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Proceedings of the 14th Asian Adult Education Pre-Conference
Norman, OK. June, 2023
Editor: Haijun Kang

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Asian Adult Education Annual Conference

The Asian Adult Education Annual Conference began in 2003. Its former name was the Asian Diaspora Adult Education Pre-conference in conjunction with Adult Education Research Conference (AERC). The steady development over the past 20 years has made it the leading pre-conference in the North American Adult Education Research Annual Conference, actively promoting and co-constructing the academic development of North American adult education.

The purpose of the Asian Adult Education Conference (AAE) is to provide a platform for academic exchange among researchers and scholars in adult and continuing education, as well as higher education, from the East, West, and Rest, especially those who are interested in conducting research related to Asian and Asian Diaspora adult education theory and practice. It seeks to promote mutual learning, enhance shared understanding, and stimulate academic viewpoints and dialogue from various perspectives from global educators. Selected presentation papers are published in peer-reviewed conference proceedings.

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The Adult Immigrant Woman: Testimonio of Her Educational Pathways

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to document the educational experiences of adult Mexican immigrants and their *convivencia* in an adult English as a second language (ESL) classroom.

Keywords: English as second language, immigrant women, Chicana feminist perspective, and testimonios

I began teaching English as a second language (ESL) during the summer of 2005 in an adult and community education program. The director encouraged me to utilize my bachelor's in biology degree teaching English to a group of students that were predominately from Mexico. I began teaching and soon discovered that my students carried many hidden stories. They were stories with experiences about their *sobrevivencia* (of survival) in a country where they needed English to survive. They also shared that upon entering ESL classes they received a warm social embrace from their peers that created a much needed network of support. Therefore, their stories intrigued me and started me on the path to documenting their fascinating narratives.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to document the educational experiences of adult Mexican immigrants and their *convivencia* that arose from an adult English as a second language (ESL) classroom. The problem it addressed was that adult ESL classes that serve adult Mexican immigrants are not based on the lived experiences and needs of the women they teach. Educational research about adult Mexican immigrants' experiences is in short supply in the field of adult education.

This study utilized a Chicana feminist epistemology theoretical framework as an alternative approach to collecting and analyzing the narratives. In my analysis, I discovered four themes and eleven sub-themes that explained how the women led their educational pathway into the United States. My research implications can aid teacher practice, research and policy because it documents the cultural and educational experiences of Latina immigrants in the U.S. My research questions were,

1. What were the educational pathways of the immigrant women prior to entering ESL classes?
2. What were the experiences of adult *mexicanas* who have immigrated to the United States?
3. How have they (re)imagined their gendered identities since coming to the United States?

The qualitative data collection was iterative and consisted of a two-stage development. In total, five women were interviewed between the ages of 30-55, identified as a female, were of Mexican nationality, and previously enrolled in a local adult and community education program. In my analysis, I discovered four themes and eleven sub-themes that explained how the women led their educational pathway into the United States. My research implications can aid teacher practice, research and policy because it documents the cultural and educational experiences of Latina immigrants in the U.S.

Relevant Literature

My literature review's purpose was to combine two interrelated but separate academic fields—immigrant learners' narratives in adult and continuing education and the historiography of immigrants in Chicanas/os ethnic studies. The first set of key words used were *English as a second learner (ESL)*, *immigrants*, *narratives*, and *adult education*. My search resulted in discovering the need for research that documents the life experiences of immigrant adult learners (Lee, 2013). I was able to ascertain this statement through Yin Lam Lee's (2013) article titled, *Telling the life stories of adult immigrant learning English as a second language in the Midwest: A chronotopic approach informed by Bakhtin's forms of time and of the chronotype in the novel*. Lam Lee explained that in adult education there is an abundance of ESL research for compulsory learners in K-12, but research studies on andragogy were far and few between. Although, I did not find many narratives on immigrants' experiences, scholars in the field of adult and continuing education, several scholars discussing immigrant's needs agreed that immigrant learners are dependent to our field because English as a second language is part of our curriculum and instruction (Dávila, 2008; Muñoz, 2012; Ullman, 2010).

My second search was based on key words such as, *immigrants*, *adult education*, and *English as a second language*. Nearly all the literature reviewed discussed that educational programs were created for immigrants in the US and it could be historically posited by the surge of *Settlement Houses* during the late nineteenth to early twentieth century (Muñoz, 2012; Ruiz, 1991, 2006, 2008; Sanchez, 1995; Ullman, 2010). During the Settlement House surge, newly arrived immigrants were educated as means to be integrated into the US society (Muñoz, 2012; Ullman, 2010). They served as institutions for European immigrants located in industrialized cities with a high poverty rate to teach them English and life skills aligned to the United States culture (Gibson, 2016). In other words, the Americanization Movement of *all* immigrants began when the surge of Settlement Houses developed and upheld the ideology that by learning English, and U.S. civics, assimilation would destroy the immigrant problem (Brantley, 2015; Ruiz, 2006; Sanchez, 1994).

In 2014, Hanover Research predicted that due to the growing number of adult learners born in another country, adult education programs would become the most sought-after social service for immigrants. Moreover, they suggested that the goal for immigrants in adult education programs is not assimilation, at least not as explicitly as in the early twentieth century but the ability to communicate in English to find jobs (Hanover Research, 2014; McHugh & Doxsee, 2018). Earlier Americanization tactics for adult immigrant learners were put in place by deficit thinkers who believed assimilation through language learning was key to successful societal integration (Dávila, 2008; Fernandez & Gonzalez, 2003; Sanchez, 1994; Ullman, 2010). However, the racialization and marginalization of ethnic immigrant groups and the xenophobic sentiment prevalent during the early twentieth century has led to a push for adult education to be socially inclusive and diverse (Alfred, 2015; Guo, 2015; Larrotta, 2017; Ullman, 2010). Therefore, it also inculcates in the field of adult and continuing education a need for a better understanding of immigrant needs and experiences to effectively create culturally relevant andragogy.

Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework used a Chicana feminist epistemology (CFE) that allowed me to use, what Dolores Delgado Bernal (1998) called "cultural intuition" (p. 563). It is an extended version of Strauss and Corbin's (1990) theoretical sensibility that includes four concepts: personal experience; existing literature; professional experience; and analytical research process. The main difference between their theoretical sensibility, and Delgado Bernal's cultural intuition is that cultural intuition includes "collective experience and

community memory, and points to the importance of participants' engaging in the analysis of data" (pp. 563-564). Cultural intuition allowed my research to have an interdependent relationship with my participants' narratives and my own lived experiences to holistically interpret their stories.

Methodology

I had five participants that were all from Mexico. My criteria were that they were between the ages of 30-75, identified as a female, had an English proficiency level of intermediate to advanced, had enrolled in a local adult and community education program to learn English, and presently resided in the United States for more than a year.

I met with a group of five participants over zoom in a *convivencia testimonial* (Quintero & Peña, 2020) setting. They all signed consent to be recorded via audio and video through the online platform called Zoom. A *convivencia testimonial* involves a social gathering of the participants, all of whom had previously shared a communal space— ESL classroom, work environment, and so forth. Participants were encouraged to bring a dish to virtually share as we discussed themes of immigration, education and gender roles.

The final installment of my research was to meet with the participants individually and discuss their educational path to the United States. We, once again, met via Zoom about 120-180 minutes. Member check-ins were done with each interviewee, preliminary themes were addressed, and we also checked for authenticity of word meanings and correct language translations. Participants were asked if they had any concluding thoughts about the overall research study. I explained that their data analysis would be included in my final researcher reflection.

Findings

Through my analysis of data, I discovered that English was important to my participants because it enabled them to enter social settings that were English-only spaces. Because English was the common factor for them to *sobresalir* (succeed) in the United States, they sought or found programs to learn English. In doing so, they combatted the isolation and loneliness felt from being miles away from extended family members. Learning to read, write, and speak in English enabled them to create friendships inside and outside of the classrooms.

I also discovered that their educational support in the United States came from their family or newly built community. In Mexico, resources to continue their education were non-existent or they were unaware of them. However, when they immigrated to the United States, they discovered that educational resources for adults were readily available for immigrants trying to learn English. While each participant's motivation to learn English differed, their main goal was the same: they began learning English to navigate their U.S experiences among family, peers, and native English speakers.

They also began forming social networks with native-English speakers and entering social settings such as restaurants, their children's schools, and their own work settings because they started learning the dominant language. They began (re)imagining their identity as women in Mexico. They entered what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987/2007) called *nepantlera* or an interstitial space between multiple and frequently conflicting worlds. The interstitial space regarding English learning for the participants became where they could not unlearn what they already knew of the English language nor move forward fast enough to learn the language like a native speaker. Yet, the participants persevered by attending ESL classes to become successful in their private and public lives.

Implications for Policy and Practice

My participants were students from adult education ESL courses interested in learning English to navigate public spaces which in turn was also a method of resisting assimilation into the U.S. culture. Their stories also explained how they forged a community from their ESL classes to claim cultural citizenship because they immigrated to a country that did not give them a sense of *belonging*. They felt isolated by the language barrier and interacting with other students gave them additional resources to living life in the United States. Therefore, my study informs adult education policy makers by highlighting the true needs of our immigrant population.

My study can also inform adult education practitioners by reminding them to check their biases regarding negative stereotypes regarding immigrant learners. Adult learners, for this and other future studies, specifically ESL immigrant learners, hold a lot of knowledge that can be tapped into by an adult education instructor. ESL classes can be designed as student-centered andragogy premised on authentic experiences such as those described by the participants from this study. My study also therefore implies that adult education instructors should act as and practice being facilitators. By collaborating with students and asking them what they need rather than telling them, we can give students the opportunity to share and have a sense of belonging in the adult education classroom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my participants' experiences in the United States encompassed learning English and attempting to fluently speak it. The educational and financial support that they could not receive in Mexico was readily available in the United States through their husbands' support. Engaging in ESL classes helped create their community of support, claim space, and claim their rights as Latina cultural citizens. I used a Chicana feminist epistemology to inform my study and depict the authentic stories of immigrant learners. My study informed policy makers by introducing and highlighting the stories of immigrant adult learners. It also informed practitioners by discussing the need to learn English as a form of survival and preventing isolation from the surrounding English-speaking community. It is therefore imperative that we genuinely understand our immigrant communities' needs and authentically depict their lived experiences learning and using the English language.

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