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CULTURAL DISSONANCE OF ELDER LEARNERS IN BEGINNING LITERACY
AND LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

by

Lisa Vogl

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in English as a Second Language.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

March 2017

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Patsy Egan, I express my gratitude for her guidance and expertise as my primary advisor as I completed this capstone. To my secondary advisor, Jen Vanek, I thank you for your thorough feedback and encouragement as I was first refining my research topic. To Burgen Young, I thank you for your work and dedication when I first approached you with my ideas for a curriculum development project for low-literate elders to whom this study ultimately became dedicated. To the interpreter and instructor featured in this study, I thank you for sharing your critical insight with me. And finally, I thank the elder learners I have known who have shared with me their generosity and wisdom, perseverance and vitality, and lessons that I will reflect on throughout my life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	8
Summary.....	13
Chapter Overviews.....	14
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....	17
Context: Adult Basic Education and English as a Second language.....	17
Educating Adult Learners.....	23
LESLLA Learners.....	23
Elders as Learners.....	24
Physical Changes.....	25
Changes in Memory.....	26
InterCultural Communication Framework (ICF).....	27
Establishing and Maintaining Relationships.....	27
Identifying and Accommodating Priority.....	29
Processes for Learning.....	30
Indigenous Knowledge.....	32
Somali Elders.....	33
Education in Somalia.....	35
Summary.....	35

CHAPTER THREE: Methods.....	38
Overview of Chapter Three.....	39
Qualitative Research Paradigm.....	39
Researcher Bias.....	40
Critical Theory.....	40
Data Collection.....	41
Participants.....	41
Setting.....	45
Data Collection Technique 1: Elder Interviews.....	45
Data Collection Technique 2: Classroom Observation.....	46
Data Collection Technique 3: Instructor Interview.....	47
Procedure.....	47
Data Analysis.....	48
Verification of Data.....	49
Ethics.....	49
Conclusion.....	50
CHAPTER FOUR: Results.....	51
Elder Participants.....	51
Interview Responses by Theme.....	57
Theme One: Age.....	59
Theme Two: Health Issues.....	61
Theme Three: Linguistic Issues.....	62
Theme Four: Isolation.....	63

Theme Five: Poor Self-Esteem.....	64
Theme Six: Trauma.....	66
Theme Seven: Indigenous Knowledge	68
Theme Eight: Cultural Dissonance.....	71
Results from Classroom Observations.....	71
Instructor Interview.....	73
Conclusions.....	79
CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion.....	81
Major Findings.....	81
Health Issues.....	82
Linguistic Issues.....	83
Isolation.....	84
Poor Self-esteem.....	85
Trauma.....	85
Indigenous Knowledge.....	86
Cultural Dissonance.....	87
Implications.....	88
Encouraging an Inclusive Classroom.....	89
Elder Learners and LESLLA Instruction.....	89
Rigor.....	91
Limitations.....	93
Further Research.....	94
Conclusion.....	95

REFERENCES.....	97
APPENDICES.....	109
Appendix A: Participant Consent Letter.....	109
Appendix B: Instructor Consent Letter.....	112
Appendix C: Participant Semi-Structured Interview Guide.....	115
Appendix D: Participant Interview Response Matrix.....	116
Appendix E: Classroom Observation Data Collection Tool.....	118
Appendix F: Instructor Interview Survey.....	119

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1- Number of authorized immigrants (including Lawful Permanent Residents) in the United States by age who are likely to have limited formal schooling and low literacy, 2000 and 2005.....	20
Table 2- Student Participants.....	43
Table 3- Student Participants' Indigenous Knowledge Context.....	44
Table 4- Interview Themes Coding Descriptions.....	59
Table 5- How Elders Perceive Age Affecting their Experience in the Classroom.....	60
Table 6- How Elders Perceive Health Affecting their Experience in the Classroom.....	62
Table 7- How Elders Perceive Linguistic Issues Affecting their Experience in the Classroom.....	63
Table 8- How Elders Perceive Isolation Affecting their Experience in the Classroom....	64
Table 9- How Elders Perceive Self-esteem Affecting their Experience in the Classroom.....	65
Table 10- How Elders Perceive Trauma Affecting their Experience in the Classroom...67	
Table 11- How Elders Perceive Indigenous Knowledge Relating to Content in the Classroom.....	69
Table 12: How Elders Perceive Cultural Dissonance in the Classroom.....	71

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Adult Basic Education (ABE) and ESL (English as a Second Language) Programs seek to work with marginalized learners. Among those served, learners with limited formal education and low first language literacy comprise a subset. When I began my career in adult basic education, it was as an adult ESL program coordinator, developing on-site programs in housing complexes scattered through a major metropolitan area in the upper Midwest. These were unique programming sites, and as is the case with most funding-strapped educational enterprises, it was my job to get creative and reach as many adult learners as possible. What I came to experience while developing programs practically in the comfort of students' own homes provided confirmation of my choice to work in this field in profound and surprising ways. When ESL programs were placed within their reach, the most regular and devoted participants were elders. Through this work, I knocked on doors and met the families and web of relations that looked out for elders. I felt I was beginning to see parts of a whole picture that reveal the vulnerabilities which we are presented with when choosing to learn something new-- what does your family say? What do you say? What does your teacher say? A critical meditation on these topics does not reflect the vitality of mind and spirit for community I have seen in elder

learners. I had to find a way to honor their spirit for learning, and so I dedicate my research to them.

This study aims to critically examine the cultural dissonance experienced by elder learners from other, non-European origins embark on learning in a Western context, and who are often already excluded from education by a variety of outside factors. My reflection on working with marginalized peoples has been significantly influenced by critical pedagogy and indigenous studies, which provide a lens I believe is necessary in order to restore power to those learners who are denied it. I first describe the ways this power is unevenly distributed within current adult education systems and then hone in on how this affects elders specifically. With this preparation, this study then embarks on a cycle of inquiry with two major research questions: *What indigenous knowledge do low-literate elder learners bring to the beginning literacy classroom?* And *How does this indigenous knowledge interact with the western teaching and learning context they are currently studying in?* In order to begin this inquiry, it is necessary to describe the profile of learners and the programming context of this study.

This research focuses on elders without literacy in their first language. National and international professional developers and researchers in the field of Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition, or LESLLA, work to meet the needs of these unique learners. In the Upper Midwest, refugee arrivals from East Africa account for a significant enrollment of LESLLA learners in ABE/ESL programs (Lepage, personal communication, 2014). With East Africans being one of the largest groups of primary refugee arrivals in Minnesota since 2006, the findings of this study focusing on East African learners are critical to adult ESL educators in Minnesota and other states with

high numbers of primary and secondary refugee arrivals from this region (MN Department of Health, 2014). According to the 2014 Minnesota Adult Basic Education database of enrollment figures for ESL/ABE programs, elder learners who enrolled in programs at National Reporting System (NRS) functional levels of 180 or lower on CASAS reading assessments accounted for the largest portion of student intakes, suggesting that elders from the East African community are most often LESLLA learners (Lepage, personal communication, 2014). Therefore, the information presented in this study contributes to the small but growing field of LESLLA which focuses on meeting the needs of this particular group of learners with limited formal education and literacy skills.

Among LESLLA learners, elder refugees, here defined generally as refugees 65 years and older, are among those hardest to serve due to low enrollment, disabilities, and significant cultural dissonance within the western educational framework. This cultural dissonance contributes to the acculturation gap between immigrants and refugees, their families, and the greater community. Research suggests that this acculturation gap correlates significantly with depression and poor health across time and across a wide range of cultures (Lum & Vandaraa, 2010, Mui & Kang, 2006; Rumbaut, 1985). Major life stressors that are inherent in the elder refugee population, such as significant social, psychological and emotional loss, as well as victimization prior to and after relocation to the United States, also correlate significantly with a higher incidence of depression (Dow, 2011; Hauck, Lo, Maxwell, & Reynolds, 2014; Lagacé, Charmarkeh, & Grandena, 2004). Compounding these risks is the turmoil caused by intergenerational conflict when the

traditional role of elders shifts in the process of relocation, due to culture and language barriers (Chenoweth & Burdick, 2001; Grognet, 1989; Olazabal, 2011; Thao, 2006).

Elders as learners represent a complex issue in society, especially when those learners are non-literate. Some may ask, how can a person make it to the winter of their life without having “made time” for education? Illiteracy is regarded as an abnormality, and the interpretation of the assessments of the cognitive abilities of elders with limited formal education are even mistaken as showing signs of dementia, or nervous system and neurological disorder (Ardila et al., 2000). With such a pathological stance on aging and education in our society relying so strongly on print literacy, if a student is over 65 years old the sentiment among even the most committed educators may be that it is too late for them. The dearth research exploring the social transformation of elder refugees, as compared with the substantially greater focus and quantity of research on younger refugees whose social transformation comes about more quickly supports this view (Haines, 2010). The research we do have on elders as learners is largely focused on high-income white populations, while minority populations are underrepresented (Doetinchem de Rande, 2012). International surveys such as PIAAC purport to provide the data which could inform nations of the literacy needs of their aging citizenry, and although their results are broken down by age, non-literate respondents were by-and-large excluded from the survey (Hout, Reder, Vollner, Drijkoningen, & Deygers, 2015; Rampey, et al., 2016).

The apocryphal belief is that elders’ health and cognitive decline represent a barrier to learning which prompts educators and society members to reject the idea of elders as learners out of hand, or, alternatively welcoming them into classes with

reservations, as the quaint, frail observers in the back of the classroom rather than powerful contributors to society who have agency in their own learning and leadership roles both within and outside their own communities. Often, elders as learners are regarded as non-rational others in the classroom who have no place there except as a way to spend time, or to have “something to do.” The voices of elder learners themselves are needed to counter the dominant narrative which further marginalizes an already vulnerable population.

This study seeks to understand the source of cultural dissonance experienced by elders as learners, situated within paradigmatic shifts between indigenous knowledge systems and western knowledge systems. For educators working with elder learners, understanding ways of knowing and indigenous knowledge systems is a critical and largely neglected consideration in curriculum development. Because new knowledge is constructed and produced through social exchange that builds on what learners already know (Auerbach, 1992), educators must understand not only what learners know but also the experiences and practices they have used to learn successfully over a lifetime. In this present study, I argue that we are complicit with students-as-blank-slates mentality, or “re-education” model that has been utilized in colonial contexts (Freire, 1993; Kincheloe & Semali, 1999) if we ignore the possibilities that indigenous knowledge systems acquired in learners’ home countries lend to the acquisition of new material and literacy skills. Thus, the goal of this research is to make more visible the role of elder learners and their prior learning, beliefs, and experiences in the western. This research seeks to contribute to a transformation of low-literate elder learners from oppressed, invisible other, to powerful agents of self-determination for themselves and their communities by

constructing new pedagogical practices cognizant of this demographics' strengths and needs.

Summary

In this study, I work to critically examine this cultural dissonance and unpack its characteristics through the perspective of the students themselves in an adult ESL context. As a result of this study, teachers may be better able to select content that is more consonant with elder learners from indigenous, agrarian backgrounds, and more importantly, both teachers and learners may experience paradigmatic shift in the classroom in which critical indigenous inquiry and western thought may work synergistically to support the acquisition of self-determined skills and ways of knowing that are priorities in elder learners' lives.

It is worth noting this paradigm shift may present an ethical dilemma in education. Flyvberg (2001) defined this dilemma with four questions: where are we going with our current curriculum design practices; who gains and who loses, and by which measures of power; and what should we do about it? These questions help us consider the direction of policies around funding adult education, and how curriculum writers and program design responds to favor certain segments of the adult learner population over others. In very specific ways, elder learners lose in current funding and programmatic models for adult basic education. At the time of this writing, little to no research has considered these questions for low-literate elder refugees in the United States. How will educators grow and adapt their classroom and instructional strategies in order to meet the needs of this underserved population? It is likely that this recommended paradigm shift

may result in instructional practices that are outside of what is called for in federally funded ABE programs. This study offers a starting point in exploring this crucial topic.

Chapter Overviews

In this study, I seek to elicit narratives on indigenous knowledge from East African elders. Indigenous knowledge refers to systems of knowledge and ways of knowing which are place-based and are accumulated, refined, and transmitted over many generations, often through oral traditions of storytelling and close observation of nature. Throughout the research, many questions may be raised which are outside the scope of this study. For example, how can educators working with displaced indigenous peoples open a dialogue in which the teacher can understand more about indigenous knowledge systems? How can knowledge of these indigenous knowledge systems be incorporated directly into classroom material and instructional practices which specifically benefit low-literate elder learners? Can incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems aid in the acquisition of new ways of learning in the western educational model? We cannot fully explore the answers to this wide range of questions within this study. However, I seek to explore an essential understanding: What do elder learners know and *how* do they know? For refugees with agrarian or pastoral backgrounds, like the Karen of Burma or East African elders, their knowledge is *indigenous*, or place-based. Indigenous knowledge is generational, and deeply connected to the environment and the societies in which it is accumulated and refined, and ways of knowing within these knowledge systems can be vastly different from what educators in western classrooms may expect. In order to illuminate these dissonant expectations specifically as they relate to elders and indigenous knowledge, a review of research from several fields of study is required.

In this study's literature review, I share research from the field of critical indigenous studies and LESLLA education to create a new framework in which critical inquiry and best practices from both fields feature prominently in curriculum design. This is accomplished by drawing from Marshall's InterCultural Communication Framework (ICF) in order to examine the differences between the indigenous knowledge systems of elder refugees and the western formal-education framework of educators. Second, I review Marshall and DeCapua's Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) to determine how low-literate elder refugees can best be served within the western educational context. My review of the research will focus on elder learners in a consideration of all relevant factors, including student needs, curriculum design, and classroom practices.

After collecting relevant research which informs the primary questions of this study, Chapter Three outlines the data collection process specific to East African learners. Using one-on-one ethnographic interviews, I open a dialogue between western and non-western culture with educator as researcher and indigenous East African elders as teacher. The interpretation of data from the individual interviews is tested using critical pedagogy as a lens and grounded theory, and triangulated by interviews with the teacher, individual interviews, and observations in the classroom.

Expanding the base of research to include the voices of low-literate elder learners and descriptions of indigenous knowledge systems strengthens the viability of adult learning theory which dictates that background knowledge and validation of prior life experiences in the classroom are essential to acquisition of literacy (Knowles, 1980; Tarone et al., 2009). Furthermore, recognizing the epistemological diversity in

classrooms and the indigenous knowledge systems possessed by learners is essential if we are to encourage retention and persistence in western classrooms (Smith & Pourchot, 1998; Watson, 2010).

In this introduction, I have described the context in which we explore the topic of elders as learners generally, and East African low-literate elder refugees in the Upper Midwest specifically. This section introduces the complexity of the topic through some consideration of elders as they are perceived in the classroom, and specific critiques of these issues are presented in order to propose a new role for elders as agents in their own learning and leaders in the community. This study reports on a thorough review of the literature on indigenous knowledge systems, leading towards the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm in order to provide suggestions for how to translate this knowledge into classroom practice and curriculum development for low-literate elder refugees from indigenous, agrarian backgrounds. In the next chapter, I introduce the methods of ethnographic interviews I conducted with East African elders and report on an analysis of the information using a grounded theory approach. Finally, I conclude with a presentation of findings and recommendations with the goal to translate the results of this study into improved classroom practice and more effective teaching and learning for low-literate refugee elders.

CHAPTER TWO

A Review of the Literature

This chapter features research relevant to understanding the questions this study poses. The first question is *What indigenous knowledge do low-literate elder learners bring to the beginning literacy classroom?* In order to prepare to answer this question, this review starts by defining the needs and characteristics of low-literate elder learners. Second, an understanding of this question is developed by defining and connecting research on indigenous knowledge systems to elders from East African refugee communities who are emergent readers, and positing ways indigenous knowledge may broaden the understanding of how adult learners are best served. The literature review ends by synthesizing these major bodies of research: elders as learners and indigenous knowledge systems, through Marshall's (1994) InterCultural Communication Framework (ICF) and Marshall and DeCapua's (2011) Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) in order to answer the second research question: *How does indigenous knowledge interact with the western teaching and learning context students are currently studying in?*

Context: Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language

Elders seeking to participate in Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs face a unique set of challenges due to the funding

structure and federal policies which dictate them. Programs are offered in a wide range of learning contexts, from schools which offer NRS (National Reporting System, an accountability system which tracks performance on six core performance indicators negotiated state by state with the Secretaries of Education and Labor) leveled programming 0 through GED with specific career training offerings and strict attendance policies, to one-room school house with multi-level drop-in classes. With the passage of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) in 1998 and the subsequent development of the National Reporting System by the Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL), all adult education programs receiving federal funding are now beholden to an outcome-based reporting system which measures both outcomes of adult education and employment programs together. The emphasis on workforce preparation and/or transitioning to postsecondary education in ABE/ESL programming contexts is quite clear. For example, under the 2014 Workforce Innovations and Opportunity Act (WIOA), funding itself is tied to student employment outcomes (WIOA, 2014). Federal funding is monitored and allocated yearly, with all states contributing non-federal funding to support programs. All state- and federally-funded programs submit reports to the NRS. These performance indicators include:

- percentage of program participants in unsubsidized employment during the second and fourth quarter after exit; median earnings; percentage of participants who obtain a postsecondary credential or diploma during participation or within one year after exit; participants achieving measurable skill gains; and effectiveness in serving employers (WIOA, 2014, p. 1-2).

Although many East African elders express interest in finding employment, programming sensitive to the challenges faced by elders, for example, access to transportation, age discrimination, and language barriers, is not something that is currently supported by any sustainable initiatives, and low-literate elders are not considered employable in a culture that does not tend to recognize people ages 65 and older as part of the labor force. ExperienceWorks of Minnesota, and the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP), as it is more commonly known nationally, do partner with organizations to place elder workers at sites where they receive training and modest wages for meager hours; however, program placements have long waiting lists and have been reported to be largely inaccessible to low-literate elders due to the language barrier (Hussein, personal communication, 2014).

Within this particular subset of low-literate participants in ABE/ESL programs, we can find a comparison in a breakdown in numbers across age groups. McHugh, Gelatt, and Fix (2007) analyzed US Census data from 2000 to estimate that approximately 750,000 adults would be assigned ‘level 0’ indexed to Department of Education accountability standards as established in the NRS, and therefore are unlikely to be literate in English or their native language(s). Of particular interest in this data set is the fact that the numbers of older (50-55 and 56+) and younger (17-24 and 25-49) authorized immigrants are roughly equal within this critical subset of adult learners as shown in Table 1, while in reality the two subsets receive drastically disparate.

Table 1

Number of authorized immigrants (including Lawful Permanent Residents) in the United States by age who are likely to have limited formal schooling and low literacy, 2000 and 2005.

Authorized immigrants		
<u>Age</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage of all immigrants</u>
56+	162,159	15
50-55	39,025	10
25-49	178,394	15
17-24	17,800	2
Unauthorized immigrants		
<u>Age</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage of all immigrants</u>
25+	311,069	6
17-25	39,304	3

Table 1. MPI analysis of tabulations of 2000 census data and 2005 CPS with imputations of legal status by the Urban Institute (McHugh, Gelatt, & Fix, 2007).

This misalignment of services to younger learners perhaps arises from the workforce development argument or justification for adult literacy, which gained a foothold in the mid-1990s. While workforce education and economic impact gained over other outcomes in ABE, literacy and ESL goals were determined on a program-to-program basis, such as increased literacy, community engagement or GED completion. The conservative tide of welfare reform which reached a crest in the 1990s emphasized consolidating literacy programs towards a focus on streamlining education to job training and career advancement, rather than the broader focus of the previous decades (Demetrion, 2005). Current legislation governing adult education (WIOA, 2014) firmly places secondary

credentials, career training, and postsecondary training as the purpose of all adult education programming supported by federal funding.

Slashed budgets and political expedience affected the development of accountability measures. Additionally, the political climate of welfare reform predicted a consolidation in the goals of both employment and adult education programs. While WIA Title II preserved adult education as separate from workforce development and attempted to offer a broader and more inclusive range of outcome measurements, the political atmosphere around federal and state funding for adult education had been significantly changed.

Under current funding policy, it seems the intent of the legislation is not to place students in subsidized employment, as policy only narrowly supports outcomes attained through entry and retention in subsidized employment (like those coordinated for elders through SCSEP). An additional problem in the welfare-to-work model of adult education programming ignores the needs of elder learners, who are almost invariably impacted by mental and physical health and transportation issues. Thus, it is clear that one area of major dissonance educators face working with elders is that, from the top down, adult education program policies with their increasingly stringent employment focus are not written with elders in mind.

Language specific to older individuals did not change significantly from WIA of 1998 and the superseding Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act of 2014. Older individuals are defined as those 55 and older, and are specifically included within plans for development and dissemination of program models which address digital literacy needs of adults (WIOA, 2014, p. 198). Additional research projects are tasked to the

Secretary, through grants and projects, to determine evidence-based strategies which provide services to low-skilled older individuals which “increase the workers’ skills and employment prospects” (WIOA, 2014, p. 147). The actual effects of these measures are open for speculation, as WIOA has yet to be fully implemented nationwide. However, the emphasis on moving adult education students into the workforce and into postsecondary education is clear and, in virtually all instances, does not match the goals and needs of elders 65 and older.

According to a report on the adult education target population of Minnesota by the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE), elders (65+) who speak English “not well or not at all” comprise the largest percentage (31%) of all groups of those not in the labor force, and the smallest percentage (1%) of those who are unemployed (2010). Considering these numbers alone, the likelihood of leadership in Minnesota’s adult ESL programs gaining traction around the WIOA policy implementations which would specifically target older adults seems very small, as such efforts would require significant support with input from practitioners themselves taking primacy over directives of the top-down variety (Belzer, 2007; Reder, 2013).

Accountability systems emphasizing outcomes which are not achievable or perhaps simply irrelevant to this entire demographic of learners may result in effectively turning away elders by not accommodating their goals and needs as learners, and instead providing instruction and assessments for learning that focus on achieving quick outcomes (Condelli, 2007; Reder, 2013). The fact that the initiatives pursuant with WIOA would require new research initiatives in a climate of increasingly limited funding

and exceedingly difficult outcome measurements, the challenge of serving elders with low literacy is unlikely to become a priority of any state- or federally-funded program.

The ramifications of insufficient funding and constraining federal policy effectively exclude low-literate elder learners from equitable access to the educational opportunities they seek. It is exceedingly common that volunteer teachers and tutors carry the load of providing specialized instruction to LESLLA learners, for which they are seldom fully qualified or actively supported to provide (Isserlis, 2010; Love & Kotai, 2013; Mathews-Adynli, 2008).

Educating Adult Learners

LESLLA Learners

Teaching adult ESL to those with no first language (L1) literacy is a complex and unique teaching assignment. Such students require specialized instruction that weaves together a variety of principles from literacy acquisition, language development, and adult learning theory. Much of the research that informs best practices in this field has emerged within the last ten to twenty years (Vinogradov, 2013). While vocabulary, fluency, phonics, phonemic awareness, and comprehension represent the major components of literacy acquisition, learners with limited formal education are often simultaneously acquiring oral language, numeracy, and digital literacy, and they are doing so in a new language and culture. They are also learning in a formal school setting for perhaps the first time, with little sense of how this academic context works. Thus, educators are charged with finding a balance which incorporates a variety of basic skills into their instruction (Vinogradov, 2014).

Perhaps for elders more than any other learner, basic tenets of adult learning theory take primacy in this study: adults have a lifetime of skills and (formal or informal) learning experiences and strategies that can and should be called upon in the classroom (Knowles, 1980). Research on LESLLA learners expounds the importance of connecting instruction to learners' lives (Condelli et al., 2009; Weinstein, 1999). Content relevance must also be carefully selected in order for LESLLA learners to find meaning in the material and be motivated to learn, and literacy skills must be woven into authentic, meaningful texts so that literacy skills can be practiced with guided structure and later utilized outside the classroom to further literacy acquisition (Reder, 2013).

A variety of instructional methods have been recommended for LESLLA learners. Whole-Part-Whole instruction proposes an instructional strategy in which top-down processing (meaning-focused) and bottom-up (skills-focused) makes literacy acquisition an effective, interactive endeavor (Fish, Knell, & Buchanan, 2007; Hokeness, 2010; Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010). The Language Experience Approach (LEA), in which learners generate their own texts according to a common experience, has also been used with great success in its adaptability at all levels of instruction (Huang, 2013; Curran, 2007), and may prove to be an avenue for incorporation of the diverse life skills and experiences that elder learners can demonstrate.

Elders as Learners

For elders, their advanced stage of life is replete with potential for a new kind of intellectual experience not afforded to those of us in earlier stages of life. The virtues of deep, reflective sensibility and insight into the precariousness and continual conditionality of life contribute to the lived intellectual experiences of elders (Deloria,

2006; Gadow, 1983). These virtues represent a wealth of inherent ability of elders in their continued learning as well as a lesson for others to bear witness and engage in.

Language development does not stop after childhood, but instead is a lifelong process that continues to present both advantages and challenges to acquiring language for adult and elder learners. De Bot and Makoni (2005) explain that there is no universal approach to aging, and language learning among the elderly cannot be defined by any one definition of functional or cognitive impairment. Rather, cognitive capacity is best described as a continuum where memory, decline in auditory and visual perception, and inhibition capacity are most often relevant when considering low-literate elder learners. In the following sections, I review several important realities which educators working with elder refugees must keep at the forefront.

Physical Changes

There are a variety of physical changes in aging that affect the articulatory patterns of elders as they speak. Structural changes to the vocal tract affect vocal resonance, and tongue musculature atrophy or weakening as well as changes in the respiratory systems can affect articulatory precision and voice quality (Linville, 1996; Linville & Rens, 2001). Perhaps more significant to language learning among elders is the prevalence of hearing loss. The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) reports that in the U.S., 17% of adults suffer from hearing loss. The prevalence of hearing loss among adults increases as we age-- 25% for 65–74 year olds, and 50% for those aged 75+, and a delay in diagnosis of hearing loss is very common (2016). If we expect to serve elder learners effectively, educational

programs must be prepared to make accommodations and equip their classrooms with hearing assistive technology (Doetinchem de Rande, 2012).

Changes in Memory

The effects of memory on language production and processing find that in normal aging, working memory and explicit memory, as cognitive resources associated with processing and learning new information, are more likely to be affected by aging than are long-term memory and implicit memory, or those resources associated with stored or learned information (De Bot and Makoni, 2005; O'Hanlon, Wilcox, & Kemper, 2001). Because one of the two subsystems of working memory, the phonological loop, plays an important role in literacy acquisition, educators must keep in mind that low-literate elders are more susceptible to memory decline (Manly, Touradji, Tang, & Stern, 2003). However, Fisk and Warr (1996) did not attribute any age-related effect on the phonological loop. Rather, studies have shown that speed of language processing, or the speed at which a person comprehends and remembers language, slows down with age (Borella, Ghisletta, & De Ribaupierre, 2011; Wingfield, Kemtes, & Miller, 2001). Additionally, inhibitory control, or the cognitive resource which allows a person to eliminate irrelevant information when processing language, also lowers speed of processing in elders (Borella, Ghisletta, & De Ribaupierre, 2011; Stine-Morrow, Hussey, & Ng, 2015). Although educators must be mindful of the physiological differences prevalent among elder learners, it is likely that they are no more or less than the differences between adult learners of all ages which educators must be prepared to accommodate.

Intercultural Communication Framework (ICF)

As this literature review defines what conditions and backgrounds are most relevant in understanding low-literate elder refugees from the East African community, the Intercultural Communication Framework is drawn upon for this study in order to address possible areas of cultural dissonance as perceived by elder LESLLA learners. Originally developed by Marshall (1994), this tool was used to navigate the cultural divide between these populations of learners and their educators. Following the principles outlined by DeCapua and Marshall (2013), this section reviews literature pertaining to forming and maintaining relationships with elder learners, identifying and accommodating priorities, and making associations between the familiar and unfamiliar. In all cases, considerations that are relevant to elders as a learner demographic are highlighted, and the East African communities are emphasized wherever possible.

Establishing and Maintaining Relationship

Individuals working with elders hold social values regarding their involvement in the greater society. As Marshall and DeCapua (2013) emphasize, educators must examine their values when establishing effective intercultural communication and a classroom environment in which all students can succeed. These social values regarding elders can be located along a continuum from an individualistic perspective, in which autonomy and individual achievement is valued, to a collectivistic perspective, in which the group and contributions made to the group are given priority.

Educators must keep in mind that their stance in the classroom has important implications, not only on intercultural communication, but also on a moral discourse in

our society in relation to aging. This discourse includes a push in services for the elderly emphasizing individualism and autonomy, in which elders' quality of life is determined by their ability to live independently (Clark, 1991). From a perspective of social regulation, this emphasis on individualism restricts power for the aged, thereby reserving time and energy for people in less advanced stages of life, and consequently contributing to the hegemonic system of power among a few select dominant groups. Additionally, this emphasis can contribute negatively to quality of life in some cases, resulting in social isolation and loss of role. Aging refugees are already at risk as the upheaval of relocation to a third country itself results in their social isolation and loss of role in the family (Dubus, 2010; Heger Boyle & Ali, 2010), and is further compounded by limited English proficiency, poverty, and unemployment which many aging refugees face (Marshall, 2005).

Clark (1991) suggests an alternative to “narcissistic individualism” and moves towards incorporating collectivist practices which emphasize social connection with elders and strengthening community. This research in aging services comports well with DeCapua and Marshall's suggestions which, as discussed previously, call for establishing and maintaining relationships in the classroom. Positive emotions, feedback, and an emphasis on significant connections between students and teachers is well-recognized as contributing to learners' persistence and investment in the classroom (Chinn, 2007). In his research on programs for the elderly, Clark states that interdependence is key to independence and an emphasis on community support is necessary for a high quality of life among older persons (1991). For Somali refugees, this community support is already strongly established in the Upper Midwest. Furthermore, there is a reportedly high level

of support in communities like High-Rise A, the affordable housing complex where this study took place. A social worker at High-Rise A reported that, in spite of having such a significant number of elder residents, the housing complex had a very low incidence of emergency situations in which an elder had to be taken to a nursing home (Anderson, personal communication, 2013). Thus, the classroom and community emerge as key extensions of support for elders in not only promoting interdependence through caring connections between teacher and students, but also as a catalyst towards increased independence as elders engage in learning which they determine to be important to their lives.

Once elders have the opportunity to extend themselves within their community and attend classes, they bring with them their own priorities for learning. In low-level language and literacy classes, special considerations must be made ahead of time to consider what the needs and goals of elder learners may be.

Identifying and Accommodating Priority

Differences in priorities between the ways of knowing and learning of low-literate elder refugees and the western-style formal educational framework used in the US can cause cultural dissonance, or a general sense of discord and conflict when confronted with a new cultural model for learning (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013). Cultural dissonance precedes academic failure because learners come to school with unmet expectations of teacher and student roles and behaviors, content choice, as well as epistemological differences between indigenous and western worldviews. Marshall and DeCapua identify comparison/contrast, analysis, and synthesis as a few central tenets to western-style formal education, and further identify literacy,

academic language, and individual accountability as priorities which we must yield to in our classrooms if students are to succeed (2013). However, in order to reach those learners who are hardest to serve, this researcher's bias is that more delineation is required to define where the indigenous knowledge of learners differs from the expectations of western educational models. Moreover, we may posit that educators should select content which recognizes what elders identify as important, and incorporate priorities which may pertain to specific times and places. The knowledge and expectations of elder refugees may be transmitted via ways of learning wholly different from the western tradition. Knowing, rather than assuming or dismissing these cognitive factors, is essential to developing an effective InterCultural Communication Framework. With this in mind, we turn to specific tenets of Marshall and Decapua's Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm to consider how we adapt our classrooms to incorporate elder learners and other ways of knowing.

Processes for Learning

Marshall and DeCapua (2013) emphasize that incorporating processes for learning which are comfortable for students are based on cultural mores. A significant consideration when working with East African elders is the role that religion plays in their associations with learning and expectations for how information is presented and processed. But, critical discussion of differences between western and Islamic forms of education remains contentious. More complicated still is the integration of indigenous knowledge of East African cultures into Western and Islamic curricular structure and remains unresolved by educational planners (Memon, 2009; Semali, 1999).

Considering the global political climate and tensions between the West and Islamic cultures, it seems unlikely that western instructors would venture to inquire too strongly about what would certainly be informative and essential information needed to properly integrate the principles of MALP into our classrooms. While discussions of indigenization of education and ways of knowing may reinforce fragmentation along cultural and religious lines, a global discourse must be established (Tibi, 1995). It is not within the scope of this study to explore integration or provide commentary on Islamization of beginning literacy instruction within ABE/ESL programming contexts, as these educational systems must remain value-free in order to accommodate the diverse clientele being served; however, the importance of Islam in the educational experiences of our interview participants will be taken into consideration.

Tarone et al. (2009) identified an important question that may be answered by participants in this study, namely: How do the skills learned in Koranic schooling bridge to English literacy learning in the formal classroom? The interpretation of these differences between Islamic, indigenous, and western processes for learning will be explored in the discussion of results of this study, where both teacher and students' contributions are considered.

Despite the challenges faced by educational planners seeking a resolve between indigenous, Islamic, and western models of education, in Somalia, several scholars report that the essence of indigenous education has been deeply interconnected with Islamic education for centuries (Bennaars, Mwangi, & Seif, 1996; Sheikh-Hasan & Robleh, 2004). In a review on the role Arabic language has played in Somalia's history, Mukhtar (1987) credits Islamic studies as being the primary method by which knowledge was

transmitted, and Koranic schools are attributed as being the oldest and most effective ways of transmitting knowledge by formal education. However, attendance at Koranic schools is often limited to boys due to several social and economic factors (Bennaars, Mwangi, & Seif, 1996), and may vary regionally (Dawson, 1964).

Indigenous Knowledge

Critical Pedagogy recognizes indigenous knowledge as a primary component to challenging power among marginalized populations. However, indigenous knowledge has long been regarded as superstitious, primitive, or illegitimate, based on oral traditions which are unstructured and less rigorous scholarly traditions based on the written word (Ahmed, 2014; Akena, 2012; Ong, 2002). While a review of the literature unpacks the backdrop against which to consider accommodating a particular group of learners, it is with the introduction of indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing into our discourse that we are faced with an actual affront to humanity. Indigenous knowledge requires a recognition of agency and self-determination of elders of their own legacy of learning and knowledge, introduced and summarized briefly in the preceding sections, and adds to our case for equity in education through narratives determined and shared with us by elders themselves. To discredit elders as learners, the vitality of lived memory and critical relevance of informal education and indigenous knowledge in solving cultural dissonance in beginning literacy classroom is a testament to a grave moral shortcoming which this study seeks to rectify.

Much of the research on indigenous knowledge uses critical theory as its lens, and so understandings of indigenous knowledge are context-dependent. For instance, discussions on indigenous knowledge are often closely related to political and economic

contexts related to sovereignty and resource rights, and the narrative around pre- and post-colonial contexts differs from nation to nation. Indigenous knowledge also has an emancipatory nature in studies of using critical theory, the results and actions of the research are self-determined and, again, context-dependent. It is with this view of indigenous knowledge as a multi-faceted concept that we turn to a description of this study's Somali elder participants.

Somali Elders

All participants interviewed in this study were Somali. For this reason, it is helpful to explore some characteristics of this specific group of elder learners and their rich indigenous knowledge base. In spite of a paucity of recent research on Somalia, the country represents a part of the world with an abundance of place-based indigenous knowledge. By engaging in critical dialogue with elders, the repositories of these treasures of generational wisdom, we stand to learn from them about four major modes of livelihood across fourteen ecological regions, including agriculture, pastoralism, agro-pastoralism, and trade (Mukhtar, 1996). In a 1964 study, when Somali elders today were in their formative years, the majority of the population (71%) lived a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle, while 20% were engaged in settled agriculture (Dawson, 1964). These indigenous lifestyles link many Somali elders to lived experience in close observation of their environment, affording them a depth of holistic ecological, medicinal, cultural and climatological knowledge that surpasses that known by Western scholars living divorced from nature, lived experience, and focused on the human-centered worldview (Akena, 2012; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Deloria & Wildcat, 2006; McGovern, 2000; Ong, 2002; Thao, 2006). This lived experience accumulates to form indigenous knowledge, and this

understanding of the world must be recognized by adult educators if they are to follow the basic tenets of adult learning theory in classrooms with elder learners-- scaffolding the unknown from that which is known by building off the indigenous knowledge their learners already bring to the classroom.

The importance of historical and cultural knowledge which comes from the lived experiences of Somali elders has been called upon in order to truly heal the diaspora. Afrax (1994) described the crisis thusly: “The entire fabric of the Somali society has been damaged, the existence of the whole nation has sunk into a deep, dark sea of unimaginable human and material disaster, and the communal mind of the people is in a coma” (p. 233). In such a situation, elders clearly have a role to play in strengthening communities formally bound by a transmission of knowledge which is vitally relevant to the Somali diaspora no matter where they may be living. Abdi (2005) boldly calls for a “new educational reconstruction scheme specific to Somalia’s historical and cultural realities, while taking what is good from the currently mainstreamed programs of school-based formal learning systems” (p. 272). Thus, in this study’s continuum of inquiry, we review the research in order to prepare to consult elder learners themselves to gain a deeper understanding of their beliefs and priorities for learning. We also endeavor to embark on a pure discovery of new ways of knowing and teaching that will be critical information for educators transforming their pedagogical practices to meet the needs of elder learners. To understand more about the educational backgrounds of Somali elders, we now review the literature available regarding the history of education in Somalia.

Education in Somalia

The history of the national language and education in Somalia has a unique effect on those who are now 65 and older, with direct implications for their experiences in Western classrooms today. Informal education in Somalia may likely have been described as pre-colonial. Formal education, on the other hand, was limited and intended to further colonization of the country by Britain and Italy (Abdi, 1998). In a report from 1964, Dawson states that school enrollment varied regionally: in the north, gender disparity was more significant as co-educational schools did not exist beyond the elementary level. In the south, however, co-education was more common but drop-out rates were significantly higher at all levels of education. Educational planning and delivery of instruction was largely imported from other countries, with the majority of teachers during this time being non-Somali (Dawson, 1964). For those who did go to school, colonial education was institutionalized from 1937 until 1960, with English and Italian being the languages of instruction in the north and south respectively (Ahmed & Bradford, 2011). It was not until 1972, when Somali elders today had already reached adulthood, that Somali became the national language and language of instruction. Given these striking historical realities, it is clear that a self-determined experience in formal education is long overdue for Somali learners, and in order to move beyond an offer of yet more colonizing and culturally dissonant instruction, the indigenous knowledge of learners must be integrated into classrooms.

Summary

In this chapter, a review of the literature was provided to define the key issues related to cultural dissonance experienced by elder learners in beginning literacy

classrooms. Changes in adult education policy may be defined as largely out of step with the experiences of elders as refugees in transition, who often struggle to maintain self-determination in both their communities and families. Limited employment opportunities for elders are compounded by an insistent and exclusionary federal policy around employment outcomes in adult education which propagate virtually all potential opportunities in programming. A review of pertinent information from ICF, MALP, and LESLLA research has helped to define the current context and accommodations of elder learners in beginning literacy classrooms. Yet, the significant health challenges which elders may face remain unaccommodated by all but the most privileged educational institutions, and only contribute to a mire of extra “burdens” in adult education systems that are already taxed with serving those who are “hardest to serve.” The result is that we may in fact further exclude an entire demographic of learners who have had every intention to survive and succeed. While the work of González et al. (2005) has established “funds of knowledge” as a theory of practice between the culture of the classroom and the knowledge that learners bring to it, the author of this study chooses to frame this discussion in terms of indigenous knowledge that captures the primary dilemma and possibly most serious form of cultural dissonance of elder refugees. Elders have inherited and are poised to pass on generational knowledge. Their knowledge is indigenous knowledge, and by definition, is place-based. Yet, these elder learners have been forced to surrender their place, and are confronted with a kind of learning experience which may discredit their prior learning experiences if we do not know what they are. This study endeavors to call upon elders themselves for their unique perspective on learning through interviews and classroom observations. In Chapter Three, the context

and methodologies of interviews and observations of elder learners participating in the study are enumerated.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

This study is designed to explore indigenous knowledge among elder East African LESLLA learners in order to provide insight for the major research questions posed: *What indigenous knowledge do low-literate elder learners bring to the beginning literacy classroom? And How does this indigenous knowledge interact with the western teaching and learning context they are currently studying in?* As East Africans comprise one of the largest groups of primary refugee arrivals in Minnesota since 2006 (MN Department of Health, 2015), the findings of this study will be critical to adult ESL educators (and perhaps other social service providers) in Minnesota and other states with high numbers of primary and secondary refugee arrivals from this group. Ethnographic interviews with East African elders make possible a dialogue in which educators can understand more about the indigenous knowledge systems of this major community and their elder learners, and how these can be incorporated into beginning language and literacy classrooms. I want to answer questions in order to open a dialogue about indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, the participants' basic profiles (age, place of birth, life before coming to the US) as well as their perceptions of informal and formal education in their home country and in Minnesota.

Overview of Chapter Three

This chapter describes the methodology used in this study. First, the rationale and description of the research design is presented along with a description of the qualitative paradigm. Second, the data collection protocols are presented. Third, participants, setting, and data collection techniques will be described. Following that, a discussion of data analysis and verification will be provided. Finally, a discussion of the safeguards in place to preserve ethics of the research practice is given.

Qualitative Research Paradigm

This study is informed by best practices gathered from a number of research methods. The data collection is driven by an epistemological approach in which the researcher recognizes that it is impossible to step outside of their own biases and presumptions, but by pursuing an inquiry in which these biases are recognized at the outset, we may come as close as possible to an objective interpretation of findings (Guba, 1990). In an autoethnographic style similar to *halaqah* as originated by Ahmed (2014), participants will be encouraged to share personal narratives of their own life stories, and their worldview will become the credible source to be studied through the lenses of critical theory and indigenization of knowledge.

The interviews had non-scripted questions prepared ahead of time in order to examine key tenets of indigenous knowledge. This provides a more useful description of the backgrounds of LESLLA learners from a major refugee community in the United States. I will use grounded theory approach to sort concepts that emerge from the interview responses into categories that can become a part of a framework to be used by

educators working with LESLLA learners from this specific refugee community, with the possible promise of use outside of this group.

Researcher Bias

As a literate white woman educated in a western educational context, I readily accept my bias in approaching this research and exercise caution in treating questions regarding indigenous knowledge of elder learners. Indigenous knowledge is sacred and has been exploited throughout colonial and imperial eras of histories affecting indigenous peoples throughout the world. Thus, I apprehend the question first with the knowledge that I have an experience totally different which may skew my perception of what elder learners know and how they know it, and second that my bias has the potential to marginalize elder learners further. For these reasons, I take great care to approach inquiry with these biases acknowledged upfront and use grounded theory to allow an accurate analysis of the data, qualitatively coded, to be self-determined elders in their own words.

Critical Theory

This study concerns itself primarily with indigenous knowledge, or what there is out there to be known and is place-based. Therefore, I have carefully considered the paradigm which is most appropriate for this study. Ontologically, critical theory takes a realist stance in that the world is real and there is a consistent script from which we read. However, what we know about the world is subjectivist in that our senses constantly impinge on that which is known in order to interpolate facts about reality (Lincoln, 1990). Critical theory pushes us to take these subjective facts and interpret them in a context-dependent participatory fashion, with its primary purpose being to promote change and give power back to marginalized populations. Given the focus of our research on low-

literate elder refugees, this lens seems most sensitive to the realities of the refugee experience, and most conducive to opening up possibilities of different ways of knowing being emancipatory tools for educators and learners to use in the classroom.

Data Collection

Participants

The challenges described by Tarone and Bigelow (2004) in conducting longitudinal studies with undereducated, transient refugee populations will be circumvented by situating the study within a single housing complex, where elder learners from the building may be students in an on-site beginning literacy class, thereby lessening issues of participant recruitment and retention.

In this study, I interviewed a total of 14 low-literate East African elders living at an affordable housing high-rise in a major metropolitan area in the upper Midwest. Participants who self-identified as elders between 60 and 80 most often gave an estimated age, as dates of birth by the Gregorian calendrical system were not always recorded in their home countries. Participants characterized their educational backgrounds as never having gone to school as children in their home country, and either having gone to school in the US for a limited time or never having gone to school in the US. The participants were gathered for interviews with a cultural liaison bilingual in their first language and English. Throughout the recruitment process, it became clear that a significant factor in who volunteered was their relation to either myself or the interpreter, and familiarity with and respect for us being noted by most of the interviewees as the reason why they consented to do the interviews at all. It is worth noting that there were in fact more elders who requested to participate in interviews than the capacity of the research project could

support. Because the purpose of participating in the interviews was introduced to elders as an opportunity to share their opinions and experience in learning, both in their home countries and in the United States, and the fact that there was more community interest in participating than there was time or resources to take advantage of, suggests that this is an important topic to elder learners. A summary of the student profiles is shown below in Table 2.

Table 2

Student Participants

Name (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Self- reported age	US Educational Background	Attending school at time of study
Ubah	female	60s	> 2 years	Yes
Guled	male	68	> 2 years	Yes
Ibrahim	male	77	> 2 years	Yes
Khamar	female	70s	< 6 months	No
Sahra	female	61	> 2 years	Yes
Luul	female	60s	< 6 months	No
Marian	female	65	None	No
Halimo	female	68	< 6 months	No
Ayan	female	60s	> 2 years	No
Halwa	female	85	None	No
Warsame	male	80	< 6 months	No
Hodan	female	67	> 2 years	Yes
Abshiro	female	73	> 2 years	Yes
Khadija	female	72	< 6 months	No

Eleven of the elders were female and three of the participants were male. The gender disparity may be accounted for by a few factors, including unavailability of male participants due to scheduling conflicts, or because their educational background did not match the target population of this study of only elder participants who had not received formal education as children. Eight participants reported being in their 60s, while of the remaining six participants, four reported being in their 70s and two reported being their 80s. Seven participants had gone to school in the US for more than two years, and of those, six were currently attending school at the time of the study. Of the remaining participants, five had attended school in the US less than six months and were not currently attending school, while two had never attended school in the US.

In addition to a basic profile of elder participants, data was collected about the participants' relation to indigenous knowledge according to climate, because indigenous knowledge is place-based, as well as the lifestyle and occupation of their parents growing up, and what occupation the participants took upon reaching adulthood. This data is summarized in the Table 3 below:

Table 3

Student Participants' Indigenous Knowledge Context

Name (Pseudonyms)	Childhood Home	Climate	Parents' Lifestyle	Parents' Occupation	Participant's Occupation
Ubah	Qoryoley	Warm Semi-Arid	Settled Agriculture	Agro- Pastoralism	Housewife
Guled	Boosaso	Warm Arid	Nomadic	Pastoralism	Pastoralism
Ibrahim	Mogadishu	Warm Semi-Arid	Semi- Nomadic	Agro- Pastoralism	Business
Khamar	Somalia/ Ethiopia	Warm Arid	Nomadic	Pastoralism	Business/Trade
Sahra	Kismaayo	Warm Semi-Arid	Urban	Business	Business
Luul	Mogadishu	Warm Semi-Arid	Settled Agriculture	Agro- Pastoralism	Housewife
Marian	Somalia	Warm Semi-Arid	Nomadic	Pastoralism	Housewife
Halimo	Mogadishu	Warm Semi-Arid	Settled Agriculture	Agriculture	Business
Ayan	North/Cent ral Kenya	Warm Semi-Arid	Settled Agriculture	Agro- Pastoralism	Agro- Pastoralism
Halwa	Ethiopia	Warm Arid	Nomadic	Pastoralism	Housewife
Warsame	Boosaso/ Qardho	Warm Arid	Nomadic	Pastoralism	Pastoralism
Hodan	Galkayo	Warm Arid	Urban	Business/Tr ade	Manufacturing
Abshiro	Boosaso	Warm Arid	Settled Agriculture	Agro- Pastoralism	Business
Khadija	Qoryoley	Warm Arid	Settled Agriculture	Agro- Pastoralism	Business

The majority of the participants (12) grew up outside of urban environments, with their formative years spent with parents involved in either a settled agriculture (6 participants), nomadic (5 participants), or semi-nomadic lifestyle (1 participant). Of these participants, only three continued in the lifestyle of their parents, while those participants raised in urban areas stayed there, and the remaining participants who grew up in the country left for occupations in business, trade, or manufacturing, or became housewives in urban areas. This data broadens our understanding of students' relation to indigenous knowledge as dynamic and subject to shifts in lifestyle and occupation, even for elder learners who, in the case of this group of participants, reached adulthood before being subjected to the upheaval and trauma following the civil war and refugee resettlement process.

Setting

In order to complete this inquiry, an affordable housing complex was selected (herein named "High-Rise A") due to established relationships with residents in the building as an on-site Adult ELL Program Coordinator from 2012 to 2014. Implications from this study will be determined by and positively impact its participants as a resource for the program and its teacher.

Data Collection Technique 1: Elder Interviews

The primary goal for the interviews with elder learners was to illuminate data on participants' experiences with informal and formal education. These interviews focused on indigenous knowledge, in order to help educators understand more about LESLLA learner backgrounds. This kind of information is, in my opinion, generalized and assumes quite a bit about oral tradition and other ways of knowing when there is a lack of research

that actually cites sources. Considering the current lack of research citing oral tradition and indigenous knowledge, the interview responses of this study have the potential to become the sources for citation in future research.

My initial tool for data collection was a set of possible questions to be followed as a template in semi-structured interviews, found in Appendix C. Most of the participants chose to stop the interview after 30 to 40 minutes, which is in line with information from lifelong learning service provision which points to the fact that most older learners prefer to engage in sessions lasting less than one hour. After the first two interviews, I decided that following the interview template too closely was inefficient, and I instead followed a more general line of inquiry with participants according to my research questions. I settled on a very general and flexible format in order to determine whether participants perceived a difference between their success in learning prior to going to school and the experience of classroom learning in the US, and whether that and/or additional factors were problematic to their continued attendance; the questions including were as follows:

Indigenous knowledge:

- Where are you from? What was it like growing up? What were you an expert at?
How did you become an expert?

Experiences with formal education:

- Have you been to school in the US? If so, did you like it? What suggestions would you have to make it better?

Data Collection Technique 2: Classroom Observation

Classroom Observations were conducted in order to find additional insight into how classes are currently conducted and how they might better serve elder learners. Two

classroom observations were completed in order to maximize the overlap between those elders who were interviewed and those were currently participating in class, but a number of factors prevented this overlap from being greater. At the time of the study, most of the elders interviewed had at one time gone to school in this high-rise, but they had since dropped out.

Data Collection Technique 3: Instructor Interview

After the interviews and classroom observations were analyzed, these results were shared with the instructor. An interview with the teacher was collected with written responses by the teacher to a series of questions related to the findings of the data analysis. The purpose of these questions was to gain an understanding of an educator's impression of elder learners in the classroom, and also to field possible insight about what suggestions may be helpful to this and other educators working with elder learners.

By pursuing possible gaps described by elders in their informal education and formal education now, and triangulating analysis with data from both the instructor and classroom observations, we entered into a conversation of practice, identifying areas of common interest and also areas of difference (Green & Chandler, 1990) in order to move beyond the dominant (Western) paradigm currently used in beginning language and literacy classrooms.

Procedure

The first stage of the research project was to recruit participants. As I was already familiar with the community in which participants were selected, a variety of factors contributed to an organic, non-invasive approach which contributed to an essential trust between researcher and participants. Firstly, collaborating with an interpreter who was

also a highly respected resident in the building contributed to the success of the project as attested to by the participants themselves. Secondly, making myself available within the building and following the lead of the community itself through word of mouth and referrals contributed to the self-determination of residents to decide whether participating in the project was important to them. From my perspective, this approach was markedly different from a more researcher-defined approach, which may have excluded certain participants or eroded trust between researcher and community.

After participants were selected, interviews took place in private and participants chose whether they wanted their responses audio recorded or not. I took notes on a computer, partially transcribing their responses during the interview. After the interviews, I observed two sessions of the beginning level class in which some of the participants were students, and took notes on the content of the lessons, interactions between students and with the teacher, and the students' engagement with the material. After analyzing the themes that emerged from these two data collection methods, I compiled a set of questions for the instructor which were completed in writing.

Data Analysis

In the data analysis, I imported the interview transcripts into Dedoose, a qualitative software which organizes and compares data from participants' demographic information and partially-transcribed interviews. I imported the interviews into the system in order to code responses according to emerging themes and highlight patterns between participants. The coding capabilities of Dedoose made it easy to find these patterns even as the direction of inquiry of each interview was different according to the

participants' preferences, with most choosing a more narrative approach to the interview and many choosing to finish before I had run out of questions.

Verification of Data

Verification of data was ensured through triangulation by three data collection techniques enumerated above. The participatory mode of the interview process ensures that qualitative findings remain faithful to the tenets of critical theory in being reflective, serving a purpose, linking to practice, and being for the promotion of change; however, the verification of data is limited by its dependence on the specific context of the participants and their experiences. Any data or findings may not be generalized to other groups as a kind of accumulated knowledge-- rather, the cycle of inquiry must be replicated anew for each new community in which indigenous knowledge may have prevalence.

In order to ensure that my collection and interpretation of data remained true to the ideas of elder learners themselves, I advised my interpreter not to explain interviewees' responses to me in the event that I didn't understand the response or the participant didn't understand the question, but rather to alert me to a misunderstanding and then allow me to ask follow-up questions and arrive at a clear understanding in tandem with the participant.

Ethics

Elder residents in the high-rise learned of the study through word of mouth, referrals, or face-to-face outreach. If they expressed interest, the purpose and procedure of the study was explained to them by an interpreter. Participants signed letters of consent outlining the purpose and procedure of the project, and the interpreter informed

participants that they can terminate the interview or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence to them. The participants' first names, first languages, place of origin, and informal educational experiences were recorded in the data collection portion of the project, and any identifying information was destroyed after the partial transcriptions were transferred into Dedoose for data analysis. The audio recordings of interviewees who consented to its use preserved no identifying information and were stored in my personal, password-protected Google drive, and will be deleted after one year. The initial interviews were followed by classroom observations, and finally an interview with the instructor in order to gain a broad picture of the experience of elder learners' experience and triangulate findings.

Conclusion

In this section, I have described the qualitative methods for data collection used in this study, including learner interviews, classroom observation, and an interview with the instructor. Through interviews and observation, I was able to broaden my understanding of the experience of elder learners in beginning language and literacy classrooms, with a specific focus on their perception of the influence of indigenous knowledge on that experience. By describing the participants, setting, data collection and procedures, verification of data, and ethics of the research project, I have set the context for this study's exploration of the major research questions: *What indigenous knowledge do low-literate elder learners bring to the beginning literacy classroom? And How does this indigenous knowledge interact with the western teaching and learning context they are currently studying in?*

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

This study took place in an affordable housing high-rise which offered on-site English classes. The data collection began with fourteen individual interviews with a Somali interpreter present. Two classroom observations and an additional interview with the instructor of the on-site English classes where many elders were or had been students were also completed. Through analysis of the data, my results aim to focus on the following research questions: *What indigenous knowledge do low-literate elder learners bring to the beginning literacy classroom? And How does this indigenous knowledge interact with the western teaching and learning context they are currently studying in?*

Elder Participants

In this section I describe the context in which informal learning took place as each participant described their childhood to me. Through their stories, we find answers to the first research question of this study: *What indigenous knowledge do low-literate elder learners bring to the beginning literacy classroom?* These descriptions provide background information in order to explore the positive or negative experiences elder learners found in their experiences in beginning language and literacy classrooms, and determine whether these experiences were influenced by perceived dissonance or by a combination of other factors which affect elder learners' attendance and participation.

Ubah grew up in Qoryole, near Mogadishu. She explained that the land there was much like land in Minnesota that has been developed for agriculture, and her parents were farmers. She explained that Qoryole was where all the food came from, and identified in pictures that this was a place with mangroves and humid weather. Although she never saw her great grandparents and grandparents, she described their lifestyles as, respectively, nomadic and semi-nomadic. Her father decided to settle in Qoryole, and there Ubah learned about farming through observing her parents farm and raise animals, and she became an expert at raising cows and planting corn, watermelon, tomatoes, beans, and peppers. Ubah noted that before the civil war, people lived happy, peaceful lives and gained expertise in farming and raising animals.

Guled lived near Boosaso, in northern Somalia. His family's lifestyle was pastoralist going back several generations. He became an expert in raising camels, goats and sheep through *jiilal* (dry, winter months) when water is only available from *ceel* (wells), and *nax* (wet, summer months) when they could collect *xareed*, or rain water. Guled learned through watching and practicing with his parents, brothers, sisters and neighbors. He learned how to butcher, milk, and build and move an *awor*, or portable shelter. In his own words, these skills were "not something you can imagine, but something you could watch."

Like Guled, Warsame grew up near Boosaso, close to Qardho. His family was nomadic. He described travelling with his mother, while she searched for water and grass for the animals and he slept in the *raxo*, or the load of household belongings carried by a camel. He watched his mother build the *aqal*, used for shelter, and explained that all girls learned how to do this, but that he also learned this skill. He explained that they were

always moving, and when he was seven he started following the camels, raising and milking the goats and helping take care of the family. He grew up to use this expertise to trade with people in the city and shipped animals to other countries in exchange for money and goods from the city.

Ahmed offered his perspective on learning as it was affected by a politically-driven shift from his parents' lifestyle, growing up in the country, to his life growing up in Mogadishu running a small business. This was affected by the political changes he witnessed. Ahmed explained that most of his ancestors were slaves to Italians, and that many people had been arrested or killed at any time. Until 1966 when the Italians moved out, the Somali people mostly stayed in the country. He said there were no big schools, and that there were small schools run by the Italians that the people did not want or trust.

Halwa grew up in the countryside of Ethiopia, and her family was nomadic. She never knew her grandparents, but she watched her father and mother and learned how to follow the animals to find *ceel* and grass. When she explained how she learned, she said she "watched for the good things," that her life was happy and she never had any problems. When she was 18 her parents died and she moved to Mogadishu and became a housewife.

Khamar's parents were nomadic and she was raised in Somalia. She reported that her parents taught her to follow her religion, and told her many stories which she listened to and practiced judging their lessons in both positive and negative decisions. Khamar grew up to leave the country and travelled to Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, and back to Somalia as a business woman, consulting partners she would make along the way to find out about business opportunities. She would visit her parents and was very successful at

business, but expressed feeling a loss in that she left the land and did not know about her parents' way of life. Khamar taught herself math through her business, and passed on her foundation in religious teachings through helping her children with *duqsi* (traditional Islamic education).

Sahra grew up in Mogadishu. Her parents were in business and she apprenticed with them. She reported later learning how to open her own business by consulting others in the community through inquiry and idea sharing. Through independent trial and error, she learned to measure and judge the color and quality of fabrics. Later, she passed on the skills she acquired in business to her younger brother and oldest son. She instructed them to learn through observation starting at the age of 5, and by 10 they had learned much of what they needed to help out in her clothing store.

Luul was raised in the countryside near Mogadishu. Her parents had a farm with cows and goats, and raised mostly watermelon, corn, and *simsim* (sesame). Luul learned through close observation, and reported that by watching her parents, she was able to acquire skills through informal mentoring and practice. She described her role as a guardian to the animals, and a helper on the farm by harvesting corn and watermelon--her favorites. Luul described learning when she was young by watching her mom and dad: "I saw how they made good decisions. This was a good way to learn... I was good at that way. That's what I believe."

Khadija also grew up learning how to raise animals and crops. She describes learning collectively, with her mother, older brother and sister. She raised goats since childhood and on into adulthood after she got married and became a housewife on a farm. She reflected on the ease of learning while growing up: "If you're born next to animals—

you already know what they are. In America, kids already know technology. But in Somalia, we know the animals. We didn't need to learn. You don't need to see what they are." Fadumo passed her skills onto her children and described her place in the community as a respected neighbor who raised her children to respect their neighbors and others.

Marian lived with her parents in the country and travelled everywhere, but did not live in the city until she was 10 years old and they moved to Mogadishu. She described her mother's expertise: "She was perfect at building the *aqal*. The woman always drives [the caravan]. Two here, two on this side. There was a rainproof cover you could put on the top, sides and bottom." Fadumo learned to make *shalash*, or decorative linens. Her learning had an individual component, in which her mother demonstrated how to sew designs, while she copied and learned through trial and error:

You just sit and watch, and the next time you copy, then independently.

Especially when you are at a young age, that's the perfect time. I copy from somebody-- white scarf, pen or pencil-- decorate with flowers, and then after that you can start using a needle-- whatever decorations, whatever color, you can make it. After you're done, you can use it as a pillow or a bed sheet.

Halimo spent her childhood in Mogadishu, raised by her father and her older brother's wife. She learned farming and raising goats and cows to produce butter. She later turned this into a business when she got married at 15, and made *moofa* (bread) and also *ashuun* (traditional water vessel), which she used to bring water back from the *ceel* on her back. She emphasized her learning taking place through careful observation-- "My dad-- I used to follow him all the time. He showed me and I watched," and through

independent practice: “They used to send me to buy things. I was like a helper. I learned everything. The reason was because when I grew up I was gone and I had to learn for myself. I was a strong and healthy person.”

Hodan was born in Galkayo and grew up in Mogadishu. Though she never went to school, she became skilled in math and business by watching her father as she helped in their store. She described becoming an expert in math and keeping track of money in her mind through informal mentoring, and later mentoring others: “I kept the money, watching my father... If you grow up with that way you will never forget, you will keep it in your mind. Everything I see with my eyes, know. I was a helper. I learned everything I know from my dad.”

Abshiro’s parents raised her in Boosaso, where she learned as an assistant to them on the farm through observation, demonstration, and trial and error, developing skills which later parlayed into a successful career as a business woman:

It started with one-- I was watching her and she said come here—she gave me the needle and said, “try this, try this,” and step by step that’s how I learned. When I try to do something, if it’s not good, she told me this is not good, when I do something the way she wants it she said, “this is good.” And after I learned, my mom used to put it up in front of our house so people could buy it. It was my mom’s business first but I helped her make more money. When I got married I didn’t buy clothes. I used to make it myself.

Ayan lived in North Central Kenya with the Somali Gurri tribe, in an area neighbored by the Turkana and Samburu tribes. Her family had farmed and raised animals for generations, and she benefited from a strong personal connection to this

foundation. She described learning in essentialist terms “I was born like that. My dad, his farm was 6 kilometers. Bulls prepared the farm—corn, beans, everything, watermelon, oatmeal. I was born and I saw my parents do this. My dad was a rich guy because of these things.” Her expertise was raising and protecting her cows from neighboring tribes, and made reference to a spot on her arm that she, like her grandfather, used to let cows suck while she led them home. She keeps this spot as a memory of her life and as a source of pride. Through her connection to the land, she learned to tell time by her shadow: “Even when I went to pray I knew the time like that. No time, no watch,” and she counted months by the weather, six months dry and six months wet.

Among all participants, indigenous knowledge acquired in their childhood and utilized in their adulthood was described with confidence and was attributed positive value as it related to their life before the civil war. This became clear to me as most interviews took a dramatic shift in tone between questions regarding learning in their formative years and questions about learning in the United States. In the following section, I outline recurring themes from participants as they relate to their perception of indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing as they underwent major life changes, which often included severe trauma and loss leading up to after arrival in the United States.

Interview Responses by Theme

In each interview, I followed a general line of inquiry in semi-structured format to elicit narrative-style responses from the participants. Through this process, I observed several common themes which categorized elders’ perceptions of how they had learned and acquired skills in their home country and how this shaped experience with formal education in the United States. Within each theme, I share representative excerpts from

the interview data (with my responses in brackets) in order to address, and in some ways broaden the scope of, the second research question of this study: *How does this indigenous knowledge interact with the western teaching and learning context they are currently studying in?* The questions I used to guide inquiry into these experiences were specific to each participant and the indigenous knowledge they had described to me, as summarized in the previous section. When they perceived a difference between how they learned in Africa and learning in the US, I asked them to describe that difference and its impact on them. This was done in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of what barriers elders face in beginning language and literacy classrooms, and, whenever possible, to elicit suggestions from elders as to how educators and programs may help address these barriers. I categorized these barriers according to eight themes: age, health issues, linguistic issues, isolation, poor self-esteem, trauma, indigenous knowledge, and cultural dissonance. A description of how these themes were coded follows in Table 4:

Table 4
Interview Themes Coding Criteria

Age	Age impacting their learning experiences
Health Issues	Health issues limiting their ability to fully participate in learning
Linguistic Issues	Language of instruction or language barrier
Isolation	Isolation of elders within family, building, or larger community hinders their learning or sense of self as a learner
Poor Self-Esteem	Elders' negative attributions to their abilities as learners
Indigenous Knowledge	References made to elders' knowledge or skills acquired generationally, through apprenticeship within families or the larger community, and/or accumulated and passed down within generations
Trauma	Incidences of trauma affecting their experiences as learners
Cultural Dissonance	Descriptions of perceived difference between indigenous knowledge, prior learning experiences, and Western educational context

Theme One: Age

One might predict that age was a common barrier for elders, due to the widely held belief that the younger a student is, the easier it is to learn-- and that to make an effort at an advanced stage of life is a sincere but futile effort. Table 5 lists excerpts as shared by half the participants who identified age affecting their participation in school.

Table 5

How elders perceive age affecting their experience in the classroom

Warsame	[Do you have any suggestions to make school better?] I'm finished. I don't know anything. I can't learn. I don't know. I become old. My brain's old. I believe [the teacher] knows everything, but our brain is too old. I wish I could go back in time 5 more years.
Luul	I will tell you the problem. My brain gets old. There is a time your brain can learn something and never gets tired. But at this moment my brain is tired. For example, I have kids, and when they came they were little. Now, they are Americanized like you. Because their brain is fresh.
Khadija	I don't understand. At the age of 70, I don't think they will understand something. When you learn something when you are young, it's good.
Ubah	Our minds are too old to learn something.
Marian	I always tell my brain-- you're too old to learn. I can't. I believe when you are young, you can learn something, but when you are old, I don't think so. I saw a lot of people in this building going to school. I live in this building 14 years, I have a lot of friends that have been going to school for 14 years, and still they're going to an interpreter. I wonder why. I believe it's because they're too old to learn. I believe there's a problem with the class. Because they keep going, but still they're not getting anything. I wonder why. Their brain's getting old and heavy. The problem is age.
Guled	It's too hard to learn at the beginning, but if they give time, they will learn even if they're old. (To the people who say they're too old to learn) I would say they're not ready to learn. You will learn if you want it.
Halimo	I wish I could learn, but I don't know how to learn because I'm too old and have trouble hearing (deaf in right ear).

It is not surprising that seven of the participants cited age as a challenge to learning, as this is a commonly held belief across cultures and does have some basis, albeit in limited and specific ways, in research. But, it is worth noting that seven of the participants did not cite their age as limiting their ability to learn, and one participant (Guled) specifically stated that motivation has more influence on your ability to learn than age does.

Theme Two: Health Issues

Another theme observed in excerpted interview data revealed the health issues that are common among elders and impact their ability to attend school. Although not all are represented in the excerpts, many of the participants in this study had at one time gone to school but were no longer attending because of health issues. The excerpts in Table 6 shed light on the needs of elders and may provide insight into considerations which must be made to accommodate their needs in the classroom.

Table 6

How elders perceive health affecting their experience in the classroom

Luul	[Did you go to school in the US?] Yes, this one, and I quit. I have a hard time seeing the books. [Did you like it?] I wish I could go. I hate when I look at it. [Do you need glasses?] I have glasses but I hate wearing them because I have pain [Did you tell the doctor?] I had surgery too. If you become older, it will be hard for you—why? because you have eye problems, you have back problems, you have kids, you can't sit a long time. So you hate it, then you're going to quit going to school.
Marian	I don't think I will go to school in America. I am sick.
Halimo	I have asthma. I'm sick. I have one kidney. My lower back, I fell in America. America is a bad way to come. I fall. My back is broken. My leg, my kidney, my ears are gone. Last snow I fell and my knee broke. I fell on black ice. I have metal in my knee. I don't know. Two months I was sleeping at home care. I used to sleep. I'm sick and tired. I don't want to go to school. If I could be healthy I would be back.
Khadija	I don't want to have high blood pressure. That's why I stop because I don't understand.

Four of the fourteen participants reported that health was a major barrier to attending school. Of the four, none are currently attending school. The remaining participants may have ongoing health issues but they did not identify them as affecting their participation in English classes.

Theme Three: Linguistic Issues

When soliciting feedback about what was difficult about English class and what suggestions they would offer, the need for interpreters or more bilingual language support was a common theme. In the following excerpts, we see that some elders acknowledge that learning any language is difficult, and that there is a difficult balancing act between getting the help you need and grappling with the challenges of being immersed in English at the beginning language and literacy level.

Table 7

How elders perceive linguistic issues affecting their experience in the classroom

Hodan	<p>But with English, I can't learn something because I don't know the language. Doctor's appointments are too hard for me too.</p> <p>I want to know the meaning and how do they write it. [The teacher] has to find how he can teach me and understand well.</p> <p>We can't understand because he's talking English, we're talking Somali. If I can speak English, but I don't know the language. If [the teacher] keeps defining the meaning, I will understand. I don't think [the teacher] has a problem, it's us that has the problem. Because we don't speak his language.</p>
Warsame	<p>English is too hard. For example, for you guys Somali is too hard. I believe if I find someone who teaches us in Somali I would learn something.</p>
Marian	<p>I believe I just see they keep continuing with an interpreter.</p> <p>I don't know anything about their teacher. They only say, "I need an interpreter."</p> <p>They should've gone to school when they were in Africa. They shouldn't go here. Of course they should go to school here. They should stop looking for interpreters. They should be more independent.</p>
Ubah	<p>[Do you have any suggestions] I would love to but it's too hard to learn.</p> <p>Let me tell you about [the teacher]—he loves to help us and he's a cool guy. The problem is, if he would know a little bit of Somali, he would give us more details and help us. For example, if we knew a little bit of English we could learn but we don't know what he's saying.</p> <p>[What if he didn't know the language, but he would know a little bit about the culture] He would talk, talk, talk, he gets tired and nobody gets it.</p>
Ayan	<p>There is one problem in here. When I was in Africa, I could survive because I could speak my language. [Here] I have to find an interpreter.</p>

Four of the participants identified feeling an acute loss of independence due to the language barrier. A high level of language support is provided at High-Rise A, and Marian illustrates a criticism among some in the community when this language support is relied upon too heavily. Warsame identifies a wish that more language support would be offered in the classroom, and it is possible that he had at one time attended a class that had been offered at a police station which was taught by a bilingual instructor.

Theme Four: Isolation

As discussed in Chapter 2, societal expectations around aging emphasize individual self-sufficiency is a key indicator of success in the late stages of life. However, this is not the reality reported by all elders. Even in a strong, supportive community which by many accounts looks after their neighbors, some elders felt the negative impacts of isolation affecting their ability to engage in the classroom. The excerpts in Table 8 illustrate the profound impact isolation played in the lives of some the elders.

Table 8

How elders perceive isolation affecting their experience in the classroom

Halimo	<p>[What were you an expert at?] I don't know if I can remember if I was an expert. the reason is I am alone in one room. I don't have anything. If I would have my family, if I weren't lonely I could remember.</p> <p>Yes, it's too hard for me. If even one person would be here, and they would stay with me, live with me, I would be a better person. My family sponsored me only by myself, not my son or my daughter, and I don't even have one person.</p> <p>I love to learn. I have a problem. I remember I ask you to come to my house one time to teach me English. I don't even know my telephone number. Somebody wrote it on my phone like this. I can't even call my family. I always wait for their call.</p> <p>I came to this country. Of course, when I remember, I feel sad. Here, I'm locked in one room. I come to this country. Their rain is snow. If I want to go out, I always see the snow.</p> <p>[Did you like school?] I believe if you would stay here I would learn something. Nobody else. You're going to tell me one by one. [What did I do?] I remember you teach me 1-2-3, and my phone number and my apartment number.</p>
Khadija	<p>I feel like I'm not learning nothing. Every day he keeps telling me, and I don't know. Nobody will take care of you.</p> <p>I wish my son would teach me but I don't have that chance.</p>
Ayan	<p>Nobody knocks on your door in America. I can't tell my problems, whatever I have inside.</p>

This group of participants indicated that they experience isolation from their family and the outside community that are compounded by trauma and health issues. Halimo made reference to efforts I had made to connect with her in my previous position at High-Rise A, and indicated that a close, trusting relationship with an instructor was very important to her success in learning.

Theme Five: Poor Self-Esteem

As reported in the interviews, elders must face many challenges to participate fully in English classes. For some, their self-esteem is greatly impacted by struggling in

the classroom and has contributed to some dropping out of the class. The excerpts in Table 9 demonstrate how poor self-esteem may be prevalent among elder learners.

Table 9

How elders perceive self-esteem affecting their experience in the classroom

Hodan	Learning is important to me. For myself, I did not learn something, and I feel like I lost something. I feel like I lost something for myself. When I remember that my brother or my sister are educated with degrees, when I see them, I feel sad for myself and guilt-- why didn't I learn? What happened to me? Why didn't I learn?
Abshiro	The teacher and the class are both very excellent but I don't put in much effort. [I see you try very hard.] Some days I come, some days I miss, but if I had good attendance I would be a better student. Every time you see me I look tired or lazy because I'm a grandmother and everyday at least one of my grandchildren comes around and I have a lot of things to do on my own.
Khadija	<p>From 1 year to 70 I was learning <i>duqsi</i>-- still I don't know anything. [What was difficult?] I don't know. I think I'm dumb. I believe I'm dumb. Before, I sit by myself, I talk to myself. Even sometimes I get mad at myself. Why aren't you learning? If you learn something, it's good for you. For example, if someone calls me the first word I say is "No English!" But if I knew English I would protect myself.</p> <p>If you want to learn something you have to learn from your brain. I think, "why do I bother my teacher? I'm not going to bother my teacher." [Why do you feel like you're wasting the teacher's time?] People keep going and I'm going behind. And I will stay home. That's what I decided.</p> <p>[Do you think school could've been better?] I'm so proud of you but I'm not educated person. All my teachers are good, sometimes they change a lot, but the problem is not the teacher, it's me. The reason I'm telling you is because you are my teacher before, and you are a young woman, and I am trying to help you.</p>

These excerpts reveal that elders with limited formal education experience may experience shame, guilt, and remorse when participating in formal schooling for the first time at an advanced stage. Three participants reported self-esteem as a major factor affecting their classroom experiences. Two continue to attend school while one cited it as the reason why she decided to quit. These excerpts compel us to consider the importance

of encouraging positive habits of mind in the classroom in order to best serve elder learners.

Theme Six: Trauma

As each theme emerges from the interview excerpts, we are reminded of the complexities of being an elder learner, as several participants reported multiple barriers to participating fully in the beginning language and literacy classroom. Six elders in this study cited the civil war and the resulting loss and upheaval as having profoundly negative consequences in their life and their sense of self as learners. In one instance, my interpreter signaled to me that a participant likely stopped the interview early because of sad memories she experienced when recounting her life before and after moving to the United States. It is most certainly probable that each participant has experienced a great deal of trauma due to the civil war and resulting conflict in Somalia.

Table 10

How elders perceive trauma affecting their experience in the classroom

Hodan	[So you're very good at math] If you ask me now I forget. They used to tell me, "Come on, come on -- you are the expert at adding together." But now I don't know because of the civil war. Our life was so bad, that's why we forget a lot.
Ibrahim	My age, all of them were born in the country. This generation, they were born in the city. The reason they ran is that in the country they didn't have a life, there was no health insurance-- I believe the life was too difficult. The water was too hard to find. Your life is stuck to animals and the farm. I believe some people are still there. When I was in the city I used to go sometimes to the country to visit. Now, the civil war keeps everybody running away.
Ubah	And now the civil war happened-- we don't know anything, we don't remember anything. Because we move and go to another country. [Did you remember the important things?] Yes, I remember my culture. [What if he would teach English through things you used to know about] Yes maybe, but if he talks a lot I wouldn't understand. Our minds get tired. We have gone through a lot.
Halwa	My parents used to have cows, camels, goats. It was a good life when I was little. I was excited about it. People lived two different ways-- country or city. When you live in the country, you have a good life. When you're in the city, there are different ways. [Did you go to school in the US?] I never went to school in America. I can't imagine. My brain was dead because of the civil war.
Halimo	I believe I can only remember the civil war. If the civil war didn't happen, I could remember. Think about it, the Somali kids, whoever were born today, they were in camps. If they were in their country, they would be better. [If you weren't lonely and the civil war didn't happen, you could remember?]. Of course, now I am a dark person.
Khadija	I have too much stress. I always think about my families, and a lot of memories. I don't like to remember back in the day.

Over the course of the interviews, several participants made reference to the term "dark person." As described by one elder, "dark person" refers to someone who doesn't know anything. But as we can deduce from other excerpts, this term may hold deep

connotations of the loneliness, hopelessness, and trauma of losing one's sense of self and abilities.

Theme Seven: Indigenous Knowledge

As one of the primary goals of this research, examples of indigenous knowledge were explicitly elicited from participants. The following excerpts enumerated in Table 11 provide a view of how elders perceive indigenous knowledge and its place in the beginning language and literacy classroom. These excerpts were chosen because they made reference to a wholly different knowledge system from that presented in Western educational contexts, or offered insight to a specific facet of knowledge which is place-based, accumulated over generations, acquired through close observation, and transmitted through apprenticeship within families or communities.

Table 11

How elders perceive Indigenous Knowledge relating to content in the classroom

Ibrahim	If I tell you our opinion, it's two different cultures. But for you guys I believe you are number one for education. We know different things that you guys don't know. You guys know about education. I believe Somali people my age don't know about education. [But you learned so many things when you were younger.] I learned the religion, not anything else.
Ubah	I don't think you can remember if you don't read or write. For example, if you don't know how to write, It's too difficult. Or for example, if you can record something you can remember better.
Marian	[How did you keep track of money?] By hand. more than a hundred. Why not, more than a hundred, like 10, 10, 20, 20. My mom taught me how to do that. [Can you tell me a story about that?] She used to teach me 10 dollars, 11 dollars, 12 dollars, and the place that you can go, "you can go buy me sugar." That's how I used to learn. [Wasn't learning the Somali culture a beautiful way (to learn)?] Yes, that was. The animals, also, you can take outside, you can milk. You can learn that too. I was good at that way. that's what I believe.

	-- Old white people are smart because they went to school, but we didn't go to school.
Halwa	[What does learning mean to you?] I didn't have the chance to go to school.
Luul	You have an education since you are 2 years old. But me, I did not go to school. I'm not an educated person. [I believe you know a lot of things] Whatever I know was farming. I forgot and I left. [How come all the people we talk to say they don't remember?] The only thing we know are the animals and the farm, and the problem is I did not ask them, and my parents didn't tell us. [If you had stayed on the farm you would've known?]. Yes.
Abshiro	[What do you wish the teacher would know?] The first thing I would want is something that we could both benefit from and that the teacher could tell me something about their culture, and I could tell them something about our culture. [How would we do that?] Even though I can't speak very much English, both me and my teachers are humans. We can still understand each other. Even people that are deaf still use sign language to talk to each other. Even though you can't hear, you will understand. [Would you tell (the teacher) about business and the farm?] If he needs it from me. [What if he would do it in class?] This is private to me. [But is this good for him to know more about you?] Yes. If I need something from the teacher, I would like to do it individually. And if he ever needs help from me, I can help him.
Warsame	If [the teacher] would understand. I will teach him how to do this. Look, the kid isn't scared, I will teach him. I would like to teach him about the culture. That would make me like to come to class more. Tell her [the interpreter present] to come too.
Ayan	If you learn one thing—If I ask you what is this, or this is this, that means I know something. No difference between school learning and country learning. Back home, there was an adult school. I didn't go because I didn't have time or interest. I had to take care of my animals. I don't have kids. They died. [How do you feel as a student now?] I'm not that bad. I always think a lot, that was my problem. But, I'm good at it. Very independent.
Asha	[What about all the things you learned in Somalia?] That was a culture thing. The culture and the learning are too different.
Guled	[What does learning mean to you?] Everything. Education is important for you. If you want to meet someone you write a letter. It's important for you.

	<p>Everything about the country, you can write. If you don't know anything, you are a dark person. [Do you think country people are dark people?] Country is country, city is city, the education is a different way. Everybody knows what they know. No, everything is good. [In reference to images of nomadic lifestyles:] This is education. This is a building that they build. This is their house. Sometimes they move. Sometimes they build. This is learning. See? It's learning.</p>
Halimo	<p>I learn from me; you can learn from me too. Take me back to Africa. I can show you. [What does learning mean to you?] If I want to learn something, I would ask to learn the Koran. Come to my house and teach me.</p>

From these excerpts we see that the elder participants in this study had very precise opinions about indigenous knowledge and its relevance to learning in the US. Five of the eleven elders quoted here explained that indigenous knowledge had relevance or could serve as a resource to them in the classroom, while the remaining six explicitly or implicitly discredited indigenous knowledge and other ways of knowing and skills they have acquired informally throughout their lives as being relevant or helpful in the acquisition of additional skills and abilities.

Theme Eight: Cultural Dissonance

In an effort to broaden our understanding of the challenges faced by elder learners in beginning language and literacy classrooms, one of the primary goals of this study was to identify areas of cultural dissonance. I identified this theme when elders were asked to describe their experiences going to school in the US, and often followed further inquiry to compare the expertise all elder participants had attested to have acquired in their formative years to the skills taught in beginning language and literacy classrooms.

Table 12

How elders perceive cultural dissonance in the classroom

Marian	Old white people are smart because they went to school, but we didn't go to school. When I was young, with my family, we were like bush people. When we came to Mogadishu, we became smart people and had a lot of money. [Why "smart?"] Because we used to think about animals. But when we have government, everybody became students. We have a flag. It's a long story about Somalia.
Halimo	English and Somali are different. I didn't even go to <i>duqsi</i> . All the things I've learned wouldn't help me in English class.
Hodan	[Did you like school?] The problem is we were not educated.
Ubah	Whatever you learn by reading and writing is way different. Something you can do, I can do it. Something you can read, I can't do it. [What do you think about more watching and less reading and writing?] When I watch something, I will learn. I don't want it that way. The only thing I want is to read and write. I would love to copy, copy, copy. [I don't think that works.] Yeah, it didn't work. [What if you would learn the way you used to learn?] Do you think it will happen? [For example if we could learn the English for what you already know.] Yes, I think so.
Khadija	I believe they can understand, some of them-- he's an educated person he's a teacher. Me, I'm not educated. [You don't see all the things you learned as being a resource in your life?] When you ask me about learning, I always think pen and pencil. But me, I don't think it was learning.

The elder learners cited here delineated early on that there was a major difference between learning to read and learning any other variety of complex skills, and some went further to say that it is not only different but that the successes they had in learning were not effective, not preferable, or were not "learning" at all.

Results from Classroom Observations

As part of data collection, I observed two sessions of the beginning language and literacy class at High-rise A. Of the fourteen participants who were interviewed, only four attended class when I was there. After checking in with those not in attendance, the

majority had stopped going to school, and the remainder were sick or taking care of children.

On October 31st, 2016, the researcher observed a two-hour evening beginning language and literacy class. The instructor demonstrated a variety of strategies he used in adapting his lessons to meet the needs of students in a drop-in class, and the nature of the class had a clear responsiveness to the community in which it took place. The class began with routine phonics practice, and as more students joined as the class went on, the teacher moved into other activities, including vocabulary review and themed readings. The routinized nature of each activity allow for a great deal of students-as-teachers leading the direction of activities.

In this first session, I was most struck by the adaptability of the instructor to the drop-in nature of the class, and by all students' contributions to a supportive and celebratory atmosphere. Five elder students were present, two of whom had not participated in the study, and all engaged in collective learning together as the teacher and then individual students lead the class in activities. All students, including elder learners, were engaged in helping each other follow along with the material, allowing them the opportunity to following along with modeled readings of texts or alternatively practicing the material individually or in pairs throughout the class. After modelling a reading of the text, the teacher also floated around the room to give each student individualized attention as they worked independently through the text.

On November 1st, the class was similarly structured with routine activities which provided review of vocabulary and reading practice that was clearly familiar and

predictable to the learners. Six elders were present on this night, two of whom had not participated in the study.

In spite of a supportive environment, one elder demonstrated what I interpreted to be a display of embarrassment after having to solicit help from other students as she read the text to the class. When I asked her about how she had felt about this later that week, she explained that she was “lazy” but also very busy helping her grandchildren, and that she was not embarrassed but wanted to try harder to attend more regularly. Hodan was also present this night, and although she was engaged in the material with the teacher and with students sitting at her table, she seemed visibly tired, putting her head on the desk at one point. Although I did not ask her directly about this, I knew that she had only recently arrived back in the United States from a trip abroad and had also been sick.

Instructor Interview

The final portion of data collection was an interview with the instructor of the elders’ class at High-Rise A. As the interview was collected in writing, the responses provided were cogent and succinct, and are thus shared here in their entirety. Each question and response is provided, with a brief discussion of the context and its relevance to this study. The complete list of questions can be found in the appendix.

The instructor at High-Rise A has unique experience in welcoming a large number of elders into his class over several years, due to its convenient location. I asked the instructor to share with me what he enjoyed most about working with elder learners:

I admire the fact that they are willing to learn something new, even though they don’t necessarily have anything to gain from it materially. They’re not likely to get a job at their age, for example, and they could just stay in their Somali-

speaking bubble if they wanted to. But they're excited to be Americans and they want to be a part of their new culture. Many of them bring a good sense of humor and positivity to the class, which is great too.

In this response, we see that the elder learners in this class contribute in a very positive way to the morale of the class. The instructor recognizes the differences between the highly prioritized outcome of employment in adult education classes, but cites a different goal to which the instructor has given credence: elders learning and adapting to a new culture and language in order to expand their roles and opportunities in a new country, with vitality and positivity which enriches the class as a whole.

One limitation in researching the experiences of elder learners that was noted early on is that many are unable to consistently attend or access classes at all. With one major barrier to attendance eliminated at High-Rise A-- that of transportation to class-- the instructor was asked what factors remained which had a major impact on elder learners:

The more consistently they attend class, the more they tend to retain. This is true for students of all ages. Some individuals seem to have memory trouble or other mental difficulties, but again this is not limited to the elders. I have many elders who attend regularly and retain just fine.

As the instructor notes, consistent attendance is critical for students at all ages, and affects students' ability to retain information. This response emphasizes that ease of accessibility to the content presented in class is essential. What is critical to note is that the instructor's observation from years of experience working with elder learners is that he has corroborated findings from the research which support that learning occurs at, and

is not limited by, any age. What is more important here, as has been noted by other LESLLA practitioners, is that regular and sustained attendance is critical for success in beginning language and literacy classrooms.

In order to explore the question of dissonance in the classroom, I asked the instructor to share his perspective on differing expectations between the class and learners' perceived expectations:

Again, what I'm going to say here isn't limited to elders, but is more prevalent in them. First, my students don't all enroll at the beginning of a school year. It's an ongoing, rolling class situation - so whenever an individual student shows up for the first time, we're in the middle of something. Some students are intimidated by that. They want me to start with A B C as if it was day one for everybody.

Provided they stick with it for a few days, they usually get comfortable pretty quickly. Also, students often expect school to be formal, strict, and teacher-centered. They expect to sit quietly, copying, repeating, and memorizing what I put on the board. I imagine this is what they're familiar with in their home culture. I try to give them some of that, but overall my class is informal, student-centered, and frankly a bit chaotic. I encourage them to talk and work together, have fun, think critically, and take turns leading the class. Students really enjoy this kind of class once they get used to it, but at first it can be confusing for them.

In his response, the apocryphal belief of elders facing an exclusionary characteristic of being "too old to learn" is challenged because the instructor notes that these observations are true to learners of all ages.

To identify whether any specific points of literacy acquisition may be challenging to elder learners and consider possible reasons, the instructor was asked for his observations as they relate to the process as it unfolds in the beginning language and literacy class the elder participants attend:

If they don't know the pronunciation or meaning of a single word in a written text, they will stop reading and get hung up on it, unable to continue until they ask me. In my view as teacher, understanding the general idea of the text is the most important thing. But that's too abstract for them to easily grasp. Deciding what information is more or less important is a higher-order critical thinking skill. In their view, a "good student" knows the "right answer" to every single bit on the paper. So they fixate on the individual words. Once they can pronounce and define every single word, THEN we can move on to comprehension. I create most of my own original reading texts, and I've become very judicious about my word choices.

This observation matches those cited by participants, and is common to the experiences of adult emergent readers, as described in this study's literature review on LESLLA learners. The instructor cites a very effective way to recognize and adapt to the learners' characteristics by tailoring his content in response to their needs, with a special focus on word choice. At the same time, the instructor references Whole-Part-Whole methodology in the need to first approach a text with a focus on comprehension and then hone in on specific features of a text such as individual words or phonics. In order to implement this strategy, the instructor's strategy of creating original texts enhances the accessibility of text and provides additional opportunities to make material student-centered.

The next question I asked of the instructor was in regards to the oral tradition of East African elders and whether this contributed to perceived strengths or challenges in the beginning language and literacy classroom:

I've definitely noticed this [oral tradition influence in the classroom], and my previous answer touches on it. The students from East African cultures are more comfortable with listening and speaking than with reading and writing. I keep this in mind when teaching. For example, when starting a new text, I always show them the pictures first, then read it aloud to them once or twice, BEFORE I show them any of the written text. I'm very careful about the timing of any papers I hand out.

This quote supports best practices in LESLLA research which dictates that instruction is best when oral practice precedes reading and writing (Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010). The instructor's strategy to provide visual support while reading a text once or twice before introducing the text to learners accommodates learners' strengths in listening and speaking which may perhaps be attributed to the oral tradition.

In the next question, I asked the instructor to consider ways in which indigenous knowledge and other ways of knowing may be present in the classroom. The instructor's response acknowledged the presence of these systems as well as his strategy to accommodate them:

Everybody has indigenous knowledge. We downplay it in Western culture, whereas East African culture emphasizes it. I try to draw parallels between their indigenous knowledge and ours, in the hope of validating their knowledge and lowering the psychological barrier to understanding American culture. In many

ways, we're not much different! An example is when I teach about American holidays. Muslims know the story of the birth of Jesus very well, for example. So I talk about how American Christians celebrate that story in December. And as part of that, Americans do pretty much exactly what most cultures, Muslims included, do on holidays: they cook lots of food, they get together with extended family, they give gifts to children, they decorate the house, they wear special clothes, they sing songs, they give to charity. Then I have them talk or write about their holiday celebrations, using the vocabulary we just learned.

While it is true that everyone has indigenous knowledge and it is downplayed in western cultures, we may still consider the extent to which indigenous knowledge influences the way other cultures treat information, transmit knowledge, and acquire new skills. Cultural traditions were identified by both the instructor and the elder participants as a point of difference, but as I will elaborate on in Chapter Five, inquiry into indigenous knowledge may produce a wider range of paradigmatic considerations which are relevant to beginning language and literacy instruction.

In my final questions, the instructor provided insight into how to accommodate elder learners and advice for new teachers working with this demographic. While these are discussed further in the implications section, I provide his response here:

For ones with physical problems, I accommodate them using comfortable chairs, large print, things like that. My colleagues take trips with their students to places outside the classroom like the public library. I don't do that because many of the elders have limited mobility. But overall, I don't really approach teaching the elders any differently than for any other student. Elder students might need some

extra encouragement because they may believe that their age makes them unable to learn well. I haven't found that to be the case, but they often believe it, so it's good to help them get past it. Generally, they're really great to work with.

Conclusions

In this chapter, the data collected in this study was shared and analyzed, including individual, semi-structured interviews with fourteen elders, two classroom observations, and one interview with the instructor. The first research question, *What indigenous knowledge do low-literate elder learners bring to the beginning literacy classroom?*, was explored through a description of each elder participants' backgrounds as it related to the indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing they learned growing up in specific environments and lifestyles. The results of the analysis supported the research of the literature review but also broadened the scope of the research question, *How does this indigenous knowledge interact with the western teaching and learning context they are currently studying in?* These revealed more about the experiences and perceptions of elder refugees in beginning language and literacy classrooms and were coded according to themes, which included age, health issues, linguistic issues, isolation, poor self-esteem, trauma, indigenous knowledge, and cultural dissonance. In Chapter Five I will discuss the major findings and implications of this research, discuss limitations of the study, and also provide suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

I undertook this study in order to honor elders, who are often overlooked and underserved, by devoting time and energy to learning more about their unique needs as learners in beginning language and literacy classrooms. As for Somali elders, I anticipated that they would have a unique perspective that came from having reached adulthood before two major events in Somalia: the adoption of a standardized writing system in 1972, and the political turmoil which resulted in relocation first to refugee camps and then to the United States. I further anticipated that Somali elders had had the opportunity to spend their formative years acquiring indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing that are wholly different from the content and knowledge systems expected of learners in western classrooms. In order to better adapt teaching strategies and adaptations to their elders' unique abilities and perspectives, I chose to consider the two main research questions of this study: *What indigenous knowledge do low-literate elder learners bring to the beginning literacy classroom?* And *How does this indigenous knowledge interact with the western teaching and learning context they are currently studying in?* In this chapter I share the major findings, limitations, implications for teachers, and suggestions for further research that came out of this research.

Major Findings

In the interviews with elder participants, data analysis revealed eight major themes. These themes give a broader understanding of the backgrounds of elders as they may affect their experience in the classroom. My interpretation as a researcher working with qualitative data is partially informed by my experience with the community over the course of four years. But, as this study follows an approach in grounded theory, the major findings were formed by the perspectives of the elders themselves.

Age

The interviews with elders revealed that half of the participants felt their age negatively affected their ability to learn, and out of these respondents, four were not currently attending school. This may remind us that perception of age's effect on elders' ability to learn may negatively impact students in the classroom, and it may be reinforced by others in elders' lives. Research has shown that the effects of aging may be limited to specific physiological and neurological changes (De Bot & Makoni, 2005, Linville & Rens, 2001) that can simply be recognized and accommodated for in the classroom (Doetinchem de Rande, 2012). This study's interview with the elders' instructor supported these findings that age is a consideration but many of the challenges faced by elders hold for adult learners at any age, a finding which was also supported by the instructor's interview responses. However, because half of the participants cited their age presenting a barrier to them suggests that negative perceptions of older learners is likely to affect their affective filters, making learning more difficult or impossible. Research on the affective filter suggests that when learners are anxious or lack self-confidence, acquisition of language

may be blocked (Singh, 2008). Therefore, educators must be aware of this and find ways to circumvent these beliefs from taking hold in classrooms.

Health Issues

Four of the participants identified health issues as a major barrier to attending classes, though more may have been impacted by poor health at the time of the study. Several of the elders interviewed were not present in the classroom observation portion of the study due to health issues. According to the instructor, one of the biggest considerations to take into account when reaching out to elders who wish to attend school is that health issues and doctor's appointments regularly affect their attendance. With this reality in mind, part of a classroom informed by the MALP should account for efforts to care about and follow up with elder learners in particular and accept these conditions for learning, as is reflected in a collectivist community (Marshall & DeCapua, 2011, 2013). The instructor interviewed in this study has demonstrated effective strategies for creating an inclusive community with drop-in enrollment, and stated that while it can be chaotic, students get the hang of it if they attend regularly. Community building activities may provide another way to encourage a welcoming environment while encouraging more regular attendance among all learners. In order to accommodate barriers to consistent attendance, the teacher or coordinator at a school makes note of learner absences or has specific accommodations ready to accommodate more common issues among elder learners like hearing or vision loss. It may also mean allowing and encouraging other students in the class to be advocates for elder learners, as they may provide a greater level of support and take leadership in helping each other.

Linguistic Issues

Challenges caused by not knowing the language of instruction were identified as problematic by four of the elders interviewed. The instructor noted that this as perhaps manifesting in elder learners' desire to understand each word and that "in their view, a 'good student' knows the 'right answer' to every single bit on the paper." However, I observed in the classroom that the instructor's careful use of scaffolding and visual support helped students and no requests were made for specific or immediate translations. The implications of first language support become controversial when funding or support for bilingual instruction in adult education is arguably never going to exist. Although bilingual instruction can be an effective practice (Dulay & Burt, 1979; Uchikoshi & Maniates, 2010), it is worth noting that because it is not funded or supported (with an exception for very limited scenarios), the bilingual instruction that the participants of this study were familiar with exists in community centers or police stations, which were not designed to provide instruction in line with current best practices in beginning language and literacy classrooms. However, as suggested by Marshall's InterCultural Communication Framework, maximizing student input and feedback in programs is essential (1994). Therefore, in spite of current funding and pedagogical constraints, making connections to students through use of their first language and with contributions from cultural liaisons may ease the difficulties experienced in English-only instruction. As a point of fact, one student made reference to this idea when suggesting that if he, the student, could teach the instructor more about his expertise, the interpreter for this study should come to class too.

Isolation

Some elders in this study reported isolation within their families or within the larger community. Yet, as a credit to the strong, supportive housing complex where this study's participants live, many of the elders are well connected to their neighbors. This was also made apparent by the strong support learners showed for each other during classroom observations—students were happy to see each other and celebrated each individual's efforts. This strong connection was also attested to by participants as a product and value of their indigenous knowledge: one participant who reported isolation commented on the problem with individualism in American society thusly:

Why don't you know your neighbors? Somali people and our religion say you have to know your neighbors. What did they eat last night? If they didn't eat, you have to feed them. You have to eat together-- that's what being neighbors means. In America, the only way that they don't know each other is because there is no trust. When one of their American neighbors dies, how do they go?

We must bear witness to the profound truth that lies in this observation, and the grave consequences it causes in isolating people from each other and from living the life they wish to live. English classes operating in the building where elders live are a unique and effective way to tap into the strengths of community, and this was seen in the classroom observation portion of this study when residents were welcomed into class at any time during the class period, but may be also accomplished through regular community building activities which encourage regular and timely attendance patterns. This supported the suggestions within ICF of building and maintaining relationships with learners. But because classes are usually held far from elders' homes and transportation is

a major barrier, we must consider how many elders are not being served at all and are likely experiencing serious effects of remaining isolated by language, literacy, and location.

Poor Self-Esteem

While many participants did not explicitly describe poor self-esteem in the interviews, three participants cited negative beliefs and regrets about their lack of formal education. As with age, participants described a belief that they could not learn because they had never been to school. This too impacts learners' affective filter, and suggests that learners would need positive habits of mind modeled and encouraged in the classroom in order to persist and succeed. The instructor may have implicitly mitigated this by his student-centered approach, and while completing the classroom observations I noted that equal time was given for each student to lead activities, regardless of their level. Of those participants who reported low self-esteem, one had only attended school briefly, and having had great difficulty, quit after just three months. The other two participants were currently attending school and were present in the classroom observations, and it was my perception that poor self-esteem was affecting some elders present at the time of the classroom observations, and may have impeded their progress since I had last worked at the school.

Trauma

Incidence of trauma is prevalent among refugee populations. Jaranson et al (2004) estimated that 36% of Somali refugees had been victims of torture, and excerpts from this study's interviews reveal that six of the elders referenced trauma and the civil war affecting their memory, their self-concept, and their ability to learn. Several elder

participants reported that they were bothered by thinking about the past, or “thinking too much.” In a report by the Minnesota Department of Health (2014), “thinking too much” was identified as possible indicator of trauma and PTSD affecting functionality, and this was corroborated by the testimony of several elders in this study. Recognition of trauma is a first step towards incorporating the systemic changes needed to adequately serve students who have been affected by it (Ridgard et al, 2015).

Indigenous Knowledge

Discovering more about elder learners’ indigenous knowledge was a major objective of this study. The instructor acknowledged that explaining cultural traditions was of great interest to learners. In my effort to delve deeper and find examples of indigenous knowledge, I found that although elders provided descriptions of the context in which they acquired indigenous knowledge, it was very difficult to explore this concept in great detail due to its abstract nature, the time constraints, and my admitted inexperience as a qualitative researcher. I did not have success in eliciting specific examples of what constituted the different ways of knowing that elders undoubtedly possess. In spite of this, all participants attributed value and admitted expertise acquired within indigenous knowledge systems. What was striking throughout the course of the interviews was a perceptible shift in the course of elders’ narratives: when I asked them to tell me about their childhood and what they learned, I sensed a pride and richness of which I could only scratch the surface. But when I guided the inquiry towards formal school experience, six elders then discredited their indigenous knowledge as being irrelevant, or did not consider it learning at all. For the four elders who did not discredit indigenous knowledge, they reported recognizing its value and its equal standing with

learning in formal settings. In these two interpretations, we see the striking role indigenous knowledge plays in the experience of Somali elders: when it is valued, it clearly provides a foundation upon which new skills can be built; but when it is discredited, it erases learners' sense of self, abilities, and worth. In addition to this devastating effect, it leads us to the additional factor of cultural dissonance impacting elder learners to which we turn next.

Cultural Dissonance

When elders hold two dissimilar opinions about a concept, we may identify this as a source of dissonance. The instructor pointed out that with time learners get used to the format and style of instruction. I observed a core group of students who had been attending class for years, so specific instances of cultural dissonance may have been more noticeable if there had been recently-registered elder learners in the class. Excerpts from the interviews reveal that there is a cultural dissonance felt between the informal educational backgrounds of elder learners and the indigenous knowledge they possess and what they perceive learning to “actually” be, as it is found in western formal educational contexts. “Pen and pencil” learning, literacy, and going to school were attributed as legitimate, whereas indigenous knowledge and informal learning was not--even when the participants had described the skills and expertise they had acquired through these means. This cultural dissonance is what must be addressed if learners' knowledge is to be validated, which will require a greater understanding of what indigenous knowledge is, how learners perceive its relevance, and how Marshall and DeCapua's theories in the Intercultural Communicative Framework and Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm may be utilized to accommodate and celebrate elder

learners' important perspectives. We now turn to this discussion in the Implications, Limitations, Further Research, and concluding section of this chapter.

Implications

The results of this study provide a picture of what a beginning language and literacy program must consider if they are to effectively serve elder learners. From the themes identified in the elder interview responses, we may draw implications relevant to building an inclusive community in the classroom, teaching practices for elder LESLLA learners, and an exploration of additional classroom support in the current climate of increased rigor in employment outcomes under WIOA which will not further marginalize what may be an essential component to empowering elder learners-- acknowledging and incorporating indigenous knowledge and other ways of knowing.

Encouraging an Inclusive Classroom

Elder participants identified several barriers that negatively affected their ability to attend and engage with the material in the classroom: age, low self-esteem, isolation, trauma, and health issues. The instructor at High-Rise A demonstrated a clear respect and appreciation for elder learners, and had identified many strategies to accommodate their needs. The instructor recognized that the challenges elders faced which may be attributed to age were in fact challenges faced by adult learners of all ages, a point which is supported by aging research. Low self-esteem was lessened by the observed celebratory atmosphere of the classroom, in which each took the lead in activities and was applauded for their efforts. Isolation and retention issues associated with health were mitigated by the mere presence of the class on-site where elder learners lived, as well as the open-enrollment attendance policy that the instructor buttressed with strong adaptability to

each learner's needs. In regards to beliefs about aging, the instructor has found this is not a major barrier, but that attendance is. The instructor also pointed out that elder learners may not fit the traditional job-seeking demographic, but they come in order to better understand American culture and the language.

Challenges which remain an issue for many adult educators working with immigrants and refugees are especially true for elder learners, as the interview responses attested. The effects of trauma on elders' sense of self and belief in their ability to learn drew a sharp line in the narrative of their life. Where lives lived before the civil war were described with pride and accomplishment, life after the civil war marked a turning point for many elders which most often affects their engagement in classes by poor self-esteem or giving up entirely and further isolating themselves. Discovering ways the effects of trauma can be mitigated by teaching practices and program design is critical to create an inclusive classroom for elder learners. Along with increased adaptations for survivors of trauma, increased support for elders in terms of vision and hearing assistive technology has already been identified as essential by more well-funded programs within post-secondary education which turn a profit-- for our society to deny these accommodations to elder learners in beginning language and literacy programs is a moral failing.

Elder Learners and LESLLA Instruction

Visual support, scaffolded instruction, relating content to learners' lives and implementing Whole-Part-Whole methodology have been identified as best practices in LESLLA instruction. The instructor utilized all these methods well within a flexible classroom structure that could readily accommodate individual learner needs and provide for student-centered instruction. As the instructor noted, students may exhibit initial

resistance to some of these methods, such as Whole-Part-Whole methodology and student-centered instruction. Some elder participants also described this resistance and requested more first language support, more explicit instruction with a focus on accuracy and comprehension, and for some elders, dissatisfaction in some way may have been attributed to the differing expectations around instructional strategies.

LESLLA instruction utilizing the strategies described above may take some time for students to get used to, and the instructor interviewed for this study confirmed that in time, students do get used to the instruction. This supports the need for routinization of classroom activities in beginning language and literacy classrooms so that, when faced with challenging material and activities, students have time to familiarize themselves with what they are asked to do so they can focus on what they seek to learn.

The instructor posited that some of the source of difference between LESLLA instruction and the expectations of East African elders may be due to Quranic education and experience with texts and readings of the Islamic faith. This is undoubtedly a factor, and presents instructors with the need to implement MALP into the classroom to explore and accommodate areas of difference between western classrooms and learners' expectations. The instructor noted that making connections between the known (East African cultural traditions and religious background) and the unknown (American culture and holiday traditions) was effective in "validating their knowledge and lowering the psychological barrier to understanding American culture," and found that "in many ways, we're not much different!" Confirming the foundational value of LESLLA methodology and ideas congruent with MALP invites the possibility to explore further implications that may be relevant when considering even more than cultural and religious differences

and similarities. These implications are best placed within the complexities of increased rigor in beginning language and literacy classrooms which serve elder learners.

Rigor

Implementation of CCRS standards in adult education requires key shifts in instructional strategies, selection of content, and outcomes. As is mandated by WIOA legislation, employment related outcomes and increased academic rigor across programs represent an increased challenge to adult programs seeking to serve all learners. As noted by the instructor interviewed in this study, most elders are not likely to enter the job force, but it is recognized that there is still a need to serve elders who may have different goals apart from getting a job. The goals of elder learners should not be seen as mutually exclusive in this era of increased rigor-- elders are not blank slates, and they demonstrate self-determination in attending classes to achieve their goals of learning more about American culture and language to become more self-sufficient. In order to support these goals, it is necessary to engage elders in affirmative practices which use their unique lived experience and indigenous knowledge as the basis for further acquisition of skills.

The instructor interviewed for this study noted that LESLLA learners require instruction around higher order critical thinking skills in order to determine what is and is not important information to aid in comprehension of written materials. In order to present these higher order critical thinking skills related to literacy acquisition, this study proposes that it is essential to engage already existing higher order critical thinking skills which elders possess and have used to learn successfully throughout their life, though for many these practices may have been disrupted or abandoned over periods of trauma. These higher order critical thinking skills lie primarily in the domain of Indigenous

Knowledge systems and must be apprehended through continual exploration and sensitivity on the part of educators and programs.

To aid in adaptations which consider indigenous knowledge and other ways of knowing, elder participants identified cultural liaisons between themselves and the teacher as something they would like to try. This may be accomplished through regular student meetings with instructors or administrators to engage in ongoing discussions about content and instructional strategies. The process between community and practitioners would be best served through ongoing support, clear buy-in and benefits from the process for elders themselves, as well as support for instructors to implement new ideas informed by practices from MALP and indigenous studies. This support for instructors would expand views of ways content can be selected and presented in beginning language and literacy classrooms which are more inclusive of indigenous knowledge and other ways of knowing. Peer Learning Communities, often cited as being more effective than traditional professional development (Smith, et al 2003; Stewart, 2014), would be necessary for instructors implementing indigenous knowledge and other ways of knowing in their classrooms in order to apprehend the historical, socioeconomic, philosophical and instructional realities which make innovation in teaching a delicate but profound intellectual enterprise. Due to the cultural dissonance that was identified by elder learners between indigenous knowledge and western teaching practices, it is without a doubt that changes in this direction would increase elder retention in beginning language and literacy classes and thus alleviate the other consequences felt by elders who are not attending classes, including isolation, linguistic barriers, and poor self-esteem.

Limitations

Throughout this study, I was encouraged by the participation and support of so many elders from the community. As noted, many more elders expressed interest in being interviewed than the scope or resources of this study could meet. However, I did encounter challenges to the study that may have impacted the range of information I was able to elicit from participants.

The first limitation I identified in this research was that a pilot study would have aided in honing in on what questions elicited the most information. After the first two interviews I settled on a general line of inquiry within a semi-structured interview format with each participant, eliciting narrative responses with visual aids from different regions in Somalia and images of daily life. Through this process I was able to gather richer stories and descriptions of the context in which Somali elders acquired indigenous knowledge and some mostly general examples of their learned expertise.

Another limitation of this study may have been a possible issue of participants perceiving myself as both interviewer and a former teacher influencing their perception of indigenous knowledge as dissonant with what they knew or imagined my beliefs about education were. I was careful to establish legitimizing affirmations of learning in indigenous context with elders *before* asking them about classroom learning in the United States in order to avoid elders discrediting their experiences out of hand. Although many elders expressed dissonant opinions of what learning is and is not, I feel that there may be room for improvement on a researcher's end to ensure that learning does not appear to refer only to what "pen and pencil" learning that teachers do with students in classrooms.

Interestingly, I was not able to elicit any narratives on an oral tradition or oracy, which has often been referenced by educators as a notable difference for non-literate students confronted with text heavy contexts. I did find compelling evidence that significant cultural dissonance exists between indigenous knowledge and formal education in the western classroom, and that the prevalence of trauma in elders' lives may significantly exacerbate this dissonance. However, as indigenous knowledge and other ways of knowing are difficult to define or talk about, I sensed I reached an impasse in my way of talking about indigenous knowledge and accessing participants' vast reserves of these systems of understanding and learning. An explanation to my dilemma may lie in one participant's cogent description of his indigenous knowledge: "It's not something you can imagine, but something you can watch."

In spite of great interest in recruiting participants, this study did involve a relatively small group of elders. This was mainly due to limited availability of interpreting services, with my own inability to speak the language of the participants itself a limiting factor, and only Somali speakers participated. For this reason, greater analysis both within groups and cross-culturally was not possible in this study.

Further Research

In this study, I have explored how indigenous knowledge and its interplay in western classrooms is perceived by Somali elder refugees in a beginning language and literacy class. The easiest area of further research would be to replicate a similar study with another indigenous peoples, such as Karen elders of Burma (Myanmar) or Oromo elders of Ethiopia. This would allow for cross-cultural comparisons and may corroborate

themes identified by this study or produce additional themes which had not been considered here.

Another area for future study would be to delve further into unresolved areas of this study; for example: how much does Quranic education affect pedagogical preferences of learners? Does a greater understanding of Islam inform indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing that could be incorporated into beginning literacy and language classrooms? Most importantly, although a semi-structured interview format worked best in this study, a more sophisticated method within this format may aid in eliciting a wider range of examples of ways of knowing that could further account for the cultural dissonance noted by participants here.

Conclusion

When I chose this research topic, my primary goal was to honor the elder learners who shaped and defined my dedication to education for those who may be least served. Despite the challenges we perceive as being exclusive to elder learners, their vitality and perseverance suggested to me that these challenges were not “their” problems or shortcomings, but problems that we face as a society. Isolation and loss exist for us all, but for victims of trauma and elders in particular, these are acutely felt. Learning is a sacred process, and because it is sacred we must not devalue any who come to take part. While indigenous knowledge may be place-based by definition, to deny its role in learning is to demote elders to blank slates. One way of teaching and learning may prove effective, but to ignore indigenous knowledge systems which elders have mastered when this mastery explains their resilience-- why aren't we tapping into this? At the end of this

study, my greatest hope is to have opened up a new conversation, one in which elders hold prominence and indigenous knowledge claims power in new places.

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APPENDIX A:
Participant Consent Letter

**Hamline University Graduate School of Education
Human Subject Research Information**

CONSENT LETTER

To Skyline Tower/HAP Adult ELL Students Requesting Permission to Take Part in Research

_____, 2016

Dear xxxxxx resident,

I am a graduate student at Hamline University. I am getting my Masters in Teaching ESL. In order to finish school, I need to complete research at xxxxxx. I want to speak with elders about ways of learning and knowledge that they have gained from a lifetime of experiences that are very different from what teachers know about in xxxxxx. I want to learn more about this so that we can be better teachers for elder learners, and you are welcome to help me determine what is and is not important. My capstone project will be available digitally through the library at Hamline University to other students and scholars at Hamline University, and may be published and shared with other teachers who also work with elder students.

To participate in my research, I will interview you with an interpreter present about knowledge you bring to xxxxxx from your life in East Africa. This interview will be in your first language, and will take place at xxxxxxxx. Your responses will be recorded on paper and on a tape recorder. These interviews will be approximately 30 minutes, but may take more or less time depending on your preference. You will benefit from having an opportunity to share opinions and beliefs you have that will make English class better for you. During the interview, you may have happy or sad memories of your life before moving to xxxxxx, but you have the choice to talk about whatever you feel is important and whatever you wish to talk about. I will also come to class and observe the teacher and students together so that I know more about your experience in class. I will take notes on what the teacher does and what the students do. During this time you will benefit from having an opportunity to react to activities honestly and without fear of embarrassment, because we want to know how to make English class best for you.

When I write about this study, all information about you will be private. I will not record your real name, your picture, or where you live, and all audio recordings will be destroyed after the study is complete. If you decide you don't want to be interviewed or observed, that is OK. You can also change your mind and stop participating in the study at any time, and that is OK too. There is no negative consequence to you if you decide to drop out of the study at any time.

I have permission to conduct this study from [the building], [the school], and Hamline University. I also need to ask for your permission.

If you have any questions, you can contact me at lvogl01@hamline.edu or by phone at xxx xxxx; or Patsy Vinogradov at Hamline University: pvinogradov@hamline.edu or by phone at xxx xxxx.

Thank you,
Lisa Vogl

Informed Consent to Participate in Qualitative Interview and Classroom Observations
Keep this full page for your records.

I have received your letter about your study on elder learners. I understand there is little to no risk to participate, that my privacy will be protected, and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequence to me.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant Copy

APPENDIX B:
Instructor Consent Letter

**Hamline University Graduate School of Education
Human Subject Research Information**

CONSENT LETTER

To HAP Adult ELL Instructor Requesting Permission to Take Part in Research

_____, 2016

Dear [Instructor Name],

I am a graduate student at Hamline University getting my Masters in ESL. In order to finish my degree, I need to complete research at xxxxxx. I want to speak with the instructor about perceived differences in ways of learning and knowledge that elder learners from East Africa with no formal education bring to the western classroom. I want to learn more about this so that we can examine our practices as teachers working with elder learners, and you are welcome to help me determine what is and is not important. My capstone project will be cataloged in Hamline University's Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository, and the final product may be published or shared with other teachers working with elder learners.

To participate in my research, I will interview you about your experience working with elder learners in beginning language and literacy classes. This interview will take place at xxxxxx. Your responses will be recorded on paper and on a tape recorder. These interviews will be approximately 30 minutes, but may take more or less time depending on your preference. I will also observe class in order to take notes on what you do and what the students do. You will benefit by having time to reflect on your experience working with this unique population of learners. Potential discomfort may come from being observed as an instructor in your own classroom.

When I write about this study, all information about you will be private. I will not record your real name, your picture, or where you work. You can decide to opt out of the study at any time for any reason without negative consequence to you.

I have permission to conduct this study from [the building], [the school], and Hamline University. I also need to ask for your permission.

If you have any questions, you can contact me at lvogl01@hamline.edu or by phone at xxx xxxx; or Patsy Vinogradov at Hamline University: pvinogradov@hamline.edu or by phone at xxx xxxx.

Thank you,

Lisa Vogl

Informed Consent to Participate in Qualitative Interview and Classroom Observations

Keep this full page for your records.

I have received your letter about your study on elder learners. I understand there is little to no risk to participate, that my privacy will be protected, and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequence to me.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant Copy

APPENDIX C:
Participant Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Indigenous knowledge:

- Where are you from? What was it like growing up? What were you an expert at?
How did you become an expert?

Experiences with formal education:

- Have you been to school in the US? If so, did you like it? What suggestions
would you have to make it better?

APPENDIX D:

Participant Interview Response Matrix

Basic Personal Information

- Where are you from? _____
- How old are you? _____
- What was your occupation? _____

Literacy/Memory Devices

Tell me about how you kept track of money?	
Tell me about how you kept track of time?	
Tell me about how you kept track of weather?	
Explain how you kept track of your family history?	
Explain how you found out about important things in your community?	
Tell me about a time you remembered something important. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you remember what was said? • What did you do afterwards to help you remember? 	

How did you make important decisions about _____?	
What did you do when you needed help? Can you give an example?	

Oracy

<p>Do you know anybody who's a great speaker?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about what characteristics make them a good speaker. 	
<p>Did you help children?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you tell children to do when they are listening and learning? • No: What did adults tell you to do when you are listening and learning? 	
<p>If you hear something you find doubtful, how do you check?</p>	
<p>How did you have discussions with many people?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were there rules? 	

Numeracy

<p>When did you use numbers?</p>	
<p>How did you use numbers to help you?</p>	
<p>Who helped you learn about numbers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did they teach you? 	

APPENDIX E:**Classroom Observation Data Collection Tool**

Pre-emptive notes from Interviews	Class observation notes (T=Teacher, S=Students)
Literacy/Memory Devices Themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • • 	
Content and skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • • 	
Oracy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • 	
Numeracy (if applicable) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • 	

APPENDIX F:
Instructor Interview Survey

1. Tell me about your elder learners- what do you particularly enjoy about them?
2. What seem to be the biggest factors affecting retention among elder learners?
3. What challenges do you perceive affecting elder learners in the classroom?
4. Have you noticed differences between elder learners' expectations and what they find in the classroom?
5. What specific aspects of literacy acquisition have been difficult for elder learners in your classroom?
6. What specific aspects of critical thinking in the western context have been difficult for elder learners in your classroom?
7. Many East African elders may come from a strong oral tradition but are now learning in a text heavy context. Are there any interesting differences you have noticed in the classroom that may be attributed to this oral tradition (for example, in students' strengths or weaknesses, perceptions or opinions about content or teaching strategies, etc.)?
8. How do you perceive the ways indigenous knowledge and other ways of knowing may differ from the content that is presented in a typical ESL class?
9. What accommodation strategies have you found helpful for elder learners?
10. What advice would they give to someone new to teaching low-literate elder learners?