

# Locating Common Ground: An Exploration of Adult Educator Practices That Support Parent Involvement for School-Age Children

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## Abstract

This article explores linkages between adult educator practices and the parent involvement needs of adult students with school-age children. A comparative case study examined the knowledge, experiential, self-efficacy, and social capital dimensions of adult educator practices that inform parent involvement efforts. One English as a Second Language (ESOL) program and one Adult Basic Education (ABE)/General Educational Development (GED) program served as the cases. Data sources include observations, semi-structured interviews with instructors and program leaders, and program and school district documents. Both explicit and implicit connections between adult education and parent involvement are identified. The degree to which these connections are recognized and encouraged is determined by the program emphasis, characteristics of the student population served, and the adult educator. Individual educator's understanding and efforts to make connections are framed by how each defines his or her role, language, social networks, and prior experiences with K–12 schools.

Key Words: parents, involvement, adult basic education programs, students, children, social capital, self-efficacy, ESL, ESOL, ABE, GED, family, educators, schools, English as a Second Language, General Educational Development, other languages, conferences, case study

## Introduction

The push to engage parents and families is reflected in school mission statements, federal and state policy, national standards for teachers and school leaders, and the adult education profession (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2002; Stein, 2001). Adult students themselves frequently cite supporting a child's education as a motivator for enrolling in adult education courses (Comings, 2007; O'Donnell, 2006). Parent involvement in a child's education yields many benefits—most notably, increased student achievement, positive attitudes towards school, and persistence to graduation (Dearing, Kreider, & Weiss, 2008; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005). Yet, providing effective parental support is a complex undertaking. (Note: The author uses the term “parent” or “parents” to refer to the primary adult caretaker(s) of a child.) School-age children operate in a formal system of education that holds substantial expectations of students and their parents for learning. Effective parent involvement requires understanding and negotiation among parents, teachers, and school leaders regarding how children should be educated, the role parents should serve, and the access to and mobilization of resources required to support these efforts. With state adoption of college- and career-ready standards (most notably the Common Core), parents will be called on to assist their children to master an increasingly sophisticated curriculum that requires use of higher order skills in coming years (Council of Chief State School Officers & the National Governors Association, 2012).

Adult education programs offer promising contexts for strengthening the involvement of parents who did not complete high school and those with limited English proficiency. Coursework in Adult Basic Education (ABE), General Educational Development (GED), and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) can provide parents with access to experiences, resources, and knowledge to navigate a child's school curriculum, instructional practices, and educational opportunities. Greater understanding of how participation in formal adult education informs parent involvement can enhance individual parent's efforts and strengthen strategies of K–12 schools and adult education programs to engage parents.

This article analyzes data collected during the first stage of a comparative case study that explores the relationship between adult education participation and parent involvement beliefs and practices for parents of school-age children in an ESOL program and an ABE/GED program. The article is guided by two research questions: (1) How do adult education programs support a parent's role in a child's education? and (2) What factors inform how and the

extent to which programs approach this parent role? Data sources include observations, program documents, and interviews with instructors and program leaders from the two adult education programs and the coordinating organization providing support for English literacy instruction.

## **Connecting Adult Learning and Parent Involvement**

Parent involvement in education encompasses a range of processes, activities, and beliefs associated with sending a child to school prepared to learn, setting and voicing expectations, supporting a child's out-of-school learning, advocating on behalf of a child, communicating with school staff, and maintaining a presence at the school (Epstein, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Drawing from ecological systems concepts, this study postulates that parents' lives at home, work, community, and school are interconnected in ways that inform how parents understand and enact their role in their child's education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This perspective is consistent with the premise that adult learners hold multiple roles as family members, workers, and citizens, for which adult education programs tailor instruction (Stein, 2001).

The association between parental educational attainment and children's educational outcomes is widely recognized (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2007). However, less is understood about the relationship of parents' additional schooling to changes in parent involvement beliefs and practices and resulting impacts on a child's educational trajectory. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Magnuson (2007) found increases in children's achievement when mothers with low levels of education completed additional education. Beder's (1999) research review spanning the 1960s to the 1990s included several studies that identified self-reported increases in parent involvement in homework and attendance at school events. A meta-analysis that examined the relationship between various parent involvement programs and student achievement found a nonstatistically significant but positive effect for the school-based ESL teaching programs included in the analysis (Jeynes, 2012). To explore how adult ABE, GED, and ESOL programs may inform parent involvement beliefs and practices, this literature review section examines the knowledge and experiences associated with learning in a formal setting, social capital, and the transfer of learning self-efficacy to parent involvement self-efficacy.

### **Knowledge and Experiences**

The research literature points to difficulties parents with less formal education or limited English proficiency face in securing the maximum benefits

available from schools that reflect the dominant culture's values, assumptions, and practices (e.g., Auerbach, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Lareau, 1989). Formal adult education courses offer parents knowledge and experiences to support a child's education (Comings, Reder, & Sum, 2001). These courses may provide parents with content knowledge, information about the learning process, and practical information about school norms and strategies to advocate on behalf of the child. For example, the adult education curriculum may parallel a child's school-based curriculum in ways that provide parents with content knowledge that is useful for assisting with homework, as in the case of an ABE or GED course (Bingman & Ebert, 2000; Shiffman, 2011). The GED tests measure the "skills and knowledge typically developed in a four-year high school education program" (GED Testing Service, 2012, para. 1) in math, language arts, social studies, and science. Adult ESOL programs provide parents with grammar and vocabulary instruction, but also with information about communication styles and cross-cultural and civics-related knowledge that can help immigrant parents navigate their child's educational experience (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010).

Participation in an adult education program may also provide parents with experiential knowledge about the learning process, varied learning strategies, and applications of learning that are relevant to understanding and supporting their child's learning. For example, leaders in the field contend that instruction for adult learners should be contextualized, learner-centered with a focus on student goals, and differentiated (Chisman, 2011; National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 2003; National Research Council, 2012). The question that emerges is this: How might exposure to the knowledge and experiences associated with ideas about learning and learning strategies acquired in an ABE/GED or ESOL program provide parents with information about a child's learning and the school-based assumptions about learning and use of learning strategies?

### **Social Capital**

Through social networks, parents acquire information about schools, teachers, and programs, as well as practical supports (Coleman, 1988). Participating in an adult education course provides access to two types of networks potentially useful in navigating a child's education: that of the educator, and those of fellow students.

Enrollment in an adult education program connects students to the expertise of individual educators and their network of professionals. These educators are situated to provide parents with support and advice about children's education when the instructor-student relationship is characterized by familiarity

and trust (Albertini, 2009; Shiffman, 2011). A well-connected organization with strong ties to the community is also positioned to link students to a range of people and resources (O'Donnell, Kirkner, & Meyer-Adams, 2008; Shiffman, 2013).

To activate such social capital, the educator must recognize and make connections that support parent involvement roles. Therefore, it is helpful to know something about adult educators and how they make decisions. Adult education programs rely heavily on volunteers and part-time employees with varying degrees of formal preparation and credentials to teach in both group- and tutor-structured learning environments (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Chisman, 2011; National Research Council, 2012; Sandlin & St. Clair, 2005). Many instructors have a background in K–12 education but have less preparation to teach adult learners (Chisman, 2011; Ziegler, McCallum, & Bell, 2009). Research is limited regarding the influences on adult educators' instructional decisions. Ziegler, McCallum, and Bell (2009) concluded that prior experience in teaching played a larger role in instructor knowledge and preparation than the instructor's status as paid staff or volunteer. Belzer (2006) found that volunteer literacy tutors in her qualitative study made instructional decisions based on many factors beyond the information they gleaned in volunteer training sessions, such as acting on what they believed was needed, trial and error, and prior knowledge.

A second network exists among fellow students. Studies have found that classmates can offer important learning and emotional support for isolated adult students (Drago-Severson, Cuban, & Daloz, 2009; Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009). A few studies have found access to fellow parents' resources, information, and advice helped to support a child's education (Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011; St. Clair, 2008; Shiffman, 2011).

### **Self-Efficacy**

In the context of parent involvement, self-efficacy is the degree to which parents believe they can positively influence their child's education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). These beliefs inform parent decisions about whether and how to be involved in their child's education. For example, a parent who does not feel she has strong literacy or math skills may be anxious about assisting her child with those homework assignments (Civil & Bernier, 2006).

Participation in adult education may foster linkages between self-efficacy acquired through the course and self-efficacy associated with supporting a child's education. A learner's self-efficacy is considered an important determinant of program completion in adult basic education programs and thus a priority for

the field (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999). In some studies, parents attributed a heightened self-efficacy to assist with homework and communicate with teachers to their ABE or GED participation (Bingman & Ebert, 2000; St. Clair, 2008; Shiffman, 2011).

## Method

A comparative case study (Yin, 1994) was conducted to explore relationships between adult education and parent involvement in the education of school-age children. Cases were selected to represent common types of programs for adults with less formal education and/or limited English proficiency based on the premise that these parents often face difficulty supporting a child's education in formal school systems. The researcher selected typical adult education programs rather than programs with a specific focus on fostering parent involvement in education for school-age children. The researcher sought to develop a picture of how typical adult education programs conceptualize and address parent involvement in education in courses as groundwork for future study.

The Learning Initiative, a nonprofit coordinating organization for English literacy programs, assisted the researcher in identifying prospective programs that might serve as the cases. (Note: Names of places, organizations, and individuals are pseudonyms.) Two of the five programs contacted agreed to participate. The Elm Project provides basic ESOL instruction. The Iris Center offers several instructional programs including ABE/GED courses.

This article focuses on data collected between spring and fall 2011. Data gathered during the first stage include observations, documents, and semi-structured interviews with adult education instructors and program leaders. Semi-structured interviews examined course goals, instructional approaches, student–instructor interactions, perceptions of parent involvement in a child's education, and linkages between adult education classes and parent involvement practices. Observations focused on interactions among students, instructors, and staff and how course material was presented.

The eight interviewees included two program leaders and five instructors affiliated with the two programs and one program leader affiliated with the Learning Initiative. The 12 observations included Elm class sessions and ceremonies, ABE/GED class sessions at the Iris Center, and a two-day professional development workshop offered by the Learning Initiative. Documents analyzed included program reports, policy statements, field notes, and curricular and other program materials from the two programs and the Learning Initiative. The researcher also reviewed publicly available reports and materials

produced by the public school system and state and county agencies. In addition, the researcher met with practitioners in the region to discuss general impressions of linkages between adult education programs and parent involvement and to explore emerging themes the researcher identified in the data.

Table 1. Data Sources

	Elm Project	Iris Center	Learning Initiative	Total
Interviews	1 program leader ( <i>Susan</i> ) 4 instructors ( <i>Betty, Deborah, Joan, &amp; Mary</i> )	1 program leader ( <i>Helen</i> ) 1 instructor ( <i>Gloria</i> )	1 program leader ( <i>Cynthia</i> )	8
Observations	5 classroom sessions 1 program celebration	4 classroom sessions	2-day workshop	12
Artifacts and Documents	Textbooks, flyers, and class materials	Textbooks, program brochure, GED materials	Workshop materials, reports, resources	

Data analysis was guided by the study's theoretical propositions (Yin, 1994). Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded according to themes identified in the literature and those that emerged during the study. The coding process identified characteristics of adult students; parent involvement beliefs and practices; programmatic and curricular features; instructors' beliefs and actions; interactions among instructors, students, and program leaders; and ways in which resources, ideas, and connections are shared. The researcher developed individual descriptive case studies of each program and then conducted a comparative analysis of the two cases to identify themes.

### The Setting: Stevens County

Stevens County Maryland is located in a large metropolitan area. Residents are diverse in native language, country of origin, income, prior formal education, and citizenship status (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The overwhelming majority of adults over 25 have a high school degree. Stevens County has a large public school system that serves a highly diverse student population in terms of race and ethnicity, native language, and family income.

The adult education offerings in Stevens County are numerous and varied yet do not fulfill demand. ESOL and ABE/GED programs are available through the community college, religious organizations, local chapters of national literacy organizations, workplace programs, family service initiatives, and neighborhood-based groups. According to the Learning Initiative, an estimated 1,500 paid and volunteer instructors teach literacy and ESOL in the county. The Learning Initiative provides coordination for English literacy programs and capacity-building through training, grants, and other resources.

## **Elm ESOL Program: Instruction Focused on Student Goals**

The overarching focus of Elm's ESOL program and individual instruction is on meeting the needs of primarily low-income adults living in the community who wish to improve their English in accordance with broadly defined goals for work, education, and family. The program serves over 200 men and women ranging widely in age and formal education. The majority are Spanish speakers from Central America; a smaller proportion is from Ethiopia and Haiti. Classes are offered at night in a public school. The program uses a combination of paid and volunteer instructors. Instructors are primarily White female professionals or retirees who do not speak a language other than English. Course texts are designed for a general audience and organized by units reflecting routine communication needs at work, schools, health facilities, shops, and on public transportation.

### **Practices That Explicitly Address Parent Involvement**

While supporting parent involvement is not the driving focus of this ESOL program, there are three types of practices that overtly expose parents to knowledge and resources that support their role in their child's education. These practices include responses to specific student-identified needs, discussions about participation in school activities, and the use of education topics as instructional material for practicing English.

Elm activates its social capital to connect students to resources *as needs arise*, including parent involvement. According to Susan, the ESOL Coordinator, "we try to help with whatever resources are available within the system" when students have problems. For example, one instructor activated the program's network to assist a student whose high school-age son was getting into trouble at school. The instructor contacted Susan who in turn notified an Elm board member who happens to be the high school's Latino liaison. The Elm Project and Susan provide this kind of timely connection to resources for a wide range of student challenges, from preparing citizenship papers to securing housing and food.

Structured efforts to support parent involvement for school-age children center on encouraging parents to participate in formal school events such as parent-teacher conferences and back-to-school nights. These efforts are consistent with state priorities to provide adult ESOL learners with knowledge of cultural norms that help them navigate their role as family members in American society (MD Dept. of Labor, Licensing, & Regulations, n.d.). Susan explained that they stress the "importance of going to the parent-teacher conferences and not being embarrassed that they need an interpreter." She believes

they need to emphasize this because for many Elm students “there’s no history in their background of participation.” A board member who is a native Spanish speaker leads workshops on parent involvement to let parents know about the PTA and English programs in the schools. In the ESOL classes, teachers allot time to discuss parent–teacher conferences. During one observation the week of districtwide parent–teacher conferences, the instructor (a former teacher) and her assistant (a former school librarian) discussed parent–teacher conferences and worked with the students to generate a list of questions they might ask teachers during these meetings.

A third type of explicit connection between the Elm ESOL classes and parent involvement practices occurred as part of one lesson observed. Joan and her students reviewed a newspaper story about the school district administration. She facilitated a discussion about district governance and the role of administrators, making reference to the fact that “we vote for” the school board members. Such discussion is aligned with state ESOL standards to increase knowledge about the education system and community resources (MD Dept. of Labor, Licensing, & Regulations, n.d.) and provides parents with a preliminary introduction to the public school system’s governance structure.

### **Practices With Implicit Implications for Parent Involvement**

Several Elm instructor and leader practices that build adult learners’ cross-cultural awareness and metacognitive skills also hold implicit implications for parent involvement in a child’s education in American public schools. These can be found in ideas communicated about interaction styles, the nature of learning, types of learning activities employed, and the experience of learning in the physical space of a public school classroom. Such connections may remain latent. It is up to the parent and the instructor or staff member to recognize and cultivate connections between these types of knowledge and experiences and the ways in which children learn in Stevens County schools.

A challenge voiced by Elm educators is that students with limited formal education “don’t know how to learn.” Instructors discuss beliefs about learning with their adult students that are commonly expressed in American education. Deborah talks to her class about different learning styles, making distinctions between visual and auditory learners. Mary explains the important role of making mistakes in the learning process to her students. To model this, she purposefully makes errors and waits for her students to correct her. Such discussions can lay the groundwork for reflecting on their child’s learning and recognizing assumptions about learning embedded in local school practices.

Similarly, the Elm instructors focus on setting and monitoring learning goals with their students. This may be a new practice for students who grew

up in a different educational system. Cynthia at the Learning Initiative believes “not everyone has been trained to set goals for themselves.” The question that emerges is how parents’ work with goal setting and monitoring might inform the ways in which parents set and monitor goals for their child’s learning and might also help them understand how their children and the school system set and monitor goals. Cynthia postulates, “if you do that for yourself, I think you’re also going to do it for your children and help them with setting and achieving goals.”

The types of activities Elm instructors use to teach the course content expose students to a variety of ways of learning and practicing new knowledge and skills. In the classroom, Elm instructors employ such nontraditional learning techniques as throwing a ball to students in a circle to answer questions, playing Bingo and other games, and using find-and-fix exercises in which students identify and correct the mistakes in sentences. Consistent with the emphasis on the real-world application of learning in state ESOL standards (MD Dept. of Labor, Licensing, & Regulations, n.d.), instructors encourage students to think of their community as a laboratory. They label as “learning” those efforts to initiate conversations with shopkeepers, scan product labels at the supermarket, read the weekly free newspaper, and obtain a library card. Deborah tries to “make them aware of how they can be learning...sitting on the bus.” Exposure to these varied learning activities offers parents alternative ways to think about and support children’s learning outside of school.

Elm’s adult ESOL students have the experience of spending extended periods of time in a public school in a way that would not typically be possible. Susan believes the location is important:

I made the case with the school system that it was important for us to be in a school because I think that then gives both the parents and the little kids who come a comfort level with going into a public school, not seeing it as threatening, and making that connection that they’ll be able to do that when their kids get older.

These classrooms provide parents with visual information about technology equipment such as interactive white boards and use of instructional space from desk arrangements to reading corners. When the school holds evening events, the building springs to life as a school. Administrators are a physical presence, directing student and parent movements.

## **Iris Center ABE/GED: Instruction Focused on Parenting, K–12 Content, and Differentiation**

The ABE/GED program is one service of many provided by this community-based program that takes a holistic approach to family well being and early childhood development. Iris offers one day and one evening combined ABE/GED course. Classes are kept intentionally small, with approximately eight students per class—the majority of whom are young and female. The population served by Iris is approximately 50% Latino. The ABE/GED instructional staff includes one full-time adult education instructor, Gloria, and volunteer tutors. Gloria is African American and a former public middle school teacher. Volunteer tutors assist Gloria in the evening ABE/GED class by working one-on-one with students. The evening tutors observed are White and range in age from college- to late middle-age.

As a program for families with young children that emphasizes school readiness, Iris actively focuses on the role of parents in their child's education and draws connections between adult learning and supporting a child's learning. According to Helen, the program director, "We tell them that they have a responsibility to learn because eventually their kids are going to be doing the exact same materials, and they are going to need to know for their kids."

There are clear parallels between the curricular focus on K–12 content knowledge and skills and those studied by school-age children. During class observations, adult students worked on basic math skills encountered in elementary and middle school including fractions, decimals, and percentages. Students were also observed practicing essay responses to GED prep questions. Gloria believes the time spent on fractions and other basic math in her class will help parents support their child's efforts to master this material, although for most students this will happen in the future when the children are in school.

The program is characterized as a "one-room schoolhouse," offering a differentiated instructional approach. Gloria tailors tasks and the pace of student work according to individual needs. Like the Iris program, the emphasis on monitoring student progress and differentiated instruction is a core practice in the Stevens County K–12 system. As such, parent exposure to monitoring their own learning and receiving differentiated instruction offers an opportunity to build awareness of this as an instructional approach to recognize this method in their child's school and to support their child's learning.

### **Learning Strategies and Tasks**

Iris students gain knowledge of and experiences with a variety of learning strategies and tasks that can inform parents' understanding of a child's school

assignments and expand their repertoire of strategies to assist with homework. During one observation, a tutor worked with a student on writing persuasive essays. The tutor suggested that she and the student each write a response to the question and then discuss their answers. As the two compared their responses, the tutor explained her strategy for structuring a response. Another tutor, a college student new to tutoring at Iris, shared her memorization tricks with another adult student.

In preparing to take the GED tests, Iris students practice distinct types of learning tasks that are also employed by the Stevens County school system. For example, a student and tutor worked on completing “brief-constructed responses” or BCRs during one observation. BCRs appear on the state’s annual assessment tests for school children (MDK12.org, 2012). Children practice these short answer response questions beginning early in elementary school. Like county students, the Iris students also practice their skills using computer-based instructional programs.

Consistent with the contextualized approach to learning valued in the adult education profession, the Iris Center generally and the ABE/GED program in particular encourage parents to recognize and seek out learning opportunities in the community for themselves and for their children. Gloria uses everyday life occurrences to highlight topics she teaches, such as integrating a life skills curriculum with the ABE/GED content. Iris Center staff members actively encourage parents to view the community as a source of learning for their children and point to the critical parent role in exposing children to these opportunities. Helen and her staff urge parents to take their children to the library: “It’s free. It’s teaching your kids. It’s making your kids ready for school.” Such practices emphasize application of content knowledge and skills to daily life, awareness of learning as something that can occur beyond the formal classroom, and the availability of community resources.

### **Developing a Student Persona**

The Iris program seeks to foster student orientations to learning in a formal classroom environment that have parallels to dispositions encouraged in K–12 schools. Gloria, a former middle school teacher, imparts the mindset she believes students need to be successful learners through verbal messages and the way in which she structures the classroom environment:

Teaching them how to be a student is my No. 1 thing. Being a student involves taking notes,...being an independent worker, and not relying on the group setting. Just, you know, holding them to deadlines and homework and class work and attitude.

She stresses, “You have to become reliable.” For Gloria, part of being a student is acting in accordance with classroom norms for behavior that are reminiscent of public school classrooms. She expects her students to stay on task. “That’s a rule. If you walk in that door, there’s only one thing to do and that’s work. Everything else is out of the door.” Students must exit the program if they do not conform to these expectations.

Self-efficacy as a learner is also a critical component of student success from Gloria’s perspective: “The number one thing is: build that confidence to make them realize that they can be good students and that whatever happened in the past is the past.” In this arena, she sees no difference between her current adult students and her former middle school students.

### **Relationships to Support Learning and Parenting**

Navigating relationships is an important consideration at the Iris Center. Gloria and Helen monitor relationships within the courses in ways that will facilitate peer support while avoiding interpersonal conflicts that could impede learning or ostracize a student. During observations, interactions among students were quiet and focused exclusively on the assigned tasks, suggesting limited opportunities during the ABE/GED class to draw on peers’ social capital to address parent involvement needs. At the same time, the staff encourages parents to view one another as sources for child care support and companionship on parent–child excursions. These are often difficult steps for Iris parents.

Gloria, a former middle school teacher, also urges her students to reexamine relationships with former teachers in the K–12 system:

They always say that [teachers] didn’t care, and they were just pushing them out, but I also talk to them about, “But that’s your behavior. It’s what you did. A teacher doesn’t just not like a student. They...don’t like your behavior. When your behavior gets progressively worse, they don’t like that, either. So why are they going to show the same attention to those who want to learn [as] those who don’t and don’t get the attention?”

In this, she encourages parents to consider a different perspective about how teachers and students relate to one another that could prove useful in parent interactions with their child’s teachers.

### **Explanatory Factors**

Four factors help to explain how and the extent to which the adult education instructors connect the knowledge and experiences, social capital, and self-efficacy acquired in their classes with parents’ involvement in the education

of their school-age children. These factors include characteristics of the program and the student population served, the perceived roles and backgrounds of individual educators, and the nature and use of social networks.

### **Program Emphasis**

Program emphasis is an important determinant of the extent to which instructors and program leaders make connections between adult learning and parent involvement in a child's education. The Iris ABE/GED instructor and texts teach content, learning strategies, and standardized assessment practices that have numerous parallels to those found in the local school system. Furthermore, the organization's dual focus on parent and child development makes the link between the education of parents and children organic. In contrast, Elm's ESOL courses focus on developing generalized English language skills for everyday use and responding to students' identified needs. The textbooks support this broad focus. Instructors teach vocabulary and grammar; however, connections between this content and a child's learning are not emphasized or viewed as particularly relevant by the instructors interviewed.

### **Adult Student Characteristics**

In both programs, the adult student population also informs the nature of connections instructors and program leaders make to parent involvement practices. Elm's ESOL classes serve a broad cross-section of adults with goals ranging from employment and educational advancement to basic survival. Elm instructors must calibrate their lessons to meet the diverse priorities and interests of parents and nonparents. This is consistent with the learner-centered approach and emphasis on student goals advocated by the adult education profession (Chisman, 2011; National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 2003; National Research Council, 2012). In contrast, Iris serves a more homogenous group of students with young children and challenges in family functioning preparing to take a standardized battery of tests—the GED. Thus, Iris staff and tutors target instruction toward shared and fairly specific learning goals and can reference parent-related topics without the risk of alienating students who are not parents.

Language and familiarity with American cultural norms are also factors in the ease with which instructors discuss parent involvement issues and foster connections between the adult class and supporting a child's school-age education. At Elm, the language barrier between the majority of instructors and their students makes nuanced conversations about parent involvement difficult. This leaves instructors to rely more heavily on inferences to determine the nature of and priorities for parent involvement among their students who have

school-age children. In contrast, Iris students are generally strong, if not fluent, in English, and many attended American public schools. As a result, the Iris instructor, tutors, and ABE/GED students have the advantage of a shared language and cultural foundation to hold more nuanced discussions about parent involvement.

### **Instructor Role Definition and Background**

The instructors also understand and focus on parent involvement efforts based on how they define and enact their role and make sense of their own experiences with K–12 schools. At the Elm Project, instructors conceptualize their role as providing ESOL instruction. Beyond that primary role, each instructor makes different choices based on a combination of beliefs about the appropriateness of topics and strategies for relating to students. For example, Mary explains, “I don’t see that as my job as the instructor to know about students’ children unless they bring it up.” At the same time, Elm instructors employ strategies to relate to their students by drawing on personal experiences. Instructors often use their own language learning challenges to empathize with their students. Deborah draws on common experiences as a parent: “I’m a parent, and many of my students are, too. I tend to throw things out about kids.” Such references to shared parent identities potentially open the door to conversations about supporting a child’s education. In contrast, Gloria takes a no-nonsense instructional approach focused on passing the GED and communicates clear expectations for student behavior. As noted earlier, instructor and student focus was centered solely on GED content during class observations. Gloria requires students to master her strategies for completing GED preparation work before exposing them to the tutors who allow students to “get to see a different way,” as she put it.

Instructor endeavors to understand and support parent involvement efforts are heavily informed by the instructors’ backgrounds. Four of the Elm educators interviewed referenced experiences as mothers and grandmothers with children in the Stevens County school system to comment on the kinds of support school-age children need, communication practices between home and school, and specific challenges of helping children with homework. At Iris, Gloria’s no-nonsense approach and clearly defined expectations for student work and behavior are also likely informed by her background as a middle school teacher. It is not a connection she made in interviews but one the researcher noted in observations. The Iris tutors were observed referencing their experiences as learners when they shared learning strategies and feelings about mastering particular content.

## **Social Capital Embedded in the Educators' Social Networks**

The Elm Project runs on its connections in the community. Susan, the program coordinator, is at the nexus of this network. Many of the instructors are residents of the community and have prior personal relationships with her. Susan is a tireless advocate for the students and the program. She raised her children in the community and was an active parent in the public schools. As such, her knowledge of the area and its resources is extensive. The ESOL program relies on her to raise funds, craft additional programming, and connect the adult students to the resources they need.

Susan recognizes and activates the social capital embedded in her relationships to share information about and connect students to community resources. She provides the instructors with flyers and other informational materials to distribute in their classes on a regular basis, from notices about community events to information about the flu, free medical clinics, and the community college's programs in trade professions. The instructors turn to Susan with concerns about students and the need to connect students to other resources. Susan then identifies her contacts and those of other members of the organization with deep ties in the community.

The social networks and activation of social capital appear more formalized at the Iris Center. Iris operates as a part of an umbrella organization serving families with multiple social service needs. Caseworkers and nurses are the primary contact point for referrals to outside community resources rather than the ABE/GED instructional staff. Interactions focused on parent involvement for school-age children are infrequent between personnel at Iris and area schools.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

The purpose of this comparative case study was to begin to build a picture of the ways in which education programs for adults with limited English proficiency or formal education can support parent involvement. To guide this inquiry, three dimensions of these programs that showed promise in the literature were examined: knowledge and experiences associated with learning in a formal environment, social capital, and the transfer of learning self-efficacy to parent involvement self-efficacy. The Elm ESOL and Iris ABE/GED programs offered opportunities to connect the knowledge, experiences, and social capital acquired there to the ways in which parents interact with school staff, assist a child with homework and other out-of-school learning activities, and understand and navigate the school system to advocate on behalf of a child. There were also challenges to making connections such as heterogeneous student goals and language barriers between instructors and students.

Some opportunities were readily apparent to Elm and Iris educators, such as communicating information about parent participation in formal school events and the relevance of parents' math learning to children's math homework—a finding consistent with a few prior studies (Civil & Bernier, 2006; Shiffman, 2011). Elm leaders, in particular, recognized the possibilities for both using their own social capital and building that of their students to access community resources including the school. These findings are consistent with earlier research highlighting the important role of neighborhood organizations as resource brokers (Albertini, 2009; O'Donnell et al., 2008; Shiffman, 2013). The social capital among learners within adult education programs—found to be an important source of support and information for parenting in prior research (Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011; St. Clair, 2008; Shiffman, 2011)—was also recognized by Iris staff as potentially important for ABE/GED students but required staff encouragement and skill development to realize.

Other opportunities to connect adult learning to parent involvement were present but subtle. This may provide a line of inquiry to explain the nonstatistically significant yet positive effect of ESL programs on student achievement found by Jeynes (2012). In the current study, potential connections were associated with the learning process, including exposure to new ideas about learning, learning tasks and strategies, and reflections on one's own learning. If recognized, these experiences could facilitate parent reflection on their child's learning and familiarity with assumptions about learning embedded in contemporary American school practices (Lareau, 1989).

Classroom observations and interviews with Elm and Iris educators revealed limited information about the ways in which learning self-efficacy might transfer to parent involvement self-efficacy. Educators in both programs spoke about building their students' confidence as learners but offered little insight regarding how this might influence parent involvement self-efficacy. Parent learners who can speak directly to their feelings of efficacy are likely to be richer sources in this area; their perspectives will be explored in a future analysis.

This article offers a preliminary framework for identifying how—and to what extent—adult education programs and individual educators are disposed to draw connections between their work with students and supporting parent involvement roles. Not surprisingly, program emphasis and population served are important determinants of the relative attention program leaders and instructors can devote to parent involvement topics. Programs like Elm that serve adults with diverse goals are less likely to extensively embed parent involvement concepts into the curriculum and instruction. Language barriers between learners and instructors can also inhibit more complex conversations about parent involvement. When the program and population served

are aligned with the needs of parents to support a child's education and there is a shared language—as in the Iris ABE/GED course—the opportunities to make these linkages are pervasive. However, the extent to which connections are recognized and made also depends on how adult educators understand and enact their role as well as on their prior experiences with K–12 education. This study's findings are consistent with Belzer's (2006) and Sandlin and St. Clair's (2005) observations that instructors' prior experience plays an influential role in instructional decisions.

As illustrated in the two cases, adult educators are in a position to explore with parents ideas about learning, resources, people, and opportunities to support their child's education. Adult educators interact with their students on a regular basis, develop relationships, and can build trust. As such, adult education programs can be an important resource for schools seeking to reach this population of parents. Adult educators can offer K–12 educators insights regarding how their adult students learn and the nature of parental priorities and concerns. At the same time, schools can expand adult educators' frame of reference for understanding parent involvement needs through ongoing communication. Specifically, school staff can provide information about the K–12 curriculum, instruction, and resources to help parents and adult educators recognize and make connections between adult and child learning and to strengthen parent involvement practices.

Further research is needed to understand how and the extent to which parents actually make connections identified in the two cases. The second stage of data collection for this current study will examine parent perspectives. Additional research is needed to explore and test the effectiveness of these connections in a range of adult education programs with diverse emphases, populations served, and organizational arrangements.

With the adoption of college- and career-ready standards by states, parents will be called on to assist their children to master an increasingly sophisticated and complex curriculum, one that demands the use of higher order thinking skills. Parents historically less connected to the educational experience of their school-age children risk even further alienation at a time when teachers and schools will most need this parental support. This study suggests that adult education programs are in a unique position to work closely with parents grappling with their own learning challenges and, thus, can be powerful partners in strengthening parent involvement.

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