

WHO ARE MINNESOTA'S ADULT ESL PRACTITIONERS?

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ABSTRACT

Adult Basic Education (ABE) at the Minnesota Department of Education and the ABE Teaching and Learning Advancement System (ATLAS) at Hamline University are collaborating to implement a data-driven professional development process that involves collecting and analyzing data, identifying needs and priorities, developing appropriate activities, and evaluating outcomes. Because there existed little data on the over 1200 teachers and administrators who are part of the state ABE system, a statewide survey of ABE instructors and administrators was administered to collect data necessary to inform the design and delivery of relevant and meaningful professional development. Nearly 700 practitioners responded to the survey, providing information on the working conditions, classroom challenges and professional development needs of the adult ESL practitioners in Minnesota. Analysis of the data has yielded valuable insights to inform professional development planning and establish priorities to meet the needs of practitioners working with literacy-level through advanced-level ESL instruction.

INTRODUCTION

The mission of Adult Basic Education (ABE) in Minnesota is to provide adults with educational opportunities to acquire and improve their literacy skills necessary to become self-sufficient and to participate effectively as productive workers, family members, and citizens. To be eligible for ABE, an individual must be at least 16, not enrolled in secondary school, and functioning below the 12th grade level in any of the basic academic areas including reading, math, writing and speaking English. ABE is delivered statewide at over 500 sites located in public schools, workforce centers, community/technical colleges, prisons/jails, libraries, learning centers, tribal centers, and non-profit organizations. Programs offered include GED (General Educational Development Diploma) preparation, adult diploma, basic skills enhancement, workforce education, transition to post-secondary education and employment, citizenship education and family literacy. However, the largest single program area in ABE is English as a Second Language (ESL). In 2008-2009, 32,025 adult learners, or 47% of total enrollees in Minnesota ABE programs, were enrolled in ESL programming (Shaffer, 2009). In addition, many of the learners enrolled in one of the other program areas are also English language learners who continue to need English language support.

In 2008, Minnesota was selected as one of 12 states to receive a technical assistance grant from the Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA) Network, a two-year initiative designed to help states increase capacity providing relevant and effective professional development to those who teach adult English language learners. ABE at the Minnesota Department of Education and the ABE Teaching and Learning Advancement System (ATLAS) at Hamline University are collaborating to lead the CAELA initiative in Minnesota, focused on implementing a data-driven professional development process that involves collecting and analyzing data, identifying needs and priorities, developing appropriate activities, and evaluating outcomes. Guided by the *Framework for Quality Professional Development* (CAELA, 2008), CAELA provided a technical assistance team to help facilitate and expand the data-driven professional development process in Minnesota.

Specifically, the *Framework for Quality Professional Development* (Schaetzel, Peyton & Burt, 2007; Young & Peyton, 2008) outlines the following seven-step planning process:

1. Review planned and actual professional development activities from previous planning cycle.
2. Examine and analyze new and existing teacher and student data, and related information.
3. Prioritize professional development topics and activities based on the data and the feasibility of implementation.
4. Identify measurable outcomes of the professional development activity.
5. Select appropriate material and staff for the professional development.
6. Write a comprehensive, systematic plan to address practitioner needs that includes appropriate follow-up activities.
7. Establish a sustainable process for carrying these steps out on a regular basis.

Work on the CAELA initiative began in summer 2008 as ABE and ATLAS staff began collecting and reviewing data outlined for steps one and two of the framework. This included the collection of 1) data on past and planned professional development activities, 2) new and existing data on practitioners, and 3) new and existing data on students. Assembling data about past professional development, including the evaluations of past activities and our ideas for future professional development proved straightforward. We were also able to gather a fair amount of data about our ESL learners from reports required of ABE programs, including information on student demographics, attendance, educational levels, performance and employment status.

It was not so easy to find data about practitioners, however, and it was immediately obvious that this represented a significant gap if our goal was to plan professional development for ABE/ESL teachers. Although we knew, for example, that most teaching positions were part-time and that most programs required a teaching license or a college degree in ESL, we had no specific information on teachers' levels of education, years of teaching adult learners, or past teaching experiences.

Thus, a data-driven process of professional development planning clearly required data on the over 1200 teachers and administrators who are part of the state ABE system. This report will share what we have learned from our first action step as part of the CAELA initiative: a statewide survey of ABE instructors and administrators to collect data necessary to inform the design and delivery of relevant and meaningful professional development for adult ESL practitioners in Minnesota. We will briefly outline the survey process, then highlight specific findings relevant to adult ESL teachers and teaching, and share the implications of these results on professional development priorities to date.

SURVEY OF ABE PRACTITIONERS

In fall of 2008, a team of ABE professionals, including the state ABE Professional Development Specialist, ATLAS/Hamline University adult ESL teacher educators, and current ABE/ESL practitioners, met to outline and design a survey to collect information on ABE professionals' work and

training experience, work environments, classroom challenges, and professional development activities and needs. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions, and also asked respondents to identify challenges or particular areas of interest for their own professional development. Specific questions were included that focused on ESL teachers, such as questions about completed coursework in different areas of second language teaching and learning, years of experience teaching ELLs in several contexts, and ESL courses taught within the last five years.

A survey pilot and request for feedback went to CAELA facilitators and ABE professional development coordinators from every region of the state in January 2009. After revisions were made, the online survey (also available in a paper format) was sent to practitioners through local, regional and statewide networks in February 2009. A total of 680 responses were received, representing over 50% of the practitioners in Minnesota. Because of the overwhelming number of responses, a consultant was brought in to help with the analysis of the data. It is important to note that although the survey was created to collect data on all ABE practitioners, this article will highlight only those findings relevant to the professional development needs of adult ESL practitioners (to view the complete survey, see the ABE Teaching and Learning Advancement System, 2009; to view the complete report, see Marchwick, 2010).

FINDINGS

The Adult ESL Workforce

Of the 680 practitioners who completed the survey, approximately 80% (544) were classroom instructors while 21% (143) described themselves as program administrators. The majority of respondents, or 58.4%, indicated that they were part-time employees as defined by their programs. About 80% have current teaching licenses, and 95.4% have bachelor's degrees. Nearly 33% (219) plan to retire or leave the field of ABE within the next five years.

Although the analysis is ongoing, the data have already yielded findings critical to a better understanding of the ABE professional workforce in Minnesota. This section will highlight findings from specific survey sections: educational background, teaching experiences, classroom challenges, and professional development (PD) needs, before moving to a discussion of the implications of these data for professional development for teachers of adult ELLs.

Professional Background: Education

Licensure

By state law, public school ABE programs in Minnesota are required to use K-12 licensed teachers or teachers with a college degree in ESL or related field. It is important to note, however, that the law does not specify the content of that K-12 license. Since the majority of ABE programs in Minnesota are run by school districts, it is not surprising that such a high percentage of ABE practitioners have a teaching license.

In terms of professional background, Minnesota's ABE practitioners come from various sectors within the field of education. Of those who have or are working toward teaching licenses, many have specialized in working with different ages, grades, and content areas. Figure 1 shows that the majority of respondents (66%) have training working with children or adolescents but not adults. Only 20% of those with or working toward a license have specialized in adult basic education. An additional 11% have or are working toward a license in teaching ESL.

The remaining 14% of respondents selected the "other" category to best describe the license that they hold or are working toward. Respondents who selected "other" to describe their license were asked to specify what license they held, which resulted in 249 individual responses. These responses were assigned into two groups by: 1) age/grade and 2) content area. As with every part of the survey, any responses labeled non-responsive, or not answering the questions asked, were eliminated. Of the 110 responses assigned to the age/grade grouping, only 9 out of the 110 responses, or 8%, indicated training in working with adults, in this case, parents. The remaining 92% had or were working toward licenses in the pre-K-12 system. A breakdown of the remaining 109 "other" responses focused on a specific area of instruction. The four most frequently named areas were: reading, fine arts, guidance counseling and psychology, and family and consumer science.

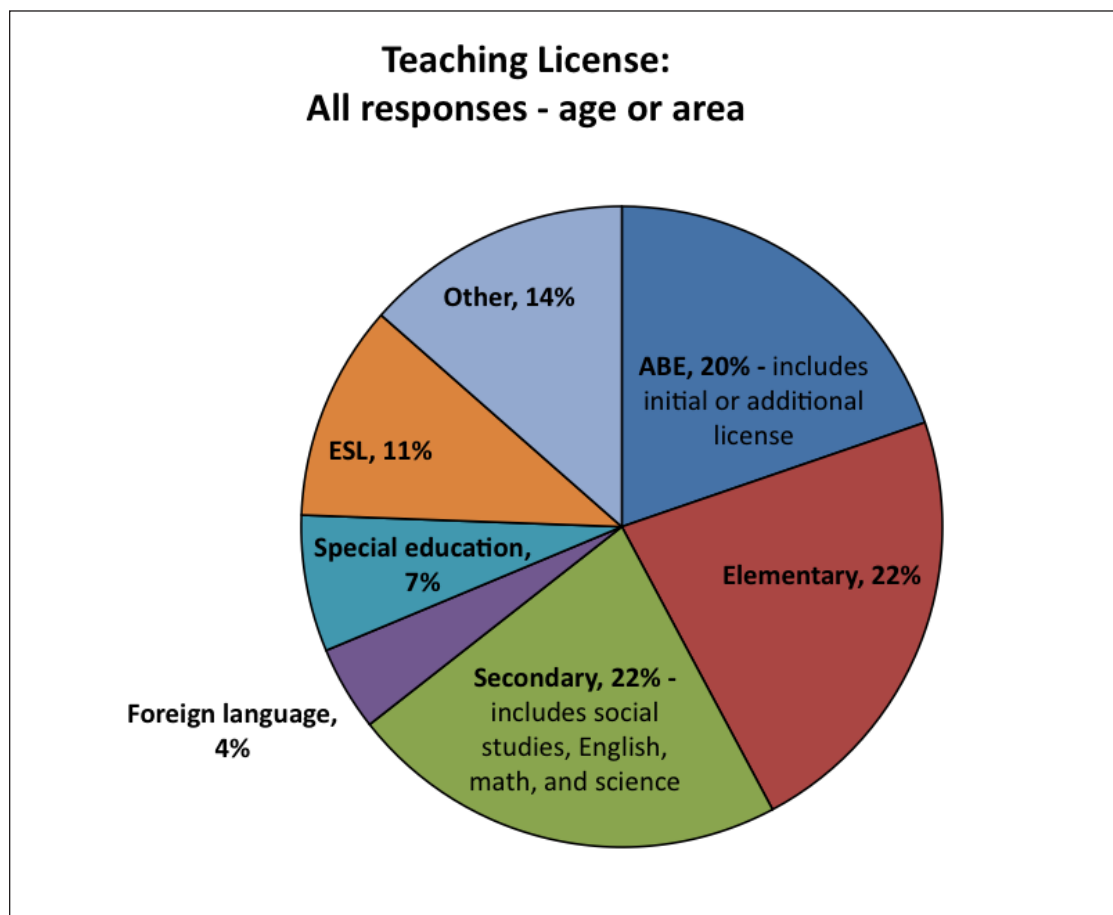


Figure 1. Breakdown of teaching licenses; 725 total responses.

Master's Degrees

The field of ABE professionals in Minnesota are evenly split between those that have or are working toward a Master's degree (50.5%) and those who do not have a Master's degree (49.5%). Figure 2 illustrates that while the largest group of respondents indicated that they have or are working toward a Master's degree in Education, it is unclear if these degrees focused on classroom instruction or another aspect of education (such as administration).

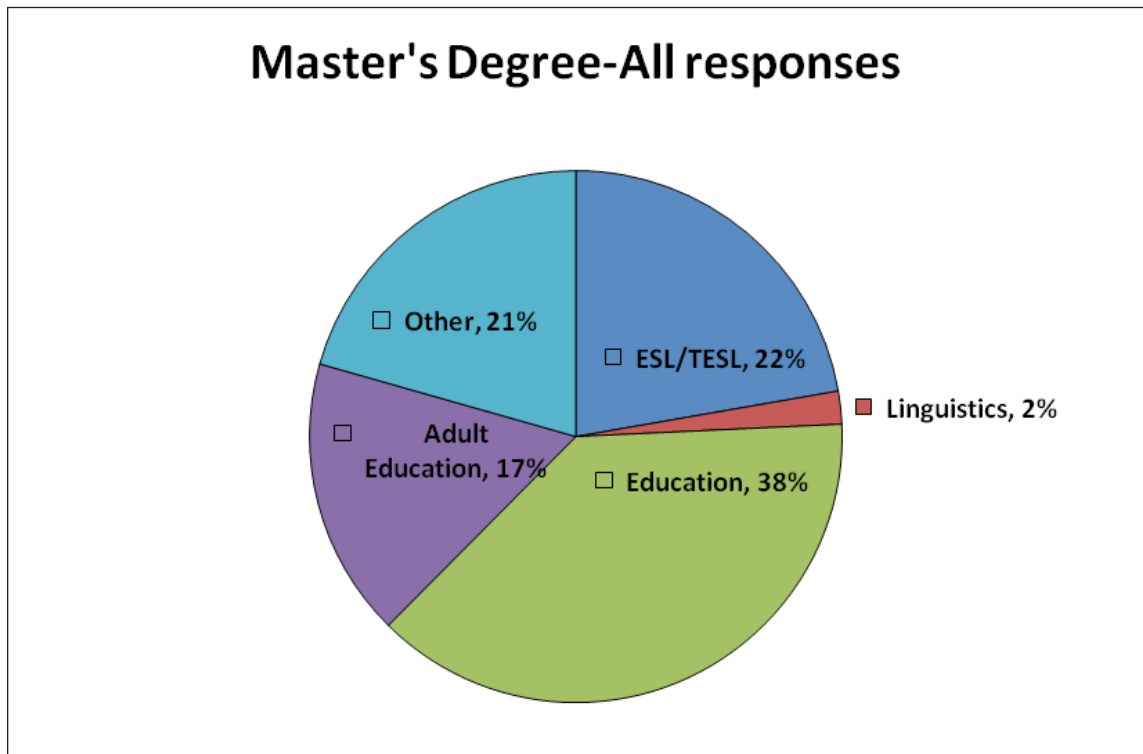


Figure 2. Master's degrees; 602 total responses.

A total of 104 individual comments from the "other" category were also analyzed. The four categories with the highest frequency counts are all in educational fields; however, not all four categories have an instructional focus. See Appendix A for a breakdown of these categories.

Professional Background: Teaching Experience

Respondents were also surveyed about the types of courses that they had taught during the past five years. The question generated 2,885 individual responses from 549 individuals. On average, each individual respondent has taught approximately five different courses in the past five years. The five most frequently taught courses are listed in Table 1. These frequently taught courses included three ESL courses and two traditional ABE courses (GED/Diploma and Pre-GED).

Table 1. Five Most Frequently Taught Courses (1416 of 2,885 individual responses)

Course	Number of responses	Percentage of respondents
Intermediate ESL	322	58.7%
Beginning ESL	295	53.7%
GED/Diploma	280	51%
Pre-GED	276	50.3%
Advanced/Transitions ESL	243	44.3%

Years of experience with ESL learners

When looking at responses of those who work with ESL learners, the lack of experience in some settings provides data as interesting as teachers' actual experience. Table 2 provides a view of the highest response categories for the settings: ESL in an Intensive English Program (IEP), adult ESL/EFL in other contexts, and adult ESL in an ABE context.

The data show that respondents seem to have very little experience with ESL learners outside the setting of an adult ESL classroom. Almost 50% of respondents stated that they had between 1-10 years teaching experience working with ESL learners in an ABE context. Sixty-eight percent had no experience teaching ESL in an academic context or IEP, which have traditionally been college preparation programs for ESL learners. In addition, around 53% have no experience teaching ESL or EFL in any other context.

Table 2. Highest Response Categories for Years of Teaching Experience with ESL Learners

Academic Setting	Highest response category	Response percentage	Number of responses	Total respondents
ESL in an IEP	No experience	68%	349	513
ESL/EFL in other contexts	No experience	53.4%	265	496
ESL in ABE context	1-5 years	26.9%	145	539
	6-10 years	22.3%	120	

Classroom Challenges

To help identify professional development needs, instructors were asked to describe the three primary challenges that they face in their classrooms. This was an open-ended question; no preselected categories were given to respondents. This question generated 1,423 individual responses from 454 individuals. Responses were analyzed and placed into 21 categories and 70 subcategories. Twenty of these categories were directly related to classroom instruction.

Figure 3 shows the 20 categories that directly affect classroom instruction and their response counts. The five primary classroom challenges identified by instructors were: 1) lack of program resources, 2) multilevel/need classrooms, 3) irregular student attendance, 4) time, and 5) lack of professional confidence. These are valuable data to identify professional development needs, so these five challenges will be briefly analyzed in the following sections.

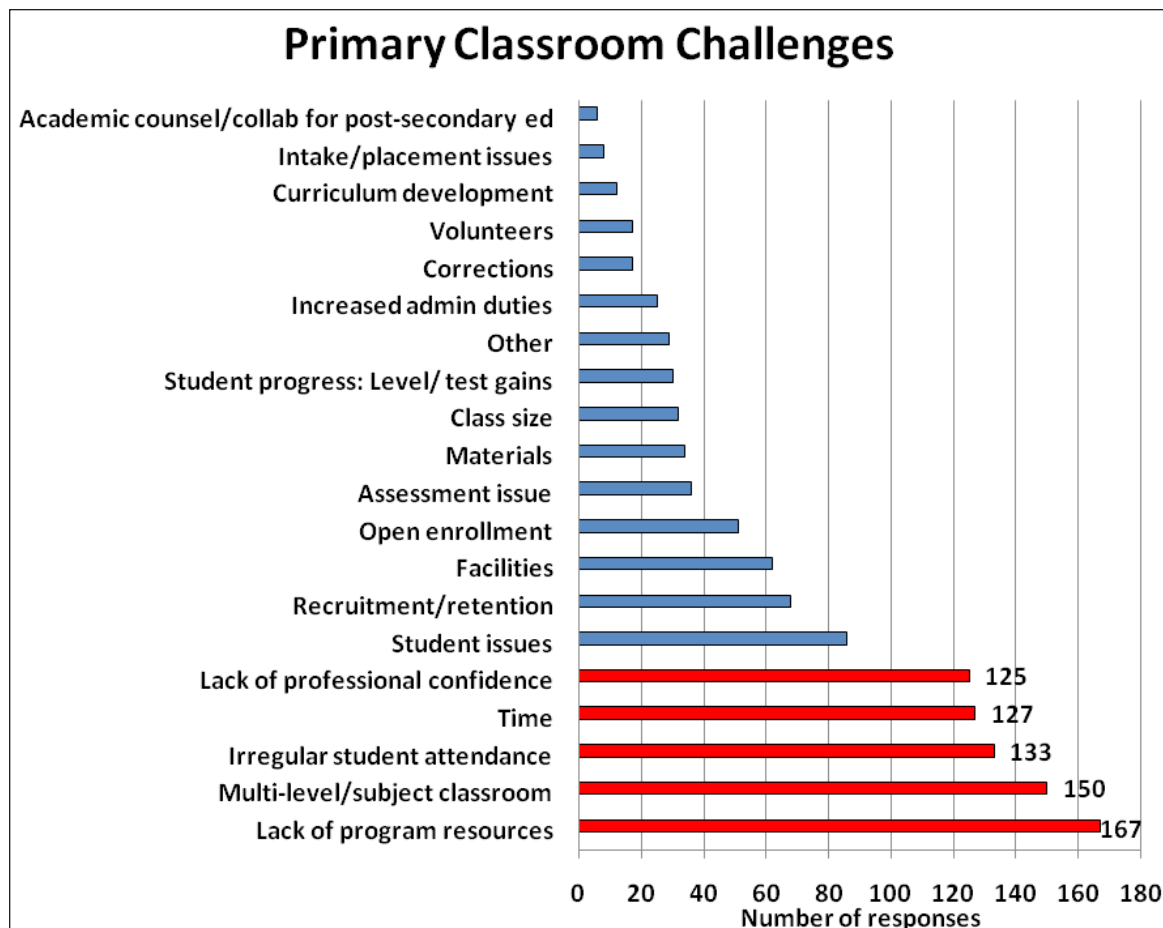


Figure 3. Primary classroom challenges identified in open-ended responses; 1,215 total responses.

Lack of program resources

When citing a lack of resources as a classroom challenge, instructors wrote primarily about two things: 1) materials, equipment and supplies, and 2) technology. First, respondents cited the need for more textbooks for both students and teachers. For example, one respondent said, "books—our book budget is non-existent every year and we are forced to glean free samples and make copies for all of our classes. It would be nice to have multiple texts of essential materials." A few respondents also referred to a lack of AV equipment such as TV/VCR, overhead projectors, and document cameras.

The other resource reported lacking was technology (computer hardware, software, internet). Twenty-nine percent of those concerned by a program's lack of resources cited technology as their challenge. Comments were primarily focused on the lack of reliable, up-to-date hardware. For example, one respondent said "VERY limited technology!!!! Just now (in FEB) I'll be hauling laptops to our classroom twice a month to use for one day." Survey respondents also expressed a need for more software, as well as increased access to technology at their worksites. Most comments about access were related to a lack of internet access, such as the following, "No Internet access at one of my sites. Not able to tap in to the school's Internet and satellite Internet is too expensive."

Multilevel/need classrooms

While the vast majority of ABE instructors expressed a general frustration about teaching in multilevel/need classrooms, among these general comments a few themes emerged. When asked to describe their challenge, most wrote simply, "multilevel class" or "wide range of levels within a level." However, many expressed the particular challenge of having pre-literate learners in a class with literate learners. For example, one teacher wrote, "Multilevel classroom, specifically, not having a separate class for Pre-literate." Another said, "I often have pre-lit students mixed in with my Level 1 (low beginning) students. The range is too broad to do either justice." Another theme present among the people who offered general comments was the challenge of students with split skills in the same classroom. One respondent noted, "Teaching ELL students whose speaking and reading abilities are at very different levels, but the students are placed in the same class."

Another theme in the data was the challenge of planning for a multilevel/need class. For example, one person wrote, "Curriculum development for multilevel class." Others wrote about the challenge of creating lessons for multilevel/need classes and finding or differentiating activities that would work for the whole class. An undercurrent of comments about planning was the lack of paid prep-time available to plan for such classes. One teacher wrote, "Lesson planning for all levels, spend too much unpaid time to do a good job."

Irregular student attendance

Irregular student attendance seems to be the stickiest problem for ABE practitioners to address as this particular challenge, more than any other, is fed by forces outside the classroom. Most comments were very general in nature such as "inconsistent attendance" or "poor attendance" but many comments reflected a belief that two main sources were the cause of this challenge.

One of these was the lack of life stability experienced by many students. For example, one person wrote, "Attendance is not consistent - many of the students are operating in crisis mode most of the time."

The other issue was open enrollment. Open enrollment policies allow students to enroll and drop out of ABE programs at any time, and are the norm in most ABE programs in Minnesota and throughout the country. One of the results of open enrollment and the absence of attendance requirements is that an ABE teacher may have a very different group of students in class each day. Respondents who wrote about open enrollment, along with irregular attendance, seemed to see them as the same problem. For example, one person wrote, "Poor learner's attendance caused by open enrollment." Another wrote, "attendance issues: open enrollment, irregular attendance, tardiness."

Regardless of the source to which respondents attributed irregular attendance, all were frustrated by the effects these issues had on student progress. One instructor put it this way, "Open enrollment as well as students coming and leaving during the class due to job or child care schedules. If I had the same students together for even 6 weeks, we could make so much progress!"

Time

While multilevel classrooms and irregular attendance were reported more often as challenges, the issue of enough time seems to be a particularly difficult problem for ABE teachers. The primary area of concern centered on the lack of time they have available to plan and prepare for their courses; 31% of respondents in this category listed this as the challenge. Moreover, another 11% of respondents in this category made a direct reference to lack of paid time for preparation and other duties. As one

respondent said, "We only get 12½ minutes of paid prep for every hour we teach. That is way too little time when we have to prep for class, read e-mail, listen to voice mail, call students, do paperwork, etc."

Lack of professional confidence

The final category among the top five classroom challenges for instructors is a lack of professional confidence. The top subcategories for this challenge are illustrated in Figure 4. The largest subcategory in this group is the lack of professional confidence in teaching a certain subject matter or skill. For example, 33% of the 125 respondents stated that they wanted or needed help with specific content such as technology or math.

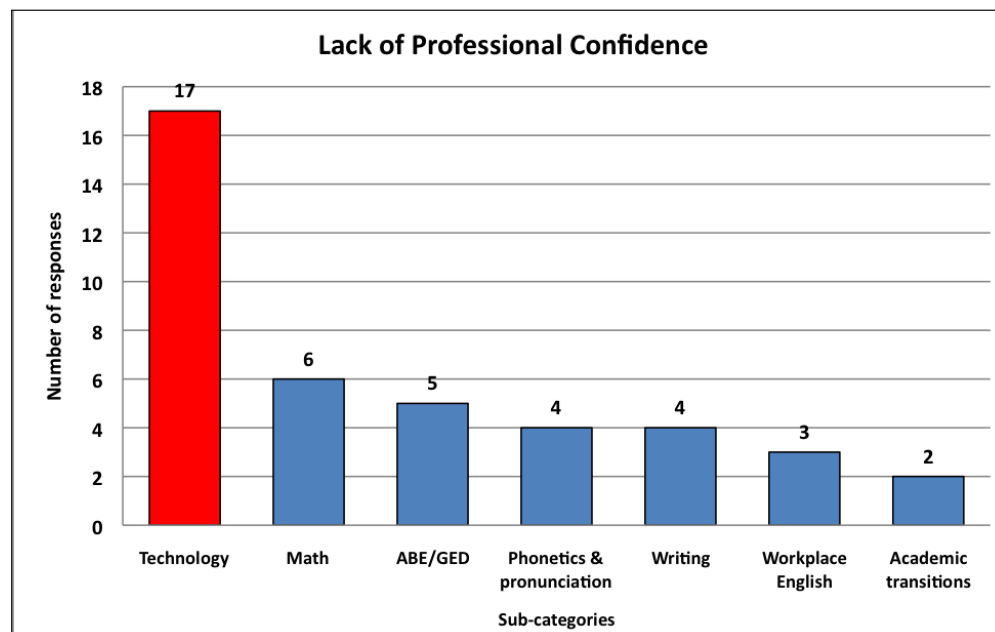


Figure 4. Lack of professional confidence as a challenge for instructors; 41 total responses.

Of those reporting a lack of professional confidence in a content area, technology tops the list. Seventeen of the 41 responses in this subcategory, almost half, refer to a need to improve the use of instructional technology or a perceived deficit in this subject. For example, one person stated, "Using technology in the classroom: It seems there's an expectation that teachers utilize technology, but I'm more comfortable not using it." Some respondents also expressed struggles with effectively integrating technology into ESL instruction, especially for lower levels.

In addition to instructors' expressed lack of confidence in certain subjects, another interesting finding was the lack of practitioners' professional confidence to work with students they knew or suspected to be learning disabled or mentally ill. A number of survey comments focused on diagnosing learning disabilities in ELLs, especially pre and low-level literacy learners. Respondents requested help in diagnosing disabilities in ESL students or in differentiating language learning issues from learning disabilities. One respondent wrote, "How to differentiate LD student from a normal ESL student." Another person went a step further by saying, "How to assess ELL students for learning disabilities and PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] and getting them the help they need."

Adapting and improving instruction for students with learning disabilities was also a major theme in remarks made by respondents. Respondents sometimes seemed to label any disability that interfered with learning as a "learning disability," not just those that are traditionally thought of

as learning disabilities. For example, one respondent wrote, "mental health needs of refugees & how to take this into consideration when designing lesson plans/teaching strategies, without feeling crippled by the students' mental health needs." Several comments also dealt with the complexity of teaching ESL to students who also have disabilities that affect learning, such as this comment from a respondent about the challenge of teaching ESL to blind students, "strategies for teaching blind students in the visually-centered ELL world where nearly every text book bases the lesson on a picture or pictures."

Professional Development Needs

Finally, survey respondents were asked to describe their professional development (PD) needs and interests in two areas: program and instructional. Each question was divided into many categories from which respondents could choose topics. Program area categories targeted the needs and interests of those teaching in specific ABE course strands such as literacy level ESL, GED, workforce education, family literacy and so on. Instructional area categories included approaches to educating adult learners, curriculum/lesson planning, and other student or teaching issues that affect learning and its outcomes. For each question, respondents were asked to select the three areas that they would most like to see addressed through PD activities, then to offer specific training topics related to those areas.

PD needs by program area

The responses of ABE teachers concerning specific program areas illustrate just how much ESL is taught in the ABE system. Respondents were given fourteen categories from which to select; 407 respondents provided 936 individual responses. Three of the top five highest response categories were ESL program areas: 1) low/intermediate ESL, 2) literacy-level ESL, and 3) advanced ESL (Figure 5). These three program areas combined account for 35% of all responses to this question and represent the largest percent of responses. Results for these three ESL program areas will be described in detail.

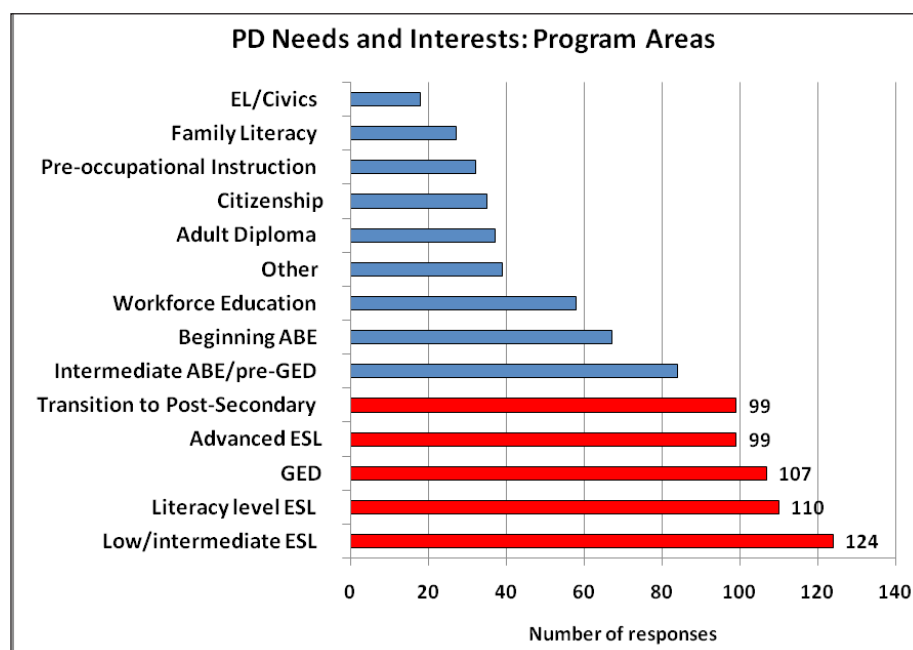


Figure 5: PD needs and interest listed by program areas; 936 total responses.

Low/intermediate ESL: Needs and interests

Perhaps because beginning and intermediate ESL are the two most commonly taught classes in the state's ABE system, low/intermediate ESL was the number one program area indicated by teachers for PD. About 30% of respondents provided 179 individual comments about their PD needs and interests for low/intermediate ESL. These comments were sorted into 14 categories and 37 sub-categories. Most categories were very small receiving fewer than 10 comments. One category received the vast majority of comments – PD for teaching a specific skill and curriculum for this program area.

Low/intermediate ESL for a specific skill: Sub-categories

The results showed an overwhelming interest in one category: PD for teaching a specific skill. Sixty two percent of all comments, or 107, referred to a specific skill. These responses were divided into eleven sub-categories. The breakdown of this category into sub-categories indicates respondents have a strong interest in PD activities related to reading and writing (see Appendix B for details and sub-categories).

A third of comments (35) cited the desire for training in teaching reading to low or intermediate level ESL students. Most comments referred to a general desire for "reading strategies." Other comments requested help teaching learners how to make meaning out of what they read. For example, one person wrote, "How to help students actually read and understand" while another stated, "attaching literacy to meaning."

The other major skill requested for low/intermediate ESL was writing and its sub-skill, spelling. Twenty-six percent of comments (28) focused on writing or spelling. Most comments reflected a general desire for "writing strategies" or "writing activities." However, some requests were more targeted. For example, one person wrote, "teaching sentence-level and paragraph-level writing skills." Another wrote, "sentence structure, mechanics of writing."

Literacy-level ESL needs and interests

The program area with the next highest response count was literacy-level ESL. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents to this question, or 110, indicated a desire for PD in this area. These 110 individuals provided 144 individual comments on the PD topics they would like to see addressed. These comments were sorted into 13 categories and 29 sub-categories. Three comments that fell into the non-responsive category were eliminated. Of the 12 remaining categories only two received 10% or more of all comments. They were PD for a specific skill and curriculum for literacy-level ESL.

Literacy-level ESL: A specific skill and its sub-categories

Once again, ABE practitioners wanted more PD on teaching a specific language or academic skill to literacy-level ESL students. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of comments in this category were a call for PD in reading and some of its sub-skills – phonics and high-frequency/sight words. As Figure 6 illustrates, thirty-six comments, or 61% of all comments in this category, expressed an interest in this group of skills. Most comments were general requests for "reading" or "making use of both phonics and sight words." However, several people expressed a desire to know how to teach these reading skills specifically to adults. For example, one respondent wrote, "I have never taken a class that teaches me how to

provide decoding instruction for adults.” Comments expressed a similar frustration of those requesting an overview of resources for literacy -level ESL (11) – i.e. the finding and availability of “adult appropriate” materials.

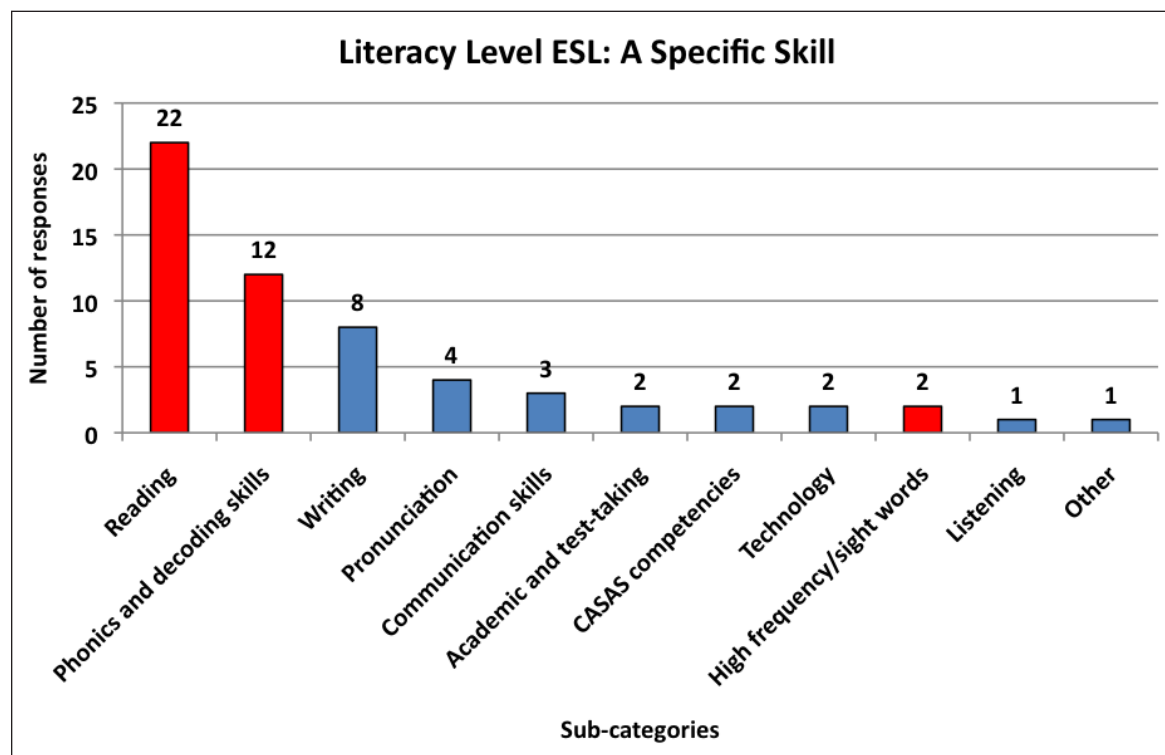


Figure 6: Requested PD needs for specific skills for literacy level ESL.

Literacy level ESL: Curriculum and its sub-categories

In addition to PD on teaching specific skills more effectively, respondents who selected literacy-level ESL also wanted help with curriculum. Nineteen, or 13% of comments, were about curriculum needs. The number one sub-category under curriculum was program or course design. Most comments reflected a need for first steps when working with literacy-level ESL students. For example, one respondent wrote, “A guide to where to start, what’s most important. A curriculum, I guess.” Another wrote, “How to start with these students. Appropriate goals.”

Advanced ESL: Needs and interests

The needs of the advanced ESL classroom were also a PD priority for ABE practitioners. Of the 407 people who responded to this question, 99 or roughly 24% indicated that advanced ESL was among their top three PD priorities, and 140 individual comments were generated by this group. Comments were placed in 14 categories and 39 sub-categories.

Advanced ESL: A specific skill and its sub-categories

Like the other ESL program areas, the PD needs and interests of advanced ESL instructors focused on teaching a specific skill. Almost 50% of comments were requests for PD as it related to a specific language or academic skill, primarily for writing (see Figure 7).

Almost all comments related to writing were very general so it was not completely clear what practitioners want or need from writing-focused PD activities. There were a few specific requests. For example, one person wrote, "writing difficulties on the sentence level (below reading level)." Another wrote, "Writing strategies based on student interests." Finally, a third person commented, "Improving academic skills, teaching writing w/an integrated approach, teaching reading fluency & strategies."

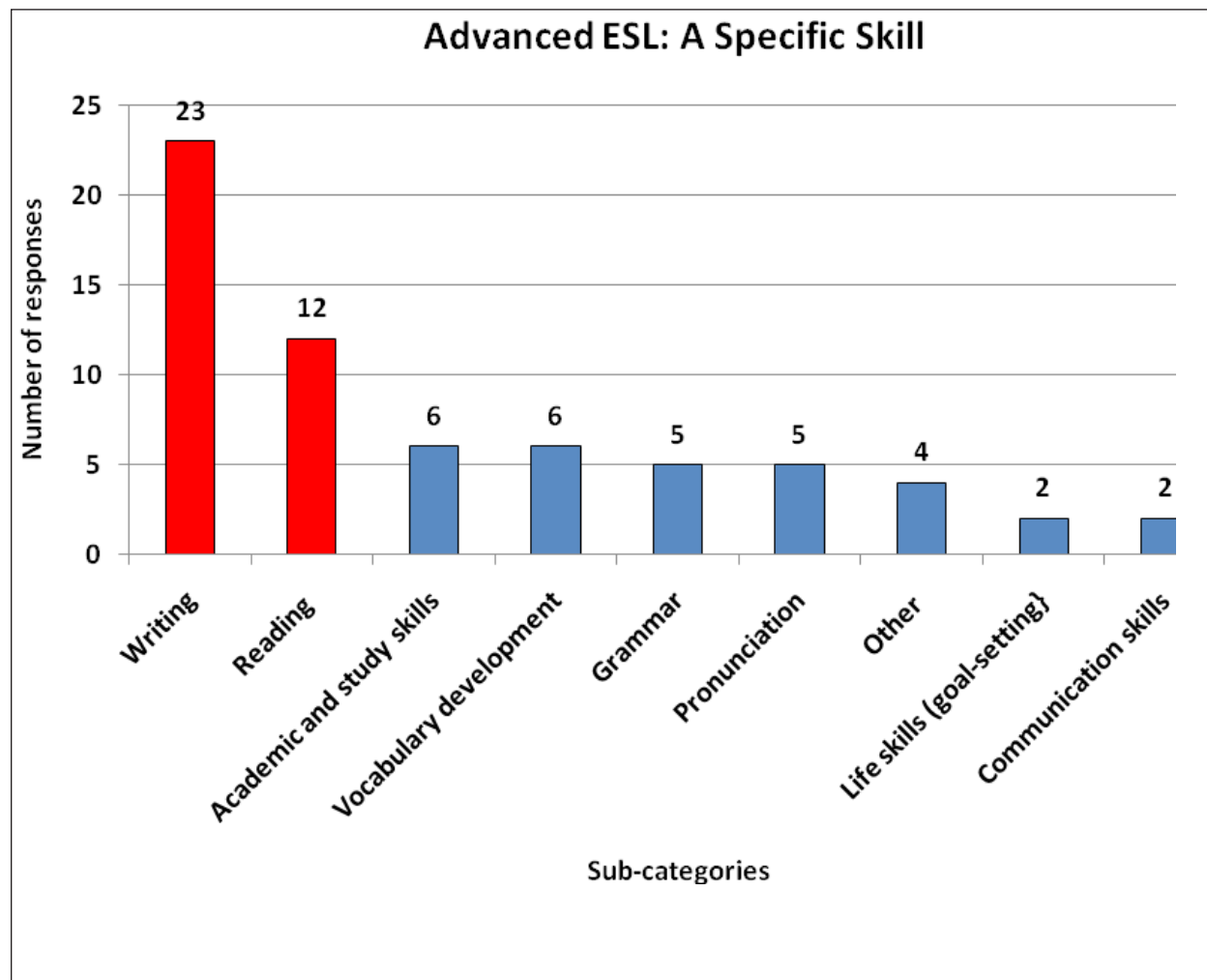


Figure 7: Requested PD needs for specific skills for advanced ESL; 65 total responses.

PD needs by instructional area

In looking at the instructional areas suggested by respondents, the ABE practitioners' PD needs and interests range from quite basic to quite complex. Sixty-eight percent of all respondents (465 total), provided 1,402 individual responses to this question. Respondents were given 21 categories from which to select. Figure 8 shows a breakdown of the response counts for each category. Curriculum received the largest number of responses with nearly 33% of respondents indicating a need or interest in receiving training on curriculum related issues.

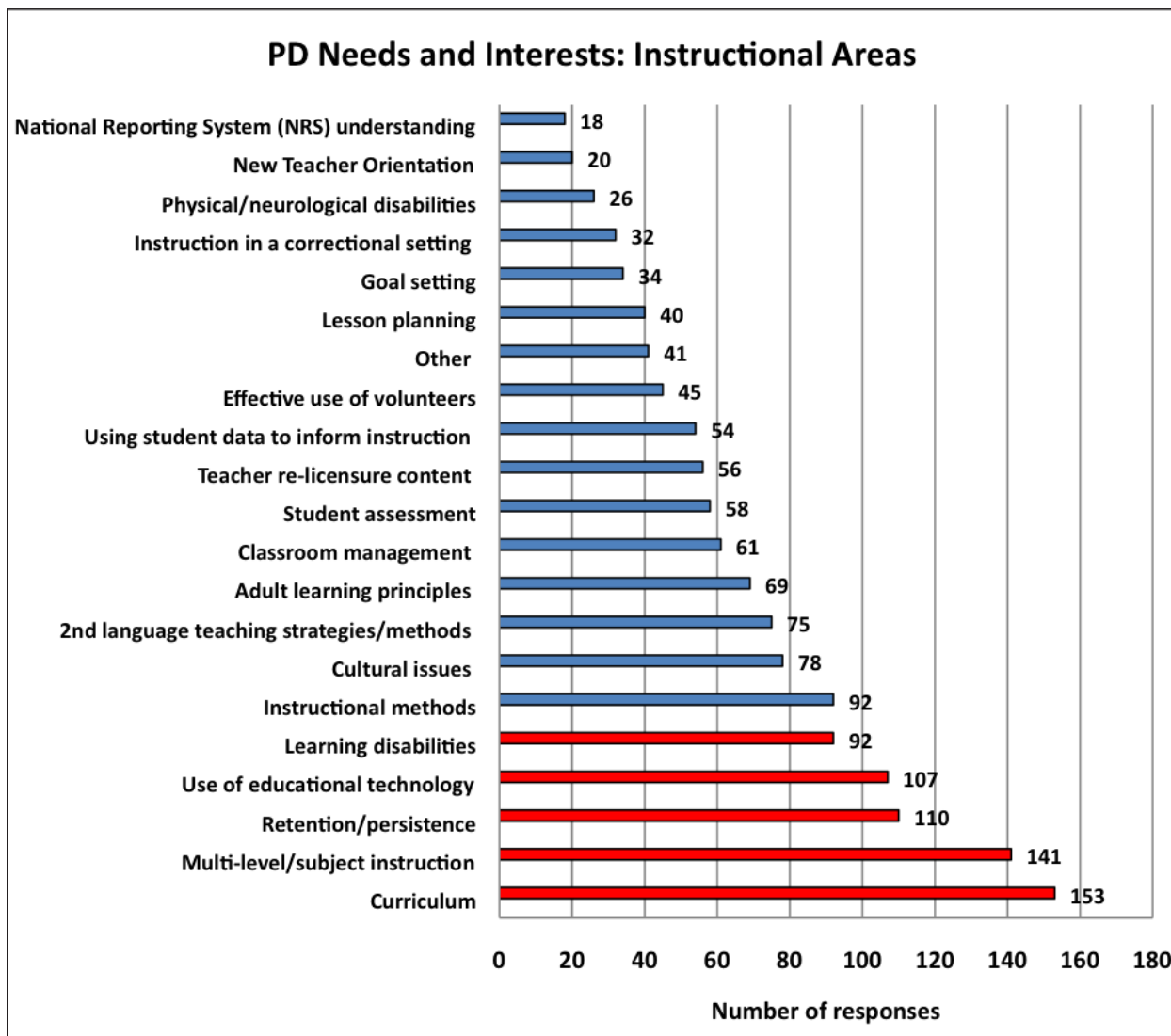


Figure 8: PD Needs and interests listed by instructional areas; 1,402 total responses.

Curriculum needs and interests

The vast majority of comments regarding curriculum focused on the need for a curriculum to teach a specific subject or for a review of curriculum development basics. There were 178 relevant comments that were classified into 14 categories, 46 sub-categories, and seven super sub-categories. As Figure 9 illustrates, 33% (58) were related to the need for curriculum for a specific subject (see Appendix C for a detailed breakdown of sub-categories) and another 25% (44) were focused on the need to review curriculum development basics.

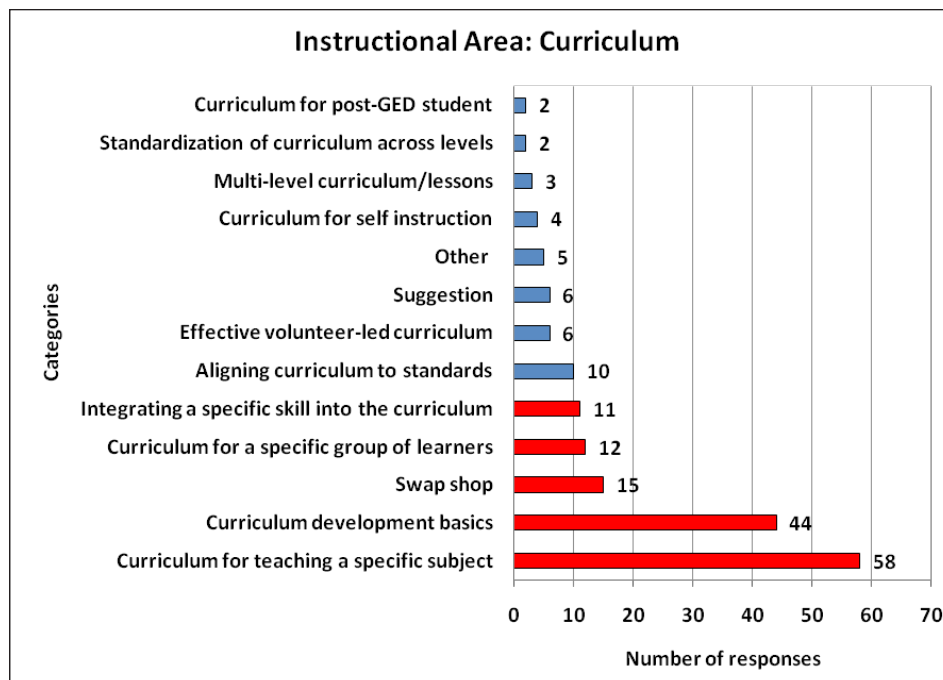


Figure 9: PD needs and interests for the instructional area of curriculum; 178 total responses.

Multilevel classroom

After curriculum, the most requested instructional area for PD was the multilevel classroom. Thirty percent, or 141, of respondents indicated this was an area in which they wanted more PD. These 141 individuals provided 140 relevant responses, which were sorted into 10 categories and 23 sub-categories. Figure 10 shows a breakdown of those responses.

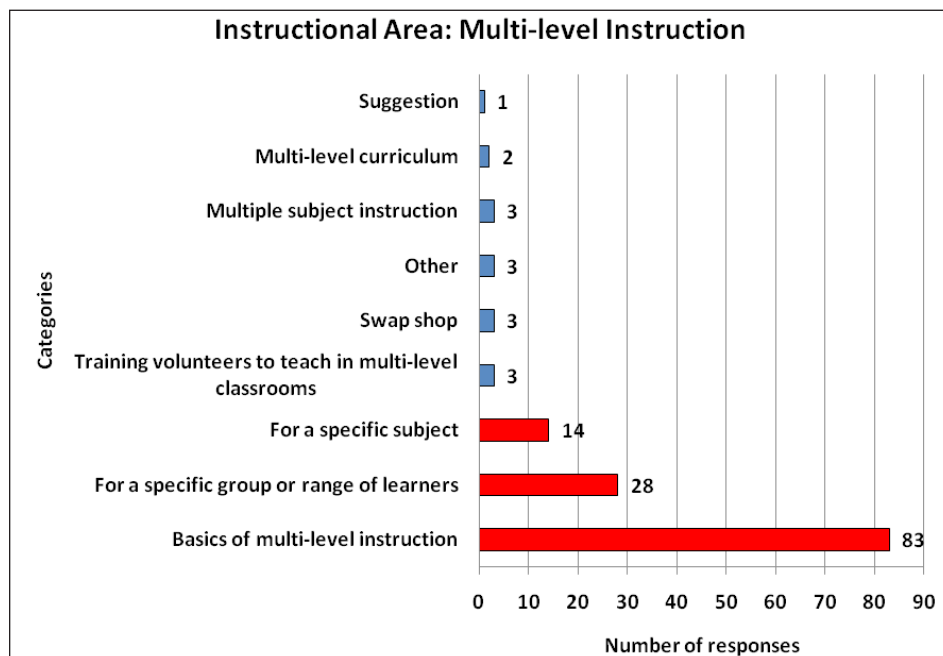


Figure 10: A breakdown of responses for the instructional area multilevel instruction; 148 total responses.

Respondents in this category overwhelming expressed a need for the basics of multilevel instruction. Of the relevant 140 comments, 83, or 61% were about the basics of multilevel instruction, including many focused on instruction for specific learners. A breakdown of responses for multilevel instruction for a specific group or range of learners can be found in Appendix D.

Retention and persistence

The instructional area with the third highest level of interest was retention and persistence. This area dealt primarily with issues related to drop-out, enrollment, attendance, and student responsibility. One hundred and ten people selected retention and persistence as a PD priority and they provided 114 individual comments. Comments from this category were divided into 18 different categories and 15 sub-categories. Figure 11 breaks down the relevant 104 comments into 14 categories.

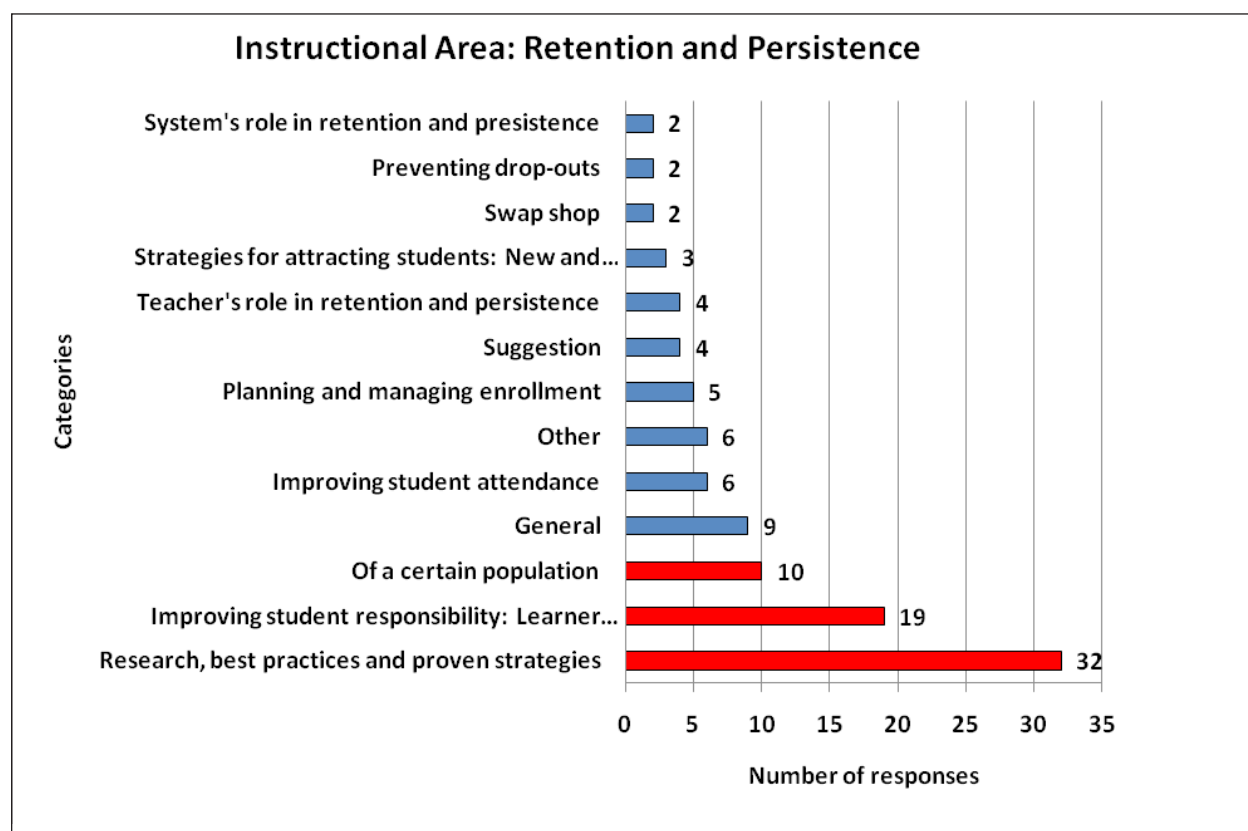


Figure 11: A breakdown of responses for the instructional area retention and persistence; 104 total responses.

Retention and persistence: Research, best practices, strategies and learner responsibility

Comments point to two areas of interest: one focused on institutional response, and the other focused on student behavior. Thirty-one percent of the comments expressed a desire to receive PD on research, best practices and proven strategies currently used to improve student retention and persistence. One individual stated the general theme of PD requested, "How to retain students and stop the revolving door." Another was more specific in his/her request for PD, "Trainings on research, tools and proven practices that lead to retention; NOT a discussion about why we have trouble retaining students."

Respondents in this category also wanted PD on improving student responsibility. A total of 19 comments reflected a desire to know how to improve aspects of student behavior such as motivation, goal-setting and students' taking ownership of their learning.

Use of educational technology

The use of educational technology was also an instructional area of high interest among respondents. Nearly 24% of respondents to this question (110 total) ranked it as a high priority for PD. These individuals provided 124 responses that were divided into 14 categories and 29 sub-categories. Figure 12 displays the breakdown of the relevant 115 comments into 13 categories. Many comments focused on a desire for a specific computer program or tool. As one person said, "I don't use the technology I have access to well...it just seems like one more thing to figure out and I need help!" Second, many comments dealt with a desire to see what was new in this area. For example, one person wrote, "The latest and greatest: websites, online learning, using different kinds of technology in the classroom, etc." For a breakdown of these sub-categories, see Appendix E.

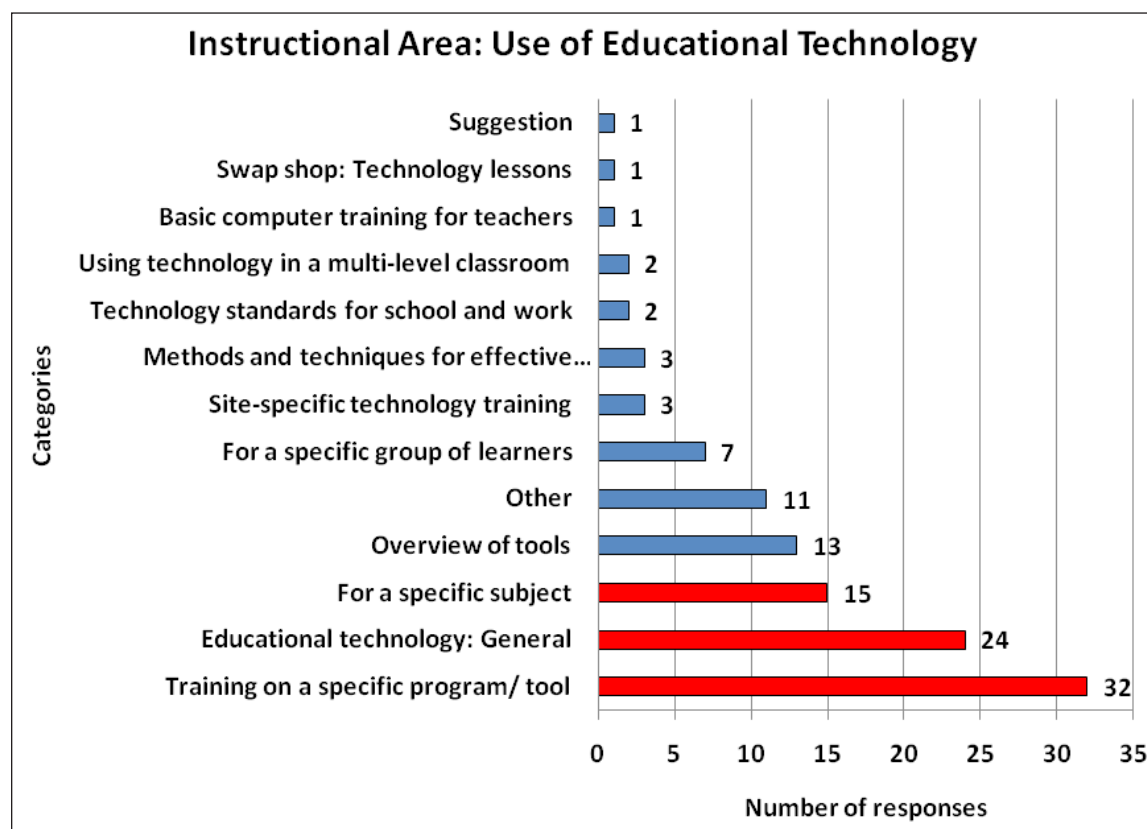


Figure 12: A breakdown of responses for the instructional area educational technology; 115 total responses.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The ABE Workforce

The findings from the survey provide many insights into the ABE/ESL workforce and their

professional development needs. To start, and keeping in mind that nearly half of ABE learners enroll in ESL and that beginning, intermediate and advanced/transitions ESL were among the top five most frequently taught courses, it was somewhat surprising to see the breakdown of licenses, Master's Degrees and Certificates related to teaching ESL. Specifically, of the 680 respondents, 12% of respondents (79 people) reported having or working toward a K-12 license in ESL, 10% of respondents (67 people) reported having or working toward a Master's Degree in ESL, and 14% report holding a TESL, TEFL, or Adult ESL certificate.

This means that even though nearly 60% of respondents have taught ESL in the past five years, at best 22% of those that responded to this question have or are working toward either a license or a Master's degree in ESL. Thus, many ESL students are likely being taught by practitioners lacking education and training in second language teaching and learning.

It is also important to note that while about 80% of respondents have current teaching licenses, the majority of those are licenses that focus on working with children or adolescents, not adults. Practitioners holding these licenses may lack training in a number of areas, including adult learning theory or creating and using adult-appropriate learning materials.

Another key finding for our purposes concerns the lack of experience teaching academic English. In the survey, 68% had no experience teaching ESL in an academic context or IEPs. This is meaningful given the state (and national) priority on the preparation of ABE learners to transition into post-secondary education. Increasing research demonstrates the value and need for ABE to shift focus from attainment of a GED to post-secondary education and training for ABE students, including adult ELLs (Prince & Jenkins, 2005; Strawn, 2007). Minnesota continues to move in this direction, with new initiatives and funding for programs to expand transitions work, statewide collaborations between workforce, ABE and the Minnesota College and University system, and the creation of a statewide ABE Transitions Specialist position. To facilitate the transition of students from ABE to post-secondary, it is vital that we have a teaching force prepared to teach higher-level, academic skills. The fact that more than 2/3 of our current practitioners lack experience teaching academic ESL points to an important professional development need.

Working Conditions in ABE

The primary classroom challenges identified by instructors paint a striking picture of the working conditions facing adult ESL practitioners working in the ABE system. A lack of program resources is one key issue – ABE programs are operating on tight budgets and may have limited funds for materials and technology. Program policies and structures can also result in very difficult teaching environments. Often due to limited funding or space, programs may be forced to place students in multilevel classes. Other programs may not have enough students at each level to create leveled classes. Furthermore, because of open enrollment policies and irregular student attendance, many, if not most, ABE practitioners must plan for instruction without knowing which students are going to be in their classes from day-to-day or month-to-month. Finally, a lack of time emerges as a major challenge to planning for and delivering quality instruction. The majority of ABE practitioners are part-time and some may be juggling the responsibilities of their ABE job with another job. Whether it is a lack of paid prep time or a lack of time due to the part-time nature of their ABE positions, practitioners are clearly struggling. It is within this context that we must plan for and deliver professional development to meet the needs of adult ESL practitioners.

Adult ESL: PD Priorities and Responses

The survey results indicate a number of cross-program PD needs and have provided guidance for PD leaders on the needs of adult ESL practitioners. Given the working conditions described above, it is not surprising that multilevel instruction, curriculum, and technology emerge as high priority PD needs in all program areas. Instructors are looking for effective ways to plan for and deliver instruction to groups of learners who may have a wide range of skills, languages, and educational backgrounds. Some of these groups may have a mix of American-born students and ELLs, each with their own needs. Some classes of ELLs may have a wide range of oral and written skills. Classes may also include learners with limited first-language literacy or formal schooling backgrounds, and teachers struggle to help them develop literacy while also meeting the needs of their more literate classmates. To address this, ATLAS and state PD providers continue to increase options for practitioners working with multilevel and multi-subject classrooms. During 2009, working groups convened in several regions of Minnesota to provide a facilitated opportunity for practitioners to explore and share best practices related to the topic of multilevel instruction. This was well-received and similar work is planned for the future.

Curriculum is another key area for professional development. Many practitioners are feeling challenged by limited program resources and are looking for curriculum and materials to teach a specific subject. They are also seeking guidance on how to develop curriculum. It may be that some of the requests for PD on curriculum are due to a lack of direction on curricular content at the statewide or program-level. At this time there are no content standards for ABE in Minnesota, but a statewide committee of ABE practitioners is currently exploring the possibility of a statewide curricular framework. The adoption of ABE content standards in the future may provide some much needed support to practitioners, while creating new professional development challenges of its own.

Another priority area that spans all program areas is technology. The survey results indicate that practitioners lack confidence in using educational technology and want training in a variety of programs and tools. While some are challenged by a lack of technology in their classrooms, others indicate that they do not know how to use the technology that is available to them. The area of technology is of the growing importance because ABE students also need to build their own skills and comfort with technology in order to be successful in today's workplace and in post-secondary education. In order to take full advantage of technology as a planning and instructional tool, and to adequately prepare their learners for transitions to work or further education, practitioners will need ongoing PD opportunities and support. ABE professional development providers, including ATLAS, the Minnesota Literacy Council and the St. Paul Community Literacy Consortium Distance Learning Project, are currently collaborating to coordinate PD for technology. This includes better integration of technology in all PD delivery, focused expansion of PD offerings on the subject of technology, and potential partnership with Project IDEAL (Improving Distance Education for Adult Learners), based at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan and focused on distance education for adult learners, to facilitate a year-long project to deliver PD for effective online teaching and learning.

In addition to these overarching PD needs, a number of needs specific to ESL programming emerge from the survey data. It is not surprising that literacy-level ESL instruction is key concern among practitioners. Minnesota's immigrant/refugee population is unique in that two of the largest groups, Somali and Hmong, include many adults who have limited literacy skills in their home languages and in English. In addition, ABE classrooms also include other foreign-born adults from a variety of language backgrounds and countries who have had limited

formal schooling in their home countries and have not had the opportunity to develop strong literacy skills. Many practitioners are not sure how to approach instruction for low-literate adults. They are looking for guidance in a number of areas, including instructional strategies for literacy skills as well as level-appropriate curriculum and materials. Again, ATLAS and leaders at the state level have commenced multiple initiatives to meet these needs, drawing on local experts in working with literacy-level and students with limited formal education. The PD options include workshops, extended learning opportunities through the annual Adult ESL Institute at Hamline University, and study circles for teachers of literacy-level learners.

At the other end of the spectrum, advanced ESL instructors are also seeking training on literacy instruction, with the majority of their requests focused on teaching writing. With increasing pressure to prepare students for transitions to postsecondary and most ABE practitioners' lack of experience teaching in academic settings, significant PD targeted at advanced ESL will be needed in the coming years. This is being addressed in multiple ways, including targeted advanced-level/transitions focused workshops at the annual Adult ESL Institute and the ABE Transitions to Work and Postsecondary conference held each year in the fall. Also, ABE PD leaders have begun to increase communication and coordination with ESL and developmental education colleagues working within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system to: 1) raise awareness of the skills needed for ABE students to succeed in post-secondary education and 2) provide ABE teachers with tools and instructional strategies to improve the academic readiness of all ESL students. With the growing emphasis on preparing learners to transition into post-secondary education, this collaboration is likely to grow in the future.

Probably because most ESL students in Minnesota ABE programs fall into beginning or intermediate levels, there were many requests for PD in the low/intermediate ESL program area. They, too, are most interested in learning more about teaching reading and writing. It is notable that at all levels of ESL, practitioners feel that they need more training in literacy instruction. This may be a result of a variety of factors, including gaps in teacher training and an understanding that students moving on to GED and post-secondary will need strong reading and writing skills to succeed.

For each of these priority areas, state ABE and ATLAS staff are developing plans for professional development that will outline desired outcomes and corresponding PD activities to be conducted over the next two years. Professional development activities in these areas will be carried out at the statewide, regional, and local levels by professional development providers and practitioners in the field.

Systemic Change

In addition to the development of statewide plans to address the priority areas, other findings from the study may have an impact on ABE in the state. Although our focus has been on the collection of data needed to inform our professional development work with teachers and administrators, other larger systems issues have been identified through this analysis. For example, open enrollment and corresponding unpredictable student attendance are huge challenges for programs and practitioners. Open enrollment, which emerged historically to meet the needs of a working population of English-speaking adult learners seeking to earn a GED, continues to be the most common program model in ABE. Research supports the survey respondents' concerns about open enrollment as a contributor to "attendance turbulence" (Sticht, McDonald, & Erickson, 1998) that undermines classroom commitment and instruction. Because students are allowed to come and go, they do not feel a sense of obligation to the teacher or commu-

nity with other students. For teachers, it is difficult or impossible to plan and present lessons sequentially and systematically. For anyone familiar with ESL teaching, it is clear to see how open enrollment policies can become an impediment to ELLs and the successful acquisition of English. A result of this survey finding, combined with emerging research that argues for the replacement of open enrollment in ABE with regularly scheduled entry points (known as managed enrollment) to increase student attendance and retention, has led to state encouragement and assistance for programs considering the transition to managed enrollment.

One of the key current professional development initiatives in ABE has also contributed to a recent shift toward managed enrollment. This very successful reading initiative – Student Achievement in Reading, or STAR – targeted at native-English speaking intermediate level readers, has had a profound impact on the structure of ABE programs throughout Minnesota. As a required component of the STAR reading reform initiative, programs have created managed enrollment for STAR classes, for periods as short as 4 weeks. The success of STAR, including the progress made by students in this more stable learning environment, has prompted multiple ABE programs to move toward instituting some type of managed enrollment for classes, including ESL. We expect this trend to continue.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, the overall lesson from the survey is the value of using current data to inform our PD efforts and meet the needs of practitioners. The survey results of ABE practitioners have yielded valuable information that will focus our work designing and delivering relevant and meaningful PD across the state. The development, implementation and analysis of the survey has been a labor-intensive but extremely valuable process that has led to new insights and a much more complete picture of our ABE workforce. It is a critical component of our PD planning cycle, and future plans include: 1) smaller-scale, focused follow-up surveys to provide more insight on specific challenges and needs, such as the specific writing challenges that teachers face, 2) a similar statewide survey to be conducted on a regular 5-year cycle, and 3) improving our PD evaluation methods to collect data about the effectiveness of PD and to cycle this information back into our PD planning in a meaningful way. Finally, we are currently analyzing the data collected from ABE program administrators, and those results will then be used to inform the development of relevant PD for managers and supervisors working with ESL teachers in the field.

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APPENDIX A

Master's degrees: Other Responses (of 97 individual responses)

Categories	Number of responses
Counseling/psychology	17
Special education	14
Other educational field	13
Educational administration or leadership	9
Other non-educational field	9
Second languages and cultures	8
International field	4
Public policy	4
Curriculum and instruction	3
Human and workforce development	3
MBA	3
Religious studies	3
STEM field	3
Applied linguistics	2
Social work	2

APPENDIX B

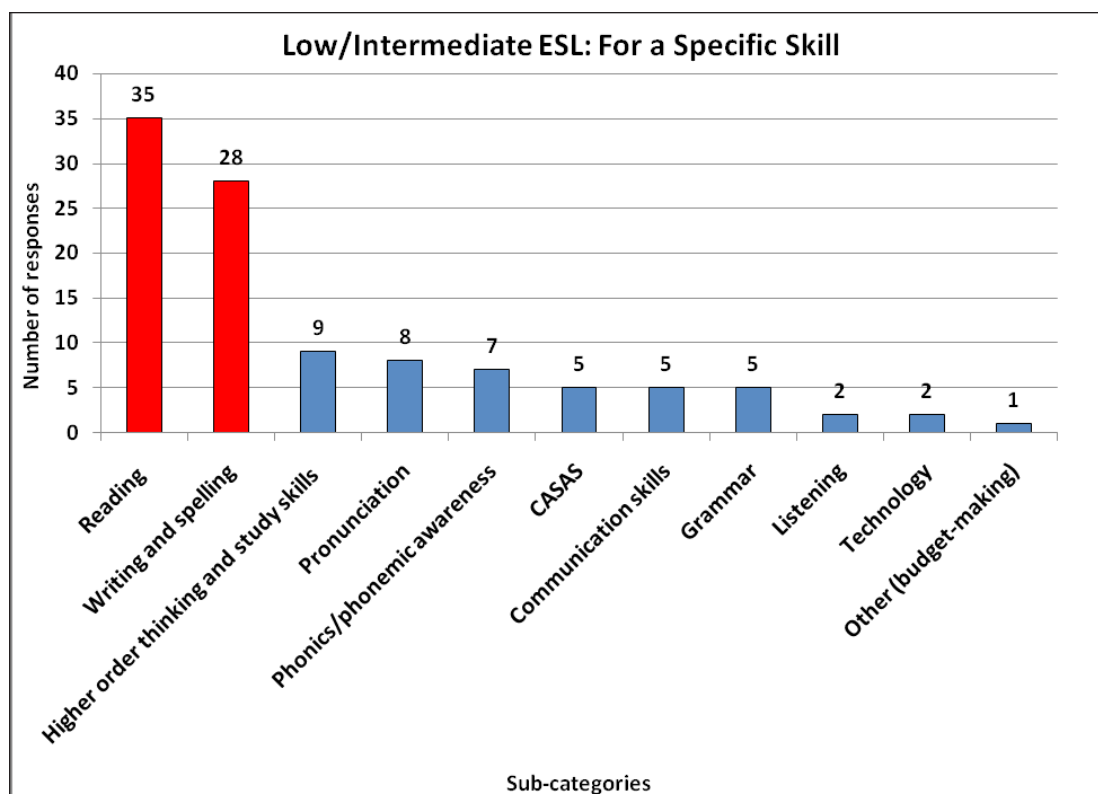


Figure B1: Requested PD needs for specific skills for low/intermediate ESL; 59 total responses.

APPENDIX C

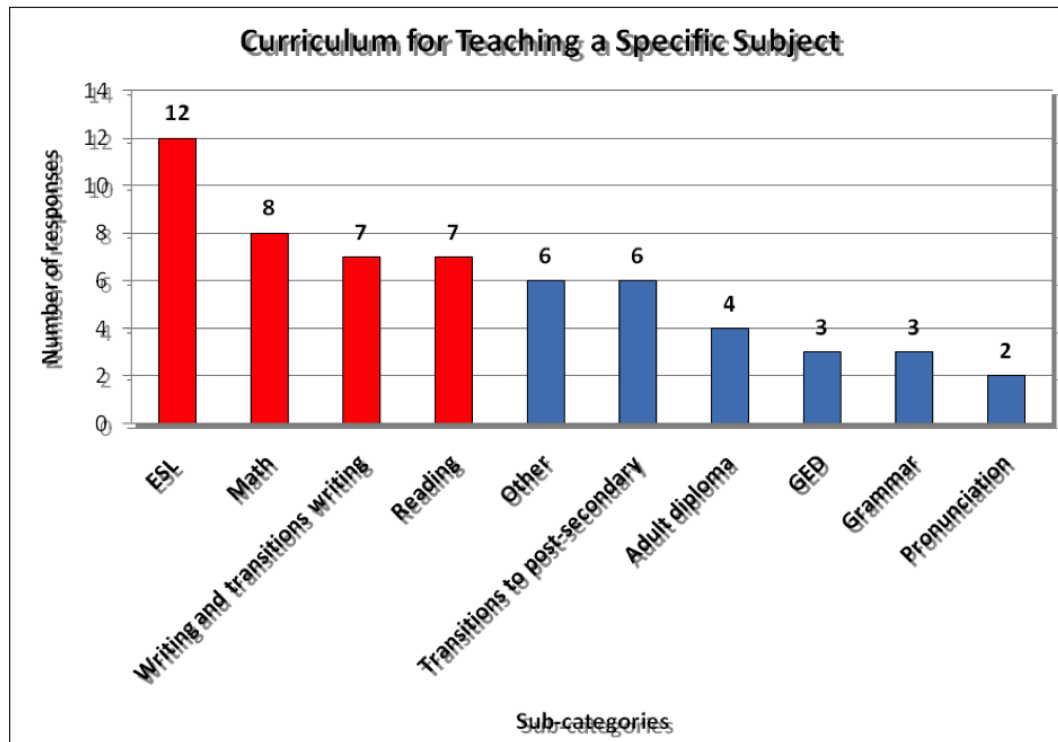


Figure C1: Subcategories of requests for curriculum for a specific subject; 58 total responses.

Note: High-response categories related to ESL included swap shops and curricula for specific groups of learners. In the category of swap shop, providers want to see a swap shop for effective curriculum (10), some specifically indicating a desire for the sharing of effective curriculum for ESL (2). Practitioners also requested curriculum for specific groups of learners (12) with most indicating a need for an effective curriculum with which to work with pre-/low literate learners (6 of 12).

APPENDIX D

Subcategories of Responses for Multilevel Instruction for a Specific Group of Learners

Sub-category	Count
ESL general	6
Pre-lit to beginning ESL learners	6
Other	5
ESL students with native speakers	4
Low- to mid-level learners	3
Low to advanced learners	2
Advanced to transitional level learners	2

APPENDIX E

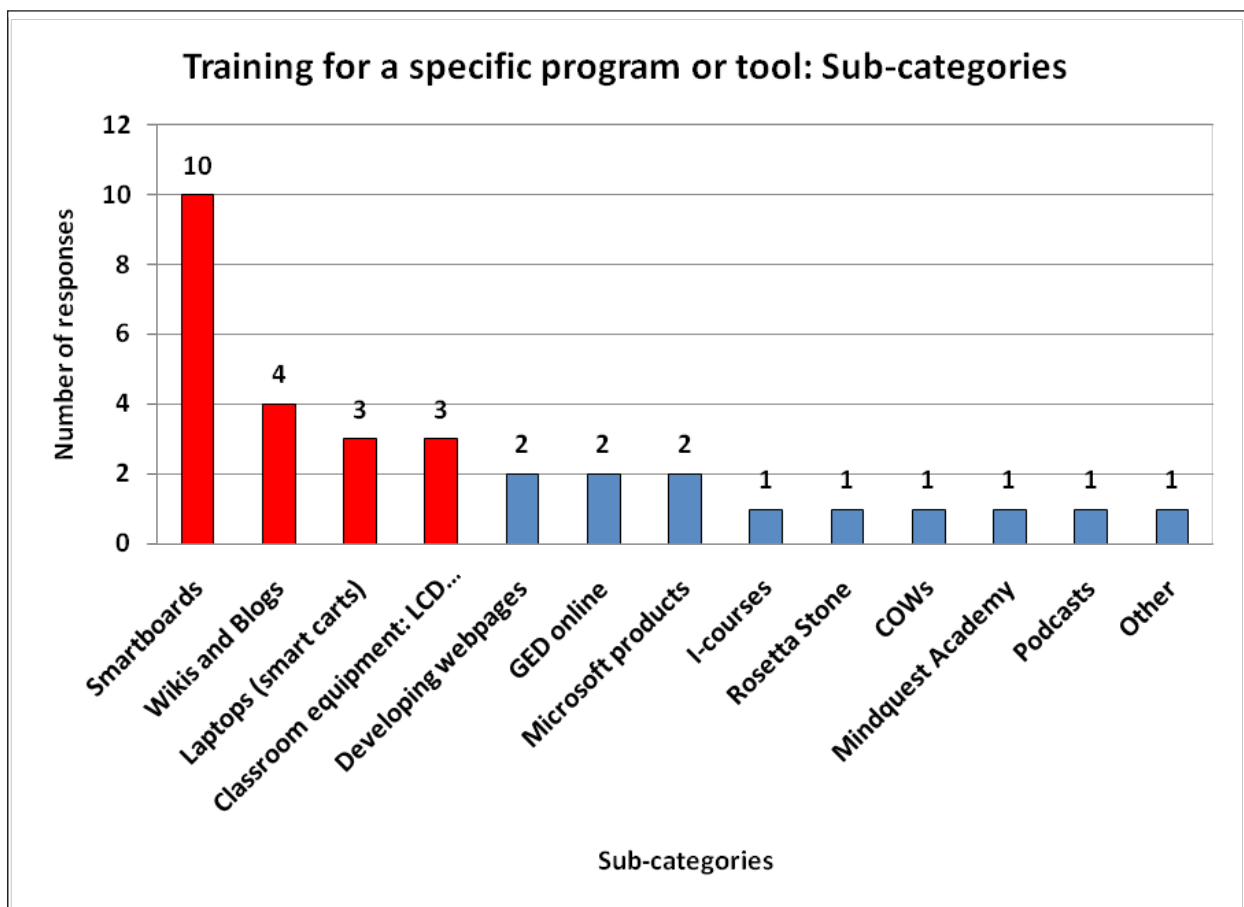


Figure E1: Breakdown of the category of a specific program or tool into its subcategories; 32 total responses.