Final Project Report from the Literacy for Integration Conference

Conference date: May 31, 2012

Presented by Kalyani Rai & Devarati Syam
Center for Urban Community Development (CUCD)
School of Continuing Education (SCE)

Executive Summary

The one day conference took place on May 31, 2012 and highlighted the challenges and promising strategies for effective literacy programming that are needed to ensure low-literate newly arrived refugees are able to thrive, not merely survive, in the United States. The keynote address by Jo Gusman focused on the role language and culture can play in literacy education and employment of refugees and immigrants. There were 8 breakout sessions of invited speakers dealing with 1) Literacy and Employment; 2) Job Training Resources; 3) ESL Workforce; 4) Career Pathways; 5) Skill Development; 6) Connecting literacy to work; 7) Workforce readiness, and 7) Computer literacy. Current gaps in practice were examined by invited speakers and in breakout sessions relating to literacy approaches for refugee adults. The conference was attended by across-system practitioners, state refugee resettlement agency and Wisconsin Department of Public Administration and those who are dedicated to literacy for newly arrived diverse refugees in Wisconsin. Our aim is to attract a full range of practitioners engaged in literacy including those involved in a broad array of adult literacy activities for refugees and immigrants.

This report describes the rationale for having the conference, recruitment and implementation of the conference, and presents findings from the meeting. In addition, specific discussion is presented regarding recurring themes in the meeting, namely, the integration of literacy and employment and the role culture and language play in providing literacy to refugees.
Literacy and English language proficiency is critical to increasing refugees’ participation in the economic and civic life of their communities. It helps promote job development, economic advancement, improved health and civic participation. An estimated 90% of refugee adults are limited English proficient, of which majority come from Burma. While English language literacy programs are offered in most localities, there are no coherent strategies for addressing this growing challenge on a statewide level. Literacy practice for refugees is a collaborative endeavor and could greatly benefit at this point from a recurring research oriented practice-based research meeting. Establishing a comprehensive integrated literacy conference would be useful for reasons that relate to 1) professional development, 2) advancing the practice of integrated curriculum, and 3) promotion of collaborative services and resources. We are aware of differences in how the field of literacy is evolving in different organizations and plan to have this conference as a meeting place in which state-wide communication and collaboration can be fostered.

**Implementation**

The “*Literacy for Integration*” conference proposed in the Community and Professional Development grant (CPDG) was held on May 31, 2013 as a collaborative project between Wisconsin Literacy and Center for Urban Community Development, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (CUCD) in accordance with the proposed grant objectives. This final report will describe the planning and implementation of the grant by CUCD to meet the goals and objectives of this initiative which was to take “a step towards organizing and aligning the literacy providers and other stakeholders in the field of English Language Learning and literacy for low literate refugees in Wisconsin.” CUCD collaborated with Wisconsin Literacy, a statewide coalition of adult, family and workplace literacy providers for the purpose of supporting one another through
resource development, information and referrals, trainings and advocacy.” The idea was to reach out to a statewide audience of stakeholders in the field.

Phase I (Pre-conference): May through June: - A conference planning committee was convened in January of 2013 comprising of community members, representatives from Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and the Bilingual Division of Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC). The planning committee developed a conference agenda with particular attention to work preparedness and work readiness outcomes. The committee identified Ms. Jo Gusman, a national expert on working with culturally and linguistically diverse groups on their literacy skills as the key note speaker for the conference.

As the planning committee worked towards the details of scheduling the event and started recruiting conference attendees from south eastern Wisconsin, it became evident that another workforce and literacy conference was also being planned on the same day in Milwaukee. In order to avoid duplication and fragmentation in conference attendance, CUCD approached the other conference organizer, Wisconsin Literacy Inc. and decided to collaborate with them and hold a single conference on the same day. This proved to be a win-win strategy for the partners because it infused the bilingual/English as a second language focus to an entire statewide body of literacy providers. Including Wisconsin Literacy Inc. meant that the mainstream literacy providers were engaged with refugee services providers on their literacy needs and considerably enlarged the scope of the conference.

Phase II (Conference): The conference titled, “Pathways to Employment: Preparing Wisconsin’s Job Seekers” was jointly organized by CUCD and Wisconsin Literacy and held in Manpower Headquarters in downtown Milwaukee in May of 2013. It was also sponsored by
Wisconsin Department of Instruction, Wisconsin Technical College System, Wisconsin Energy Foundation, Manpower Group and Gordon Flesch Company. The day long conference was attended by 102 participants and included members from refugee servicing agencies, literacy providers, area technical college staff and a small group of employers. They had the opportunity to earn CEUs and participate in workshops and work groups to create an action plan that is tailored to their specific program/practice. Attached is the conference agenda with all the details on individual sessions (Appendix I).

Phase III (Post-conference): Staff members of CUCD and Wisconsin Literacy have met a few times since May to debrief and review the results from the event. They reviewed the participant feedback surveys, which reported a high degree of satisfaction (4 out of 5 attendees) with the conference. The discussions and debriefing sessions led this team to conclude that there was not sufficient information from the conference presenters to create a proceeding. However, the two entities were highly satisfied with this collaborative experience and the success of the project as reported by the conference attendees. They are currently working jointly to plan and develop another annual conference in 2014 to build on the work that was accomplished in 2013. In addition, they are also collaborating to build capacity of grassroots literacy agencies.

The matrix below will summarize the project implementation under each objective of the project.

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<th>Objective</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
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<td>1) Map out the literacy needs and services to the refugee population in south eastern Wisconsin and how they relate to the workplace</td>
<td>Based on the information presented at the conference the following findings are reported as they relate to the literacy needs of the refugee population. 1. The majority of 4,500 newly arrived refugees are from Myanmar, Somalia, Bhutan and Iraq. 2. One-third of them are pre-literate in their own languages and the remaining are low-literate. Only a handful of the newly arrived have completed high school and has some post secondary education before coming to the USA.</td>
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3. All of the newly arrived refugees are considered as English Language Learners at different levels of language competency.
4. The existing literacy programs for newly arrived refugees are embedded in the resettlement agencies’ programming efforts. This group of learners is not served by the programming in traditional literacy programs.
5. Literacy programs in the resettlement context are focused on fulfilling the functional literacy with a focus on civic engagement/citizenship, health, and employment. Only a few are focused on ABE. The main objective of the resettlement program is to promote self-sufficiency with an increasing focus on getting employment, which often places the learners in a difficult place where they have to choose between getting literacy training for accessing the labor market, holding a job fulfilling W2 requirements and making progress towards career development.

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<th>2) Provide a greater degree of coordinated services between literacy and workforce development</th>
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<td>Based on the attendance information, the conference was attended by a wide range of agency professionals that are working in refugee serving agencies, employment agencies, W2 agencies, state refugee service agencies, and educational institutions. These agencies include: Myanmar Learning Center, Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, Pan African Community Association, Maximus, UMOS, Department of Children and Family, Department of Workforce Development, Milwaukee Public Schools, Department of Public Instruction, Milwaukee Area Technical College, Wisconsin Literacy Inc., and International Institute. Bringing these diverse groups to the conference is the first step towards building a collaborative network of service providers in addressing the unique needs of the refugee population. This is an ongoing effort to develop and implement an integrated literacy services in south east Wisconsin. The conference was a good opportunity for Wisconsin Literacy Inc. to learn more about the newly arrived refugees and start incorporating their needs in the future policies and programming efforts of their member agencies.</td>
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<th>3) Share best practices to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of newly arrived</th>
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<td>The Pathways to Employment Conference was designed to share best practices on how to prepare Wisconsin job seekers. The tracks for this one day conference was to share best practices in the following areas: Workforce Development and workforce readiness for immigrants and refugees; the role of literacy on employment; pipelines to employment, job training resources for beginning learners; transitioning ABE students to post secondary; ESL and job shadowing; career pathways initiative; Wisconsin Fast Forward and the Office of Skills development. The key note address in the conference was a presentation and hands on activity on the language learning and literacy needs titled: <em>Diverse brains, diverse learners: Understanding the complex world of</em></td>
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**Attendance and Evaluation**

The conference was very well attended. Almost 100 people registered for the conference, 80 attended. Participants included the strong majority of all active refugee serving agencies in Wisconsin.

Evaluation was conducted by a follow-up survey using Survey Monkey. A total of 39 participants responded to the survey questionnaire. Close to 60% rated the conference to be “excellent” and 37% rated it as “good.” The remaining 5% rated it as Fair. The conference attendees (61%) also reported that their main reason for attending the conference was to learn about specific resources, tools and organizations that would help them better prepare their clients for job opportunities. About 39% of respondents reported that they attended the conference to connect clients with job opportunities and about 30% if they attended to network with other professionals who serve adults with limited literacy and and/or barriers to employment. An overwhelming majority of the conference attendees (more than 80%) reported a high degree of

| **4) Create a collaborative agenda on the learning and research to improve the literacy outcomes of refugees** | The common theme that emerged from the presentations was the need for:  
1) professional development of literacy providers  
2) securing funding to support the implementation of literacy programs  
3) sharing and adapting standards of literacy practices that are responsive to literacy needs  
CUCD has made progress in creating a collaborative agenda by forging an ongoing relationship with Wisconsin Literacy Inc. and made efforts to secure joint funding and programming to align the roles literacy play in workforce development efforts of refugees/immigrants. |
| --- | --- |
| **culturally and linguistically diverse children and adults** by Jo Gusman. 
The afternoon was focused on the Employers’ panel – strategies and practices for improving the literacy outcomes of ELLs, computer literacy, connecting literacy to work and GED tests. |
satisfaction with conference facility, location, time and food. Approximately, 90% reported that they would attend another conference on the topic of Wisconsin job seekers’ barriers to employment.

**Conclusion and Implications for the future programming in this area**

Several debriefing sessions have been held between CUCD and Wisconsin Literacy to reflect and find ways to improve the conference for the next year as well as to frame the future directions for programming based on the discussions and presentations in this conference. Some of the major theme areas that have been identified are as follows:

1. Many of the discussions are consistent with the research in the Adult Education and literacy field. Research has begun to emerge showing how literacy skill set is linked to employment outcomes and evidences demonstrating how deficit these skills possibly explain certain disparities in health, employment and education (Innovation in Health Literacy: Summary of Workshop, 2011, NSF). The conference discussions also pointed out that the literacy providers are recognizing the need for comprehensive strategies and go beyond individual functional literacy framework. Literacy should examine the complexities of tasks required of refugee families to acquire refugees in the new environment.

2. The other theme area refers to the support services for refugee families: Accessibility and preparedness of the educational professionals and agency workers to engage productively with the refugee families is missing in many cases. Professionals working with refugee families need to understand and integrate the issues of employment system, health care system, workplace environment and communities in which support takes place.
3. The literacy theory and practice need to call attention to the ways in which literacy could help eliminate unequal access to services. Opportunities to integrate these fields of theory and practice are likely to be mutually beneficial. Yet the services still occur in their own silos. For example, technical education programs and the community ESL and workplace learnings are functioning not with too much collaboration. Several possible opportunities can be discussed in the future on how to link research and practice in eliminating the gaps in services.

4. Another salient issue is the education and professional development of literacy professionals. Literacy curricula in community settings need to be integrated in the professional education and such efforts need to be evaluated. Professionals serving in K-12 settings are critically important to include in this conversation since many of the refugee children enter the public school system and are served in that area.

5. Last but not the least, several literacy programs were featured in the conference with evidence of success. It is very critical to identify programs that serve the needs of the learners and can be replicated in other settings. Therefore, evaluating literacy programs in order to eliminate the barriers to access and use literacy services and help the refugees integrate fully in the mainstream societies.

The two entities are currently working on a future conference for 2014 -to be held in Milwaukee metropolitan area on September 19, 2014. Both entities are applying to other funding agencies to move their work forward. The development of a collaborative relationship between CUCD and the Literacy Network Inc. is an excellent outcome of this project, which positions this collaborative network to work jointly in building capacity in literacy agencies to serve the needs of the growing numbers of English Language Learners in the state. It further advances University
of Wisconsin System’s overall goal of reaching out to diverse populations in the state as well as prepare them for educational pathways and workforce participation.

***Budget is expended as specified in the proposal.