

**Burning Out or Finding Your Way:**

**How Adult ESL Teachers Cope with the Challenges of the Profession**

**Dawn Allen**

**Portland State University**

**Table of Contents**

ABSTRACT..... 3

INTRODUCTION ..... 3

STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER..... 5

LITTERATURE REVIEW ..... 5

    The Need for Experienced Teachers in Adult ESL..... 5

    The Challenging Working Conditions ESL Teachers Face ..... 6

    A First Step in Moving Forward..... 8

RESEARCH QUESTIONS ..... 10

METHODOLOGY ..... 10

    Context of the Study ..... 10

    Participants..... 11

    Materials ..... 12

    Instruments and Data Collection Procedures ..... 12

    Data Analysis ..... 13

    Validity and Reliability..... 13

RESULTS ..... 14

    Frustrations ..... 14

    Stay, Fight or Leave..... 14

    The Need for Support..... 18

    Improving the Lives of Students..... 19

    Partnerships in the Community..... 22

    A Call to Action..... 24

CONCLUSION..... 25

**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the experiences of veteran adult ESL instructors with the goal of moving the profession forward and improving working conditions for teachers. Experienced teachers were selected as the research focus due to the professional knowledge and unique insights they have gained over their years in the classroom. This study values that expertise by examining experienced teachers' views on the many challenges of the job and their ideas on how to make improvements in the field. An exploratory interview format was used to elicit responses from participants. Findings indicated teachers face a number of frustrating working conditions such as lack of respect in the profession and a scarcity of full-time job opportunities. As a result, many adult ESL teachers reach a state of burnout and leave the profession, but for others a passion for working with students is a strong enough force to keep them in the field. While most participants believed increased funding is the way to solve the problems faced day in and day out, they also admitted they do not see this happening any time soon. Teachers offered up a number of solutions that could positively impact their working lives, from forming partnerships in the community to improving the lives of the students they work with. The most prevalent solution supported by teachers included providing instructors with more professional support and giving them ample opportunities to share ideas and talk with each other as a way to build community and improve the field for all – teachers and students alike.

**INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationships between experienced adult English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors' views on the profession, the frustrating working conditions they often face, and their thoughts on how the profession might begin to tackle these challenges. The impetus for this investigation arose from research suggesting

experienced teachers often reach a “settled” state – a state of burnout (Smith, Hofer, Gillespie, Solomon, and Rowe, 2003). This burnout is frequently a side effect of difficulties teachers face such as low pay and lack of benefits. As a result some teachers leave the profession. Others stay but lose excitement in their jobs. These burned-out teachers have a high level of experience and knowledge but have little interest in experimenting in the classroom or sharing their knowledge with the field. The profession is failing to take advantage of its greatest asset – the teachers themselves.

It is these experienced teachers who have the greatest insights into the challenges that exist and potential solutions that could benefit the profession. To profit from this knowledge, a clear understanding of teachers’ concerns must first be established. As a step towards this goal, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews. The interviews aimed to uncover potential conflicts between teachers’ love of working in the classroom and their frustrations with the profession. The interviews also challenged experienced teachers to offer up creative solutions based on their unique insider knowledge to address the problems the field faces.

By understanding the challenges teachers face and valuing their solutions, it is my hope this study can help programs more effectively support their ESL teachers and keep them from leaving the profession. I also hope this study can contribute to an ongoing discussion among adult ESL instructors, administrators, and funders with the goal of moving the field towards higher levels of professionalism. These goals can be accomplished by taking advantage of the knowledge that already exists in the ranks of the many dedicated and experienced teachers working today, engaging the passion that brought them to teaching in the first place, and using this knowledge to improve their working lives. It is the teachers themselves with their direct knowledge who are in the best situation to provide solutions to the problems that exist.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER**

This article begins by outlining the literature on the need for experienced teachers, the many challenges they face, and why many of them either reach a settled state or choose to leave the profession. The literature review leads into a discussion of how these teachers may provide the initial steps towards solutions to the profession's problems. This is followed by a methodology section describing the study's data collection and analysis processes. The paper then discusses trends discovered in the data and concludes with a discussion of how the information gained can improve the profession.

## **LITTERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Need for Experienced Teachers in Adult ESL**

Efforts aimed at improvements in the field of adult ESL must take into account a number of realities. With changes in the economy and an increasing number of immigrants and refugees in need of English language instruction, not only is there a greater need for qualified ESL teachers, but the skills these teachers are required to master is growing as well. Teachers must have a solid understanding of a wide range of knowledge in order to instruct students in the skills they need to be productive members of the community. These skills range from training students to work with technology and preparing them for further education, to teaching them literacy and critical thinking skills (Taylor et al., 2009). In addition to basic English skills, students need to learn everything from how to complete a job application, to how respond to a note sent home by their child's teacher, how to solve a problem in the workplace, or how to file a complaint with a supervisor. Teachers also need to know how adults learn best, how adults acquire a new language, how to teach students from a variety of cultures, and how to best facilitate student

learning (Burt & Keenan, 1998). On top of this, our world is changing at a fast pace and ESL teachers must keep up with changes in the field – from new research to changes in technology, funding, and even changes in the way people communicate. This new breed of teacher has been called the “21<sup>st</sup> century educator” (Taylor et al., 2009). The 21<sup>st</sup> century educator is a professional who has a strong background in both content and pedagogy. And the 21<sup>st</sup> century educator continues to update his or her skills and knowledge to keep pace with changes in society. But when less than half of all adult education teachers have any formal training in teaching adults (Smith et al. 2001), this ideal is far from a reality in the profession today. Many teachers do not even have a solid background in the basics upon which to build. This places a heavy burden on the minority of experienced and highly qualified teachers to lead the field forward.

### **The Challenging Working Conditions ESL Teachers Face**

The burden placed on experienced teachers is further exacerbated by the challenging working environments that serve as barriers to teacher growth. These challenges impact the quality of education provided to students, the professionalization of the adult ESL field, and ultimately the longevity of a teacher’s tenure in the profession. “The delivery of strong, consistent, quality educational services is impossible without the requisite supportive working/teaching conditions” (Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education, 2007). These conditions include access to resources, to colleagues, to program decision making, and to a “real” job. A real job is defined as “including sufficient working hours to complete all of the teaching, program, and other tasks required of teachers; paid preparation and professional development time; stability; and benefits” (Smith et al., 2001, pp. 1-2). Unfortunately, many teachers do not have access to all or even a few of these requirements. Research into the field of adult education, of which ESL is one component, found 55% of participants received no benefits,

46% received no paid prep time, 56% worked part-time, and 23% received no paid professional development time (Smith et al., 2001). Research focusing specifically on adult ESL teachers confirms these less than ideal working conditions, finding 52% of questioned teachers received no benefits, 65% worked part-time, and 29% received no paid professional development (Sun, 2010).

The fortunate teachers are those who are able to depend on income and benefits from other family members. Seventy percent of full-time respondents and 80% of part-time respondents to a 2007 survey by the Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education (MCAE) reported being able to stay in the profession only because they were supported by a family member. Many teachers try to off-set the impact of part-time jobs and a lack of benefits by committing themselves to teaching for multiple organizations. Seventy percent of respondents to MCAE's (2007) survey reported working for more than one employer. In the end, as teachers move from class to class and program to program, teaching throughout the day in different locations, they find themselves leading a fractured work-life where they are not truly a part of any one organization. The result is a loss of the sense of community inherent in being part of a larger institution and not having access to colleagues with whom one can collaborate and share classroom concerns.

In order to better respond to the needs of their member teachers, the professional organization Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) conducted a survey of over 1,000 adult ESL teachers (Sun, 2010). Along with previously discussed issues such as a lack of benefits, no access to full-time jobs, no paid prep time, and low pay, Sun also elicited qualitative feedback from teachers' on their perceptions of themselves and the profession. Teachers reported feelings of "disenchantment, displeasure, frustration, and in some instances

even resentment” (Sun, 2010, pp. 1-2) in response to their working conditions. Sun also found that one of the biggest concerns of teachers was the lack of status ESL teachers receive in the field of education.

In the face of such challenging conditions what do adult ESL teachers do? Research suggests they ultimately make one of three decisions in an effort to deal with the problems they face: “they decide to challenge, cope, or leave” (Smith et al., 2001, p. 9). Those who cope often reach a settled or burned-out state. Many others find it financially impossible to stay in the field and end up leaving for better jobs. The result is a profession full of new teachers still trying to find their way in the classroom. Over half of the respondents in MCAE’s (2007) survey had been in the profession five years or less. As a result the profession finds itself in the position of trying to make up for the knowledge lost by teachers who leave the field, either mentally or physically. But how is this lost knowledge to be recouped? Experience gained in the classroom is not something that can be taught in a workshop or a pre-service teacher training program. It takes years of working in the classroom. A profession already struggling with funding issues is forced to continually train and retrain as teachers cycle in and out of the profession. For the profession to begin to deal with issues of low-pay, scarcity of full-time, and lack of benefits, it is imperative to value and support experienced teachers in order to keep them engaged and to keep them in the classroom.

### **A First Step in Moving Forward**

In order to move forward the profession must “first have a keen understanding of the realities of teachers’ working lives” (Smith et al., 2001, p.1). Experienced teachers with their first-hand knowledge are in the best position to provide an in depth discussion of the field's problems and the effects on their working lives. Experienced teachers still working in the field

have persevered in the face of the barriers of the profession. This provides them with valuable insights on how to keep teachers from leaving the field. They also will have ideas on how the profession might begin to tackle its problems. From the understanding they bring, it is possible to begin to explore profession-wide solutions. The ideas of teachers can be used as a starting point in making changes in the way teachers are trained and compensated thus leading to lower rates of turnover and more satisfied teachers. Their insights can also be used as the foundation for teacher advocacy movements. The MCAE is one organization that has worked to implement action based on adult education teachers' feedback. The MCAE is a membership organization made up of teachers of adult education (GED, Adult Basic Education and ESL), their adult students, and other supporters in the state of Massachusetts. The organization advocates for their members, educates policy makers, and provides professional development that is responsive to the needs of adult education teachers. Their advocacy arm focuses on improving the working conditions of teachers. Their goal is to "identify best practices in ABE/ESOL employment and develop strategies for improving conditions within workplaces and in the field as a whole" (Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education, 2012). To meet this goal they rely heavily on the involvement and suggestions provided by their member teachers. By understanding their members' problems and involving them in the problem-solving process, the MCAE has begun to make inroads in the state of Massachusetts. They are currently exploring teacher unionization modeled on a system used in the field of early childhood education, a profession that faces many of the same challenges faced by adult ESL teachers. While the work of the MCAE and similar organizations are only small steps, this is where a movement begins. It is hoped the findings of this study can be another step towards understanding problems and posing solutions that contribute to large-scale changes in the profession.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study aims to better understand the working lives of experienced ESL teachers as a way to tackle the problems faced by the field. With this in mind, the investigation will focus on the following research questions:

1. How do experienced teachers perceive themselves as professionals? How do they perceive the profession of adult ESL education as a whole?
2. Do experienced teachers feel valued by the profession?
3. How can experienced teachers best be supported by their programs and by the profession?
4. What are solutions that begin to address the challenges of the profession (scarcity of full-time jobs, lack of benefits, etc.)?

The goal of these questions is not only to better understand teachers and the challenges they face with the goal of keeping teachers in the field. It is also to value the ideas and suggestions of experienced teachers. Through these ideas the profession can begin to work towards solutions that provide teachers with the compensation and professional respect they deserve.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Context of the Study**

While the focus of this study is experienced adult ESL teachers, the context for data collection was further narrowed to focus on teachers working in community ESL classrooms rather than teachers working in academic settings. In community settings where students do not pay tuition and funding is an ever-present concern, it was believed teachers would be more likely to be faced with challenges such as low pay and lack of prep time. In order to conduct face-to-

face interviews, the population was limited further to only include participants in the Portland, Oregon vicinity.

### **Participants**

In selecting experienced teachers as participants I first needed to define “experience”. Five years is commonly used in the field to make the distinction between new and experienced teachers, although this number is somewhat arbitrary. I looked at research on trends in teacher tenure to select an appropriate baseline for experienced teachers. My criterion was to find a baseline that was the point at which approximately half of adult ESL teachers leave the profession. Research suggested between 37% (Sabatini, Daniels, Limeul, Russell, & Stites, 2000) and 52% (Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Literacy Education, 2007) of adult ESL teachers have worked in the field for 5 years or less, supporting the use of six or more years of experience as an appropriate definition for determining teacher experience.

Teacher selection was made following a convenience sampling model. I approached colleagues for recommendations of potential participants who met a number of conditions. I asked for suggestions of participants who were both experienced and who were interested in contributing to knowledge in the field. Along with this, I sought participants who would be comfortable responding in a verbal interview format. I approached a number of teachers, but many did not respond or did not have the time to participate. Those who responded and fit the criteria mentioned above were selected as participants. One of the teachers selected, Michael, started his own business that serves English language learners. The other two teachers, Sue and Maria, teach in the community college setting.

## **Materials**

This project's aim is to record teachers' existing thoughts and feelings on their experiences as an ESL teacher, and their recommendation for improvements in the field. There is no treatment. The only materials used in data collection were a digital audio recorder to document the interviews, a computer on which to download and play the recordings, and a spreadsheet program on which to classify and analyze the data.

## **Instruments and Data Collection Procedures**

The purpose of this study was to “probe beneath the surface of things and to see things from the (teachers’) perspectives.” (Heigham, and Croker, 2009, p. 183). Because the goal of the interviews was to explore and better understand experienced teachers, I chose a qualitative research format exploratory in nature to gather data. With this in mind, I designed a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A) to facilitate a dialog with participants.

To prepare for the interviews, I first piloted the interview guide with an ESL teacher to hone the interview process, refine the guide, and give me the chance to improve my interview skills. I then interviewed participants. Rather than holding interviews in a controlled environment, I allowed participants to select a time and location convenient to them. I felt by allowing teachers to choose a comfortable and familiar location, they would be more likely to open up and freely express themselves. I also felt it was more important to acknowledge the daily challenges teachers face by opting for a location convenient to them rather than holding interviews in a controlled environment of my choosing. In one instance the interview was conducted in the participant's office. The other two interviews were held in cafes. The interviews were open and free-form, allowing participants to drive the focus of the conversation.

## **Data Analysis**

The semi-structured format was selected in order to allow some comparisons to be made among participants as the interviews investigated similar topics, while at the same time providing the freedom to explore unanticipated issues brought up by teachers. Once collected, the data was categorized according to theme and analyzed for emerging patterns. It is hoped that the results can serve as the preliminary stage of a more in-depth investigation directed towards questioning the way the field supports teacher growth and encourages tenure in the field while acknowledging the true value of the knowledge experienced teachers bring to the profession.

## **Validity and Reliability**

This study is grounded in the previous work of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) on adult education teacher development and working conditions, especially the research of Smith et al. (2003) on settled teachers. The study was also informed by my own experience as an adult ESL teacher and a member of the population being studied. I attempted to gain further insights into the population by shadowing an experienced colleague in the classroom over the course of a term and by informally interviewing experienced teachers prior to the start of the research study. While insider status provides me with knowledge unavailable to a non-insider, it is also possible my background contributed to biases in analyzing the data. I freely admit that I have been subject to and frustrated by the many challenges of ESL teachers outlined in this paper, and it is these frustrations that led me to this study. I have made every effort to approach the data dispassionately and aware of my own biases. I understand that in order to make improvements in the professional lives of teachers, an accurate portrayal of their needs and interests, free of partiality, is necessary.

I also made every effort to fully disclose my methods with my participants. Each teacher participating in the interviews was informed ahead of time that their responses would be anonymous and pseudonyms were used when reporting data.

## **RESULTS**

### **Frustrations**

The opinions expressed by Sue, Maria, and Michael confirm the frustrations and challenges of the profession outlined in the literature review. In many cases participants did not feel they were given the level of respect they merited. In 2008 Michael started his own business to provide language and cultural services. While he has received support from Oregon Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ORTESOL), he still feels he is striving to achieve acknowledgement of his program and his impact in the community. Sue's and Maria's frustrations stem from the lack of respect ESL programs receive from community colleges:

ESL instructors want to be recognized as a profession.... I think in some cases the profession doesn't get the respect that it deserves.... So that's a little frustrating to me  
(Sue, personal communication, April 27, 2012).

Over time these frustrations can begin to negatively affect a teacher's work in the classroom. In the end each teacher must find their own way of coming to terms with the challenges of the job.

### **Stay, Fight or Leave**

As teachers deal with their frustration, research has shown they ultimately make one of three decisions: "they decide to challenge, cope, or leave" (Smith et al., 2001, p. 9). Maria related the story of a fellow teacher who recently had to leave teaching because she needed a full-time job even though she was a skilled ESL teacher. Maria also described teachers who she

has worked with over the years who cope by reaching a state of indifference. These are the teachers who conform to Smith et al.'s (2003) description of a settled teacher:

There are teachers who have been at (the community college) for a long time. They are really good teachers. They are involved in everything. They participate in everything and there is just not an opportunity for them to grow. So then after 10 years ... of not seeing any opportunities for them to grow they just start getting really disappointed about the whole thing. And maybe they don't prepare their classes so well anymore or 'Oh why am I going to this professional development activity when I'm never going to be able to get a full-time job here.' So that impacts the profession a lot I think.... 'So why am I going to do all this work when I can just do the basics and continue getting the same amount of money.' So it's very frustrating for everyone (Maria, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

But even in the face of these frustrations and disappointments, despite the stories of teachers who leave the profession or who reach a state of burnout, all the experienced teachers who took part in this study found a way to make the profession work for them. Their stories fall into two categories – those who cope by making the most of the situation to create a job that gives them satisfaction and enjoyment, and those who deal with conditions by challenging the system that exists.

Maria and Sue who teach at local community colleges have traditional ESL jobs within established institutions. Maria works full time and has had to take on a number of commitments that pull her away from the classroom. She currently serves as the head of the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) department on her campus and only spends a portion of her time teaching. She admits she does not enjoy the non-teaching aspects of her position, but

they are part of a shared commitment among the full-time teachers at her site. She's looking forward to being able to turn her duties over to another full-time teacher and return to spending all of her time teaching. Maria has wanted to teach ever since she was young. She especially loves working with the lowest level students. Taking on non-teaching commitments is a sacrifice she has made in order to hold a full-time position that allows her to do what she loves.

Unlike Maria, Sue teaches part-time. Sue admits that she wishes she had the benefits of a full-time employee. Even as a part-timer, she finds herself working full-time hours. She also has found that part-time employees do not have the same level of representation or voice in decisions at the college. Nonetheless, Sue enjoys the flexibility of part-time teaching and the freedom it allows. She loves her job and has found a way to make a part-time position work.

Michael found a way to make the profession work for him by challenging the system. He ventured out on his own and started his own business serving language learners. While he still teaches, he cannot be everywhere at once. He also trains other teachers to teach English to widen his impact on the community. When asked why he made the decision to start his own organization he replied "I can't wait any longer for my profession to come up with something good. So the only thing I could do was just really jump out there and try to make something happen" (Michael, personal communication, April 24, 2012):

I want to make myself a job that's good, that pays me what I'm worth. I want to see bridges built between cultures in our community. I want folks who are American but not English speakers take their place in the full spectrum of American life. But even more importantly, I want to see what it means to be American changing to reflect what our communities actually look like (Michael, personal communication, April 24, 2012).

Michael's response points to his realizations that to get what he wanted out of the profession he had to act independently. He saw what needed to be done and no one else was doing it. He felt compelled to act.

Michael's feelings also reflect a deep concern for the students themselves and the important role students play in a teacher's motivation in the profession. This responsibility to the needs of students was a theme I saw reflected throughout the interviews I conducted. Those teachers who stay in the profession have a fighting spirit, a dedication to their students, and they make the most out of the situation. "I think that you can make your experience much richer and much more rewarding. You can do more for your students" (Sue, personal communication, April 27, 2012). It is through this dedication and passion that teachers are able to manage and come to terms with the many challenges they face:

I think that most teachers who have been in the profession for some time and they stay, right, they don't look for something else. They really, really love it, because what is the other reason, what is another reason you could have to be a teacher, right? It's not money. So, if it's not money then it's because you really like it. So I think that teachers, most teachers if they really, really like what they do they wouldn't give up so easy and do something they don't like just because they have more benefits (Maria, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

In many cases the satisfaction of working with students and making a difference in their lives makes up for a lack of benefits or a part-time job and gives teachers the ability to cope with the challenges of teaching ESL.

## The Need for Support

For many teachers the ability to cope with the profession's barriers goes hand-in-hand with resignation to the fact that the profession is not going to make major changes any time soon, especially to the lack of full-time jobs. Still they see opportunities for the profession to contribute positively to their working lives. Study participants advocated increasing the level of support teachers receive. For some teachers this meant opportunities to develop and strengthen professional relationships with colleagues. Sue wanted more chances to develop communities of support with her fellow teachers:

I think that what I would most like to see in our college, or in our department actually is the chance to really meet with other ESL instructors and talk about teaching. 'What are you doing? What do you do in this class? What do you do in that class?' Let's have a dialog about what we're really doing (Sue, personal communication, April 27, 2012).

Maria expressed similar ideas about the importance of learning from other teachers:

I do think that learning from other teachers is the best way. We have a lot of this here.... I'm very lucky that way. Sometimes I have a problem in my classroom and I don't know how to deal with a student or something is not going OK... and I'm like 'OK, I have this problem,' and everyone's like 'Ok sit down.' Everybody has lots of things to say.... That support is very important I think (Maria, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

Maria has seen first-hand the impact teacher support has had at her own teaching site:

One thing we talked about, community, and that's something that's so important. I hear many, many teachers 'Oh I love teaching here ... because I can talk to everyone and I don't feel like I'm alone. You know, any problem I have I can talk to everyone and they're not going to judge me.'... So I think that this community is so important for

everyone, for the students too.... This community feeling I think is good for everyone (Maria, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

It is clear receiving support from fellow teachers is an important part of what makes teaching rewarding for Sue and Maria and something they feel would benefit all teachers.

Unlike Sue and Maria, Michael consciously chose not to be part of a larger institution. Because of this he does not have the day-to-day support of an institution nor the same access to a group of teaching colleagues. Perhaps because of this Michael has strived to provide this support community to the teachers he trains. While he does receive support from the teachers he works with, he admits there is something missing. He does not feel he receives the support he needs, especially in his unique position of starting and running his own business:

It's hard. It's really, really hard.... I don't have a lot of models to follow so I'm really trying to create my own support .... I'm excited I get to make it all up, but I wish I had more people out there.... I'm trying, I'm excited that I get to make it all up but I sure wish I had a few more people, who you know – I honestly pray with every step, with every single breath that the energy in the world that I need is going to manifest and I feel like it kind of is (Michael, personal communication, April 24, 2012).

In the end Michael has been forced to look outside the profession to the larger community to try to forge those bonds of support. As echoed by all participants, cultivating communities of support for teachers within an organization and among the wider population is an important way the profession can begin to move forward.

### **Improving the Lives of Students**

In keeping with the strong commitment teachers in this study showed to their students, it is not surprising that they saw making improvements in the lives of students as an important

component of making improvements in the field. While suggestions for ways to help the profession varied from participant to participant depending on their teaching context, all teachers saw the need for changes to better serve students.

Teachers working in the community college setting felt improvements should be made in the way ESOL departments are represented within the structure of the larger organization. These teachers have seen a number of problems arise because the larger institution did not keep in mind ESOL departments and the students they serve when making decisions. As Maria stated:

I think that sometimes the ESOL program is not taken very seriously by the college, and because it's something that is pre-academic. So all of the major decisions that the college makes, they don't really think about ESOL students or how the decisions are going to affect them and after the fact we have to keep trying to find solutions and then it's too late. They've already made the decisions.... I have a feeling that many times (the administration) just forgets about us (Maria, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

Sue experienced similar difficulties within her organization:

A recent decision came down ... based on the regular college courses that are much different than our ESL classes.... That's a policy being determined by the administration of the college, and without any consideration of how that impacts the students that we serve, so they don't always see that there needs to be some considerations of the population that we serve (Sue, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

Sue and Maria see the problems that negatively affect their students in the same light as they see their own challenges – as a problem the field must deal with in order to make improvements.

By creating his own organization, Michael has steered clear of the institutional setting and its many challenges. This has allowed him to focus his work on designing courses and

teacher trainings that directly address the immediate needs of students. This led him to a popular education approach to teaching ESL. Popular education “is a concept grounded in notions of class, political struggle, and social transformation” (“Popular Education,” 2012) as seen in the work of educators such as Paulo Freire. It relies on a method of dialog and problem posing that can be problematic in ESL classrooms where students have low English proficiency levels.

According to Michael the idea comes out of a discussion when he was in school led by one of his professors concerning the viability of a popular education approach:

‘How do you do popular education in the classroom? I can’t know what their needs are because I can’t ask them what their needs are.’ That’s the problem, right? I’ve solved that problem.... It’s a combination of things like building real relationships, having enough experience to know what the common needs are, having enough connections in your own community, knowing what your community looks like and what its cultural geography is and then using certain techniques that are not, that don’t require verbal responses in order to understand the specific needs of people....

It may be that this popular education approach becomes something that’s really real and that’s worth being paid for. In such a case I hope I’m still training other people to do it ... and I’m making a contribution to the field in that way (Michael, personal communication, April 24, 2012).

By forging his own path, Michael is working towards the changes he sees the field must make rather than looking for these changes to be made by someone else. Ultimately his success in the profession and his ability to carve out for himself a sustainable career is closely tied to the success of his program and the students he works with. Michael’s statement above suggests what each of the teachers seems to be indicating – that they see making improvements in their own

working lives as being intricately tied to the need to make improvements in the lives of the students they serve.

### **Partnerships in the Community**

Sue and Michael also saw community partnerships as a way to work towards improvements in the field. Michael's vision for the future of the profession comes out of his popular education approach:

I'm intending to try to urge the creation of a new kind of language teaching which is social services and community organizing and cross-cultural bridge-building all rolled into one.... It's more about facilitation than it is about being a language expert per se.... The extent that we want to help develop people's skills at interacting with the doctor what we want to do is have clinics that our students can go to, that our learners might go to, and bring those nurses into classes.... We need to figure out ways to minimize that fear of actually ... going to the clinic.... I would love to see an entire viable arm of applied linguistics across the field that is considered to be, to have its own area of specialty and is more about – it would marry together what goes on in social services and linguistics and create this new space (Michael, personal communication, April 24, 2012).

These partnerships with social service agencies are a way for the profession to support teachers by giving them the tools to better serve the students with whom they work. ESL teachers are trained to support students in their language needs, but this is only one component of teaching ESL. It is just as important for community ESL teachers to provide students with the knowledge and ability to access a range of services from medical care to immigration assistance. When students are unable to access social services they often find themselves faced with barriers that stand in their way of their success and continued participation in ESL classes. In the end this

keeps them from integrating in their communities. From seeing first-hand the challenges of the field and the needs of teachers and students, Michael feels he has been given a directive:

Ultimately either I'll fail at what I'm doing or I'll succeed and I'm going to try to create that. Maybe once it's visible that will spur our profession to try to create something that is ... instead of operated by a dude, you know, that it will be supported by the profession (Michael, personal communication, April 24, 2012).

Rather than waiting for change to occur, Michael has taken action in hopes of driving improvements in the field.

Like Michael, Sue too sees the potential of partnerships with organizations outside the field. While Michael has visions for a branch of applied linguistics that marries social services and language teaching, Sue sees employer partnerships as a way to positively impact the profession:

That's an idea that I could see the federal government backing is starting to encourage employers somehow, whether it's in the form of tax credits, to allow them to support their employees' education because the federal government keeps saying that we need a more educated workforce, that we're not prepared for the kinds of jobs that are going to be coming in the future, and so let's figure out a way to incentivize that with employers.... Maybe that's something that the federal government should focus on is how can you work with private employers to gain an incentive to do that, to support students and get a better educated workforce – but that won't happen without some kind of monetary support.... We know that money is the way that we change things (Sue, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

In the end it is employers who reap the many benefits that come from their employees attending ESL classes and improving their English proficiency. Calling on employers to support ESL training for employees could bring much needed money to ESL programs. While it would require incentives such as tax breaks, involving employers would pass some of the responsibilities and burdens of the profession along to the business community. The support by an employer would also likely lead to higher levels of student retention and commitment within ESL classes – a problem faced by most community ESL programs. In community ESL classes where attendance is inconsistent and students often discontinue due to life circumstances and lack of support from outside the classroom, employer support could make a noticeable improvement in the challenges teachers face in the classroom.

### **A Call to Action**

While securing funding to hire more full-time teachers, increasing pay, or providing comprehensive benefits are laudable goals, participants acknowledged they do not see such goals as realistic. Maria indicated she does not anticipate any full-time jobs being added in her department anytime soon. In fact, it may be that her department could lose a full-time position. Sue does not anticipate any full-time positions being added at her campus either. She added substantial changes “won’t happen without money” (Sue, personal communication, April 26, 2012). Even providing business incentives would require capital and support from the government. In an era of shrinking budgets and dwindling funds, more money is not a short term option in most contexts. In the short-term, the profession should commit to providing support for mentorship programs, community building activities, and dedicated time when teachers are able to get together, share innovative practices, and support each other. This can be done locally by individual organizations and on a wider scale by colleges, universities, and professional

organizations such as TESOL to create opportunities for teachers to come together and share their classroom experiences. Study participants made it clear they see the improvement of their own working lives as tied to the students they serve. The profession can also advocate for greater support for students from the institutions where they attend classes and from the community at large. This is not to say that the profession should abandon its responsibility to improve working conditions, but rather it highlights the need for support in the interim.

## **CONCLUSION**

Participants suggested one strategy to improve the profession would be to provide teachers with more opportunities to share ideas and support each other. The fact that participants agreed on this strategy suggests the concept should be explored further. This finding has implications for the way programs design professional development for their teachers, the way professional organizations such as TESOL provide resources and support to the teaching community, and the way pre-service degree and certificate programs train teachers.

Teachers understand the ESL classroom better than anyone else. Their views on the profession come from the perspective of individuals focused on day-to-day interactions with students. Even though two of the teachers in this study did have administrative duties as part of their job, complementing their views on the profession with those of administrators and institutional decision makers would lead to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges teachers face. Conflicts uncovered between teacher and administrator viewpoints might also bring to light additional issues impacting working conditions. Starting a dialogue on the issue could inform the decision making process of administrators who are often not fully aware of

what it is like to be in the classroom. It is also possible that administrators' alternate viewpoints might lead to potential solutions not envisioned by teachers.

The fact that none of the teachers involved in this study saw the profession making changes and increasing the number of full-time ESL teaching positions anytime soon makes a strong statement. This suggests teachers are resigned to the conditions that exist in the field. The teachers in this study all have come to terms with the challenges they have faced over the years and have been able to make a place for themselves in the field. They derive their satisfaction in part from the sense of accomplishment they receive from working with students and making a positive impact on their lives. One teacher even went so far as to fight the system and start his own organization as a way to deal with issues in the profession. While this is not an option many teachers would choose, it points to the fact that there are many different paths teachers can take to find their place in the profession.

Supporting teachers by giving them more opportunities to work together and build communities of support is a vital goal for the profession to tackle. Nevertheless, in the long-run teacher frustrations need to be addressed and teachers need to be provided with better opportunities to make the profession a career rather than a job. Teachers must begin to speak up and voice their dissatisfaction with the challenges they face, and for the future of the profession, their frustrations must be taken seriously. Further research must be done on the effect working conditions have not only on teachers themselves, but on their effectiveness in the classroom. Demonstration projects aimed at creating teacher support communities must be piloted. Government and foundation funding must be secured. The profession has an obligation to improve the quality of life of the many adult ESL teachers who make sacrifices so they can devote their energy to providing better opportunities for their students.

## REFERENCES

- Association of Adult Literacy Professional Developers. (2005) *Recommended policies to support professional development for adult basic education practitioners*. Retrieved from [http://www.aalpd.org/priorities\\_pdpolicies.html](http://www.aalpd.org/priorities_pdpolicies.html)
- Association of Adult Literacy Professional Developers. (2005). *Recommended policies to support professional development for adult basic education practitioners matrix*. Retrieved from [http://www.aalpd.org/priorities\\_pdpolicies.html](http://www.aalpd.org/priorities_pdpolicies.html)
- Burt, M., & Keenan, F. (1998). *Trends in staff development for adult ESL instructors*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Adult English Language Acquisition. Retrieved from [http://www.cal.org/caela/esl\\_resources/digests/trendQA.html](http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/trendQA.html)
- Garet, M. S., Porter, A. C., Desimone, L., Birman, B. F., & Yoon, K. S. (2002). What makes professional development effective? Results from a national sample of teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(4), pp. 915-45. Retrieved from [http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/hww/results/external\\_link\\_maincontentframe.jhtml?\\_DARGS=/hww/results/results\\_common.jhtml.44](http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/hww/results/external_link_maincontentframe.jhtml?_DARGS=/hww/results/results_common.jhtml.44)
- Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education. (2012). Working Conditions. In *The Voice of Adult Education in Massachusetts*. Retrieved from <http://www.mcae.net/workingconditions.php>.
- Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education. (2007). *Working conditions survey of ABE/ESOL practitioners*. Retrieved from <http://www.mcae.net/documents/2007MCAEPPTforgraphs.ppt>
- Popular Education. (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved May 15, 2012, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular\\_education](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular_education)

- Richardson, V. (1998). How teachers change: What will lead to change that most benefits student learning? *Focus on Basics*, 2(c). Retrieved from <http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=395>
- Sabatini, J. P., Daniels, M., Ginsburg, L., Limeul, K., Russell, M., & Stites, R. (2000). *Teacher perspectives on the adult education profession: National survey findings about an emerging profession*. Philadelphia, PA: National Center on Adult Literacy. Technical Report 00-02.
- Schaetzel, Kristen. (2007). *Professional development for teachers of adult English language learners: An annotated bibliography*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Adult English Language Acquisition. Retrieved from [http://www.cal.org/caela/esl\\_resources/bibliographies/profdev.html](http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/bibliographies/profdev.html)
- Smith, C., & Hofer, J. (2003). *The characteristics and concerns of adult basic education teachers* (NCSALL Research Brief November 2003). Washington, D.C.: Center for Adult English Language Acquisition. Retrieved from <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/brief26.pdf>
- Smith, C., Hofer, J., & Gillespie, M. (2001). The working conditions of adult literacy teachers: Preliminary findings from the NCSALL Staff Development Study. *Focus on Basics*, 4(D). Retrieved from <http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=291>
- Smith, C., Hofer, J., Gillespie, M., Solomon, M., & Rowe, K. (2003). *How teachers change: A study in professional development in adult education*. Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. Retrieved from [www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report25a.pdf](http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report25a.pdf)

Sun, Y. (2010). Standards, equity, and advocacy: Employment conditions of ESOL teachers in adult basic education and literacy systems. *TESOL Journal*, 1(1), pp. 142-158.

Taylor, J., Silver-Pacuilla, H., Greiner, J., Nash, A., Segota, J., Sherman, R., & Weng, B. (2009) *Teacher quality and career pathways: A proposal for the reauthorizations of the workforce investment act*. Retrieved from <http://www.aalpd.org/issues.html>

Villegas-Reimers, E., & International Institute for Educational Planning. (2003). *Teacher professional development: An international review of the literature*. Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning.

## APPENDIX A

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What prompted you to start teaching adult ESL? How did you feel about the profession when you first started teaching?
2. Tell me about your work as an ESL teacher? What is your background? In what context do you teach?
3. How do you feel about the profession now?
4. What kind of training did you have before you started teaching? What additional training have you received?
5. Do you feel like you're in a rut or that the profession has become stagnant for you?
6. Do you feel there are opportunities for you for growth in the profession? What are they?
7. Do you feel your experience and expertise is valued by the profession, by your organization, by your coworkers?
8. How do you feel you could be better supported – by your organization, colleagues, and the profession?
9. Do you have a desire to contribute to the profession? Why or why not?
10. How do you think the profession could be improved? How can the profession better support teachers?
11. What do you see as possible solutions to the challenges adult ESL teachers face?