

# ESL and Adult Literacy Provision for Refugees in Lexington

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## Overview

This study examines educational provision (specifically, English as a Second Language and Adult Basic Literacy programs) for adult refugees in Lexington in order to understand (a) how educational opportunities are meeting (or not meeting) the needs of local refugees in Lexington, Kentucky, (b) the constraints and affordances that shape refugees' participation in available programs, (c) how these constraints and affordances shape refugees' participation in the available programs, (d) the constraints and affordances that exist with regard to educators' abilities to meet the needs of refugees, and (e) ways in which these constraints and affordances shape the available educational opportunities in Lexington.

## Methods

This qualitative case study involved 33 participants, including refugees, tutors/ instructors, staff at the resettlement agency, and other stakeholders. Data sources included a qualitative questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and some observations in instructional settings. Analysis involved techniques such as open coding and theme analysis across data sources.

## Findings and Implications

Overall, Lexington is meeting some needs of some refugees, but there is much room for improvement. Although the city is meeting basic needs, ESL opportunities at either end of the spectrum – for refugees who are low-literate or pre-literate, or for those seeking academic opportunities are poor. A variety of educational opportunities, mostly free or low-cost, are available to refugees. However, the structure and goals of these programs varied.

Refugees reported affordances and constraints related to their participation in ESL programs. Affordances included access to funding and educational materials, availability of bus transportation, even free child care. Good efforts have also been made to match refugees with volunteer tutors. Obstacles included structural constraints (e.g., work, scheduling of classes, transportation, child care, program costs, access to technology), cultural constraints (e.g., gender roles & expectations) and other refugee-specific constraints (e.g., requirements for quick employment, interrupted schooling, lack of documentation of prior education, etc). Refugees also had a general lack of awareness about educational opportunities and how to access those opportunities.

Participants felt overall that the programs are beneficial and support English proficiency, cultural adjustment, and socialization, but they also communicated negative perceptions of programs. Refugees perceived that some of the educational programs were more “professional” than others. Participants also critiqued the frequency/timing of classes, the ways in which students' levels were determined, the ways in which students were grouped, and the lack of training of most tutors/instructors. Many refugees attended programs for short times and then dropped out.

Educational programs themselves faced constraints in terms of the structure of the educational system, limited funding, needing to rely on volunteer instructors, high rates of volunteer burnout, etc. Instructors had varying levels of training/certification and prior experience working with English Language Learners or low-literate adults. Few instructors had degrees or certification in education, ESL, or literacy. Tutors reported feeling relatively unprepared to deal with refugees' educational needs. Many volunteers dropped out, while others found ways to learn what they needed.

Recommendations for improving programs for refugees include better coordination among programs, specialization of individual programs, weekend and evening classes, provision of childcare and transportation, more training for volunteers, recruitment of qualified instructors, and community outreach.