources and also saw themselves as having such resources: “[Y]ou can express with them whatever you know and they can express with you what they know.” In lieu of textbooks and dictionaries, we often turned to each other first for help in understanding our questions about language. While other sources were certainly used, fellow classmates proved to be the most readily available and accessible information sources.

Salima’s excerpt builds on Rose’s observations in exploring how students engaged each other as co-learners and information sources. She first described how
“everyone has his own level,” implicating herself in the description of people joining class to seek growth in desired areas of language and literacy learning. She identified that “I have some problem […] to understand what the person say sometimes.” She continued, noting “there are other people who have problem with reading, others with writing and we are all there together to learn more and to improve our level.” Like Rose, she noted that everyone brings something that they want to learn and that everyone also has something to offer. As she said, “That's what make our room, our mix” naming that the defining aspect of our classroom as the different language and literacy histories people bring with them. While Salima’s description of herself and classmates could be seen as reifying hierarchical definitions of language knowledge in her use of the concept of improving levels, she emphasized more how everyone has unique competencies and can serve as supports for fellow classmates, rather than how some students are better than others because of their different language levels.

Salima explicated further what learning in class meant to her, saying that “it’s never boring to be in this class.” She noted how we were always active in class, turning to each other with questions rather than sitting with a “paper in the chair.” As she explained, “We work, we conversate, we ask, ‘Oh, do you know what does this mean?’” Here, she underscored that these language differences do not denote a hierarchy; rather she framed these differences as a feature of our classroom that contributed to the dialogic learning that defines our class. Describing what building from our different language knowledges looks like in class, she said, “We ask question between us and it’s really, it’s really interesting.” Adding on to the distinctions Rose made about our class, Salima described our interactions as “interesting,” indicating that class is not only informative,
but captive of her curiosities as well. This, in her experience, was not something she had often encountered in educational spaces. “I never did this things before. It’s the first time I did and I really enjoy. I love this [...] idea, this work.” In explicating how we learn from one and another, Salima underscored that learning from other people in class fed her intellectual inquiries about the world in addition to more focused questions about language learning.

**Difference fueling dialogue**

Through insights from students describing the essential features of our learning, it becomes clear that the heterogeneity of learners was a key asset of our learning community to the extent that students were able to access multiple ways of knowing and ways of being literate through class time. In our context, heterogeneity spanned multiple aspects of students’ identities. While we stratified learners to a certain extent into beginner and intermediate sections, students were very different from one and another within these groups in terms of their reasons for coming to class, their comfort with English and the language and literacy practices they were building from. Students’ backgrounds in terms of work histories, income levels, immigration status, race, cultural backgrounds, living situations, and more also all varied. While these differences could have been approached as barriers, students took advantage of these differences, learning from each other both through teacher and student-guided events. Though language about leveling was sometimes invoked, it was done so by students with the understanding that everyone had something to learn and that this *something to learn* united students.

Despite differences in schooling, language, work, and general life histories, people found...
commonalities through collaboratively making sense of new language and literacy practices.

Opening space for this dialogue to happen was an essential part of our approach informed by critical pedagogy. As Wong (2006) described in her overview of dialogic approaches to TESOL, a dialogic foundation embraces “community as a site and motivation for learning,” “a process of inquiry,” learning “through actual communication”, and an interrogation of “educational participation with respect to multiple dimensions of language, culture and power” (p. 35 – 38). Our learning reflected these four areas as we daily engaged each other on multiple levels of dialogue through written conversations, whole group discussions, and smaller group discussions. For our class, what fostered this dialogic learning involved working from students’ knowledges and past experiences with language and literacy learning. From that inviting in of literacy histories, collaborative meaning making about language followed. In this chapter I explore how these two things took place in our classroom, forming a process of inquiry into language I term making meaning from living literacy histories. In doing so, I also answer my initial research question, “What language and literacy learning practices circulate in a community-based, adult ESOL classroom?” focusing on the sub-questions inquiring into specific student and teacher practices and how they are utilized in class.

Centering meaning-making

Research from sociolinguistics and sociocultural literacy that looks at all speech and literacy events as occurring within specific contexts and mobilized uniquely by different individuals fundamentally shaped my orientation to curriculum formation. Knowing that students would bring rich histories of literacy knowledge with them to
class, a main task became figuring out how to center those knowledges in my planning in service of helping students augment their language and literacy repertoires (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Barton et al., 2000; Rymes, 2013). As Flores (2016) described, seeing language-minoritized students as having language resources entails inviting these students to “explore” language. This investigational approach to building linguistic knowledge has potential to be resistant to ones that center policing students’ language through monitoring and correcting supposedly inappropriate language usages. In designing class learning opportunities and curricular frameworks, I considered how students might best pull from their literacy histories in class to learn together and make meaning through investigation. To capture what this learning meant for us, I use theories from scholars who take a sociocultural and contextualized approach to literacy research to understand how we focused on making meaning collaboratively, layering new language learning onto existing ways of being literate rather than solely trying to acquire new competencies.

**Living literacy histories and meaning making**

Scholars taking a sociocultural approach have long focused on adults’ literacy practices in their examinations of localized and situated literacies. Seminal works that have documented how adults utilize literacies in their home and community life laid groundwork for understanding literacy as something more than reading and writing and something that happens beyond the realm of schools (e.g. Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Brandt, 2001; Heath, 1983). While discussions of using texts authentic to students’ lives and centering students’ experiences in curriculum planning are main concerns within adult literacy research that reflect this sociocultural turn (Auerbach, 2002; Purcell-Gates
et al., 2002), there remains a need for understanding how adult literacy educators identify and generate these materials and learning experiences in practice. Filling this gap, I propose two moves educators can make to shape their curriculum around students’ learning histories that proved fruitful in my own teaching: inquiring purposefully with students into their living literacy histories and facilitating learning opportunities that allow students to make meaning from those histories.

Living literacy histories I termed to encapsulate the breadth of literacy experiences that inform students’ perspectives on what it means to learn language and literacy. Building from Brandt’s (2001) work exploring literacy in the life histories of adults, the concept of literacy histories has special meaning for adult learners who are dually identified in literacy research as having rich learning experiences while also often treated as though they were without literacy resources. While Brandt looked at literacy more as reading and writing text as defined by Western norms, I augment the term literacy to include those ways that students are literate according to definitions that extend beyond easily recognizable text, being mindful of the marginalized, culturally-informed, and multimodal ways of being literate students might use to make meaning in class. I add the term living to bring attention to the ever-changing nature of these histories. While adults are often positioned as being less able to learn new concepts than children due to their cognitive development and life-stage, adults are, just as children, always learning. Many students in our class, as exemplified in the opening quotations in this chapter, saw themselves as lifelong learners and while they identified that learning as adults was sometimes challenging, they also found themselves equipped in new ways to learn than they might have been at other points in their lives.
Taking an inquiry stance into these histories also recognizes that they cannot be known from an intake form or one-time questionnaire. To understand how these histories inform students’ understanding of their own learning journeys, teachers must work creatively to explore them in multiple aspects of classroom learning. Within my inquiry, I specifically examined how students understood their process of language and literacy learning based on their experiences, more than trying to fully understand students’ language and literacy repertoires so that I could incorporate them into the curriculum. While it is certainly beneficial to understand the full breadth of how students are literate, there are limitations each teacher brings and must be mindful of based on their own experiences that shape how these histories can be used in class. Rather than trying to assume that I, a white, US-born ESOL teacher, could understand and incorporate into class the complexities of multilingual, immigrant students’ culturally-specific ways of being literate, I engaged students as fellow education experts who had sophisticated perspectives on their learning because of their prior experiences. In this way, I took a learning stance to students’ living literacy histories and what they saw as the implications in their lives as adult learners.

This is not to say that these histories should not be invited into the classroom. Alongside inquiries into how students reflect and build on their living literacy histories, adult ESOL teachers should open opportunities for students to utilize these histories to make meaning of English in class. Meaning making, a popular phrase in contemporary adult literacy research and literacy research more broadly (Ajayi, 2008; Roessger, 2017), foregrounds the unique ways people interpret texts (broadly defined). Meaning making is also intimately related to dialogic approaches, which emphasize allowing students to
arrive at understandings of language and text informed by the knowledges they bring to class (Wong, 2006). When mobilized with a critical sociocultural lens, meaning making can be a useful term to frame how individuals and collectives create subjective understanding of texts and language informed by their individualized ways of knowing in addition to their immediate context. As opposed to focusing on students acquiring and performing correct usages of standard English for preidentified purposes, teachers can make clear that language and literacy are forms of meaning making that differ from person to person and allow students to be the primary actors in shaping their own understandings of how to use English. Specific illustrations and implications of students’ meaning making from their living literacy histories are detailed throughout this chapter.

**Examining students’ living literacy legacies**

Learning about students’ literacy legacies was an ongoing inquiry throughout the term. In prior teaching experiences I had seen that it was not uncommon for surveys provided by literacy organizations to ask students to check a box for “highest level of schooling achieved.” Similar to the data gathered through questionnaires about what students wanted from ESOL, these surveys always had baseline information of what students’ experiences in formalized institutions might have been like. I found the information lacking or even misrepresentative given students’ often complicated education histories and vast knowledge base beyond school. I also wanted to be clear that I valued a range of learning experiences that might extend beyond the classroom, which asking this question upon admission might have diminished. Instead, I and my fellow co-educators tried to take time in other activities asking questions in different ways about students’ perceptions of and experience with learning across a range of
locations in and beyond schools to gain a sense of the different sources informing their literacy histories. Key themes emerged across our inquiries into students’ histories, outlined in the following sections.

**Varying histories of access to school**

Though I did not ask specifically about schooling upon students’ entry, I did want to know what their experience in schools had been like. Knowing the experience learners have had with schooling is important for any educator. More than knowing the perceived level of literacy indicated through their highest level of school completed, knowing if students have had positive or negative experiences in school impacts how one might design a course to be mindful of these histories, careful not to repeat damaging experiences with school. Our conversation notebooks became a vital source of my knowledge about students’ schooling. Though I was careful to be respectful of the conversation notebook as an open-ended form of interaction, I developed a particular goal within the looser structure of the notebook of finding out what I could about students’ learning histories. Sometimes, the topic would come up naturally through my writing back and forth with students, and other times I asked more pointed questions. To my surprise, students rarely shared negative experiences that happened within school. Given the breadth of backgrounds students came to class with, I expected some students to share less than rosy memories of times in school. What emerged, however, was that students only spoke about their schooling as less than ideal when they spoke about access to school. This theme of students’ access versus their lack of access to education was fundamental in explorations of schooling and emerged as a significant dimension of difference that impacted students’ learning in class.
**Students with extensive schooling histories.** In students’ descriptions, positive memories of attending a variety of schools were persistent topics of interest. From stories of times in seminary, to remembering impactful novels read in class to joyful moments with friends in school, students shared multiple remembrances of time spent in education settings that stayed with them and impacted how they understood the purpose of education.

Figure 5.1: Malek’s writing about his degrees.

I share Malek’s writing in Figure 5.1 as an illustration of one student’s varied experiences in higher education and how they understood it to shape their orientation to learning. In
Figure 5.1 Malek, a student who recently had immigrated from Algeria and mostly came in the spring of 2018, detailed a length list of credentials he had earned upon my asking more about his experience in higher education. A dynamic presence in class, Malek was quick to ask questions and share his thoughts about what we discussed together. One day, Malek mentioned something about his university degree, piquing my interest as to what his time in university was like and what he studied. I asked him, in one entry, to share what his history in the university had been, prompting the detailed list of earned degrees in Figure 5.1. Malek enumerated the many credentials he had, from a Baccalaureate, to two different Bachelor’s degrees in sociology and law to “professional Lawyer” certificate.

Malek’s extensive history of schooling is demonstrative of the access he had to school and the interest he took in education in multiple dimensions. At the end of the list he stated, “It’s a long course of University. Because I like a knowledge.” For Malek, school was not just about being credentialed, it was about exploring things that were interesting to him and that pushed him to think about the world differently. As he noted, “I like study for understand a life well.” Malek’s long history of school bespoke a commitment to using his schooling experiences to pursue inquiry. His desire for future learning was expressed in other conversations, where he shared that he wanted to pursue his GED or possibly get his certificates convalidated to pursue higher education in the US. As such, his seeking out of ESOL in the US can be seen as a further pursuit of this life understanding. Malek and others who shared histories of positive access to education narrated different ways these histories impacted their understanding of why they were in
class and what they saw as the purpose of participating in courses and seeking further education.

**Histories of inequitable access fueling a desire for future education.** Aside from students’ more affirmative experiences with school, there were many who expressed that they were not able to study as much as they would have liked in what they identified as their home countries. Several students indicated that family circumstances, money issues and lack of connection to school materials had made it difficult for them to attend and follow through with completing their K-12 or college education. By asking students to narrate their own histories of schooling, I was able to understand students’ schooling experiences as not only being what they did and did not achieve, but how larger forces shaped these histories and informed students’ perceptions of how education systems operated. Minerva, specifically, shared with me details about her learning experiences in school spaces that helped me understand multiple dimensions of her schooling history and provides an illustration of how lack of access was discussed and contextualized by students in their writing. After being in class for two months and writing several exchanges back and forth with me, her education history came up organically, in writing about her goal of going to nursing school and becoming a nurse:

I would like be a nurse because I like to help, I didn’t take the career in my country because is to expensive and my family doesn’t have the money, but here is better because if you work hard you can save the mony, and you can pay your studies. (Minerva, Conversation notebook exchange, 10/26/17)

Here Minerva, shared that more than finding a good job that pays well, she wanted a job where she can “help” others. The reason she is not a nurse, as she stated, is because it is “to expensive and my family doesn’t have the money.” This, to me, indicated that not
only did Minerva see her lack of access to school as a denial of education, but also as a hinderance of her desire to have a career that engaged the entirety of her intellect and motivation to make an impact on the world.

In my response, I acknowledged that paying for school is difficult. I also knew that in the US, college was expensive for many people as well. As such, I asked a clarifying question, asking how much it cost to go to school in Ecuador. She elaborated on her previous writing, excerpted below, sharing with me cost estimates of how much schooling would cost in Ecuador versus in the US relative to income.

I want to study and get my GED. The cost in Ecuador for the university Every 3 months you have to pay 1,200 dollars, is expensive because the basic salary per mont is $380 dollars, but you have to expend money for food, bus, clothes and something else you need it. You can’t save any money, but here is diferent if you do you have two jobs you can make $700 $900 dolars per week is different to Ecuador. (Minerva, Conversation notebook exchange, 11/2/17)

Her response illustrated inequities she faced living in a situation where her income did not allow her to go to school and realize her dream of becoming a nurse. While she did not specifically name neocolonialism as a factor, what she pointed to in marking the differences between access to education in the US and in Ecuador is a critical awareness of how her educational opportunities were affected by global inequities (Souto-Manning, 2014). Through her narrative writing, Minerva told me about her experiences with schooling in her own words, providing context and analysis that framed her history more critically than she might have been able to in other settings.

Generally, students’ schooling experiences emerged as multifaceted and evoked a mix of emotions in students. Across students’ sharing about their school histories, however, was a shared optimism about education and what it could provide. For those
that had named having multiple opportunities to access higher education and secondary schooling, positive memories of learning in those spaces provided new insights into understanding the world and fostered an interest in future formal learning endeavors. Students who felt denied an ideal schooling experience often narrated their lack of access to schooling as a function of systemic and situational injustices. Feeling that they were unable to access the education they desired, students indicated that they were not deterred by these inequities and sought other ways they could claim the education they wanted. These experiences stuck with students — both good and bad — and contributed to their visions of future schooling.

**Students creating a course of adult literacy study**

As mentioned in the discussion of Salima and Rose’s beginning quotes, other experiences in adult literacy classes shaped students’ expectations of what they wanted from class and provided them a breadth of experiences from which to understand the many different approaches to adult ESOL and literacy. Throughout the year, students often brought in materials or insights from other adult learning classes they were attending to share and get feedback from other students and me. I share materials brought in from Romo and Rose to explore different approaches to adult literacy students encountered in these experiences and how despite hurdles in access, students made their own paths of adult literacy study utilizing the resources available to them.

**Romo’s intensive English program.** Romo, a priest from Indonesia who lived on site at the St. Francis parish, joined our class periodically throughout the fall and spring term to practice English. While Romo came to only a handful of class sessions
due to his busy schedule, he often reached out for one-on-one help with his homework for an intensive ESOL class he was taking at a local private college.

![Figure 5.2: Romo’s practice test](image)

Romo often brought me multiple choice tests and fill-in-the-blanks to grade, as shown in Figure 5.2 and 5.3. Though he brought others that we sometimes read through together, he most commonly wanted me to check his work on sample exams, as he was tested frequently in his class and wanted to do well on them. In our first few sessions working together, I found his assignments generally narrow and overly-focused on notions of correctness, wanting more nuance in recommended language use and lighter emphasis on
testing. Though he was encountering other assignments that asked more critical questions, as depicted in Figure 5.3, they were still often bounded in certain ways. In Figure 5.3, we can see how Romo’s other ESOL teacher asked him to reflect on the nature of language, something we were also exploring in our class.

![Romo's fill-in-the-blank](image)

**Figure 5.3: Romo’s fill-in-the-blank**

This assignment brought up critical considerations of language, beginning a conversation about the mutability of linguistic codes. The assignment, however, also set up Romo to have a fairly narrow set of responses in providing the turns of phrases and transitions he was expected to follow in his writing — “Language is something that____”, “Languages change because _____” — leaving little room for creative license. Though this activity
might not have been representative of all his class material, I rarely encountered other open-ended activities Romo completed in this class.

Through our one-on-one sessions, however, my understandings of these assignments were complicated as I took an inquiry stance to understanding what he valued about these classes and what I could learn from these materials. In our discussions, I found out that through his program, he was taking six classes a day with different focuses on various aspects of language learning. This he enjoyed, as he felt he was immersing himself in English. Contrary to our class, which was limited in scope due to the few sessions we offered a week, Romo was able to practice English for several hours a day and interrogate multiple areas of language study. While his packed schedule meant that our time was limited to engage in any deep discussions of what he was learning, from our brief conversations, I was able to understand that he liked the nitty-gritty of learning grammar and knowing about specific rules of what situations certain phrases and words were considered appropriate to use. While I often wanted to push back on some of the ways that things were presented in Romo’s class, I noted these points I wanted to push and marked them as future topics of exploration for our class. In examining the materials he shared with me and in our conversations, I saw that Romo felt he was having particular needs met related to grammar and vocabulary learning while engaging issues that he identified as relevant and interesting. I considered how our class might reflect some of these foci more and also engage some of the inquiries sparked in his other classes I felt might be useful to explore.

**Rose’s one-on-one tutoring.** Rose also shared some of her reading assignments from one-on-one tutoring sessions she attended at a local adult literacy class provider.
Often times, Rose would come in early to class to do extra work and write in her notebooks. This time overlapped with Romo’s visits, who would pop in before class if he stopped by for extra help. During one of these sessions, Rose noticed Romo sharing his work with me and shared with me her work as well. A copy of one of the several readings she shared is pictured in Figure 5.4. The piece she shared, titled “Getting to Work on Time,” tells a story about Sai getting ready for work. Upon further investigation after class, I found that these texts were from a popular website for adult literacy practitioners, entitled Marshall Adult Education⁹.

![Figure 5.4: Getting to Work on Time](http://resources.marshalladulteducation.org/reading_skills_home.htm)
The website offers a number of simplified adult literacy texts, identified as appropriate for learners gaining comfort in decoding while also relatable in content to adult literacy learners. Sai, as the piece says, “wants to keep his job, so he gets to work on time.” The story goes on to provide concrete steps Sai takes to be ready for work the night before his shift and the morning of, including looking at his clothes to make sure “[t]hey are clean and do not have any rips.” After the many precautions Sai takes to ensure he gets to work on time, “[h]e gets to the car wash ten minutes before his shift starts.” While this piece could be read as an account of one person getting to work on time, the fact that it is a piece prepared for adult literacy students indicates that this is a particular lesson selected as appropriate for students labeled as having low literacy levels. The allegory of Sai becomes an example of how workforce competency conversations permeate adult literacy classrooms. It can also be viewed as presumptive and insulting, implying that adult literacy students might not have the skills needed to get ready for work appropriately. Rather than opening conversations with adults about issues relevant to their lives, “Getting to Work On Time” lays out by example what practices good workers utilize to perform well in their jobs. By focusing on what Sai does to get ready for work, it also underscores that Sai has complete control over getting to work on time. By discounting any hurdles Sai might encounter getting to work on time — waking up to a sick child in need of care, getting caught in traffic on his way to work, hearing an upsetting news story on the TV about his community that affects him mentally and hinders his ability to get ready for work quickly — the author of the story positions Sai as the sole factor that controls whether or not he performs well at work. By indicating that Sai is the only one responsible for how he performs at work, critical conversations about
inequity in the workplace can be dispelled as it is assumed that individuals alone shape their work conditions.

Though of course “Getting to Work on Time” is one assignment among many that Rose showed me, including several pieces that did not echo this tone or material, it is still demonstrative of an assimilationist and deficitizing orientation assumed by many adult literacy programs and teaching materials. While I was aware of these materials circulating generally in the world, Rose’s sharing made clear to me that students in our class came into contact with these ideas first-hand through their other adult literacy learning experiences. In taking an inquiry stance, I wanted to understand if Rose liked this piece or not and whether she found her one-on-one tutoring useful more broadly. While Rose was enthusiastic when asked about her one-on-one tutoring experience on the whole, I had a harder time telling if she enjoyed this reading. When I asked Rose if she liked the story, she seemed neutral and did not give much of an opinion one way or another.

Rose’s indifference signaled to me that she was not that engaged by the piece, but her enthusiasm for and long-time commitment to the tutoring also represented that she took something away from the sessions. In conversations with her about her one-on-one tutoring, I saw that her tutor provided her with the individualized attention she wanted having not had her needs met for intensive help with decoding in other group classes. In specific instances Rose described over our time in class, including how her tutor helped her with a difficult situation in an old job and the work her tutor put in to maintaining a sustained journal with Rose over many years, I saw that Rose’s tutor demonstrated care for her. Reflecting on what I found most bothersome about Rose’s readings, I realized
that more than any judgement about the quality of the tutoring she was receiving, I was reminded of how limited available materials are for educators with adult literacy students. I myself had experienced difficulty finding readings and activities that were linguistically accessible to students, affordable for me to access and relatable to students’ reading interests. While I was thrilled Rose felt like she was getting the support she needed, I also felt a pang of wanting more from texts created for adult literacy students that honored the range of their experiences.

Through students’ sharing of their texts and experiences from other adult literacy classes, I gained an appreciation for the multiplicity of ways they were being taught about adult literacy pedagogy itself. This gave me a better idea of certain ideologies they might be taking in that were problematic and which I might need to actively resist in my curriculum planning. Through discussing with them their assignments and the other things they were learning in their classes outside of the Cabrini center, I was given ideas about what they thought worked in an adult literacy program and what they thought could be improved about our own practice. Romo and Rose’s distinct experiences in different classes was also indicative of the breadth of formats students’ outside learning took. According to the time and money students had available to invest in their outside coursework, students were provided with distinct differences in their education, reflecting the decentralized and variable nature of adult literacy education in the US. Across students’ differing levels of access to education programming, I came to see the phenomenon of students attending a variety of classes as students curating their learning. By attending a range of classes to find ones that worked for them, students made their
own course of study in a place where adult literacy, and ESOL specifically, is greatly under-resourced and difficult to navigate.

**Inviting students’ family and community legacies into the classroom**

Alongside inquiring into students’ experiences in formal learning settings, I also made a point to discuss with students their language and literacy knowledge beyond what is labeled as “school.” Many students identified speaking multiple languages aside from the dominant language in what they identified as their home country, including indigenous languages marginalized within their country’s sociopolitical context. An especially poignant learning moment came from Aurora. For a few weeks prior to the excerpted interaction, we had been discussing the history of immigration Philadelphia. Through this discussion, we brought up our own immigration histories in class and in our notebooks. Aurora had intertwined stories of her immigration history with discussions of indigenous traditions in Mexico, specifically Nahuatl: an indigenous culture from the area where she grew up. In Figure 5.5, Aurora brought up the challenge of sharing traditions from Mexico with her young daughter — who was born in the US and had not spent time in Mexico — in response to my asking about what traditions she brought with her from Mexico that she tries to maintain in the US.

![Figure 5.5: Aurora’s first excerpt](image)

I try to do some thing we’ve sharing but nothing is the same, Some day is More like...do with us family, like New Year or other day especial like 21 december that the thing is good to share with my mom, my aunt, my sister, my mom, momm, like nahuatl but is no easy, when ya don’t repeat again an again, some times you forget.
Aurora explained maintaining Nahuatl is a language is difficult, because she is not around communities in the US who share Nahuatl language and culture, saying “I try do some thing sharing but nothing is the same.” She says that she tries to maintain connections through celebrating important holidays, but it is difficult. As she notes, “when yo[u] don’t repeat again an[d] again, some times you forget.” I found this statement quite impactful in shaping my understanding of Aurora’s language history and wanted to know more about how she tried to maintain a connection to Nahuatl traditions as they had clearly impacted how she understood her own literacy history. I excerpt my writing to her below:

I agree – it is difficult to share things in a new place where the traditions and languages are different. When few people celebrate the same holidays or speak the same language, it is hard to maintain your culture. What ways do you keep your language and culture here? How is Nahuatl different from Spanish? (Aurora Conversation Notebook Excerpt, 9/7/17)

As a person who knew no Nahuatl and very little about the specific aspects of how Aurora experienced Nahuatl, I asked Aurora a genuine question about something I knew nothing about. I also only asked about her history with Nahuatl after knowing Aurora for a while. Knowing the traumatic and painful histories of language erasure in indigenous communities in Mexico and beyond (Anzaldúa, 2012; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012), I wanted to be thoughtful about how I engaged anybody in talking about their indigenous languages they did not identify speaking initially on intake forms or in basic communication. As this conversation grew organically from Aurora, I felt more comfortable talking about these histories.

In Figure 5.6, I show Aurora response to these questions. Though Aurora had told me at other times that she had little familiarity with Nahuatl language, her writing
shows otherwise. Here, Aurora took on the position of teacher, sharing with me knowledge generated from her unique language and literacy legacies. Spacing out the pronunciations for me, the learner, to digest — “Yo – lotl (Yolotl), “Ha: - ch – cali (Hachcali)” — she showed not only a sophisticated awareness of a language but also the kindness and patience of a good teacher. Relatedly, she noted that the words “suena muy diferente y es difícil pronunciar” (sounds very different and is difficult to pronounce), linking the oral and print awareness of the terms for me in addition to translating.

Figure 5.6: Aurora’s second excerpt

Through this exchange, I was able to see how her linguistic repertoire extended beyond Spanish and English. This pushed me to think of ways I might decenter Spanish as the only language learners spoke besides English if they identified as being from a primarily Spanish-speaking country. It also pushed me to consider how I might open space for students to share these more marginalized language histories that might feel difficult for students to bring up without feeling invited.

While this theme of students’ sharing indigenous languages did not come up often in class beyond a few notable moments, I highlight this exchange to signal the extent of students’ language histories that might be rendered invisible without a relational, inquisitive stance toward getting to know students. Had I not engaged in multiple levels
of interaction and inquiry with Aurora, including moments of more private, one-on-one discussions, this exchange might never have happened. With Aurora and other students, language and literacy histories absent from their time in schools surfaced as important, but also difficult to reflect on given their marginalized position in students’ lives.

**The need to dig deep to understand living literacy histories**

Through my inquiries in conversation notebooks, class news and informal class interactions, I came to understand the complexity of students’ literacy histories and how they were growing and changing. From literacy and language learning both supported and unsupported in schools, students developed understandings of what they wanted from current and future education endeavors and how they thought they learned best. The portion of students’ histories that were *living*, here discussed through their adult literacy class experiences, were also fundamental to how students encountered our class learning and impacted how I and my fellow educators shaped our curriculum. Though I spotlighted only a few of the histories here, they extended into multiple realms beyond the three explored.

While these histories were essential to how students approached their learning in our ESOL class, they also could have very well gone unnoticed had I not dug consciously into our class literacy histories. I say this not to indicate that they would have gone unutilized by students without my inquiry, but to say that I would not have known to make use of them without a pointed inquiry. From this examination, it becomes evident that to build from the rich living literacy histories of students, educators must take an inquiry stance in multiple class activities to understand the wealth of resources students
bring with them. In the following section, I explore what happened in class when students pulled from these literacy histories to make meaning of language.

**Making meaning from our living literacy histories collectively**

Through my inquiry into students’ in- and out-of-school literacy and language learning experiences, I gained an appreciation for the range of ways students made sense of the material we interacted with in class and the way they conceptualized their language learning. As such, I was conscious to design learning experiences that engaged a range of literature and modalities. I also consistently built in open-ended activities for students to use these literacies and encouraged us to use our outside knowledges to make sense of class material. In the final section of this chapter I will examine two different ways that students used their different resources together, making sense of language in class and helping each other in their different language and literacy learning endeavors.

**Pulling from our literacy histories to make critical meaning of language**

In class there were numerous moments where, through students’ own initiatives and through structured activities, students came together and shared the language resources they had with one another. Class was often buzzing with side conversations as people helped each other in shared non-English languages. During independent writing time, it was not uncommon for students who were more comfortable speaking over writing to call me over to ask for help, only to be helped by a fellow classmate. Relatedly, students often readily offered assistance to students verbally in class when they noticed a classmate struggling to find or translate a word. While some did so more than others, students, fellow co-facilitators and I were constantly sharing our experiences to talk through how we made sense of language and subject matter in class.
Sometimes, our conversations went further into depth about critical language issues, exploring how world politics and social dynamics effected the language and literacy choices we made. I excerpt a conversation we had as a whole group about the word “whom” in the context of talking about different approaches to asking questions with “Wh” words (who/what/where/when/why) in pursuit of finding information. This conversation turn began with Malek, asking about how to use the word “whom.” While I wanted to acknowledge that this was a word some people used in the US, I wanted to be frank about it being uncommon in daily US usage. As I had a feeling, due to other conversations with Malek about his literacy history, that his use of this word might come from his time learning British English, I also wanted to think about how this might also be a difference in regional language usage. Thinking through how I might address this difference I realized that Gabriel, a long-time student in the class who identified as being from Honduras and speaking mainly Spanish, might have some insights to share. I had often spoken to Gabriel about a similar conundrum he encountered trying to supplement his English learning from YouTube videos. Many of these clips he watched, unbeknownst to him, had used British or Australian English and when he tried to adapt them in his daily conversations and writing, people were often confused by terms he used that he learned from the videos but were commonly used in the US. As such, I brought him into the conversation, excerpted below:

Emily: Yeah, right. Often in the, the case of…Gabriel, you watch videos sometimes in British, right (to Gabriel)?
Emily: So it’s confusing, right? We learn English in all different countries, and coming here. So…I wouldn’t use this, but if you wanted to use some of this, this is how you use it writing on the board an example of using the word whom.
Malek: It doesn’t exist here.
Emily: It doesn’t exist here.
Willow: Gabriel gives it a thumbs down.
Emily: ‘Cause Gabriel, you watch videos on YouTube, right?
Gabriel: Yeah, yeah.
Emily: And sometimes they use British words, right, we were talking about?
Gabriel: Yeah, British.
Malek: Me either, before I learn British English
Emily: Which is…it’s perfectly fine, you would…people would understand you here, they would just be like *tips head and quizzical look* that’s weird, yeah.
(Fieldnotes, 2/27/18)

Though I typically shied away from monitoring students’ language usage, I felt it was important to point out differences that students might encounter in English between textbook and decontextualized language teaching resources. I tried to make clear that language was a choice, saying “I wouldn’t use this, but if you wanted to use some of this, this is how you use it.” Though of course, my position of authority in the classroom might have sent students a message that my approach was the approach I expected others to utilize, negating the actual possibility of choice, I found it important to be honest about my own perspectives on language to model that our use language could be determined by our own decisions about what was contextually appropriate and what was not. After my sharing and invitation to join the conversation, Gabriel popped in, confirming his experience with YouTube videos and indicating his confusion with them through his few words and gestures. Gabriel and Malek, despite their disparate contexts and learning histories, became linked in their encounter with the word “whom,” commiserating over the confusion that can follow when learning a new language with multiple forms.

In exploring why the word “whom” might be used in some places and not others, we moved further into why these differences exist in English around the world, comparing it to Spanish spoken in Spain versus the US. Graciela stated why these
differences occur, spurring our conversation into discussing the relationship between colonization and language as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Graciela: ‘Cause there was the like…como se dice la los…
Teresa: Europeans, Europeans?
Graciela: No…porque España fue a conquistar…conquestate.
Willow: Right, conquer. Or, colonize.
Graciela: Colonizar, uh huh. Entonces, Inglaterra con los Estados Unidos. That’s, that’s why.
Willow: Right, right (Fieldnotes, 2/27/18)

Teresa, Willow and Graciela engaged a discussion about how both colonization and immigration shaped language in the US, nodding to the idea that the English language is not a fixed, natural part of the US identity. Initially struggling over how to discuss the concept of colonizing, Graciela, Teresa, and Willow negotiated what term they were looking for, Graciela ultimately finding that “colonize” or “colonizar” was the best word for what she was describing.

After this exchange, students engaged many side conversations about these differences, trying to agree on why they thought these differences occurred and what the implications of these differences might be. I eventually brought the group back together, trying to bring attention to the fact that these differences exist not just from country to country, but internally as well:

Emily: So we’re talking a lot about the difference between how you read and hear in other places, then you come to the United States and it’s very different than maybe it was when you were learning English in other places. And even in Philadelphia (affirmative mhm from Willow and Malek) It’s a different kind of English than it is in Chicago, or California.
Graciela: California.
Willow: Florida, South.
Emily: Florida. Right? There’s a lot of different ways to speak English, in the United States.
Graciela: It’s the same in Mexico, it’s the same in everywhere. You know, each…
Malek: Yes, it’s different accents, same, same…for example, say my native language, Arabic or French…it’s a different accent. (Fieldnotes, 2/27/18)

Here we got into talking about regional differences, conceptualizing how place impacts our language and the way we speak it. Graciela and Malek each shared their own insights into the existence of language differences, Graciela saying “It’s the same in Mexico, it’s the same in everywhere” and Malek supporting her, “Yes, it’s different accents, same, same…for example, say my native language, Arabic or French…it’s a different accent.” Here, students grappled with complicated linguistic awareness, beginning to collectively consider how people might share the same language but be viewed differently because of the accents they had when speaking those languages.

While I had wanted to bring up more critical issues related to intersecting identities and how individuals might be marked for language difference according to their racial and ethnic identities more than their linguistic correctness (Flores & Rosa, 2015), the conversation continued to steer towards talking in terms of countries and language differences at the nation-state level. I did eventually move the conversation to focusing on the issue of power dynamics, naming power as an important factor to consider when thinking about how these language differences arise:

Graciela: It’s like in Spanish, we were talking about that in, uh Spain
Emily: Vosotros, right?
Graciela: Nosotros, is the common in…in Mexico, in uh, in uh Spain, it’s “vosotros.”
Emily: Mhm, right? So there’s words that we don’t use, like you don’t use in Mexico that you use in Spain. Right? But a lot of, do a lot of people think that Spain is more formal? So there’s also, right the power difference, right?
Graciela: That’s what they conquest, how you say?
Willow: Right.
Graciela: Conquest?
Willow: Colonize.
Graciela: Colonize!
Willow: Right
Graciela: That’s what they colonize, England colonized United States, so Spain colonized Mexico. That’s why. It was, well that’s why we speak Spanish and...gestures well
Willow: Right. (Fieldnotes, 2/27/18)

In this final excerpt, I worked with Graciela to think through how we understand the history of language colonization to affect language use in Mexico. As a partner in this investigation, I posit that these relationships are not neutral, that a “power difference” comes into play when thinking about the relationship between Spain and Mexico. Graciela took up this invitation to interrogate power differentials in language use, stating “that’s what they colonize [...] that’s why we speak Spanish.”

Together, through this class interaction around making sense of the word “whom” we began to make sense of how colonialism influenced our language choices and histories. While we acknowledged that certain strains of English and Spanish might be seen as more formal or correct, it was really the product of colonization that made these categories and created the systems of communication we utilize. Importantly, students made this meaning of language only because of their prior learning in other settings. Malek and Gabriel were able to connect to each other through encountering different ways of speaking English. Graciela and Teresa’s knowledge of Mexican history informed their reading of Malek’s use of the word “whom” and enabled a further conversation about colonialism and language. Despite our lesson starting out as an exploration of the seemingly basic concept of question words, we veered off into new directions in which we were able to ask deep, critical questions about language. We thought together about what these histories have meant for how we speak today, I myself joining in my own knowledge alongside students narrating theirs. While I would not
argue that anyone’s perspective shifted dramatically after this encounter or that this was a
dramatic moment of resistance, we did, together, pull from our literacy histories to share
what we knew about a specific issue and used them to illuminate certain parts of history
taken for granted in discussions of learning English.

Making ESOL meaningful

Apart from trying to understand language together, many students often shared
information and insights as a way to share what they considered vital information. To
share this information, students used English as a medium to communicate across
linguistic communities and used English class as a forum for that sharing. A major outlet
for these conversations was Class News, as an excerpt of a class transcript from February
exhibits. On this day, Teresa came to class visibly less happy than she normally was.
After writing in our conversation notebooks and listening to a few other people share
news, Teresa spoke up, indicating her desire to share:

**Teresa:** I would like to share about the news.
**Emily:** Mhm, you wanna do class news?
**Teresa:** Yeah, yes. Because that’s…important for us.
**Emily:** Mhm.
**Teresa:** Because today, uh I went to the dentist: I take [my children]. And when I
fill, the uh, form for the doctor he needs, and one of the questions says “You are
smoking?”
**Emily:** Oh.
**Teresa:** And I said, I went to the nurse or the front uh, people and, and asking
what, what happen with this question? And she said, “Yeah, you know. At this
age, the, the, the boys start to smoking now. So they are crazy, and they are doing
uh, whatever they want.” And I said, “What?” And, she says “Yes!”
**Rose:** Yes, it’s true.
**Teresa:** I, I know, I…I have a boys that they start now, but I feel it’s sad.
**Emily:** So …you asked the receptionist.
**Teresa:** Yeah.
**Emily:** Yeah.
**Romo:** How old is he?
**Teresa:** Huh?
Romo: How old, the kids?
Teresa: How old...
Graciela helps repeating in English
Teresa: Twelve! My son is twelve! (Class transcript, 2/22/18)

As she spoke, Teresa was visibly upset in addition to being verbally concerned. Not only was she upset that her son might be influenced by other boys his age smoking, but she stated she wanted to share the class news “[b]ecause that’s…important for us.” This indicated that beyond any need to practice English, she wanted to share something because the content of it was so necessary, she wanted everyone in class to know. After her initial sharing, I tried to put what she shared into words as I wrote what she said up on the white board.

Emily: So I took what you said and I, I tried to put it in the words and you tell me if you want me to change something.
Teresa: Mhm.
Emily: Ok?
Teresa: Mmm.
Emily: So today I went to the dentist. When I filled out the form for the doctor about my children’s health, they asked if my kids smoke.
Teresa: Mhm
Emily: I asked the receptionist if this was about the kids, and she said yes. Boys my son’s age start smoking. He is only twelve! This made me sad. Is that everything?
Teresa: Yeah (sounding down).
Emily: Yeah.
Teresa: yeah. She, she uh…told me, uh the boys are crazy, the boys are whatever they want and the parents don’t have control for they.
Emily: That’s a lot.
Teresa: That’s sad. (Class transcript, 2/22/18)

Teresa was moved by the idea that boys as young as twelve might be subject to peer pressure and might start doing something dangerous from their bodies at such a young age. More than upsetting, she noted that it was “sad” and thought others should be informed by it as well. This sharing sparked a larger conversation about struggles and
frustrations with parenting, in which I also troubled some of the problematic ideas that
the receptionist voiced about boys being “crazy.” Together, we moved the conversation
to focus on what conditions might arise to enable children to make decisions that
negatively impact their lives. Ultimately, Teresa’s sharing opened up space for others to
voice their own concerns about parenting and for people who might not have come
together otherwise to share what they knew about parenting in pursuit of resolving some
of their own questions about what it means to parent well. Teresa also wanted to be clear
that she shared this news not only as an outlet for her concern, but as a way that other
parents could protect their children and have access to information they might not
otherwise have. I confirmed this, asking her to reflect one more time on why she shared
this information:

Emily: So Teresa, you wanted to share this because you were surprised about
that? And you want other people to know?
Teresa: Yes I was. Yes.
Emily: So you think it’s important other parents know…
Teresa: Yes
Emily: …that this is what’s happening?
Teresa: Yes, because it’s important.
(Class transcript, 2/22/18)

Teresa’s sharing underscores that more than using each other as linguistic resources,
students saw each other as people and wanted to share resources with their classmates
that could improve their lives and possibly protect them from harm. Teresa’s impulse to
reach out to her fellow classmates also sparked a rich inquiry spiral, allowing others to
voice concerns they had about their children and to use English to make sense of
childrearing, one of the most complicated issues in the world. In this way, Teresa and the
whole class made meaning through English, utilizing the language in a powerful way for their own purposes.

This impulse to share information extended into students sharing resources with each other about other adult learning courses. As many students attended programming at other adult literacy institutions, students often shared stories about other academic resources they encountered across educational institutions. From sharing information verbally in side conversations to class news, our class became a place for learners to share adult literacy opportunities across the city as exemplified in Minerva’s transition out of our program. Minerva, who had come consistently through the fall and early spring, let us know one day that she lost her job. Rather than seeing this as a bad thing, she said she was using this opportunity to refocus on her studies and follow her dream of becoming a nurse. Through class news and in her conversation notebooks, she shared the story of her transition and slowly stopped coming to class. One day, after coming in less consistently over several weeks, Minerva returned to class, coming in during Class News. While I thought she had returned to participate in class, she told me she was unable to stay, but wanted to drop off fliers to share with others. As some students, like Rose, already knew about these classes and had taken classes there, only a handful of students were interested in getting copies of the fliers. They were, however, enthusiastic about the opportunity to learn from these resources, demonstrated in my fieldnotes excerpt below.

I stopped Teresa and Graciela before they were leaving to give them the resources Minerva had brought. Aurora stayed behind too, sifting with them through the papers. There were over 10 papers, some different, some were just multiple copies of the same thing. This made distributing the copies difficult, as there were not enough for the three women. Teresa and Graciela took charge organizing the copies, each woman pointing out what they wanted copies of. Eventually, I just took a pile of distinct copies and said I’d make 3 copies for each
person. After I made copies, I gave them to the 3 women but then realized they were messed up [out of order]. Not wanting anyone to be missing anything, Teresa sorted through the papers and made sure each woman got a copy of each flier. They were very excited about the information, all three especially about the tax help with Teresa and Graciela also very interested in GED/nursing classes. (Fieldnotes, 3/6/18)

Figure 5.7: Graciela, Teresa and Aurora reading through fliers

As depicted in figure 5.7 and described in the fieldnotes excerpt, Graciela, Teresa and Aurora poured over these fliers and valued the information shared in them. They carefully sorted through the copies of all the materials available and took them home to read more in-depth. While it would have been easy enough for her to never come back, Minerva made a point to return to class to share with her fellow learners resources she knew they would benefit from. Minerva’s involvement in class and her dedication to sharing these resources was notable on many levels. For one, Minerva lived far away from the neighborhood where Cabrini was located so returning to drop off fliers was not an easy task. Relatedly, Minerva’s ties with Cabrini were more limited than Graciela,
Teresa and Aurora, who were all quite involved in the larger Cabrini parish. Minerva’s dedication to her fellow learners shone through in this moment, illuminating how English class had become more than a source for learning English, but a source for connecting to others and sharing our resources.

Sharing information from living literacy histories in our class exemplified the meaning students made from class beyond English. Class News became a place for people to share potentially impactful information that they thought other students could benefit from. Other class activities became a conduit for this information sharing, making our class a hub of resource sharing channels. Many students’ only point of connection to each other was in class, making the space all the more important in this information exchange. In this way, students’ meaning making from their literacy resources emerged in pursuit of improving our collective wellbeing and our happiness in futures beyond class. I posit that through this specific type of class sharing, students not only made meaning through English, but made English have meaning. While English can be approached solely as a medium to navigate institutions and make sense of language in response to an imposed need, students in class made English meaningful to them in instances where they used class to share what they perceived as important information.

**Connection, care, and curiosity in action**

In making meaning from our living literacy histories, students came together to shape our ESOL class into a space that was useful for them in developing their self-identified areas of growth. Together, we synergized connection, care, and curiosity to forge relationships with each other not only as classmates but as whole people with
concerns that extended beyond language learning. This is not to say that the ultimate goal of learning English was abandoned. Instead, students expanded their knowledge of English while forging connections across difference to maximize access to information. While students shared common experiences as adult immigrants learning English, they also had variable histories of schooling that shaped their outlook on learning and informed how they approached their learning as adults. On the whole, students created their own tailored language and literacy learning experiences by attending a variety of adult education classes that fulfilled different needs in their life. By taking an inquiry stance into how students made these choices, I was able to re-evaluate what I considered critical and learn from students about different dimensions of literacy and language teaching I could better incorporate into my own practices.

Connection emerged as essential in making meaning from class literacy histories. While students brought their own histories in to class that shaped how they uniquely understood their own learning and what they wanted from class, in moments of collaborative meaning making, these histories came together as students made sense of complex linguistic phenomena that only crystallized through dialogue with others. As exemplified in the whole group discussion of colonialism and its relationship to language use, students drew from a range of knowledges to think through together not only how to use English but why we might make different decisions in our communication choices. Fellow educators and I were also included in this meaning making, interjecting our own opinions about language use in while also being open to students’ input in reshaping our perspectives. Through sharing our different histories, we also found common points of
connection, bonding over how we saw language operating in similar ways despite stark differences in our histories.

The role care played in our learning was most evident in how students came together to share information that they felt would benefit others in class. Exemplified in Teresa’s Class News event and Minerva’s adult literacy resource sharing, students utilized class time to come together across their commonalities to build new knowledge bases around issues that emerged as relevant to their lives. By actively reaching out to share information with their classmates, students demonstrated care for their fellow students and fostered a class community centered around their whole selves including health, wellbeing, family, career, interests, and more. Educators were involved in this caring community as well. My fellow co-facilitators and I, following in the steps of students, demonstrated our care for students by attempting to slow class down and allow moments of collective meaning making to happen on students’ terms. By letting students dictate class directions, while also sharing our own insights, we involved ourselves as class community members with limitations.

Curiosity ultimately formed the basis for these moments of meaning making. Without students expressing and following lines of inquiry, none of our avenues of learning would have been illuminated. Students inclinations to ask questions of their classmates and educators spurred us on our learning journey together. Malek’s one question about the use of the word whom led to a whole discussion about how political and social history influence language and create pathways for communication. Students’ curiosity about the world also led them to our ESOL class and others. More than just acquiring a new language, students expressed in numerous ways that they enjoyed
learning about new ways of seeing the world through their classmates in English class; a place that centralized many different students from different backgrounds. Teachers also remained curious about students, understanding that an ongoing period of sustained questioning was needed to understand students’ living literacy histories. By understanding histories as living and meaning making as an action we also understood these things to be fluctuating. In looking at the world, language, and literacy curiously, we established a classroom community built around pursuing lines of inquiry that were interesting to us and that could be mined collectively through our knowledges.

Rooting inquiry in our ways of knowing language and of being literate that we already knew was essential to our practice together as a community of learners. Returning to my initial research question about what language and literacy learning practices circulate in our class, I find a wealth of language and literacy practices including those examined in depth in this chapter. Beyond, I also saw that students’ faith-communities, their work contexts, their families, and their communities shaped their learning. While I do not have enough space here to name them all, I find that students’ living histories were formative in shaping those practices. In addition to students, my own literacy and practices and legacies — explored in my methodology positionality statement — came through in class interactions and shaped how I spoke with students and helped them make meaning from English. In the following last data chapter, I explore what happened when we centered these histories in assessing our learning.
CHAPTER SIX: STORYING OUR LEARNING: A CONTEXTUALIZED VIEW OF PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

Graciela: I like stories, so when we're talking about that it's interesting, and you learn.

(Interview with Graciela, 11/21/17)

Sonia: I like the stories where the stories have some suspense.

Emily: You like the suspense.

Sonia: Suspense is, for me, really interesting. And you don't know what happen in the next part, just you're thinking what happen in the next part. I like the TV show, like telenovelas. [...] My favorite part in English class is when we are doing, telling the stories. I am listen the stories from each person, because everybody has different stories. I really like that.

(Interview with Sonia, 11/21/17)

Teresa: I understand more the life. Well, I am here. Sometimes with other people when you stay in your country, you never imagine there are other countries and there are other people. When you stay here, you saw different future. You hear about what happened in their country and what is exactly their lives there.

Emily: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Teresa: I'm surprised, I'm lucky because I know now.

Emily: Yeah. So part of your positive experience [in class] has been learning about ...

Teresa: The history. The life.

(Interview with Teresa, 2/22/18)

Processing class learning

I bring together the words of Sonia, Graciela and Teresa to meditate on what students identify as impactful about their learning in class. Using their words, I set up parameters for how I and my fellow educators sought to build opportunities for us as a
class to reflect on our learning. In each instant, students remember moments from class when they were particularly engaged and felt like they had learned something; centering the role of story sharing in each of their rememberings. Graciela began by sharing with me how she finds stories not only “interesting” to hear, but that “you learn” from them. Taken from a longer piece of dialogue in which she discussed enjoying reading articles in class, specifically referencing an article we read by a Navajo woman about the importance of her indigenous language in her life, Graciela remembered fondly how we had engaged narratives in class to learn about new subjects and new languages. In other parts of her interview, she recalled reading the wordless picture book *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan as one of her favorite activities in class. She shared how she had not encountered a wordless picture book before and that it had made her think differently about reading and understanding stories. Through her interview it became clear stories had provided her with different ways to talk about and describe things that happen in the world. Putting both “interesting” and “learn” side by side, she equates the two. Stories pique her curiosity in addition to augmenting her learning about the world. While stories could be thought of purely for their entertainment value, she asserts that they offer lessons in language and new perspectives for seeing the world.

Sonia’s words build on this wondering, conveying that one of the things she liked about stories and why she found them to be one of her favorite class activities was the “suspense.” As a class, it emerged that many students enjoyed supernatural and spooky stories, which had prompted a dive into discussing stories and what makes them dynamic. Referencing the scary stories we had read in class in her discussion of suspense, Sonia describes the affective experience of reading these gripping stories. Connecting to the
appeal of telenovelas, she claims she likes suspense because “you don't know what happen in the next part.” More than words on a page, stories can stir emotional and excitable reactions in you that compel you to read further. She feels most connected to narratives where she is engaged at every turn, working to predict the next moment. Unlike the dry and predictable adult literacy texts I encountered that seemed to flood reading resources for adult literacy learners, Sonia — who also had told me her favorite text in high school was *Crime and Punishment* — named engaging stories as a fundamental to her experience in class.

She also connects this interest in suspense to learning from her classmates, stating that hearing from different people in class is her favorite part of our time together. She notes “I am listen the stories from each person, because everybody has different stories.” Echoing sentiments expressed in the previous chapter about how students felt they learned from each other in class, Sonia explains that “everybody has different stories” that are worth listening to. While she doesn’t highlight learning as much, she states that she “likes” this listening, that she enjoys hearing other stories. Class for her becomes not just about processing new information but finding pleasure in class through our story-telling. Each person in class in this way becomes part of our curriculum, part of our course of study and part of the joy we get from class. Our class is particular because we have this mix of people and our learning outcomes would have been different had we been another group of learners coming together.

Like Graciela and Sonia, Teresa brings up how people in our class have shaped their learning. As she frames it, other people’s stories about “what happened in their country” have impacted her way of understanding the world. She ruminates that
sometimes “when you stay in your country, you never imagine there are other countries and there are other people.” As she states, you see a “different future” when you are in one country versus another. In a space where adults come together with many years of lived experience, from a variety of countries and speaking numerous languages, the potential to learn about other ways of seeing the world is vast. Teresa confirms that this was an unexpected experience for her. She notes that she is “surprised” and also considers herself “lucky because I know now”, evaluating her learning from others as an overwhelmingly positive one. Encapsulating exactly what was positive for her about our learning here, she names that she learned about “The history. The life.” Referencing both what we learned about together in class sessions exploring US immigration history (indicated by earlier conversation in the interview) in addition to the histories learned about through other students in class sharing, Teresa indicates that what she learned about is encapsulated by discussions of “history” and “life” rather than language. What impacted her the most and what she found “lucky” to know more about is what life was like for others and how she might imagine new futures and ways of seeing the world through this knowledge.

Inquiry, for Teresa, also seemed to be a central aspect of her learning. Not only was she hearing new subject matter, but she herself was questioning assumptions she had previously and taking what might be viewed as tensions between her worldview and her classmates’ as areas of consideration and potential questioning. Teresa, whose story-sharing with Senait is central to my introduction, re-emphasized the importance of learning from other students in class through sharing different experiences. While Teresa came to class in part to practice and build up her English knowledge, what she took away
from class what seem to be deeper shifts in her worldview brought on by meaningful
class material and fellow classmates who pushed her in inquiry. Though she says that “I
know now”, indicating some completion in her “knowing”, what she claims to know is
that points of view informed by a variety of contexts expand beyond her imagination.
While of course she might have “known” this to be true before coming to class, I
gathered that her “know”-ing was a sense of appreciation rather than a firm declaration of
mastered competency. What it appears she is embracing is a sense of not knowing; being
open to new ways of knowing from others.

Centering narrative in gauging our learning

In each of these quotations, students share what about stories have impacted them
over their time in class. What students learned in class through story was connected to
their sense of curiosity, to the affective experience of engaging exciting, new stories and
to their own questioning of how they understand the world through hearing about the
experiences and histories of others. Stories have been used by people across cultures to
make sense of the world around them. Stories are told to share histories, to give
warnings, to teach lessons, to entertain. In our class, we often pulled stories from our
own experiences in addition to the histories of our families and various communities to
build relationships and share a variety of insights about language and life more broadly
with each other. Teachers are also indicated in this story-sharing as a review of the data
demonstrates that my fellow co-educators and I engaged anecdotes and stories frequently
to explain linguistic phenomena and relate to students in class.

Story has also been used by education researchers to get at the nuance of
individuals’ journeys through education and the way that learning is contextualized
within the longer story of students’ lives. As Campano (2007) conceptualized in naming the role of storytelling in an inquiry-based classroom, “Students (and teachers) write not only from experience but also for experience; storytelling becomes an ongoing process of inquiry and discovery that is potentially generative.” (p. 18) By understanding storytelling as one way students and teachers connect their classroom learning to their life learning, we can understand storytelling practices as manifestations of students’ living literacy histories. Seeing narratives not as static, but subject to change as the people who tell them change, opens space for telling and retelling of experiences responsive to the changing nature of people’s realities.

The complexity of our learning from story was beautiful and illuminated when we conversed together in moments of reflection captured in the opening vignettes. However, as educators and students, we also craved moments where our learning synthesized across time and we developed evidence of what we had learned to reflect on and share with others. Many students on end of year feedback in other terms had asked for more tests, for ways of measuring what their progress was from the beginning of the term to the end. As teachers who also served as program administrators responsible for sustaining class structure, we knew that eventually we wanted to look to outside sources of funding to make the learning space more sustainably managed, to pay teachers better wages and to provide better resources for students in class; sources which often required formal illustrations of what class learning looked like and the gains students made over discrete periods of time (Condelli, 2007; Shin & Ging, 2019). Given our commitment to a contextualized and critically-informed approach to language learning, we had eschewed standardized testing tools common in adult literacy classrooms as means of assessments.
and demonstrating program effectiveness as we found that they did not assess the learning particular to our context (Auerbach, 1992). Taking inspiration from other adult ESOL educators and researchers who advocate an approach to program assessment that allows students and teachers to reflect on class learning relative to the goals stated by students in the class, my fellow educators and I decided to commit ourselves to answering students’ call for some tangible measurement of their learning that was rooted in students’ living literacy histories (Auerbach, 1992, 2002).

For our context, harnessing storytelling in our program assessments proved to be a useful way for us to capture our learning in a way that was responsive to how both students and teachers used language and literacy in class. In discussing program assessments, rather than student assessments, I include students along with teachers and administrators as part of our learning reflection. In this final chapter, I will examine what happened when we attempted to bring our terms to a close, to make sense through narrative of what it meant to never be quite done knowing while also recognizing at times, more concrete reflection on class learning was helpful to us in making our program critically student-centered. I engage an analysis of how we conceived of and carried out two very different end-of-term inquiries meant to encapsulate our learning as a class through storying. I first examine how story arose as an important way of making meaning in our class, as indicated by students in an unexpected inquiry spiral spurred by students. I then explore how I myself took up storying as a way to make sense of our learning as a class; using inquiry to posit a new framework for understanding our success and function as a program. Through an examination of these two very different term endings, I offer an approach to teacher and program assessment that arise from students’
lives and asks teachers to engage in a narrative-based approach that honors the learning students do within and beyond class. Through this postulating I, in part, answer my second major research question: “What happens when I, as a teacher in this setting, work to develop curriculum informed by critical language and literacy pedagogy along with my students’ and fellow teachers varied and unique perspectives?” Utilizing student-generated materials, fieldnote excerpts and reflective memos, I examine two distinct ways we used story to make sense of our learning and the potential this storying could have in making our class learning visible to others.

**Collecting stories as manifestations of our living literacy histories**

In the following section, I examine how our community of learners formulated the idea to make a book of stories written by students as a culminating project in our fall term. By following the class inquiry spiral that shaped our final project, I examine how storying emerged as an important aspect of our collective meaning making. I then look in depth at the final product we created: a book of short stories covering a range of topics that students deemed interesting and important.

**Roots of our class story collection**

As hinted at in Sonia and Graciela’s opening quotation, stories became a major part of our learning in class together, specifically in the fall term. While we had conducted different activities focused around the theme of self-expression and experimented with language through reading different texts including poetry, song lyrics and essays, we discovered a shared love for suspenseful stories through our Halloween class. Normally, I tried not to do lessons that were holiday-themed as I did not find these lessons particularly critical or ripe for deep discussion of language. In fall 2017,
however, Halloween fell on a Tuesday and seemed unavoidable. As I knew many students might be out trick-or-treating with their children or perhaps might have thought class was cancelled due to the holiday, I opted to copy a few brief scary stories from a childhood favorite book of short stories, for a fun lesson to do on an atypical class day. Despite my assumptions, eight students showed up to class eager to participate. After sharing some candy and a short, informal talk about how Halloween is often celebrated in the US, I asked students if they liked scary stories or knew any scary stories, wanting to gauge students’ comfort with reading scary stories before wholly diving in. This sparked Graciela to tell the story of La Llorona, a well-known figure in Mexican folklore, after which Sonia shared a story her grandmother used to tell her about a witch whose head was known to fly around their town. As noted in my fieldnotes, “This led into Graciela and Sonia going back and forth about stories their grandma would tell them about people who misbehaved.” (Fieldnotes, 10/31/17) More than just sharing stories, here Sonia and Graciela connected that their elders would share these stories to give them warnings or get them to behave. While both women grew up in distinct cultures and contexts — Sonia in Peru and Graciela in Mexico — both recalled with detail ghost stories from their childhoods and the meaning it imprinted on them. After this lengthy discussion, I pulled out the story copies I had made and we read one together as a class. Students engaged this reading with great excitement, exclaiming at different twists and turns and offering predictions at multiple points when prompted by me. We left class full of good energy, laughing and chattering on our way out, I especially glowing from a fairly unplanned lesson gone well.
The following class, after writing in our conversation notebooks and undirected from me, students continued this inquiry with fellow educators, as explicated in fieldnotes:

After Sonia finished her writing, she spent time chatting with Yared, telling her stories about the things we’d talked about Tuesday. Yared sat and told everyone a story that was passed down in her family; she said that her great-great grandfather had been very rich, but her great grandfather was not very wise with money; spending it all and using it up gambling, etc. He buried the rest of his treasure under a tree that it was a said the ghost of a bull guarded, attacking anyone that didn’t have a claim over it. This sparked a conversation with others about money; other learners saying that in their different cultural contexts, there were stories about how money that wasn’t rightfully yours would be cursed/curse you if you took it. After, Graciela shared tons of print offs she had brought talking about the things we had talked about Tuesday. She had printed off pictures of the island of the dolls, Dia de Los Muertos with an accompanying article and several copies of the story of La Llorona. (Fieldnotes, 11/2/17)

We pored over the stories, some people taking copies of the articles Graciela had printed home with them. I was excited to see the enthusiasm everyone sustained from class period to class period. While other engagements with story-telling demonstrated students’ learning through narrative, in this incident, students directed the conversation and showed me what they were interested in talking more about, evidenced in Graciela’s printing out of stories and in Sonia’s eager recounting to Yared. Yared’s responsiveness and engagement back demonstrates the reciprocity of interest, teachers and students organically co-constructing a language learning opportunity and exchange. Our personal and family lore emerged as important over these multiple days, not just as a way to learn English, but as a way to share about different beliefs, different cultural tropes and different ways of making sense of the world we all brought together.

Over the next several weeks, we dove into class activities dissecting the act of storytelling: discussing story arcs, identifying different elements of compelling stories
using folktales and beginning to pen our own stories. In one instance my father, who was visiting me, even stopped by class to share a story he used to tell me at bedtime, bringing my own literacy and language history into class as a point of direct investigation and interrogation. Together, in planning conversations over the weeks following Halloween, Willow and I realized that creating a book of stories written by students could be an appropriate culmination of our learning. We moved forward with this project, designing a several-week stretch of lessons that helped students build up to the point of producing a final, written narrative. Rather than narrowing what students could write about, we designed the project to be a collection of stories from people about whatever memory, folktale or current experience stuck out to them. We also scaffolded the projects out into portions, from outlining through several rounds of revisions. The final project became an illustration of our larger attempt to balance multiple perspectives on language learning.

We thought that putting students’ narratives in print produced a recognizable product in which students could have concrete evidence of their English language knowledge, which students in the past had explicitly asked for. At the same time, the open-endedness of the project would allow students freedom to share what they felt would most represent their learning, inviting, in a way, students’ culturally-informed and non-English-based literacy and language histories into what we utilized as our final class assessment.

From a one-off session I threw together after several weeks of highly planned and carefully considered lessons, a whole inquiry into narrative perpetuated by students and supported by our responsiveness as planners blossomed into a final project to bring together our learning. Unforeseen by me, students picked up on a thread in class and pushed us forward; prompting an inquiry into both fictionalized and experience-based
story-sharing. Together, we inquired into the intergenerational nature of literacy and language learning, students sharing stories together that elders had told them and thinking through together about what the significance of this story-sharing meant in their lives. A rich area of research explored by many sociolinguists and literacy scholars, narrative study is understood within academia to be one way to better understand how people construct the world around them through story (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012; Ochs & Capps, 2002; Wortham, 2001). Students, through our inquiry into what narrative is and what it can look like, engaged these questions naturally, speaking to a level of engagement with language that extends beyond learning grammar and word sequence. Had we opted for pre-determined testing options – either designed by a testing company or designed ourselves – this complex level of learning would not have been captured. By not having a plan, the direction for final assessment emerged through teacher and students’ interests converging. In the following section, I review what students contributed to our book and findings about how learning came together.

**Celebrating Our Stories!: Reflecting on a life of literacy and language knowing**

Over several weeks of class sessions, students formulated stories based on a variety of topics that they elected themselves. We combined these stories together in a book entitled, *Celebrating Our Stories!*. In Table 6.1, I provide an overview of the nine different submissions and their summaries, along with different elements I identified in them for this analysis. To evaluate our final project developed together, I first utilize a representational narrative analysis (Bamberg, 2010) that attends to the texts as they appear in the book apart from how they were created and embedded in students’ literacy practices beyond the final product. Re-reading each story, I read them for several
different purposes: to name where the authors pulled the story from; interpret the tone of the piece; distill its desired effect on the audience; and identify important subject matter (appearing in order under the table heading “Themes”). Rather than reading for any truth or authority about students’ experience, I read the narratives paying attention to how students used their writing to provide a certain experience for the reader and think through why these choices were made and the effect they have as a collective. I also did not read closely for narrative structure, as we had worked as a class to identify common parts of a narrative — a problem, rising action, climax, resolution — through an investigation into story structure. We provided optional scaffolding for students in their writing through a pre-planning graphic organizer where students identified these parts of their stories, making the structure of many students’ stories fairly similar. Through my initial reading, I arrive at a sense of how students understood and employed multiple uses of narrative.

Table 6.1: Students final stories’ summaries and themes.\(^\text{10}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mateo</td>
<td>When I Was Little</td>
<td>Mateo, as a child, received a homemade kite from his father but ended up injuring himself playing with it dangerously on the roof against his parents’ directions.</td>
<td>childhood memory; humor(ous)/dramatic; cautionary tale; family; journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>I Lost My Money</td>
<td>Sonia lost her money on the way to work at her factory job in Lima, only to have someone lend her some to help her get to work.</td>
<td>adulthood memory; dramatic; anecdote; work; help from strangers; loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minerva</td>
<td>White Little Dog</td>
<td>One day when she was younger, Minerva thought her dog had run away as she heard a barking</td>
<td>childhood memory; suspenseful; unexplained</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{10}\) A full copy of the book with illustrations is included in Appendix A.
from deep in the woods. She chased the barking for hours, only to return home without the dog find that him safe at home.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Theme(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graciela</td>
<td>Sweets and Cigars</td>
<td>When she was a child, Graciela was asked by her uncle to go to the store to get cigarettes, but got candy instead.</td>
<td>childhood memory; humor(ous); anecdote; family; children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora</td>
<td>The Volcan in Her Love</td>
<td>Aurora, in this story, retells a legend she remembers from her child about a warrior and his unrequited love turning into volcanoes in their sorrow from being unable to be together.</td>
<td>story passed down from elder; tragic; dramatic; folk story/origin story; supernatural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>José</td>
<td>Interview with God</td>
<td>A man, who was looking to notch up his career as a journalist, decided to interview God. On his way to the interview, a child appeared who was ill, so the man drove him to the hospital only to miss the interview. It then was revealed that the child was God.</td>
<td>popular story retelling; suspenseful; morality tale; faith; supernatural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romo</td>
<td>[untitled]</td>
<td>Romo entered a drawing contest as a child with great hope of winning the grand prize, a desk, only to have his hopes dashed upon losing. His family accompanies him through the journey</td>
<td>childhood memory; dramatic; anecdote; journey; loss; family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>My story is About Nancy the Turtle</td>
<td>Rose’s saga of sneaking a turtle she got on a visit to the island of St. Thomas back to the US through multiple levels of airport security</td>
<td>adulthood memory; humor(ous); anecdote; travel; work; relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teresa</td>
<td>The Light Came</td>
<td>One evening, Teresa went to a local Philadelphia park in the evening with her family where they saw a bright white light, whose origin remains unexplained to this day.</td>
<td>adulthood memory; suspenseful; unexplained phenomenon; supernatural; family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most students’ stories are narrations of experiences that had happened to them, the outliers being Aurora’s and José’s stories, the former being a tale heard from an elder and
the latter, a popular narrative circulating in numerous outlets. Within the category of memory, however, are distinct tones, that authors manipulate to convey different meanings and reading experiences. Some pieces that are “dramatic” and “suspenseful” convey a sense of urgency in anticipation. Others marked “suspenseful” are more lighthearted, prompting one to laugh and pushing the reader forward out of enjoyment, to see what hilarious thing might happen next. Sometimes, the tone and purpose meld together. For instance, the code “humor(ous)” emerged to pay homage to both the tone being funny and the genre being humor, in that it is told to primarily make one laugh. Interacting with tone, students also mobilized their narratives to meditate on different themes — family relationships, work dynamics, inexplicable occurrences — relevant to their lives. Dramatic stories were told both to provide people the experience of reliving an impactful moment in the author’s lives (what I term “anecdotes”) and for specific teaching purposes (to meditate on morality and life lessons). More were told to share shocking and unexplained phenomenon, asking audiences to bear witness to and perhaps help make sense of bizarre moments the authors’ experienced first-hand.

Utilized to entertain, to investigate one’s past experiences and to share learnings about past experiences with others, the range of purposes students engaged and the topics they contemplated reflect students’ expertise as storytellers in multiple senses. This command of constructing narrative spoke not only to what students learned in class, but exemplified a literacy and language practice they have been doing their entire lives. While English is the medium through which they communicated their stories, students built on language and literacy skills they have been using since childhood. Using this already familiar linguistic tool, students were able to experiment with using English
within a genre of language and literacy already familiar to many. While the act of writing down these narratives also might have been a new experience for students, given how many expressed desires to work on their writing specifically, again, the unfamiliar literacy practice was layered on top of a well-practiced and lived experience. In this way, our final assessment not only allowed students to demonstrate English language knowledge, but made visible the multiple literacy legacies students were building from in their adult learning class.

The multifaceted nature of students’ final compositions demonstrated a range of competencies in narrative construction and English language knowledge. Students showed themselves to be story-crafters; a fact obvious from our class interactions, but evidenced concretely in this piece. On top of all this, students had figured out ways to communicate this craft in English, a language all learners identified as still becoming familiar with. As a project used as an alternative assessment, students were at once able gauge their English knowledge and reflect on what they already knew in addition to what more they might want to learn through reading the final product. The collective nature of the book also demonstrated our commitment to growth as a class and provided students with a snapshot of their classmates’ language and literacy legacies. To make further sense of these texts and take them seriously as living narratives, despite their calcified existence as text in a book, I dive into an in-depth analysis of the stories by Mateo and Aurora to illuminate how this final project was responsive to and representative of our learning in this context.

**Mateo: Reflection on parenting.** The first narrative we included in our book was from Mateo, a student who joined our class in the first two weeks of November.
Mateo, though quiet in class and opting not to share that much initially during large group discussions, took quickly to writing in the conversation notebooks. Through our conversation notebook writing and brief exchanges in class up until his narrative writing, it became clear that Mateo’s family was a centralizing force in his life. He wrote often about his children and indicated them as significant not just in his reasons for coming to class, but in making his life choices more generally. Over several class sessions, Mateo worked independently to write his story, doing several rounds of edits himself on the piece in addition to working with a facilitator in class to revise language and clarify parts of the structure. In figure 6.1, I share a copy of his narrative.

Figure 6.1: Image of Mateo’s storybook contribution.

The story begins with Mateo recalling himself as seven years old, calling himself the diminutive of his given name in his author’s byline, further locating himself as a child in the stories telling. He moves us through the emotional experience of being ecstatic to receive a kite, “my first kite I can play with!”, made by his father. He
builds up the relationship between he and the kite, telling us how he “played with the kite for more than one month” and how it was “so fun.” Notching up the suspense with an anticipatory “…”, leading us to believe that the enjoyment of the kite might soon be disrupted, he foreshadows an ominous occurrence, telling us “until one idea came to my head.” Flashing back to that moment, he divulges that he climbed up on the roof of his house, despite his mother’s warning that “it is so dangerous to go up.” He notes his ignoring of her advice, “But I did not listen to her.” Almost like a cartoon illustration, Mateo describes falling from the roof “with a big scream, ‘WAAA!’”, a scene easily emerging in the readers head. A little boy so happy with his new toy falling to the ground, tended to by his worried parents. The aftermath “was like a dream”, he remembered little, only the pain and recovery from his injuries. He ends the story with an indication of what he took away from the event, “After that, every time when I play anything and my parent say: do not go there or stop doing that... I listened to my parent to be safe…” In this final section, Mateo returns to his parents, indicating that the biggest take away for him was to listen to his them, even if they are telling him things he did not want to do. With this ending, the story reads as a cautionary tale, warning others to obey your parents or suffer the consequences as he did.

Mateo’s story, with its highs and lows, recalls the pain, both physical and internal, of not heeding your parents’ advice. Not only did Mateo ignore his mother, he did so despite all the good things they had done for him. After the kindness his father showed in making a kite for Mateo, Mateo disobeyed his parents’ advice, which was also given out of kindness in their concern for his safety. The sharpness of this memory also indicated a certain guilt that he was not more
attentive to his parents’ lessons as a child. Though gentle on himself as a young child, discussing himself more as blissfully unaware of the dangers present in everyday living rather than willfully defiant of his parents, he also saw himself as having a lot to learn. In his writing, his parents emerge as formative figures in his early life, providing him with security and joy in addition to guidance through life’s sometimes literal ups and downs.

When read in the context of Mateo’s other writing and class interactions, in which he lovingly describes his children and his desires to help guide them as best he can in their lives, the theme of parent-child relationships take on new meaning. In the description he penned one day of his son, a flash of little Mateo emerges: “My son is terrible but I love this little kid, he make me crazy but is so funny and smile” (Mateo, Conversation notebook writing, 1/25/18). Just like the naughty boy that climbed up on his parents’ roof, Mateo describes his son as a mischief-maker, who is “terrible” and drives Mateo “crazy” but also in his “smile” and “funny” ways, fills his heart with joy. Similar descriptions of his daughter emerged through our conversations, whom he described as talkative and energetic but sweet and loving (Conversation notebook, 1/25/18). In understanding what Mateo was grappling with as a parent himself, we can understand his narrative as a meditation on parenting, not just a cautionary tale about listening to your elders. Despite his parents’ best intentions, Mateo still ended up seriously hurting himself as a child under their care. Though not blaming his parents for the injury, he also implicates parents in maintaining children’s safety, by calling attention to how he learned to listen to his parents and accept their guidance in maintaining his wellbeing. In trying to think through how best to parent children who are excited yet still learning
about the world and all the dangers present in it, Mateo is presented with challenges his own parents faced. His narrative for this class project, then, can be understood as a project Mateo undertook to process some of his own thinking about his upbringing alongside a consideration of how to parent and teach young children.

**Aurora: Storying marginalized literacy legacies.** Aurora, a student who has appeared in numerous data illustrations throughout this dissertation, used her authoring opportunity to share a remembered childhood folk story. As discussed in the previous chapter, Aurora and I had long been engaged in a conversation about the importance of Nahuatl culture and language in her literacy legacy. Over the course of several conversation notebook entries, Aurora detailed aspects of Nahuatl history and language and its relevance in her life. Memorably, Aurora also shared with me that it was a challenge for her to remember these legacies and share them others, specifically her daughter, when she is so distant from her family and others who are the keepers of these legacies. Her decision to share a Nahuatl folk story was particularly interesting to me and prompted me to examine the potential significance of her sharing this story in the context of her longer learning journey. Her story is shared in Figure 6.2.

Aurora begins the story with orienting us in the past, saying that “this story began many years ago when an emperor still had power and existed as the government for a village.” Situating the story within a time and place when emperors ruled, Aurora also grounds us in the historical moment and significance of this telling. Introducing the emperor’s “beautiful daughter”, she sets up the story for its main thrust: the ill-fated relationship between the daughter and a warrior, “fighting for a better deal and power.” She then weaves a tale of trickery and betrayal, the daughter driven to stop “eating,
drinking and falling asleep” upon hearing, falsely, that the warrior had been killed.

The Volcan in Her Love
By Aurora

This story began many years ago when an emperor still had power and existed as the government for a village. He had a beautiful daughter. She was in love with a warrior in charge of fighting for a better deal and power.

The time passed and they finished the combat. The warrior won but some bad people came to the emperor and told the news, but they lied and said that the warrior died. The daughter listened and felt so bad and stopped eating, drinking and falling asleep.

When the warrior came back and found his love dead he took a big torch and walked so long, far away from the village, he took the princess near to the Big Mountains and stayed there with her. When the time passed, the dad saw two mountains appear with a flame, and he thought, it is my daughter and the warrior. He said, “they are in love forever, that is the reason they are next to each other.”

Figure 6.2: Aurora’s storybook contribution and illustration of her story

The daughter soon dies, which the warrior does not take well: “When the warrior came back and found his love dead, he took a big torch and walked so long, far away from the village” carrying the body of his love. Eventually, the warrior also dies, away from the village. The story ends with the sad realization of the daughter’s father, who
sees “the two mountains appear with a flame” and thinks “it is my daughter and the warrior.” He comforts himself, saying “they are in love forever, that is the reason why they are next to each other.” Connecting back to the title, “The Volcan and Her Love”, we understand that this is also an origin story of two volcanoes prominent in the lives of the onlooking village. We see this reflected in Aurora’s accompanying illustration.

Aurora, who often doodled in her notebook margins and sometimes drew more elaborate images with her daughter in their independent time, accompanied her story with a clarifying image, showing one mountain standing tall, looking over the other, more level mountain: the warrior in watch and mourning of his love, the maiden in deathly repose.

In many ways, this story is impactful on its own in communicating a story that moves the reader in its tragedy. When contextualized within Aurora’s other writing and interactions in class, the story, however, takes on new meaning. In many ways, Aurora had been working on sharing this narrative in English for many months, having described to me at different points aspects of the story and the volcanoes’ presence in Nahuatl history. While her description of Nahuatl history was more contained to our personal correspondence, her sharing in the class storybook was the first time she had shared a narrative openly with the whole class. Knowing Aurora’s concerns about remembering Nahuatl traditions in Philadelphia, her choice to use the platform of the storybook to share a Nahuatl legend becomes a choice to uphold a part of her literacy legacy marginalized by multiple forces, including colonialism and US imperialism. This has particular significance as a sharing done in an ESOL class, a site proven to be instrumental in the project to erase non-Anglo language and literacy practices. This sharing of course does not neutralize the effect that forced Anglo hegemony has wrought.
on indigenous languages and communities. It does, however, represent a moment Aurora used a class activity to spotlight one aspect of her literacy legacy as it extends beyond English and experiment with narrative writing in a way that built on a history she was worried about forgetting; using class time to work on a literacy learning aspiration that lay outside of her goals for learning English.

Figure 6.3: Aurora’s daughter’s illustration of her story.

Moreover, Aurora also found a way to directly involve her daughter as a co-author in her writing of this narrative, further illuminating how she used this opportunity not only to share a piece of Nahuatl history with the class but sustain this legacy in her daughter’s own literacy learning. Figure 6.3 depicts her young daughter’s drawing of the princess who turned into a volcano, an illustration which her daughter created alongside Aurora as Aurora crafted the story and which we also included in our book. While her daughter was not included in the study leaving close recordings of her authoring practices out of examination, the illustration in the book itself signifies how Aurora brought her
daughter into the telling. The caption, as dictated by Aurora’s daughter further connects her drawing to Aurora’s story, demonstrating how her daughter interpreted the story and accompanied her mother in her authoring. As described in my previous chapter, in conversation notebook entries Aurora had expressed that it was especially hard for her to remember and share Nahuatl traditions and language with her daughter without a surrounding community knowledgeable about these legacies. Aurora’s daughter’s drawing exemplifies one instance of how she and her mother worked together to remember these traditions and engage them together in a specific literacy event (Heath & Street, 2008). While this is a snapshot of a complex and living indigenous culture that cannot be captured in one story retelling, I thought this moment was significant as it represented one way Aurora worked to keep the memory of her Nahuatl literacy history in practice with her daughter, despite all the challenges she encountered in trying to do so. Examining how Aurora and her daughter created these texts, it becomes clear that ESOL assessments can become a time not just to perform English language knowledge, which is inevitable, but also a time to simultaneously address other literacy learning goals that come from literacy histories often excluded from class perhaps more important and meaningful to students.

**Reading across our stories to create a class learning narrative**

In many ways, this final project represented a successful culmination of the multiple teaching perspectives we had been trying to mediate throughout the term. This was accomplished by allowing our assessment to follow our lines of inquiry. In letting our class learning and students’ interactions with different activities dictate the turns we took, we were able meld teachers’ and students’ commitments into a final project that
celebrated and strengthened our work together. Asking students to review their own writing and engage in multiple rounds of feedback with facilitators allowed students to gauge their English language knowledge, attending to specific concerns of students to have opportunities in which to practice English. When given space to show their learning through a final project, students also nominated to interrogate issues we could not have identified as important prior to conducting our assessment, touching on our desires as educators to better understand and incorporate students’ literacy histories and critical perspectives. As evidenced in the close read of Mateo and Aurora’s writing, students used the space provided by the open-ended nature of the assignment to process experiences and complex topics that were on their minds in many different ways.

In my examination of the underlying themes that arise from students’ texts when contextualized within other class learnings, our final assessment also serves as a story in and of itself of students’ literacy knowledge as they extend beyond class. By connecting the stories students wrote in our final class project to their learning over the whole semester, I was able to see how students worked toward goals outside of those related to English language acquisition. While Aurora and Mateo’s final stories were complex, I was able to glean even more connection to different parts of their life when I situated their final writing within other conversations we had had to create a narrative of their learning in class. In this situating, I storied Mateo’s ongoing inquiry as to what it means to be a good parent. I also storied Aurora’s reflections on her relationship to Nahuatl and its presence in her life in the US. Taking cues from our class learning, I assumed a storying approach to final assessments to highlight the intellectual work students did all term through their grappling with language in class. While this storying did not happen...
in formal meetings with students where we identified these learnings together given time limitations, we did work collaboratively on drafting multiple copies of these stories during which we conversed and reflected on the purpose of these stories and what they meant in the lives of students.

There is also something specific that happened in bringing our stories together. Rather than just writing stories independently and sharing them page by page with each other, facilitators created a book that bound everyone’s stories side by side; recreating interactions we had in class where people drew from each other’s storying to make new meaning of language and life. By providing a loose structure, students were given a framework in which to create a product together that maintained their individual perspective imprint on the assignment. As such, our learning from each other, from our different stories, became clearer in putting our narratives together in one book.

What is not clear from reading the texts and analyzing the final product is how this final product physically came together. Orchestrating all of our pieces to appear in one book was not done seamlessly. While engaging students in their writing was intuitive and fit into the longer stream’ of students learning journeys, actually getting students’ work together over the short period of a few weeks was challenging with students’ shifting schedules and sometimes unpredictable attendance. As my fellow educators and I were fully committed to providing all students with the experience of being featured in our book, we had to be creative in how we worked with students who did not have as much time as others to complete their writing. Some students came every class in the weeks we completed the project, leaving them bored some days if they finished everything early, while some students came one or two days out of six class
sessions and had engage more intensive periods of work if they wanted to contribute a piece to the book. Sustaining students through this writing process was then at once responsive to their interests and ways of being literate, but also in a way not responsive to the shifting nature of students’ lives. In this project, however, a number of students were able to see the project through and though some got more chances to review than others, everyone got to see some finalized version of their narrative through to print.

This neater ending to a term, however, is not representative of all endings. Having experienced sharp drops in student attendance multiple times throughout my teaching, I was well aware of how quickly these conditions could change and how shocking they could feel to our class community. I share a jotted down worry from fieldnotes that captures some of this fear, recorded from the class after Halloween, described earlier, “After these [engaging] classes, there is almost a desperation I feel; I am so excited about the potential and so worried that people won’t come back and that we end class without finishing what we were thinking.” (Fieldnotes, 11/2/17). Building on student inquiries as we did for this project requires that students stay for a prolonged period of time, which is something I knew was difficult for many of the students I worked with. As described in my framing questions, shifting attendance was not just a feature of our class or a number we took for our statistics. Who came to class shaped the kinds of lessons we could do, described in detail in the previous chapter. In the following section, I examine what happened when such a drop-off occurred and how it affected our other major final project, at once greatly troubling me and giving me pause to shift my definitions of achievement and story our learning in a different way.
A promising new inquiry

In the spring term we followed quite a different path for our curriculum. Rather than concentrating on forms of creative self-expression, we developed a curriculum focused on helping students learn how to ask questions and find information to their questions using English. Beyond just finding information we focused on asking questions to critically assess sources and question information they encountered. Given that many students expressed wanting to get their GED and wanting to learn more about writing essays and analyzing sources — skills that would be tested on the GED — we moved forward with conversations about how to look critically at texts and evaluate them for what messages they might be trying to send us and how they might be trying to manipulate our perspective in some way. This investigation dovetailed nicely with our critical approach as a program. Focusing on supporting students in developing their comfort to ask questions about texts and question information given to them in English could open conversations and directions for curriculum that would allow them to bring in concerns about equity not easily brought into general class discussions; bringing student and teacher perspectives on learning together in a common inquiry.

An excerpt from a February 2018 class captures some of the conversations we had been having in class around critical approaches to collecting information. In this conversation, I asked people where they liked to find information, looking for ins to begin our discussion of gathering information and asking appropriate questions of our data sources. After a whole group brainstorm about places where we look for information, I reflected on what we had brainstormed and asked people what they thought about trusting different sources. We talked about as a group first about trusting people, a
subject many people connected to easily. As many students had named the internet as a
place they went for information, I dove further into that specific source, when it did not
come up organically:

Emily: What about trust with something like Google? Or Facebook?
Teresa: Nothing
Emily: How do you know what to trust on that?
Graciela: No
_A few of the women agree_
Emily: You don’t think you can? Is there any Internet that you trust?
Graciela: Facebook is uh, not private…its…
Emily: Anyone can…public?
Graciela: No matter what the people say, its…my Facebook is private. It’s not.
Teresa: It’s not
Emily: Right
Graciela: We have a class about that.
Emily: Yeah, so it’s…
Graciela: For the parents.
Emily: Right, right. It’s hard, because some things you can trust. Like if you
need information for an event….right?
Graciela: Uh huh
Emily: Like Cabrini? Like the Center? They use Facebook to share information,
sometimes with people.
Graciela: Or when, you give your emails to the stores. The same thing.
Emily: Oh yeah, yeah right.
Graciela: When you buy something from some stores and they say “Oh can you
give us your emails?”
Emily: Right, right
Graciela: To send like a promotion or something like that, o, specials, then…a lot
of companies…they have your information and then another companies, and
another companies…
Emily: Yeah so there’s a thing, and that’s called data – data sharing
*Many people say yes, nod their heads*
Emily: When companies they share your information with other companies. So
it’s hard, yeah. On the internet, it’s hard. We’re gonna talk more…do you want to
do a class where we talk about like, trust and trusting websites?
*Most nod*
(Class recording, 2/15/18)

To my surprise, my question about people using Google and Facebook sparked a
conversation about how suspicious people were of the internet. As can be seen in the
beginning of the exchange, I attempted to spark a conversation about internet usage. Thinking that some people might say they trusted this source, I mentioned Facebook, knowing it can be a way for news to travel quickly between individuals. This set off a whole conversation about not trusting Facebook and other websites and online forums, which continued despite my attempt to bring the conversation back to ways we might be able to trust social media sites. Graciela forged ahead, mentioning a class for parents she knows about that teaches about the dangers of Facebook. While some students remained silent, the most prominent voices in class condemned wholeheartedly most online media. At one point, I say “Like Cabrini? Like the Center? They use Facebook to share information, sometimes with people,” meaning sharing information about programming with users the way Facebook was originally constructed. Graciela picked up on “share” in a different way, connecting share to data sharing: social media platforms selling or sharing data with third parties unbeknownst to users. I realized that this is a bigger issue that cannot be thought through in one conversation. Certain words were sparking multiple meanings for people and I wanted to dive in more to the nuances of these concepts, thinking through with people why they do or do not trust certain websites and sources of information. I tabled the issue at the end, directing us to further inquiry, “We’re gonna talk more…do you want to do a class where we talk about like, trust and trusting websites?” Students affirmative responses pushed me to consider how I might extend this conversation into future classes.

Through this discussion and others, it became clear to me that many of my students had critical questions about how to use the internet and how to integrate digital media into their information finding practices that typically centered around asking
people they knew and trusted in real life. Though I had noticed in class that many students used phones and other digital tools to find information on the internet, I was unaware of the divisions in class around whether the source was useful or not. I thought an inquiry together into identifying where we could find good information on the internet and perhaps triangulate that information with in-person sources could be a fruitful direction.

I was especially excited as many of the students in our class had been in our program the term before, making them familiar with the routines of class and the kinds of questions we engaged together in our learning. While some newcomers, like Salima and Malek, were new in the spring semester, they were mentored into class routines and protocols by other students who had been in the class a while. This lay the groundwork for future conversations and projects that could incorporate our past inquiries. Building, once more, from a common practice and common set of questions students seemed to have, Willow and I envisioned moving forward with other activities that explored critical usages of media. Over the next several weeks, we engaged critical readings not only of websites, but critical readings of paintings, photos and other images to hone our critical conversation skills; comparing how different artistic choices evoked different moods and responses in addition to how positioning figures in images could affect the way you read an image. Students enjoyed this multimodal engagement and it seemed that we were embarking on another rich period of inquiry.

**An inquiry disruption: Storying unexpected absences**

What actually ended up happening at the end of the second term is difficult to capture through an examination of fieldnotes, class transcripts and student writing. Over
the next few months, when the inquiry might have taken twists and turns according to the whims of students, paralleling our fall term, our inquiry petered out in a way. Not due to any one issue or person’s fault, our inquiry as a class seemed to dwindle as a number of circumstances collided to make for an end of term where class numbers were low and students came inconsistently. Though we conducted a final project in which students conducted mini research projects that the two students who finished the project seemed to enjoy, the inquiry by the end felt more teacher than student driven as we worked to hold the class together across unpredictable patterns of student attendance. During an end of term with a paucity of evidence as to our learning, storying as a form of program assessment emerged as a useful practice for my fellow teachers and I to engage to fill these gaps when things like text-rich final projects were not available as evidence of what happened in class. It was in this moment that my own storying of class term learning came through as an essential component of making our learning visible and assessing what meaning we made together in class for us as a whole program beyond individual students’ experiences.

Reading back through my reflective memos, I noticed a trend starting in mid-March, of a discernable preoccupation with attendance and its effect on our planning. At first my concerns were mild, noting some people’s work schedules had made coming to class more difficult. These absences took up space in my reflective writing about how class was going, but did not dominate what I wrote about. Then, after a mathematics GED class in Spanish that used to meet on Sundays shifted to Tuesdays, my concerns about students’ absences became more prominent in my writing as any students whose immediate goal was to get their GED left our class to attend the GED prep sessions. By
the end of the year, we only had a handful of students coming to each class. I pull an excerpt from a reflective memo written in May 2018 to capture some of the ways I processed these changes at that time:

The year ended on a bit of a flat note that certainly pushed me in terms of how I think of success and also pushed me to think of achievement as non-linear and as something that exists outside of myself. By the end of the term, there were several students who had been consistently attending stop coming. Mateo, Minerva, Salima, Graciela, Aurora, Teresa….all had reasons they communicated for not coming, but our classroom still felt empty and a little dejected. Mateo’s work schedule changed; Salima had family visiting in town and worked as a bike delivery person for UberEats, making her tired, often too tired to come to class; Graciela injured herself in her home in the last month of class and was required by the doctor to stay home for 2 weeks and also left her job at [Cabrini]. Minerva lost her job and took the opportunity to take more classes, including intensive beautician schooling and specific ESOL prep classes to go into the health field. (Reflective memo, May, 2018)

All of these things are typical reasons students stop coming to class. Work schedule changes often meant that students had to stop coming to class, personal health and family issues bumped attending ESOL classes as a low priority. Alongside my logical processing of knowing that shifting life circumstances meant our class shifted as well, I also had developed close relationships with many students and felt their absence emotionally in class. Concern for Graciela who was injured and for Salima who was working what I perceived as a dangerous job shaded my sadness at their absence with concern for their wellbeing.

On top of absences that occurred with these life shifts, the GED class that met on Tuesdays also pushed students to leave. Whereas it was easy for me to understand why students stopped coming to class with illness and work schedule shifts, it was harder for me to deal with the fact that a GED class had been scheduled at the same time as our class. On one hand I was thrilled students were able to access resources they had long
told me they wanted, but I was also frustrated with the thin ranks this left in my class. As I note in my memo, “I struggled with this tension the rest of the term. I couldn’t help but feel that this GED class was taking away students from class, affecting the culture of my classroom.” (Reflective memo, May, 2018). Though other students had left to pursue classes at other locations, this double-booking felt avoidable given that we were teaching in the same community. In trying to figure out how this had happened, I figured out that the teacher only had Tuesday nights that they could come and offer classes; a seemingly unavoidable impasses in scheduling.

Knowing why students were absent did not stop me, however, from locating the reason for this shift back onto myself and my teaching. This is not without cause. Research in adult literacy highlights that student retention is often a measure of a program’s quality (Belzer, 2007; Comings, 2007). According to this logic, students not coming to class means the class is not satisfactory. What about the other students I could not account for? Were students not coming because classes were bad? Was I a bad teacher? Had I not listened to students fully?

I tried to get outside of myself, thinking about how the opportunities were right for the people taking advantage of them at this point in time. But I constantly circled back to feeling like I failed. The class I taught was not interesting enough to keep people coming. Though by the end we had about 3 people (Malek, Rose and Gabriel) who continued to come, I let the feelings of inadequacy sneak in and define a lot of how I felt about how the end of the term went. Though zooming out, I recognize it as part of how things are to a certain extent in these settings, I am amazed at how similar this feeling is to other feelings I’ve had other terms where the same thing happened. It seems inevitable that we just lose a lot of people throughout the term. I struggle still with how to live with this and not map it back onto myself, knowing all the facts about why people stop coming. (Reflective Memo, May 2018)
I share these worries to be honest about one of the challenges of teaching in community-based adult literacy setting. While I always logically understood that students in adult literacy programming often left class in high numbers over a term, teaching and working in a system where your worth as a teacher is valued by whether you can get people to reach a certain level of English competency had also affected me and figured into how I measured my self-worth as a teacher and by extension, my students. Though I expressed ambivalence about my ability to actually take a neutral outlook on this term ending, acknowledging how “I struggle still with how to live with this,” I recognized that the struggle to understand these class absences was internal. In seeing how I storied this experience to myself, it becomes evident that part of my storying was processing this logical and emotional in service of further action to improve my practice.

By recognizing that my own feelings of “inadequacy” were internal, I also indicated a then nascent but growing sense that I needed to decenter myself and ESOL as a program from students’ lives. Thinking only about how I and the program were affecting/affected by students’ lives could lead me down the path to enacting a white savior mentality. While it is important to assess how students are responding to one’s teaching and try to change programming if it seems people are leaving, it is also important as a teacher to remember one’s place in students’ lives. This realization should have seemed obvious long before, especially given my critical stance. ESOL is one activity among many that students engage. Without this contextualization and decentering, teachers can take on a mentality that their program holds more importance and sway over students’ lives than it actually does; a common phenomenon across teaching contexts especially in contexts where white teachers are working with students
of color. By re-contextualizing a program’s existence within the worlds of students, a new student-centeredness can be imagined that acknowledges not only with the learning students are doing in one’s class, but in their lives generally.

**Putting class learning into perspective**

My own memoing and grappling over the end of the spring term about how and why students were absent served as a form of teacher and program self-assessment. While students having opportunities to communicate their knowledge and what they have learned is a fundamental part of education, it is just as essential for practitioners and programs to do the same. When adult literacy programs see themselves as being meaningful within students’ lives, rather than students’ lives only having meaning within the context of class (e.g. valuing a student as a whole person rather than a language learner), programs also might find themselves at a loss as to how to continue if a student-driven classroom is left without many students. Through my own storying, student-centeredness became not just about the immediate students in class but those that were yet to come to class and those that had been in class and still considered it an important site of learning.

Though I did not reach this conclusion in my memoing, engaging in an active effort to understand the complexities of why I was troubled by the end of the semester led me to take action on the things I was realizing. I saw that though we had rethought our approach to assessment to gauge not only students’ English language competence but other language and literacy histories as well, we had not yet thought through how we actually might gauge student learning beyond the immediate classroom. To expand my notions of success as a teacher and by extension how I measured my students, I needed to
have a longer and broader view of learning. As such, part of our end of term assessment necessitated looking back to create a narrative of students’ absences across time in our program. Willow, Bridget and I undertook this program assessment dialogically during an end of year retreat, in which we processed our learning from the year and looked forward to how we might alter our program in the upcoming terms when I would no longer be teacher. In our reflection, we remembered not only the times students stopped coming to class in years before, but also how they often returned. Multiple students left class seemingly for good only to return months, sometimes years later. Each time students came back, they shared stories about fluctuating shift hours, new family responsibilities or changing immigration statuses that affected their coming to class. They also spoke of new learning opportunities they took on in those gaps, telling us about English or citizenship classes they had attended that piqued their interests and taught them something new.

These realizations emphasized that we needed to take seriously not only the learning people demonstrated in class, but the learning and life circumstances that took place in other parts of students’ lives. Instead of feeling in competition with a Spanish GED class, how could we approach them as partners in education? How could we work to get GED classes at the Center for students who felt left behind when their peers went off to other classes? How do we maintain these learning spaces for people to return to, even when it might seem that a community-based class has run its course and is no longer necessary? How do we locate our class narrative within the narrative of students’ lives rather than the other way around?
These questions, which we asked ourselves at the end of the retreat, fueled a period of reassessment and the development of new programming responsive to the story of our term. Though difficult to contend with, engaging a process of reflective storytelling as a program enabled us to make sense of what felt like a disjointed term while also providing us with future directions for learning. Though I was not present to see how these questions were grappled with in programming, our story that included why people left class served as evidence of the realities of students’ lives and the challenges they encountered to accessing learning. It also served as a fodder for us to consider how we could frame absences as positive occurrences, when students left our program to pursue other endeavors that were meaningful to them.

**Using story to make sense of critically student-centered learning**

The end of the spring term gave me pause to consider how I storied our learning as a class. In storying our learning to locate class within the lives of students, I was reminded of a core belief with which I entered teaching: that English was useful to learn in the US, but was not more important than other languages, literacies or other happenings in students’ lives. A critical stance as an ESOL teacher mindful of all the ways English dominance has harmed immigrant populations also means finding a different way of measuring a program’s worth apart from how well it retains students. By storying why people were absent from class and decentering our English program from students’ lives in my narrative of how class ended, I was able to develop new paths for inquiry that encouraged me to think about how one term might connect with others and how we could assess our program over time to tell a story contextualized within students’ lives. Similarly, storying at the program level enabled us to reflect on the many
ways we might narrate students’ individual success and success of the program. Creating learning narratives proved fruitful not only for students and teachers, as discussed in the analysis of the spring term’s narrative, but for programs as well.

I end with a thought from Teresa. Being a highly involved member of multiple learning and faith initiatives at the Center, Teresa often left class and returned after months of absence due to her busy schedule. She found herself often returning to not only learn English, but continue the learning in community she found so important. As she identified, ESOL learners’ multiple interests and rich participation in multiple education initiatives made class a place where she often found inspiration from others. Referencing Minerva, who had recently announced in class that she was focusing on attending other classes, Teresa stated “I remember the last class, the last week. I don't remember their name, but the lady who was sharing us to the ... She's interested to study for a nurse. That's, for me, inspired me more for prepare or keep going to study.” (Interview, Teresa, 2/22/18) While class absences could sometimes leave people missing their peers, Teresa reminded me that watching people seek and claim their right to education across multiple sites was “inspir[ing]”. Part of our strength as a class were these ebbs and flows. Though it was sometimes challenging to come to class, many returned and shared their journey with us. Figuring out a way to capture this feature of our class learning in a way meaningful for both students and programs is still elusive, but at least now recognized through our storying.

**Synergizing connection, care, and curiosity**

In looking at what cuts across these two term endings, I find that though the final learning narratives look quite different, the essential elements remain the same. In each
term, we sought to capture how our students were learning in a specific moment of reflection and assessment. At each point of assessment, we sought ways students might story their own learning and ways we as educators might make sense of students’ stories collectively. Each point of assessment prompted reflection from my fellow educators and I about what the purpose of our class was and how learning took shape both within and beyond class. These assessments mobilized connection, care and curiosity together, building on critical and sociocultural foundations to story our learning together and mediate students’ learning expectations with teachers’.

In the two different terms, we are presented with two different visions of connected learning. Our collective storybook most obviously built on connection, providing a physical iteration of the story-sharing students did almost daily in class. Building on students’ own visions of learning through narratives and learning through each other, our storybook served as a memory of how we learned together in class and the wealth of stories present in class that we created curriculum from. Our final inquiry in the spring pushed my fellow educators and I to consider how we sustain this connection across time and space. When students are absent, how do we honor their effect on class and the impact they make? How do we hold space for students that might return while also recognizing the students present in our class and the work they did over a term? While we left with more questions about what connection looks like in this situation, we also left with important lessons learned for improving and nuancing our definitions of connection to better fit students’ realities.

These lessons learned about amplifying connection came directly out of the care we as educators expressed for our students. In both assessments, we thought of creative
ways we could include all students’ perspectives, no matter how many classes they had attended. In listening to students’ calls to be patient, as named in the opening introduction, my fellow educators and I tried to form assessments that allowed students to take the time they needed to complete the projects. Relatedly, taking an alternative approach to assessment that built on students’ strengths foregrounded what they knew, rather what they did not. In our open approach to assessment, we invited students to work from the full scope of their literacy practices. Taking a care-full approach to assessment, in our context, meant giving students ample time and support in formulating contributions to final projects. It also meant looking at their literacy and language histories more holistically, as they extended back into their childhoods and into multiple aspects of their lives as adults. Taking this assessment to the program level, where student absences can denote program and student failure, we were able to create a narrative of our term learning that that positioned students’ absences not as failures to finish out a term but as part of larger trends in which adult immigrants are affected by job loss, employment shifts and immigration status precarity.

Finally, in our caring and connected approach, students’ curiosity about language and the world served as the foundation for assessments. While assessment can sometimes be seen only as a measurement of student learning, as is the case with many approaches to standardized assessments decontextualized from immediate learning contexts, in our alternative approach, our final assessments were times when students continued their learning. Through revising stories and researching for inquiry projects, learning and questioning was seen as a central part of our assessment experience. This made sense in multiple ways for our context. For one, knowing students’ limited time in
class, we wanted to use all parts of our time together to nourish students’ curiosities. We also saw our program as supporting students’ already ongoing language explorations. By expanding our spring term narrative to include learning beyond class, we were able to honor the breadth of curiosity students might explore beyond ESOL.

What these findings about student-centered assessment emphasize is the need for adult ESOL programs to have a way to glean fuller senses of students’ knowledges through contextualized assessments. Doing so not only provides more robust visions of students’ learning, but also has potential to provide data that resists narratives about adult immigrant learners having deficient language and literacy knowledges. This can be done through broadening the content of assessment to include competencies and literacies beyond immediate classroom learning and beyond units of time defined by the program. What I hope to eventually move towards in my own practice and what I hope we can engage as an adult literacy community is a how we might take a lifelong view on adult ESOL students’ knowledges that values the many years and experiences students have had as literacy and language learners.
In August of 2017, the second month of my data collection, an immigration reform bill entitled the “RAISE Act” was introduced to the US Congress. In an address introducing the bill, Tom Cotton — a lead shaper of this act — asserted that the act would ensure “the most ultra, high-skilled immigrants who can come here […] speak English, and contribute to our economy, and stand on their own two feet, and pay taxes.”\(^\text{11}\) Speaking English, contributing to the economy and a bootstrap mentality are all equated with “ultra” immigrants. Invoking thinly veiled racist ideologies that have long circulated about who and who is not the ideal US immigrant, Cotton makes clear that English speaking and value go hand-in-hand. To be of worth as a potential US citizen according to this ideology is to speak English and earn money for the US through work and paying taxes (things many immigrants, with or without documentation already do). In the speech, Cotton continues in this vein, repeatedly indexing English speaking immigrants as desirable and non-English-speaking ones as undesirable.

The RAISE act is only one recent and salient iteration of the anti-immigrant racism that has always undergirded US sociopolitical institutions. Reading this news, I remember feeling weighed down by how pervasive these ideas are, despite decades of resistance. In its explicit naming of “English-speaking” as an ideal characteristic of a US immigrant, I felt my own implication anew as a practitioner teaching adult immigrant

\(^{11}\) I gathered the transcription for this speech through the Whitehouse’s press archives: https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/08/02/remarks-president-trump-senator-tom-cotton-and-senator-david-perdue.
students English. Despite my commitment to resisting these ideologies, I, as a white, native English speaker who was born in the US and teaches ESOL, operates within and benefits from these systems that dehumanize and devalue the people of color and immigrant communities I worked with. I wondered, turning over old inquiries in my mind, as an ESOL teacher, what does it mean to be the most ethical I can be? How does one resist these ideologies even as we are embedded in a project instrumental to the perpetuation of English language supremacy in the US? How do we produce research from our lived realities that also pushes back on these systems and challenges the way things are? My answer, for now, is this dissertation and I hope that it will give others involved in this work either support in their often unseen and unsupported critical endeavors or pause to reconsider some of the practices and ideas they might be holding onto. I also hope that eventually, we can come together more as a community of practitioners and researchers and learners to think through what an ethical education looks like for language marginalized adults in the US.

These political times very well may pass. New politicians with seemingly different ideologies may be elected, legislation may be proposed, signed into law and reformed again. What will not change, as evidenced in the long history of adult ESOL programs in the US, is the persistence of ideologies about the ideal immigrant playing out in our adult ESOL classrooms and limiting our learning horizons. We need an ESOL pedagogy that acknowledges the importance of resisting these ideologies as they are embedded in aspects of our adult literacy structures that are difficult to recognize. We need a pedagogy that recognizes and values the multiple language and literacy histories learners bring. We need a pedagogy that anticipates, holds and grows from the intellect.
and lived realities of students along with the strengths and fallibilities of teachers. In so many words we need a pedagogy that understands the full humanity of us and how language and literacy interacts with that humanity.

**Review of findings**

Looking back across our year of learning, I find that the answers to my initial research questions span the breadth of the findings I developed. I remind and retell what I gleaned as the most important learnings regarding how we built on our collective literacy practices and how our learning was shaped in inquiry together. To begin I restate, my research questions here:

1) **What language and literacy learning practices circulate in a community-based, adult ESOL classroom?**
   a. What literacy practices and legacies do students bring with them? How are they utilized and valued in class both by students and educators?
   b. What literacy practices and legacies do educators bring with them? How are they utilized in class?

2) **What happens when I, as a teacher in this setting, work to develop curriculum informed by critical language and literacy pedagogy along with my students’ and fellow teachers varied and unique perspectives?**
   a. How do I center each of my students’ distinct interests in curriculum design while also being mindful of students’ changing interests and shifting class attendance?
   b. How do my own, my students’ and my fellow teachers’ understandings of literacy learning change over time mediating these differences?
Seeing students’ class goals as inquiries into what we wanted from English class

I began each term with an essential inquiry into what students wanted to learn from class. In trying to resist popular assumptions prolific in adult literacy research about what motivates adult ESOL students to come to class, I took an inquiry stance to what my students wanted to learn, trying to leave the conversation as open as possible. A popular and long-used tool in adult literacy classrooms, goal-setting is done in most classes to facilitate students taking ownership of their learning in addition to providing direction for both student and teacher throughout the year. I used this practice to identify a collective direction for our class and to begin an inquiry into what students’ aspirations were in the future beyond our time in class. As opposed to other years, where learning what students wanted from class was limited to a survey or isolated activity, my co-teachers and I designed an inquiry into the word *dream* alongside our goal-setting. This enabled us to see what our students wanted from class in multiple and complex ways. It also pushed us to design a curriculum that was thoughtfully constructed to be flexible and open to students’ changing interests while still hanging on an overarching theme.

Through our goal-setting inquiry, it became evident that goals only had meaning when viewed within the lives students led. To get at the contextualized nature of students’ goals it proved useful to ask about them in varied ways — through independent writing, group discussions, readings and small group dialogues — utilizing multiple terms and materials to explore what students’ complex desires for our class learning might be. Our investigation into what students wanted to learn in class was also shaped by the story-sharing of students during one pivotal Class News event, underscoring the importance of incorporating unstructured, student-led portions of class within all points
of our inquiry cycle. Through these initial interactions in class, students demonstrated early on their care for each other by supporting their classmates through difficult moments in their lives. In following our inquiry spiral, we as educators also expressed care for students by prioritizing students’ lives and their inquiries over covering class material. This care signaled that students’ inquiries beyond the sanctioned class parameters were welcome, per a critical definition of care (Valenzuela, 1999) and that class could be a place to process and support each other through life events.

Importantly, while I gained a richer picture of students’ lives and hopes for the future through our inquiry, students also signaled to me that while their dreams extended into numerous realms, what they wanted most from class was to learn English. Contrary to my impulse to broaden our discussion of dreams in an effort to decenter English as the only thing that could define students’ goals for the future, students reminded me that they had come to class for this specific purpose and that English occupied areas of their lives that did not necessarily relate to their larger dreams in life. While students expressed that their desires to learn English were linked to larger concerns in their life like connection to family members, navigating English dominant institutions and improving their earning potential at work, the entire definition of their aspirations extended beyond things that related to class and as a result, were not relevant to share in collective goal setting activities. Relationally, though they named learning English as important for their work goals, students also connected these work goals to wanting to improve life conditions for their families. Though researchers have indicated that family plays a large role in students’ aspirations for coming pursuing adult literacy education (Tighe et al., 2013), through my inquiry I was able to understand how this connection to family superseded
goals for improved employment. By taking an inquiry stance to these goals, I saw how they were embedded within lives that were already rich without English.

Finally, through re-evaluating our goals, we encouraged students to approach their goals as things that could grow with changing life circumstances. By re-assessing what our goals were and whether we wanted to continue to work towards them in class, we also moved away from treating them as another way for students to measure their worth along rigid definitions of success. While goals can often be talked about in binary notions of achievement and failure, through our re-evaluation we understood them to be something that could guide us in our learning. In conversations re-visiting these goals, new directions for class learning emerged that also illuminated relevant issues in students’ lives. Overall, students’ final iterations of their goals pushed me to re-commit to my own inquiry stance in troubling the distinction between what counts as resistant and not resistant literacy and language learning.

**Collective meaning making from our living literacy legacies**

From learning about students’ goals for our learning in class and their dreams for the future, we moved forward into building a curriculum from students’ rich knowledge base. Taking an inquiry stance once more, I and my fellow educators worked to understand what literacy histories students brought with them. Utilizing Brandt's (2001) concept of identifying adults’ literacy histories, I conceptualized the term *living literacy history* as a way to capture the various ways of being literate students might bring to class, adding living to acknowledge how students continue to shape and reshape their knowledge through other adult learning endeavors and through their own reflections on their learning histories. I also found that these histories were meaningful when invited
into class. Rather than trying to create a literacy curriculum that was created from students’ literacy histories, I sought to understand how students discussed their own histories and used those findings to shape how I taught class.

This exploration proved especially helpful in identifying the literacy and language practices that circulated in our classroom. I found three overarching themes that ran through my investigation into how students used their living histories to make sense of learning as adults. Inquiring into students schooling histories allowed me to see how students’ narrations of their access to school shaped how they talked about their current pursuit of adult literacy education. Many students also attended a range of adult literacy classes while also attending our class, bringing in work from their different programs to our sessions that demonstrated the range of adult literacy approaches they encountered. It became clear through our conversations that students saw the differences in these approaches and curated their adult literacy learning accordingly. Histories that were also not so readily apparent, specifically those marginalized from formal classroom settings and by dominant language and literacy, proved to be impactful on students. Inquiring into these histories meant digging deep, inquiring through multiple avenues to allow students space to share these histories.

The complex and rich histories students brought with them proved unknowable in their totality. They were, however, most fruitfully explored through multiple avenues of inquiry. Essential to these avenues were their open-endedness. Though my fellow educators and I designed learning opportunities based on students’ knowledges, we also were careful not to limit our design to what we perceived as their knowledges. Instead, we infused open-ended activities into our learning to allow students space to bring these
histories in to their processes of meaning making. In moments where learners shared these living literacy histories and made sense together of language, critical conversations about language use often followed. Students strengthened their knowledge of English, a goal most students identified as their main objective, while also talking through with classmates how and why they might make decisions about their language use. Aside from critical conversations about language, students ultimately used language critically for their own ends when provided space to make their own meaning of language in class. Through sharing vital information, students made what could be a site of transaction in language learning, into a site of exchange and site to discuss issues critical to their lives.

Through these exchanges, I saw how students used class activities to make ESOL useful for themselves. Resultingly, I was able to see the space that ESOL took up in students’ lives more clearly. I was also able to see that my role in these situations was to engage students as co-learners in making meaning. While my fellow educators and I were central to most class exchanges in my data samples, we attempted to fill this role as a dialogue partner. To understand and invite in students’ outside language histories as sources of information, it was important that I work to structure class to allow such a dive into students’ experiences. It was also important, once that invitation had been extended, to step back and allow students to make their own meaning. By taking a co-inquiry stance, students repurposed English class to be less about the language learned and more about each other. While English was the primary way we communicated as a group, our other language and literacy resources were a part of that experience. Together, students and teachers used class to cultivate their own alternatives to assimilationist models in
choosing people in the room as the ultimate knowledge holders rather than an authoritative text or set of rules.

**Storying our learning as program assessment**

In my final findings chapter, I looked at how our learning came together in moments of assessment of whole class learning. These reflections built on the meaningful ways of using ESOL students developed through their class interactions, through our investigations into how we already know how to use language, and how we might learn new practices through this knowledge. As creating alternative assessments that reflected our learning was often challenging given the few models we had as a program for designing assessments in our specific context, turning to our inquiries proved fruitful in providing direction for making our learning visible. Storying emerged as a useful tool for not only capturing students’ learning, but for modeling how my fellow teachers and I made sense of our learning.

In my analysis of the fall term’s final project, I examined how story-telling, through a surprising inquiry spiral, ultimately determined the direction of a final project. Wanting to use the final project as a form of alternative assessment in line with participatory approaches to assessment in adult ESOL, my fellow co-educators and I decided to invite students to participate in making a final book together of stories from different parts of our life. At once reflecting the richness of our learning and providing students with one final, engaging activity through which they could practice and demonstrate their knowledge of English, our book emerged as a source for students and teachers to assess what we knew about language use at the end of a term. A look across the stories students wrote demonstrated that students’ command of narrative spanned
multiple genres and were informed by a range of histories. Students’ stories, in a way, were manifestations of their living literacy histories. Pulled from different parts of their lives, students selected and crafted stories that represented the range of knowledges students brought with them to class. Though the book was meant to be an assessment of students’ learning over one term, ultimately the assessment reflected a life of literacy and language learning.

Additionally, by storying students’ narratives within their learning in class, the complex questions students were grappling with beyond language were made central to our inquiries. Aurora and Mateo’s stories were selected for such an examination. By reading their stories alongside other class writings and conversations, it became evident that our collection of stories emerged as an assessment that measured students’ learning according to their own questions. While time did not allow for me to foster an in-depth dialogue about the deeper meaning of students’ writing with them, I did generate future inquiries from their writing that we took up together when we came back in the spring. I also generated important insights myself about the nature of students’ learning in class that spoke to realms of literacy and language beyond students’ English language acquisition.

In our second term of learning, though starting out in a similar fashion to our fall term, our inquiry was curtailed when we experienced a sharp drop off in student attendance. To examine how I storied this experience to myself and in inquiry with fellow educators, I engaged a read of my reflective memos from that time period. In looking at how I storied this experience to myself, I saw how I attempted to story the end of the term in a way that relocated English within the lives of students, creating a
narrative for the end of our term that filled in the gaps left by students’ absences. In critically reading my reaction, I find that a more generative response on my end might have been to decenter myself from students’ narratives further in an effort to recognize how ESOL fits into the realities with which students must contend. Pressures, however, to defend your worth as a program by enumerating how many students you serve and how quickly they acquire English made this shift difficult.

Ultimately, through this inquiry, I found that taking a stance that honored students’ non-English literacy and language practices meant augmenting the scope of what we measured. Though I did not attempt to do this in any way beyond creating the second term learning narrative, my inquiry spiral led me to consider the possibility of this augmentation. Importantly, this realization also sparked new inquiries for our program as a whole, prompting a round of program assessment after I left the program as a teacher.

**Limitations of an inquiry-based practice within an oppressive reality**

In reflection on my work I find several potential limitations as to the validity of my claims. Though I was careful to triangulate my data between multiple sources (conversation notebooks, student interviews, class conversation transcripts and fieldnotes) to confirm insights shared by students, it was also difficult to check in with students as to whether they agreed with my claims or not. I was able to check in with some key participants to communicate my findings and discuss whether or not they resonated with them, but many students were out of touch by the end of the study and were not available for conversation about my findings. That being said, the students and educators I spoke with found that my general findings rang true in their remembrances of class. Memorably, in discussing my critically student-centered framework of connection,
care and curiosity with Teresa, she confirmed what I said and related it to her teaching practice as a catechism teacher. She shared with me that she found the framework helpful not only in framing our learning but in her own teaching, noting that the three were interrelated and inseparable for her in practice.

These insights are also bounded by the particular context in which our learning occurred. Learning and teaching in a program unburdened by grant or funding requirements made forming iterative curricula and alternative assessments easy in comparison to other programs beholden to more stakeholders. While many programs operate on small budgets with volunteer teachers or are funded through donations, many programs must look to outside sources of funding to run their programs. In these cases, programs must often show their gains relative to their funders’ interests. As detailed in the description of the current focus on funding workforce readiness programs in adult literacy policy, many programs by nature of being bound to federal funding, must demonstrate how they are contributing to this aim. My research, however, shows what can be possible when students’ perspectives and desires are the primary informant of curricula, learning objectives and assessment rather than top-down policies. By providing a rigorous description of this learning, I contribute to the field of research that exists exploring what being student-centered and critical means in adult literacy and ESOL teaching and hope to be in conversation with others about how this work might be relevant across contexts.

Similarly, I also recognize that the transferability of these claims might be limited. Though I was working as a volunteer teacher, I was also paid via a graduate student stipend at my university to do scholarly work throughout my data collection time. Other
volunteer teachers, including those in the program at Cabrini, do not have the luxury of large amounts of time to do this inquiry work. On average, I spent about five a hours a week in out-of-class time preparing materials for our sessions and meeting with fellow co-educators on top of the three hours I taught. For adult educators who are either under-payed or unpaid, this high number of hours relative to time teaching class is unsustainable (Sun, 2010). Adult literacy teachers often cobble together multiple jobs that make scheduling time for planning beyond compensated hours difficult or impossible. In this way, I recognize that teachers and students must follow their own inquiries in class within the parameters of what is possible for them. In the following discussion, I engage these limitations and look to how we might view these findings overall within them.

Discussion

To guide future conversations that we might have as an adult ESOL community and a broader community of education researchers concerned with equitable and inclusive teaching for multilingual and immigrant adults, I provide three areas of consideration building from my data findings.

An adaptable and critical lens for adult ESOL across shifting contexts

In considering the realistic parameters for an inquiry-based adult ESOL pedagogy, I acknowledged that my experience having the time and resources to invest in planning an iterative curriculum were rare in the world of adult literacy education. This does not mean a critically student-centered approach cannot be engaged. The interlocking focus on connection, care and curiosity can, I argue, be adapted to multiple contexts for adult ESOL learning as it proved malleable across my own year of teaching.
In focusing on developing student-centered and relational learning experiences, the model of a critically student-centered pedagogy I put forth can be used as a tool across disparate classrooms and changing contexts within classrooms.

A key aspect of what makes this approach adaptable is the consistency of inquiry. In my own research, the student body and available resources changed constantly. Taking an inquiry stance as to what students wanted and reflecting those desires back in my own teaching enabled our class community to build on the consistent threads of connection, care, and curiosity across their different iterations our class took. Given how different each adult ESOL classroom can look depending on the resources available and the students present, these three areas will inevitably take on different meaning in each classroom. As these themes remained important across disparate moments in my research, I find that they can take on different meaning when taken up as points of inquiry in class.

By focusing on how to allow students to build connection between each other and learn from one another, the social aspects of students’ language and literacy practices become central. Rather than looking at our students as individuals, we see them as connected to a network of people that are also essential to their understandings of what they want from their adult learning. Emphasizing connections between students in class also positions students as sources of knowledge that other students might engage through connection in their meaning making. Providing opportunities for students to work together not only as language investigators, but as language knowers can be encouraged not only in iterative programs, but any program where students might do group work or converse together.
Valuing care emerges as a complement to connection. In environments where students and teachers are free to shape lesson directions and take time in learning at the pace of students’ lives, care can become a foundational element for learning. As exemplified in moments where I allowed class to follow an unexpected inquiry relevant to students’ lives and in moments where students took time and energy to build solidarity through story-sharing or advice giving, the care we took of each other and displayed for each other represented a less talked about aspect of learning in critical community. I emphasize, building from Valenzuela’s (1999) conception of authentic caring as a politicized act, that care in adult ESOL must be mindful and resistant of adult ESOL’s history as an assimilationist endeavor. Without a critical consideration of how these dominant language ideologies affect classroom practice, teacher care for the linguistically marginalized immigrant students in their class is not possible. Care can be infused in multiple levels of adult ESOL: from attendance policies, to class dialogue protocols, to assessment. Above all, a caring approach to adult ESOL must be patient and resistant to damaging ideologies that permeate adult ESOL and literacy discussions.

Finally, attention to students’ curiosity entails opening space for students’ inquiries across different levels of engagement. Though I emphasize that ESOL professionals ought to take a critical approach in reflecting on how their practices might perpetuate marginalizing ideologies, this is not to say that I think all class endeavors need to interrogate meaningful social justice issues. Rather, following curiosities might mean feeding students interests about things that puzzle them, providing space for students to use language and literacy in play to entertain each other or supporting students to pursue further education. This, in itself, can be a critical practice. Following students’
curiosities requires that one decenters their role as authority figure in the classroom. Instead of worrying if an issue is compelling enough to be counted as a meaningful classroom activity, allowing students to dictate meaning honors students as participants in shaping the curriculum and creates contextualized definitions of meaning.

My advocating of this framework for educators across adult ESOL contexts also underscores that critical teaching does not have to look one certain way. Facing the reality of adult ESOL and literacy in the US, it is evident that a flexible critical approach is needed. Many adult ESOL programs only meet a handful of times per week. Students and teachers also often have limited time to invest in their classes. The restrictions on learning time necessarily bounds the possibilities for in-depth critical work that results in action, but should also not discourage educators from taking on a critical stance. Taking these three areas into consideration can open space for reflection across multiple avenues.

**The possibility of a mutually humanizing stance between teacher and student**

When teachers work to decenter themselves as authorities and follow students’ leads in learning directions, possibilities for mutual humanization may arise. Though I shy away from humanization as a concept in this dissertation, given that it can imply that I problematically assume I can make students more human through critical teaching, I do think the term has use when thought of as a mutual process between teacher and student. A key aspect of Freire’s (2000) conceptualization of a humanizing pedagogy relies on the idea of “becoming,” a dialogic process of developing critical awareness of the world with others. As Salazar (2013) notes in her review of humanizing approaches to teaching, this process of “mutual humanization” occurs when teachers investigate issues together and teachers take a stance that they can learn from students and shift their worldview.
accordingly; especially when educators occupying dominant positions in society teach students who come from marginalized backgrounds. Teacher’s own “becoming” and “mutual humanization” are essential concepts for any critical educator to consider in forming their teaching practice. As delineated in the opening chapters of this dissertation, critical pedagogues run the risk of falling into the role of authority figure when attempting to enact a pedagogy that encourages students alone to make shifts in their worldview.

Mutual humanization occurs only through teachers’ constant and consistent self-reflection both independently and in dialogue with students. In my experience, this meant being reflective about what practices I considered critical and resistant in response to students’ perspective sharing. While I had a vision of what being critical meant that typically included directly interrogating how one’s identity and positionality developed relative to systemic oppressions, students’ own ways of being critical were often phrased and enacted differently. Taking an inquiry stance into multiple aspects of students’ identities and abilities allowed this constant reflection and allowed me to recast what might be viewed as obstacles to students’ learning as points of growth and reflection on myself.

This inquiry stance, similar in the effect of a listening stance (Martin, 2001; Schultz, 2003) in teaching, is also useful for teachers in interrogating their own positionalities when working with a classroom of students whose backgrounds and experiences are different from their own. As a white, primarily English-speaking teacher, my inquiry into how to privilege students’ wellbeing over language acquisition was essential in encouraging constant self-reflexivity about how my own preconceived
notions shaped how I saw students and how I approached teaching. I used this inquiry outlet to pursue my own questions about what it meant to be critical of the very language conventions I was teaching. In so doing, I realized I could turn to my students as co-investigators in figuring out this question. Together, we inquired into what it meant to make English have meaning, what the purpose of ESOL ought to be, and how we might make sense of our disparate histories together. As taking action to respond to new levels of critical consciousness about the world is a key aspect of a mutually humanizing experience, I tweaked my practice to honor what students told me about these different inquiries and also pushed students when I felt I had something to share with them about a perspective they might not be familiar with.

Given how basic this concept is to Freire’s theory of humanization, it should not come as a surprise that mutuality in humanization is a byproduct of taking a critical approach rooted in dialogic inquiry. The potential for teachers to experience a mutual humanization, however, is rarely written about in adult ESOL research. Though I am careful to note that my teaching was a reciprocal practice in that I also worked to share knowledge I had with students, my own growth and change over the period of my teaching was just as significant as the learning students experienced. Self-reflexivity, in this way, becomes central to any critical practice and can be encouraged in adult ESOL classrooms by seeing learners as partners in meaning making who are language and literacy learning experts.

**A framework for students and teachers to write their own success**

Taking a critically student-centered approach to adult ESOL rooted in inquiry can open space for students and teachers to co-create their own definitions of success. As
Belzer (2017; 2007) and others note, adult literacy is in an era where what denotes success is not always easily agreed upon. With a focus in adult literacy funding made even narrower by the implementation of WIOA (Shin & Ging, 2019), educators interested in challenging the workforce competency encroachment on all disciplines within the field could see this moment as a defeat or a time to rally together. Eschewing standardized assessments, of course, does not mean that we abandon all assessments and learning standards. As exemplified in our class book of stories, students and teachers can imagine meaningful projects that reflect students’ learning in a multiplicity of ways. Being open to the twists and turns students’ inquiries might take, assessments have potential to take on new iterations each learning unit and can have potential to be learning experiences in and of themselves. Though we did not engage this practice, teachers can engage students in more structured reflection within these projects to identify pieces that represent students’ growth and interpret with students what the different components of the projects mean to them.

Relatedly, using a critically student-centered approach, teachers and students might develop their own contextualized sets of learning standards based on students’ self-identified learning goals and future aspirations each term. From these standards, educators and program administrators can create assessments meaningful to changing student populations. Taking an inquiry approach to these goals can provide a fluid structure that guides students and teachers in their curriculum formation. Inquiry stances into assessments and learning standards also honor the mutability of students’ perspectives and the unknowability of students. By honoring that mutability, educators can form assessments that celebrate students’ knowledge rather than punishing them for
not achieving certain levels. While this is not to say that we should do away with looking for growth, being open to the possibility of change allows for students’ variable learning desires to be more closely listened to in the forming of curriculum.

At the program level, administrators, when in dialogue with students and teachers, can consider forming protocols that make sense for the realities in which students live. Attendance policies, class schedules, and ways of narrating success to funders can be altered to fit students’ lives. Reframing these basic characteristics of class has the potential to more fully capture the ways students are literate and multilingual. This reframing has the potential for radical results by putting adult immigrants in the center of ESOL program planning. Rather than being subject to policy decisions dictated by those potentially more interested in workforce development than learners’ wellbeing as a whole, how can we open space in adult ESOL for immigrants perspectives — marginalized in multiple aspects of US political and popular discourse — to be not only heard, but made foundational in our work? What would it mean to write our successes in resistance to these top-down standards?

**Implications**

In writing out these findings and making my arguments for future action we can take as an adult ESOL community, I am acutely aware that many teachers, researchers and program administrators are already enacting these principles. In part, I make these arguments to make visible the work I already have seen dedicated teachers and researchers do. I have had the fortune to be mentored by critical educators and colleagues into this practice who have worked for years in adult literacy settings under difficult conditions because they are so dedicated to fighting for equity for adult learners
too long denied a fair education. This work is their work too. My implications should be understood as recommendations adult literacy programs and practitioners may already be doing but are policies not implemented on a larger scale. Within each of my recommendations, I differentiate between considerations for practitioners, researchers, and policy makers.

**Valuing connection in how we measure learning gains**

In my research, students repeatedly spoke to the value of connection and its importance in their learning process as adult ESOL students. In reflecting on these findings, I find that standardized forms of assessment have failed to capture how students learn in community with each other. Relying on assessments that test students’ achievement of pre-prescribed learning goals can ignore the unique meaning students make together in different classroom contexts. Each group of students that come together form a unique learning community and bring different meaning making resources. To support students in fostering the bonds they may seek to build in ESOL class, valuing connection must also be at the center of what teachers, researchers, and policy makers name as important in adult ESOL education.

To value the connections students make in class, teachers might consider how class bonds can become curriculum. Forming class projects and assessments where students reflect not only on their independent learning but how they learned in community can make visible how connection plays out in multiple ways in adult ESOL classrooms. As with our final class storybook and other collective projects, representations of class learning that put all students’ work side by side served as a celebration of our learning in community and a record of our learning together.
Educators may consider how to spotlight connection in their assessments, emphasizing the learning gains that happen uniquely through class dialogues and contextualized interactions.

In support of educators seeking to value students’ relationships in their teaching, researchers can further nuance how connection plays out in classrooms across different ESOL contexts. Future research projects might investigate the following questions: What types of social connection do adult ESOL students form in different classes? What are commonalities and differences across classes with different foci? How might common learning standards be revised to be more fluid and accepting of the contextualized ways students make meaning?

Policy makers and funders can consider how the standards they endorse and the assessments they recommend embrace the uniqueness of individual ESOL learning communities. Rather than focusing on how individual students fare in adult ESOL programs, policy makers and funders might offer space for programs to report on how they built learning community. To avoid making class community building another box for programs to check, federal and grant giving organizations that monitor adult ESOL programs can encourage programs to report their own measures of success that they identify. Allowing programs and educators space to story their own class community may foster conditions for programs to be more responsive to their students and the richness of resources available in their local contexts.

**Re-bounding parameters of time as care**

To work towards a caring approach to adult ESOL, we can restructure adult ESOL opportunities to fit the time scale of students’ lives: embodying a more holistic and
patient approach that accounts for the numerous forces that shape students’ adult learning paths. As my research demonstrated, many learners came in and out of class depending on their life circumstances and their changing desires. To capture the breadth of ways students learn, we can look at students learning across their adult lives to honor the richness of learning opportunities students seek out and make for themselves.

For practitioners, this means taking time to dive into students’ learning histories. It means storying them in class alongside students and considering how these learning histories might be built on in curricula. It also means rethinking how we form our learning terms. Rather than looking at a semester or session as a discrete unit of time that we use to measure students’ success, how can we keep records across years to track learners’ involvement in class? How can we collaborate with other teachers in the area to create narratives of students’ learning across time and different programs they might utilize? How can we envision learning projects that allow for the fluidity of students’ attendance while still being student centered in our program design?

Researchers can work with practitioners and adult ESOL students to track their learning over time, using their resources as university-based researchers to do longitudinal work that follow learners across different contexts. In situations where policy changes and funding opportunities might make it difficult for practitioners to do the work of tracking students’ learning across long periods of time, researchers can provide a bridge in storying the learning of adult ESOL students across the many years they might spend attending such classes. Researchers can also engage comparative analyses of how different programs’ approaches to structuring learning terms affects how
students’ learning is measured differently depending upon the scale of time used in their respective classes.

Policy makers and funders can use these recommendations to reconsider the time constraints they require for programs to show gains in student learning. Understanding that adult learners’ lives are complex and that gains in their literacy and language learning might not always be linear or even predictable necessitates leaving the timeframe we use to measure the success of a program open to negotiation with practitioners and researchers.

**Honoring curiosity by broadening the learning material in adult ESOL contexts**

Finally, I argue that to embrace the full extent of students’ curiosity, we ought to broaden what we think of as relevant learning material for students. Different from authentic learning materials or learning curricula that make students *job ready*, I argue that learning materials ought to appeal to students’ interests and their myriad lines of questions. Consistently, students spoke to the need for interesting classes, pushing me to consider how ESOL classes might see learners for the dynamic, inquisitive people they are. Without compelling material, ESOL can lose its meaning and become focused on the mechanics of language.

Students’ interests can become centralized in classrooms when teachers form curriculum to their students and follow students’ inquiries. Instead of utilizing a textbook with a predefined path for students’ explorations of English, teachers can consider how they might make classes more iterative. Literature, film, music, and other art forms might be incorporated into class activities to pique students’ interests. While it is common to focus on basic English skills and language themes to ensure that all students
walk away with the language tools necessary to navigate US social institutions, I urge teachers to think beyond survival skills and think of how their classes might reflect students’ inquiries. Class directions might arise from class conversations and students’ individual writing. Following inquiries also means that teacher’s predetermined directions of study might need to be abandoned in favor of new class directions.

Generally, teachers might relinquish more control over the direction of class and allow the exploration of language to include the exploration of meaningful material.

To aid in the broadening of what is considered appropriate adult ESOL learning material, researchers might examine how curricula can be framed to allow for the inclusion of students’ unique interests. Given their influence on the development of widely utilized ESOL textbooks and learning aids, researchers are positioned to introduce new areas of consideration for curriculum formation. Deviating from classic ESOL textbook models, where chapters are typically organized by common themes (health, transportation, grocery shopping) or grammatical progressions, researchers may develop materials that encourage teachers to form learning opportunities around students’ interests. Researchers can also provide valuable insight into how educators can develop learning materials that are intellectually rich and linguistically accessible to students.

Funders and policy makers can augment their criteria for effective teaching to include criteria for assessing how responsive programs are to students’ interests. Rather than solely measuring how much students learn, actors who hold sway in allocating funds and support can create incentives for programs that take a listening stance to students’ interests and who report out on how they do that work. To reach this point, these institutions may engage more qualitative approaches to assessing programs’ success. If
the true goal — as a bulk of research reports — is to provide adult literacy students with an education responsive to their needs, policy makers and funders must themselves take innovative approaches to measuring how literacy programs respond to their students that honors the messy work of building curriculum according to students’ curiosities.

Closing

Over the months of March and April 2019, during the last term of my dissertation writing, I was able to re-connect with both Teresa and Senait, the two students who are featured in my opening vignette, after a prolonged period of not seeing either woman. Teresa I met in a coffee shop after not seeing her for months. As we were both busy with work and I was hardly ever at the Cabrini Center to catch her, we had spent several months not seeing each other despite living in the same city. In our reconnection I updated her on my dissertation progress, sharing with her the opening vignette and other pieces of my findings. She reflected on that moment, remembering Senait’s story and her reaction that day. Though initially hard to remember, she was able to recall the moment and remembered how striking that story was to her when Senait shared it in class. Since I have known Teresa, she has been granted a visa to stay in the US, lessening her concerns about her own immigration status. She, however, continues to be disturbed by the effects of deportation on her fellow community members who do not have such documentation. She detailed different endeavors she is undertaking through her role as a catechism teacher to support her community as they experience an increase in violence brought on by escalating ICE raids and violence directed towards immigrant communities. Teresa also continues to work on her GED, a long-term goal she had been working on for several years. Though Teresa has stayed in the US and in the same neighborhood for several
years, her life changes continue to be marked by political shifts while also anchored by her drive for education and growth.

Senait, who I had not seen for over two years since she moved to Canada following the traumatic 2016 election, and I were able to connect on a recent trip I took to Toronto. Though I went in large part to attend a major conference, I also went knowing Senait would be there, having heard from the Cabrini Center director that she now lived outside of Toronto, and hoped we could reconnect. We were able to see each other, I going to her house for lunch to visit and catch up. Over an emotional reunion, Senait shared with me that she already has a visa and a work permit in Canada. She also is able to take classes in preparation for college level courses. She is hoping to one day be an engineer who works on improving access to water sources so that she can be independent and make a positive change in the world for women, who often must bear the brunt of water collecting in regions of the world affected by low water supply. In our conversation, I shared with her how I decided to focus on our ESOL class in my dissertation. Though she did not remember the specific incident of her sharing in class, she remembered the ESOL class fondly, saying sharing different stories and life experiences in class was one of the most important parts of what she learned in our ESOL class. We parted ways with long hugs and promises to stay in touch and support each other in our different life and academic endeavors.

The experiences of Teresa and Senait speak to the variability and unknowability of what the future holds for all people, but especially adult immigrants in the US living in an era marked by nativist and overtly racist vitriol in public speech and action. Both Senait and Teresa are in very different places than we could have imagined on that day.
back in 2016 described in the introduction. Though both had remarkably different journeys, each woman contended in their own way with the political and social violence that marks our contemporary era while maintaining a desire to continue their education. Their stories and continued interest in pursuing education reminds me of my role as an educator and white ally working in solidarity to realize equity and justice for immigrant communities. In the face of these multiple forms of violence immigrants face, teachers need to be present for students both as learners and as fellow humans in need of comfort and care. We need to protect our classroom as spaces where immigrant learners can come together, learn and share resources across different linguistic and cultural communities. As such, we need to resist policies that would narrow students’ ability to fully engage the range of their curiosities in class. We also need to resist the urge to center ourselves as the primary shapers of classroom discourse, approaching our work as partnership with the immigrant students in our class. Only then can any critical work and resistance in adult ESOL classes begin.
APPENDIX A: Celebrating our Stories!
Here I include the full book, Celebrating Our Stories! From the fall 2017 end of semester project, featured in Chapter Six. These stories not only illustrate the learning we did but also the breadth of our student knowledge. The pages appear in order as they appeared in the book.

Appendix Figure A.1: Cover of Celebrating our Stories!
About this Project

This collection of stories was written, edited and published by the students and instructors of the Aquinas Center Intermediate ESol class, Fall 2017. After a semester of reading stories together as a class, we decided to try writing our own! Some of the stories in this collection are true, some are imagined, and some are important cultural tales. Every story represents hours of hard work and learning, and we want to thank all of Intermediate ESol for their dedication to this project, our class, and each other. Let’s celebrate!

Love,

Emily, Willow and Yared

Appendix Figure A.2: Welcoming letter page one
When I Was Little
By Carl Mati

This story starts when I was seven years old and my dad decided to make me a kite. I was so happy because it was my first kite I can play with! After he made it I played with the kite for more than one month and it was so fun... until one idea came to my head. I climbed to the roof. My mom saw what I tried to do and she tell me, “don’t do that because it is so dangerous to go up.” But I did not listen to her. I went up and played there for a few minutes until I fell down from the roof to the ground with a big scream, “WAAAA!” My parents ran to me and helped me. I do not remember that part, for me it was like a dream; I just remember when I was on the roof. When I woke up I was in the bed with something in my head and also something in my body and I could not move for a few weeks. After that, every time when I play anything and my parent say: do not go there or stop doing that... I listened to my parent to be safe...

About the Author

C Mateo e from Mexico to live in Philadelphia many years ago. After a few years in Philadelphia, he got married and now has two kids.
Appendix Figure A.4: Mateo’s accompanying photo
I Lost My Money

By Gise  Sonia

This happened when I was 21 years old, and I started to work in the center of Lima, in a factory.

Every morning I had to take the bus at 7 o'clock, every day I had my fare and the money for my lunch, I think almost 10 dollars. Every morning the bus was full and I put my money in my pockets. As always, I was on the bus for 1 hour of travel when just 15 minutes before I arrived at my job, the person who asked for the fare started to ask. When I checked my pockets, I didn’t have money, I had nothing. The man asked me for the money and I just said to him, “please, I don’t have money, I didn’t realize someone took my money away, I mean someone stole my money!” The person looked at me and he didn’t say anything, I was scared, I almost cried, but he helped me go to my job without problems, thank God. Later, I asked my boss to lend me some money and when I was done at my job, I went back home with my mom.
White Little Dog
By Dimal Minerva

One day, when I was 17, I had a little white dog. One day I was coming back to the house around 11:30PM and I heard my dog crying behind the house. I went to find him, I was walking and the dog was going to the forest. At that time everything was calm, and everybody was sleeping. He was taking me deeper and deeper into the forest but it was too dark in the forest, I started to get scared and I decided to walk fast back home. When I was at home, the dog was there, sleeping!
Sweets And Cigars
By Mar Graciela

It was the year 1978. At that time my dad was in the United States working and my mom and sisters were in Guadalajara, Mexico. I do not remember how much time went by before my dad’s return, but one day he came back and came with gifts for us. My sisters and I received toys and looked like princesses. In a few days my parents planned to visit my grandparents at the ranch where they lived. Also when they arrived they had a great meal to receive my dad and the whole family. We played with the other children and the adults talked and talked with me that they had different stories about everything that my father had lived through in another country.

That day one of my uncles asked me to go to the small store that was in the town, and I was thinking all the way what I would buy them. He sent me to buy them cigarettes, but I said, “that is bad for him,” then I decided when I got there to buy everything. The money I was given, I used it to buy different candies and the girl who attended me wondered, “you’re sure you want to spend all this money?” I do not remember if it was a lot of money or not, the only thing is that I had my bag full of candy. After a while my uncle asked me, “where are my cigarettes?” I answered him, “Uncle, Uncle, look! the best candy!” and everyone stared to laugh. From then on, all the time they looked at me and joked if the sweets were very delicious, more than my uncle’s cigarettes.

As an adult it makes me laugh if I remember, it was something from my childhood that I do not forget and it makes me happy to remember it.
The Volcan In Her Love
By Silvi  Aurora

This story began many years ago when an emperor still had power and existed as the government for a village. He had a beautiful daughter. She was in love with a warrior in charge of fighting for a better deal and power.

The time passed and they finished the combat. The warrior won but some bad people came to the emperor and told the news, but they lied and said that the warrior died. The daughter listened and felt so bad and stopped eating, drinking and falling asleep.

When the warrior came back and found his love dead he took a big torch and walked so long, far away from the village, he took the princess near to the Big Mountains and stayed there with her. When the time passed, the dad saw two mountains appear with a flame, and he thought, it is my daughter and the warrior. He said, “they are in love forever, that is the reason they are next to each other.”
The princess is covering herself with a blanket. The fire is coming out from the volcano.
Interview With God
By An‡ Jose

A man was looking to do the best interview of his life, one that wins the best awards. Something that no one has ever thought about: the "greatest" news of the world. So he decided to interview God, that being that no one knows, that no one has even seen. This man got an interview with God, and the appointment was at 7:00PM, so he went back home to get prepared for the interview. He took his car and started driving to the place of the interview but it started to rain, and the rain formed traffic, and the traffic was bad.

Suddenly, a child knocked on his window with a little box of candies. He was selling them in the middle of the rain. The man turned to reach into his pockets and when he looked back, the child was not there – the child was on the floor with convulsions. It was 6:20. So he did what is correct. He put the child in the car and drove him to the hospital. He dropped him there and put some cash into his pockets. Then he ran back, because he had the most important interview: the interview with God.

When he arrived to the place it was 7:10 and God was not there. The man was tremendously disappointed so he asked, "why didn't you wait for me? Didn't you see I was helping that child?" Then in the dark he saw the face of the child and a voice that said "I couldn't wait to see you, so I went to meet you!"

God is in every child's face that we see around, and in our brothers and sisters.
In my family I have one older sister and one younger brother. My sister and I had our own desk for studying, but my younger brother didn't have one. I thought that it was good if my brother also had a desk for studying. I knew that my parents did not have enough money to buy a new desk. One day I saw an announcement that there was a drawing contest and the winner would get a trophy, some money and a desk for studying. It was very interesting for me. But I was not good in drawing. I decided to learn drawing. Near my house I had someone who was good in drawing. I asked him to teach me how to draw. Twice a week I spent my time at least 2 hours for studying drawing. That was three months before the contest.

The time was coming, the day to make it real, my dream came true. I really wanted the desk for studying. I came to the contest place with my parents. I was nervous, but I had enough self-confidence for drawing. I made a landscape picture with mountains, the sun is shining, the bird is flying, the river is flowing, and there is a home beside the river. I liked that picture. I hoped I could win the contest and get a desk. The time is finished. While waiting for the drawing jury, I ate with my parents and bought a toy in the store. The moment I had been waiting for came. The jury announced who was the winner. I was very panicked. I still hoped that I won. But...I lost. I didn't get a desk for studying for my brother. I cried out. I was very sad. My parents tried to comfort me, to give support, but I was still sad. Very sad. I had failed to give a desk. That was my experience when I was child.
My Story Is About Nancy My Turtle
By Ma Rose

When I went back to St. Thomas for my brother’s wedding in July of 2000, I went by my best friend’s. She had free turtles. I asked her to give me one and she said to me, “you cannot take it to Philadelphia. You are crazy!” So when I was leaving I took it with me and wrapped it with a napkin. I put it in my pocket when I reached the airport when I was going to security, but it did not ring at that time. Security was not tight like now so I went on the plane. I flew from St. Thomas to Charlotte. When I landed in Charlotte, I went to the bathroom because my pants smelled like turtle poop. I had to change my pants and wait for my plane to leave. I had to wait for two hours. When I reached Philadelphia, I took a taxi home and after I reached home I put my luggage down. I ran upstairs to take a shower and put all my clothes in the wash. I still have my turtle today. Why did I give my turtle the name Nancy? I gave my turtle the name Nancy because when I was working at St. [redacted] highschool, the manager used to snap at any little thing. That’s why I named my turtle Nancy, after my boss at St. [redacted].

About the Author

My name is Mai Rose. I come from the land of 365 Rivers, which is in Dominica. It is not Dominican Republic, it’s located in the Caribbean in between two French countries: Guadeloupe and Martinique. I left my country to go to St. Maarten, then I went back to my country to move to St. Thomas. A couple of years later I moved to New York City and I did not spend a full year in New York City, so I moved to Philadelphia. Right now this is my home.
Appendix Figure A.13: Rose’s photo of her turtle
The Light Came
By Yolė Teresa

One day I went with my family to the feast of the Father Pio of Petrenchina and we were walking in the feast looking at what they have in each tent. But in the parking lot behind the church was a tent and they were selling beer and when I saw that I didn’t feel comfortable. The feast was around the Anunciation Church. I told my husband, “let’s go to the park, I don’t want to be here.” We went to the park, my husband, my sister in law, my daughter and my son. The park was almost empty; just two boys and their father were there. The boys were little like five years old or four years old. My husband was playing with my son and my sister in law was playing with my daughter, and I was just looking at the sky and suddenly I saw a big light! a white light. But when the light came down I said, “look! the light,” and the little boys said the same to their Dad together with me. When we said that, the light went up. My sister in law and my daughter just saw smoke. And my husband and the other man didn’t see anything. Then we talked about what happened with the light. We didn’t know what it was. To this day, the light is a mystery.

About the Author

Yolė Teresa is from Mexico with her husband and her daughter. Now she has two more children. She loves Philly.
Appendix Figure A.15: Teresa’s image
And finally, here is a blank page for you to write your own story!
   Thank you for reading!
REFERENCES


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