

Resiliency and Well-Being: Reflections of English as a Second Language Older Adults on Immigration and Integration

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Introduction

Language competency is a major component of empowerment contributing to a sense of well-being and resiliency because it enables the development of a sense of mastery of one's environment, and most importantly the ability to interact with family, friends, neighbors and the community at large. Social workers tend to consider ESL classes the domain of ESL teachers and educators and have tended to overlook the tremendous opportunities for social advocacy, and information-searching about social resources and social issues (for example information on as elder abuse and domestic violence) that ESL classes could provide.

An examination of current language competencies for new Canadian immigration show an growing number of non-English speaking immigrants, and of these 33% of all immigrants to Canada have no high school education (Lamba, Mulder and Wilkinson, 2000). These figures support the need for ESL classes generally, and the need to make information available about ESL classes to new immigrants and refugees. Furthermore, within ESL classes, there is a need to recognize that limited literacy skills even in the "home" language (defined by Statistics Canada as the language spoken most often in the home) make learning a second language more challenging for both the student and the teacher. In addition, immigration policies designed to promote family reunification have helped to make older persons from diverse cultural groups one of the most rapidly growing populations in Canada (Manitoba Fact Book on Aging, 1996; Lamba, Mulder & Wilkinson, 2000). This project examines the connections between resiliency, language competency building, social well-being and integration.

The ESL for Seniors Programme

Age & Opportunity Centre Inc. of Winnipeg has developed a unique ESL for Seniors Program in co-operation with Citizenship and Immigration Canada (1997-98), the Manitoba Labour & Immigration and ethnic community based organizations through the programs LINC (Language Instruction for New Comers to Canada) and CBLT (Community –Based Language Training). The main goal of the ESL for Seniors program is to provide an opportunity for immigrant seniors to learn ESL to enhance their participation in the

community. The objectives include: building self-confidence as language learners and as active participants in the community; building awareness of seniors services and activities; to promote relationship between ESL and non-ESL seniors; and to facilitate continued integration into the community at large. The program began in October 1997 with six classes and 81 participants and has grown steadily to serve over three hundred students from twenty one different first language groupings, with 21 classes available days, afternoons, evenings and weekends and based in senior's centers and community facilities. First language support through community liaison officers; child-minding and transportation services may be considered as needed. Some classes are comprised of all one-language students, while others are a mixture of several languages.

Summary of Project

The **purpose** of this project is to explore the culture meanings of well-being and resiliency for ESL older adults as they reflect on their lived stories of immigration to, and experience of integration within Canadian society. Our major research questions are: **(1) What are the cultural meanings of and challenges to, resiliency and well-being as reflected through lived stories of immigration and integration for ESL older adults; and, (2) how might this knowledge be used to inform policy and program development?** For this study older adults will be defined persons who aged 50+. The immigration experience must have taken place in adulthood which for purposes of this study will be defined as age eighteen years or later. Two concepts are key to resiliency (i) risk factors and (ii) protective factors. Our project hopes to identify resiliency “chains” – connecting factors that help us understand the resiliency of ESL immigrants in general and ESL senior immigrants in particular.

The **methodology** is participatory action research and has evolved as part of the research process. Initially we proposed to develop focus groups of volunteers from the language classes using translators within the focus groups and afterwards to discuss immigration, integration and resiliency experiences while providing within these focus groups a lesson module on social well-being, health and resiliency. However **the Teacher Advisory Meeting** suggested that the English levels of their students and student “shyness” and cultural conditioning would preclude the majority of students. They suggested a better response would be obtained if we visited individual classes and asked the students to write their experience in either English or their own first language. They supported the building of a story-book as part of the outcome of the project. Our **Seniors Project Advisory Group** refined the guiding questions for use in the classroom to help give focus to the stories and kept the expectations of new ESL students language competencies in perspective. Our **Translators** challenged us to consider whether we wanted a literal translation or a more polished rendering of the story without changing the intended meaning to make the story book useful as a learning tool.

Year 1

In Year 1 we established our Project Advisory Groups and consulted with teachers and translators and re-shaped the project design. We initially intended to interview 100 seniors using focus groups, individual and couples interviews. Instead we visited 14 ESL classes and explained the project to approximately 175 students and obtained 128 narrative stories from

the ESL seniors of which 55 are in English, the remainders are in Vietnamese, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, French, Hindi, Russian, Polish and Farsi. The students were asked to reflect on the following types of themes: (1) On days when you miss your own country or family, how do you keep your spirits up? (2) What do you do to keep yourself healthy? (3) What advice do you have for new immigrants? (4) In reflecting upon your own immigration what is the best memory; the most difficult happening? (5) When did you begin to feel at home, a part of Canada? (6) What gave you this feeling of belonging? We are still completing the translations and beginning the storybook compilation and narrative analysis of the stories for knowledge about resiliency chains and implications for policy and program development.

Year 2

In Year 2 of the project, we will finish the storybook and receive class reactions, continue the narrative analysis and make the connections to policy recommendations and undertake individual and couples interviews. A standardized instrument – the Dyadic Adjustment Scale will be used for interviews with 30 couples. A smaller sample of between 10-20 individuals will be interviewed with a specific focus of work-related immigration issues. While we planned a second standardized instrument on health attributes, because of the good response to the request for stories and the richness of the story content, we have decided to limit the standardized scales to the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). The DAS has been used to measure well-being in multi-cultural families and has been translated into Chinese. Demographic information on participants will be drawn from the ESL for Seniors records.

Within the stories, the social network created by the ESL for Seniors classes, the competencies developed through lessons on shopping, travel by bus, and use of the telephone, the expansion of language skills to communicate with service providers, neighbors and even grandchildren, and to express health concerns, or a need for help, all contribute to an increase sense of belonging and social well-being.

Summary

The project is designed augment existing knowledge of resiliency and well-being of ESL seniors, to contribute to knowledge about ESL for Seniors program in general, and to identify policy and program needs around ESL for Seniors. In this project, we also hope to promote the need for continued funding for ESL classes, and for increased availability and improved access through the use of media such as television and radio classes. The ESL for Seniors program also combats stereo-types on aging, or as the ESL senior explained, ***“this [The ESL for Seniors program] proves that you can teach an old parrot new tricks”***.

References

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