

PARENT AND TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON CONGOLESE STUDENTS IN THE
AMERICAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

BY

KATHLEEN KOLUMBAN

THESIS

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Master's Committee:

Associate Professor Irene Koshik
Associate Professor Ann Abbott

Abstract

Parents of ESL students face a unique set of challenges as they begin to navigate the American education system after immigrating to the United States. They often utilize different home literacy practices from American parents (Heath, 1982) and have different practices for socializing their children into their language and culture (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984). They must work to develop their understanding of the new school system and educational culture (Gaitan, 2012) and often find that obstacles such as a language barrier affect their involvement in their children's education (Vera et al., 2010).

The following study investigates Congolese parent perceptions of the education of their children in the United States. Congolese parents and ESL teachers were interviewed about their experiences in the education of the local Congolese students. Parents were asked to explain their own educational backgrounds and experiences, what kinds of home educational practices they engage in with their children, how they were involved in the education of their children, and what difficulties they had in understanding or participating in the American education system. Teachers were asked to explain their experiences in teaching Congolese ESL students, how the Congolese students differed from other groups of ESL students, and what their interactions were like with Congolese parents. The parent interviews indicated several areas where parents' home educational practices and expectations differed from mainstream American educational practices. While the information provided by the teachers differed significantly in several areas, there were still areas of similarity in the teacher interviews, including comments about discipline and their interactions with the Congolese parents. The final analysis of the parent and teacher interviews suggests implications for school district staff interactions with Congolese students and their parents.

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Chapter 1: **Introduction and Literature Review**

When one thinks of ESL (English as a Second Language) education in the United States, the teachers and students immediately come to mind as the ones who are directly involved and affected by ESL teaching practices. However, when we only consider the students and teachers, we are missing a very important voice in the process of educating ESL students. In order to really understand how ESL students are educated, we also need to investigate the way that ESL instruction affects the parents of ESL students and what they perceive and experience as a result of their children's education in the United States. The majority of parents of ESL students did not have the same educational experience as their children. Most have spent the majority of their lives in a different culture from the United States and have been educated in a different culture as well. Some may not have been required to attend school in their home countries, so they have limited formal education. Some may have lived in very different socioeconomic conditions in their home countries. All of these factors can affect the way that they perceive their children's education in the United States and the way they are involved in their children's education.

The following is a review of relevant literature that looks at different factors in the way that ESL parents are involved in the education of their children. It looks at socio-cultural aspects of language learning that are affected by the home and culture of the children as well as the importance of language socialization in developing culture and learning practices. The review will then discuss literacy practices and perceptions of literacy by parents and teachers and how these perceptions affect the education that ESL students receive. Finally relevant research related to parent involvement in ESL education and parent-teacher communication will be discussed.

Language socialization and home educational practices

The first reason that it is important to investigate parent perspectives of ESL education in the United States is that culture-specific language socialization practices and home educational practices that parents engage in with their children can differ from those of mainstream American households. Ochs (1991) defined the process of socialization as “the process whereby novices gain knowledge and skills relevant to membership in a social group” (p. 143). Parents and other family members generally have the responsibility of socializing their children to the culture that surrounds them and engaging in home practices that will ultimately prepare their children for schooling and general participation within their culture. The practices that are socialized and the practices by which they are socialized within a particular culture or group of people differ from culture to culture (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984), which becomes particularly relevant when thinking about ESL instruction within the United States. It is important to discover the similarities and differences between the socialization practices of families of ESL students and American socialization and educational practices to help educators of ESL students understand the background that their students have when they enter the American school system.

Within the context of socialization to culture, we can talk more specifically about language socialization and how it could affect ESL students in an American educational system. Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) defined language socialization as two processes. It is both “socialization through the use of language” and “socialization to use language” (p. 163). Language is the medium through which we learn to understand and participate in a culture, especially our first culture. Language and the way that it is used is also learned through the way that we interact with others, be it our parents, our teachers, or our peers. According to Schieffelin and Ochs (1986), language and culture are very important factors in how we interact

with one another. However, in practice, differences in language and culture are often ignored when interacting with others who do not share the same background.

These language socialization practices are not universal, but for a long time were treated as universal by an academic bias that favored white middle-class (mainstream) American practices for language socialization (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). That is, the language socialization practices of white middle-class families from the United States were considered to be the only, and therefore the correct, way of socializing children through language in the home. For example, in work done by Ochs and Schieffelin (1984), they discovered that though it is often considered natural or normal for caregivers to speak to their babies using a “baby register” commonly used in many Western cultures, this feature of language socialization is not universal in all cultures, and the way that caregivers communicate with and socialize their children is quite different across cultures (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). The fact that language socialization practices are not universal is especially important in the ESL context where students come from many very different cultural and familial environments. Socialization practices of a particular culture are also often reflected in the socialization practices and expectations of the educational system of that culture. ESL students entering the United States and its educational system may not share in the cultural knowledge of the American school system that language socialization would provide to American children.

Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) discussed the implications of language socialization practices in education. They reported that when there is “continuity” between educational practices and home language socialization practices, it provides access to success for mainstream children who are already accustomed to these types of practices. However, when there is “discontinuity” between home practices and school practices, as is often the case with non-

mainstream children, it limits the access that these students have to educational success. This idea was echoed by Delgado-Gaitan (1991) when she said, “Where sociocultural congruency exists between home and school settings, children have a greater chance of succeeding in school” (p. 21).

There are several important examples of what can happen when there is this discontinuity between language socialization practices and school practices. Heath’s (1982, 1983) work comparing the literacy practices of mainstream middle-class communities with black and white working-class communities is a telling example of how language socialization practices and home literacy practices can differ even among children of the same first language. Her study demonstrated in what ways the middle-class children enter a school environment that according to Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) would have continuity with what is practiced at home. She observed in her work that the middle class children were read bedtime stories every night, used books as a form of entertainment, and were encouraged by adults to make connections between what they read in books and what they experienced in real life (Heath, 1982; 1983). The skills that they developed through language socialization and socialization to literacy aligned with what was expected of them at school.

However, working-class white and black children entered a somewhat discontinuous environment, each needing to develop or alter skills they had acquired at home to “catch up” to the middle-class children. Heath (1982, 1983) commented that in the white working-class neighborhood, she observed that literacy was not an activity that extended beyond reading books. Parents did not bring attention to real-life situations that were similar to what their children had read about, and much of what was taught to the children was done by example or observation, not through explanation or reasoning as was done in the middle class neighborhood. In the black

working class neighborhood, children had very limited exposure to books, much less books intended for children. They were not read bedtime stories, and their parents did not take a role in “tutoring” their children in developmental skills. Instead they were expected to learn through observation and independent trial of skills. The children from the black working class neighborhood were very skilled storytellers, but they were not used to having to do the sort of story-analyzing that is such a part of the middle class upbringing.

As a result of the differences in literacy socialization, the children who grew up in both working class neighborhoods were less successful when they attended schools where mainstream middle class educational practices were used that mimicked the way that the middle class children were socialized to literacy. Neither group was accustomed to needing to find answers to the wh-questions that they were asked while reading. The children from the white working class neighborhood were not used to having to actively participate in the reading process or having to understand and discuss the story instead of just passively listening to it. The children from the black working class neighborhood were not used to having to define, label, and categorize information that they had read in a story, which is important to mainstream education. Looking at these two groups through the lens of the mainstream education system, they were seen as deficient as they struggled to “catch-up” to mainstream middle class students, all because their socialization to literacy had differed at home.

Reese, Arauz, and Bazán (2012) found that, similar to Heath’s (1982, 1983) analysis, the middle class and lower class students of Mexico had different socializations to literacy. However, they also found that instead of each group of students being required to adhere to the same mainstream practices, which found one group more deficient than the other, the schools themselves were perpetuating the differences in socialization practices, which further widened

the gap between literacy levels of the two groups of students. Even though Mexico uses a national curriculum which should be administered to all children, they found that students in the lower-class elementary school were doing more tasks related to rote skills that were not as developed as those taught to the middle-class children. These methods employed by teachers at lower-class schools were perpetuating the achievement divide between low and middle-class students.

If there are these major differences within one language and society as to how children are socialized and taught literacy skills, the differences and challenges become even more pronounced when children of one language and culture must enter the educational system of another language and culture. This is the case of English language learners (ELLs) within the United States. According to Chen and Harris (2009), literacy can be considered a social practice, and it is influenced by the sociocultural surroundings of the learner (Freebody, 1992; Heath, 1982; 1983). Students' literacy skills are molded by the way that they have been socialized and the needs of the community in which they grow up. Traditionally, the mainstream educational system has viewed students who come to a mainstream educational setting and have a different cultural or linguistic background through the *deficit approach* or *deficit view* (Billings, 2009; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Peterson & Heywood, 2007). According to the deficit approach, students who come into the American mainstream educational system from a different culture with different language socialization or educational practices are somehow deficient or maybe even seen as coming in with nothing (Billings, 2009).

Educators of ELLs have also used the deficit view when describing parental involvement in their children's school and literacy practices. Parents bring their own literacy background with them to the United States, and their definition or representation of what it means to be

literate may differ from what is considered literate in the United States (Chen & Harris, 2009). There is also evidence that the way that parents were taught and the way that they developed literacy in their native languages influences the way that they educate their own children (Chen & Harris, 2009; Huss-Keeler, 1997, Reese et al., 2012). Billings (2009) found that many Latino parents from Mexico, El Salvador, and Nicaragua believed that the most important skills for children to have when they enter school are oral and motor skills, with less emphasis on formal literacy skills. Oral storytelling was a highly valued skill in their culture, and the parents noted that their children had more physical exposure to books than linguistic exposure, meaning that they were given books to physically play with, such as flipping the pages or looking at the pictures, instead of being given them to read. Vera et al. (2010) found that parents who were more literate in their native languages were more likely to read to their children than those who were less literate.

When thinking about these issues related to literacy and socialization to literacy, it is also important to think about other skills that students bring to the learning environment that are not based in text-based literacy. One way that these other skills have been discussed is through the concept of “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). Funds of knowledge refer to types of knowledge and skills that people have accumulated over their lifetime, which they use to perform household tasks and other daily occupations that are common within their culture. For example, these funds of knowledge could include skills used to farm, run a household, practice religion, or trade with other groups of people. As Moll et al. (1992) noted, teachers within an educational setting do not often recognize funds of knowledge, even though the ESL students may have extensive background knowledge in many areas. Under the deficit model of education, these funds of knowledge are not valued as adding to the children’s

education since they often do not match the criteria of traditional literacy that other mainstream students bring with them into the American educational setting.

The deficit model also tends to disregard the idea that parents can contribute to their children's literacy development in English by using their native languages to do so (Peterson & Heywood, 2007). However, work has been done to demonstrate the value of using the learner's native language to teach literacy skills that can then be applied to becoming literate in English (Cummings, 1981). When thinking about how to implement family literacy programs, Auerbach (1989) said that there should be a social-contextual model of family literacy. This model needs to ask, "How can we draw on parents' knowledge and experience to inform instruction? Rather than, "How can we transfer school practices into home contexts?" (p. 177). She advocated for incorporating cultural content into literacy development so that families feel like the literacy skills are more pertinent to their cultural backgrounds and understandings of the world. When educators think about the background of the parents and incorporate their funds of knowledge and previous experience into the education of ESL students, it can lead to better outcomes than forcing students to learn only discontinuous educational practices without having the cultural or academic background to understand them.

An important study that ties language socialization and culture with literacy development in an ESL context is Peterson & Heywood's (2007) study of parent, teacher, and administrator perspectives on the role and value of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) in parent involvement in their children's education and the parent's role in the literacy development of their children. According to Peterson and Heywood (2007), cultural capital refers to "the styles of behavior and knowledge that are linked to social class" (p. 519). They used Lareau's (1987, 1989) model for the components of cultural capital as it applies to parents of ESL students,

which include interactions with other parents, understanding of the school system, contact with teachers and administrators, and their communication skills. Overall, the teachers in the study valued the culture of the parents and students and made an effort to learn and understand the different cultures in the class. The teachers also valued the parents' role in literacy development and understood the importance of practices that they did with their children, even if they did not use English to encourage literacy within their homes. The teachers encouraged the parents to use the students' first language when reading with and telling stories to their children. The teachers also made efforts to understand the cultures of the students that they taught and connect with the community. This work demonstrates a different perspective on traditional views of home culture and literacy practices by educators, and this could be a vein of research that positively affects change in the field of ESL in the United States. The work done by Peterson and Heywood (2007) also leads to another important aspect of analyzing the role of the parents in ESL education. The issues that were considered by Lareau (1987, 1989) are very relevant to the question of parent involvement in their children's education and their connection and communication with the school system.

Parent involvement and parent-teacher communication

A very important issue that has been addressed in the literature and continues to be very relevant is the issue of parent involvement in the education of ESL students. Traditionally, parent involvement in ESL student education was viewed through the deficit model (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991) where it was believed that parents of ESL students were inactive and unable to be involved with their children's education because of a difference in language, culture, and social situation. However, numerous authors have noted that parents of ESL students are highly active

in their children's education and put a high value on education since for many it is seen as a vehicle for social mobility and advancement (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Gaitan, 2012; Guo, 2006; Reese et al., 2012; Reibolt & Goldstein, 2000; Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). Others noted that this parental engagement in education leads to greater achievement in school by ESL students (Jeynes, 2003; Plunkett et al., 2009).

However, though this engagement exists and is valued by the parents, there are still many barriers that ESL parents face when it comes to being involved with their children's education. These barriers include language differences, lack of knowledge about the U.S. school system, the desire to avoid interfering with the job of the teacher, stress from other responsibilities such as work, socioeconomic barriers, etc. (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Good et al., 2010; Guo, 2006; Lueck, 2010; Peterson & Ladky, 2007; Vera et al., 2012; Waterman, 2009).

Vera et al. (2012) found a correlation between proficiency in English and the way that parents were involved in the education of their children. Less proficiency or confidence speaking English led to parents being less likely to use community resources such as libraries, set a routine for their children at home, read to their children, and talk about school with their children. The parents' level of education also correlated with language proficiency, so the less formally educated the parents were, the more likely they were to lack proficiency in English.

Gaitan (2012) referred to the parents' knowledge of the American educational system as a type of literacy that must be developed. Just as the literacy background that parents bring to the United States might not be the same as what is considered literate in English (Chen & Harris, 2009), parents bring with them knowledge about how schools function that may not align with the expectations of teachers in the United States. Having limited English literacy makes it very difficult to read in English, and having a limited "school literacy" makes it more difficult for

parents to participate in the education of their children (Gaitan, 2012). In their survey of ESL parents from diverse cultural backgrounds, Vera et al. (2010) found a correlation between the parents' lack of understanding of the school system and the amount that they read to their children, utilized community resources such as the public library, communicated with the teachers of their children, and communicated with their children about school. They found that parents who expressed that they had a lack of understanding of the American school system did each of these activities less than if they did understand the school system. This demonstrates that parents who do not understand the educational system are also less likely to do other practices that are expected by the system, which puts their children at a further disadvantage compared to mainstream students, whose parents already understand the school system and its expectations.

Despite the barriers that parents of ESL students face, studies have revealed qualities that parents possess that enable them to still be involved and effective in aiding their children with their education. Delgado-Gaitan (1992) noted that parents are still able to provide their children with a safe environment and conditions in the home that are conducive to learning regardless of the parents' level of education. Parents also monitored the homework that the students completed, making sure that it was finished (Vera et al, 2010). Most of the communication that these parents engaged in with their children about their education centered on their homework and its completion. They offered a strong emotional support for their children, which is still very valuable to their success (Vera et al, 2010).

There are many components to the concept of parental involvement in education in general, and many more when considering the involvement of parents of ESL students. Waterman (2009) stated that this term "parent involvement" is unsatisfactory, as it seems to denote a one-sided responsibility for the parents to involve themselves in their children's

education. However, while the parents do have a responsibility to their children, there are many others that share this involvement with parents, including teachers and school administrators. It is important to consider the other factors that affect the way that parents can be involved in their children's education including the parent-school relationship (Chen & Harris, 2009). Vera et al. (2010) acknowledged that it is important to think about the *types* of involvement that parents are capable of. There are many different ways for parents to be involved in their children's education, and merely addressing general parent involvement could lead to ideas that there is only one ideal way for parents to be involved. As a result, those who differ from mainstream involvement practices could be considered uninvolved or not invested in their children's education.

Parent-teacher communication is one component of parent involvement in their children's education. Epstein (1986) described two perspectives for school-home interaction that affect parent-teacher communication. The first perspective is that the school and home environments are incompatible, in that what happens at school is distinct and separate from what happens at home. The other and more constructive perspective is that the school and home environments should be compatible and promote cooperation and collaboration between what happens at school and at home. The second perspective is favored for promoting parent-teacher communication, though in practice, there can be many issues that can cause disconnect between the school and the home environment for ESL students.

It is often a lack of parent-teacher communication that leads teachers and administrators to infer that parents are not involved or do not wish to be involved in their child's education (Guo, 2006). However, it may be that parents are not advocating for their children or demonstrating involvement in their education in a way that is expected by teachers and

administrators. In other words, as parents come from a different cultural and educational background, they may not practice the traditional mainstream norms for being involved in their children's education. For example, some parents may come from cultures where the teacher is held in very high esteem and is given total authority in the education of the children (Plunkett et al., 2009; Reinbolt & Goldstein, 2000; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). Delgado-Gaitan (1992) also found that Latino parents were less likely to question the evaluation of their children by the teacher than American parents, coming across as less interested in their children's education because they did not try to talk to the teacher regarding negative comments. In her analysis of Pakistani families in Great Britain, Huss-Keeler (1997) observed that while other White and Afro-Caribbean parents were considered to be actively involved in their children's education because they volunteered at school functions, the Pakistani families were seen as not being involved because they showed their support for their children in a different way. They often attended school functions instead of volunteering to work at them, for example. The teachers at the school viewed the Pakistani parents as uninterested because they did not display the norms for parent involvement that were common in mainstream British culture.

Because these types of misconceptions often occur, teacher perceptions of parent involvement and the students' home life is also a very important factor to consider when thinking about parent-school communication, and Moll et al.'s (1992) funds of knowledge become especially important to consider. Teachers need to recognize other areas of knowledge that their ESL students can draw from. Students do not come with nothing, as the deficit model would suggest. They already have special knowledge about the world that can be put to use in the classroom as a resource. Teachers need to recognize the culture and knowledge that students have been socialized to at home and allow it to coexist with the school culture that the students

are being introduced to (Gaitan, 2012; Peterson & Ladky, 2007). This may help to eliminate educator bias that has led to such views of ESL students as the deficit model.

Good communication between schools and students' homes can lead to positive effects on ESL students. Vera et al. (2010) found that parents who perceived more positive or encouraging messages from the school about parental involvement within the schools and who had fewer negative experiences in interacting with the teachers and administrators were more likely to talk with their children about school. There are many ways that schools and teachers can try to help improve the quality of communication so that strategies can be used to promote positive outcomes for the students and families. Vera et al. (2010) suggested that schools give more targeted training to parents regarding how to be involved in the schools. This was noted to be an issue in Huss-Keeler's (1997) observation of the school interactions with the Pakistani parents in England. Many teachers complained that the parents were not practicing literacy skills that aligned with the way that the students were taught in school, but the communication with the parents to address this issue did not explicitly explain what the practices that were used. This information was aimed at those parents who were already familiar with mainstream practices of literacy and who probably did not need the information about the way that their children were being taught to read. For example, one teacher stated that Pakistani parents taught the names of letters instead of the sounds of letters which was against the methods of school district, yet the reading curriculum was not clearly defined in the parent handbook. There was no outreach to parents to try to train and educate them in the expected educational practices of the school.

Epstein (1986) found in her study that parents stated that they would spend more time helping their children if they were taught specifically how to do types of learning activities that children were expected to do at home. She also found that in classes with teachers who were

designated as leaders in their communication with parents, there was not as great a difference in parent involvement between parents with higher and lower levels of education. There was, however, a significant difference in involvement between parents in classes where teachers did not lead parents through good communication. One way that parents and teachers can promote good communication is by eliminating the common one-way style of communication (Dudley-Marling, 2009) in which it is only the teachers that communicate with the parents, without giving parents an equal opportunity to communicate their needs with the teacher. Dudley-Marling (2009) noted that teachers needed to allow parents to express their needs, expectations, and values to the schools, and for the schools to listen to these needs and address them.

Good et al. (2010) addressed this issue by referring to it as a “relationship barrier”, as opposed to the traditional language barrier that many assume is the cause for lack of communication. Parents may feel that they are not given the opportunities to address the needs of their children with the teachers. In his study of ESL parent-teacher communication in Canada, Guo (2010) found that there were conflicting expectations at parents’ night functions between the parents and teachers as to the purpose of the gatherings. Teachers treated the gatherings as a chance to inform parents about the ESL program at the school and the expectations of Canadian school culture by presenting to parents who sat and listened to them talk. The parents, however, wanted more of an opportunity to discuss the individual needs of their children and felt unsatisfied with the attention that they received from the teachers. Because of the differences in expectations that were not addressed at the parents’ night functions, a clear power difference between the parents and teachers was perpetuated, inhibiting the possibility of stronger relationships between them.

Studies have demonstrated the positive effects that increased communication can have on both parent-teacher relationships and parent involvement in their children's education. Rivera and Lavan (2012) noted that mothers of ESL students were able to increase their involvement in their children's education as a result of programs such as Parent and Child Together activities that were held at school, adult ESL classes, and Parent Time sessions that were designed to train parents to understand the school system and educational activities that were done with the children and to address their concerns specifically about their children's education. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) found similar results in her observations of a parent group led by a preschool teacher to inform the parents of cultural expectations about parenting and education in the United States. This type of outreach to parents is one way that the school can bridge existing gaps with the homes of ESL children. It can better inform both parents and teachers of each group's expectations regarding the education of ESL students and the issues that need to be addressed to insure better achievement for these already at-risk students.

Implications and the current study

Taking into consideration the research that has been done in the areas of language socialization, home educational practices of immigrant families, and parent involvement in ESL education, there are still some issues that need to be further addressed by future research. The United States has a very diverse ESL population as a nation, but there are still populations and communities whose experiences regarding education have not yet been investigated. The research cited above proves that there has already been a large amount of work done related to literacy development and parent involvement in ESL education in the United States. However, more work could be done to analyze more specific ESL populations and parent involvement

from immigrant cultures that have not been represented in the research. One such population that has not been represented and that could benefit from work done to analyze their relationship to an American educational setting is the Congolese community in the United States.

For reasons that will be explained below, the Congolese community may differ from other immigrant communities in the way that they relate to the American educational system, the way that parents involve themselves in the education of their children, and in the issues that teachers have in educating Congolese students and communicating with their parents. Garcia Coll et al. (2002) found that parent involvement differed significantly among three distinct immigrant groups: Portuguese, Dominican, and Cambodian communities. They found that the groups differed significantly in factors such as level of parental involvement, the level of use of home based rules (e.g. enforcing a curfew), and the amount school based involvement (e.g. meeting with the teacher). They assert that differences in home culture, reasons for coming to the United States, native language, and parent level of education were all among the factors that contribute to the differences between the three groups. If this research illustrates such significant difference between these three cultural groups, it can be assumed that the Congolese community will also differ significantly from other ESL communities that have previously been studied.

There has been limited research that analyzes the experience of the Congolese immigrant population outside of the United States. Mitchell and Ouko (2012) described the perspective of the Congolese refugee population in New Zealand related to early childhood education and childcare centers. They drew upon Moll et al.'s (1992) "funds of knowledge" in their analysis to demonstrate what knowledge and experiences the refugees brought with them to their new setting and the need to recognize these experiences. They discussed many factors that distinguish Congolese refugees from other groups and mainstream New Zealanders. They cited

Nsamenang (2008) in describing the African socialization practices as incorporating the extended family, siblings, and wider community in child rearing, which differs from the white mainstream socialization practices as analyzed by Ochs and Schieffelin (1984). They described the parents as having difficulty communicating with the teachers due to language barriers and as having a desire to learn English in order to gain economic security. They noted that because the children were learning English more quickly than the parents, some parents saw this as a challenge to the traditional power roles between adults and children that was important to their culture. The parents also expressed that they had negative feelings about not being allowed to use physical punishment in schools, which was a large factor in their educational culture. They did not see any alternatives as being effective ways to discipline their children and maintain authority.

A distinct feature of the Congolese community in the United States is that there are two groups of people coming to the United States. Many from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have come as refugees, but more recently a significant population has come as immigrants to work in the United States. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a refugee is defined as a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" must leave their home country and cannot safely return. In this way refugees differ from other groups of immigrants who voluntarily choose to leave their country of nationality. McBrien (2005) reviewed the literature relevant to the needs of refugee students in the United States and cited Ogbu (1982) and Gibson (1998) in addressing the potential differences between voluntary immigrants and refugees in terms of socialization and acculturation. Ogbu (1982) noted that when group members that must involuntarily immigrate,

such as refugees, come to a new culture, it is more likely that they will reject the norms of the new culture that surrounds them, as they feel isolated from society and disconnected from their home culture. In contrast, Gibson (1998) stated that voluntary immigrants are more likely to acclimate and become involved with the new culture to the new culture. Though this distinction has been investigated at a societal level, McBrien (2005) noted that when it comes to school research, most of the research treats language acquisition as universal, treating immigrants and refugee students equally without consideration that the two groups could have different educational and psychological needs. McBrien (2005) also found that there was no existing research that compared refugees to immigrant students in an educational setting. As this is an area where research is lacking, this thesis could provide greater insight into how these two populations are different from both a teacher and parent perspective and assist educators to understand considerations that must be taken into account when educating mixed groups such as the Congolese population.

For these reasons, the current thesis will aim to document the personal experiences of Congolese parents related to their education, the education of their children, and their involvement in the American education system. It will also review issues in educating Congolese students and school communication with the parents from a teacher perspective. Better understanding of this currently under-represented population will lead to educational gains for Congolese ESL students, better equip teachers to educate these students and interact with their parents, and help teachers and administrators better prepare parents in the Congolese community to become participants in the American educational system. These aims are discussed in greater detail in the explanation of the current project and methodology.

Chapter 2: **Project Explanation and Methodology**

This thesis aims to add to previous work done in K-12 ESL education by investigating a population that has previously not been studied in the context of ESL education within the United States: the Congolese community. While research has been done to analyze the experience of other groups of ESL learners in the United States from the Latino population and the Asian and Southeast Asian population, no work has been done to investigate what similarities and differences exist between the Congolese community and these other documented communities of ESL learners in the United States. In the Champaign-Urbana community in east-central Illinois, there is a substantial Congolese community. Many of the members of this community have children that are enrolled in the Champaign and Urbana school districts and receive ESL support from the districts.

The members of the local Congolese community have immigrated to the United States for two main reasons. The first group of Congolese has come to the United States as refugees due to war and political unrest in their home country. The second group of Congolese has come to the United States through the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program (Visa Lottery), which grants visas to immigrants from countries that have low immigrant populations in the United States (US Embassy, Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Within this community, there is a range of levels of education among both the adults and children due to the political unrest that has taken place in DRC and their socioeconomic status. The range of educational background and differing reasons for coming to the United States that are seen in the population make it an important population of immigrants to study as they differ in many ways from other communities of immigrants that have been the previous focus in ESL research.

Because little work has been done to analyze the experience of the Congolese population in the United States, this research aims to investigate what this community experiences when they immigrate to the United States, how Congolese parents interact with their children and socialize them to education, their thoughts and perceptions about the education system within the United States, including their children's ESL education, and what the teachers of Congolese children perceive about the Congolese children and their families. Another significant area of investigation for this project will be the educational background and experiences of the parents, both in DRC and since they have come to the United States. The experiences of the parents will be used to help understand their involvement in the education of their children and will be compared to the educational experiences of their children within an American educational setting.

Methodology

The current project consists of qualitative ethnographic research. The main source of data was obtained through interviews with local parents in the Congolese community and local teachers of Congolese students. Parents were recruited via contacts within the Congolese community, primarily through a local church community that has a large Congolese membership. Those who were willing to participate in the interviews were asked to volunteer for a one-hour interview with the research team. The interviews took place anywhere that the parents were comfortable meeting and at a time that was compatible with their schedules. Interviews included questions related to the research questions stated above. Parents were also asked if they would consent to allow the research team to audio record the interviews so that the research team could refer to the interviews at a later time during the analysis process. A French interpreter was

available at every interview to interpret the research questions for the parents and their responses to the questions for the research team.

The teachers were recruited for interviews from an existing contact within the Champaign School District. Permission had to first be given by the school principals or directors of individual schools. Once the principals were contacted and they gave their permission, the teachers were contacted directly by the research team. As with the parent interviews, the teacher interviews included questions related to those stated above, lasted about one hour each, and took place at a time and location that was convenient for the teachers. These interviews were not recorded as it was easier to follow-up with the teachers should additional questions have arisen later about their answers.

All interviews were conducted in the spring of 2014. In total, two teachers and six parents were interviewed. For both the parent and teacher interviews, the researchers took an ethnographic approach. Any and all information provided by the participants was documented or recorded. There were no specific answers that the research team was looking for or expected from the interviews. Once the interviews were complete, the researchers looked at the qualitative data in a global sense to discover common themes that would shape the final analysis. The analysis of the interviews attempts to answer many of the questions posed in the initial research questions.

Research questions

There are several specific questions that this research aims to answer. Since little work has been done that looks at the Congolese community, the questions asked to both the parents and teachers were rather broad. During the interviews, questions were asked based on the flow

of conversation and what each participant focused on in their responses. The following are example questions and topics that were addressed during the interviews.

The first major question that this research addresses is what the members of the Congolese community have experienced before and after moving to the United States. What were their lives like when they lived in DRC? What were their reasons for wanting to come to the United States? What is their life like in the United States compared to what it was in DRC? What kinds of problems have they encountered while living in Champaign-Urbana? What types of emotions or psychological effects have they undergone as a result of their immigration to the United States? It can be expected that their lives in the United States are very different from what they experienced in the DRC, and these differences may be thought to be both positive and negative by the Congolese population. Obtaining answers or insights to some of these questions helps to gain an overall sense of what the Congolese community has been through and how these experiences affect their families and the education of their children in the United States.

The second major question is how children are socialized into the Congolese community, including language socialization practices that are common in the Congolese culture (Heath, 1982, 1983; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). How do parents socialize their children to be a part of the Congolese community, and what kinds of pre-school educational practices and literacy development practices occur in the homes of Congolese families before their children begin school? What do parents do to support their children's education when they enter school? How might these practices differ from practices of other immigrant groups in the Champaign and Urbana school districts, and how are they similar based on comparisons with teacher observations? How are these practices similar to and different from mainstream American socialization and literacy practices as described by Heath (1982, 1983) and Ochs and

Schieffelin (1984)? As every culture differs in various ways in their socialization and literacy practices, it is expected that there will be notable differences in the way that the Congolese parents socialize their children and are involved in their education compared to mainstream American practices and documented practices of other immigrant groups in the United States.

The third question that this research investigates is how Congolese parents of ESL children perceive the education of their children in the United States. What do they understand or not understand about the American education system? What do they believe should be their role in the children's education? What do they believe is the role of the teacher? Do they understand what the teachers expect from them in terms of their involvement in their children's education? Do they agree with these expectations and with what is done in the classroom? What problems have they encountered related to their children's education since their children have entered schooling in the United States? There has been some previous work regarding the perceptions of ESL parents in the United States, but no research has been done to compare these findings to the Congolese population. This research aims to uncover some of this information so that it can be compared to analyses of other groups of immigrants.

The fourth research question that is addressed in this research is what the teachers experience and perceive about their work with the Congolese students and their families. What kinds of issues have the teachers experienced related to teaching the Congolese students, and what are their observations about how this group is similar to or different from other immigrant groups and mainstream American children? What types of interactions do the teachers have with the Congolese parents? How do they communicate with the parents? Do they believe that the Congolese parents understand the American educational system? If not, what kinds of practices do they not seem to understand? What do the teachers expect from the parents with regard to

their involvement in their children's education? This information can help demonstrate where parent and teacher perceptions compare and contrast and can help to provide a baseline for discussion about what can be done to assist the Congolese students, their families, and their teachers.

The final research question addressed in this project deals with the educational experiences of the Congolese parents and children before coming to the United States. Did the parents attend school in the DRC, and for how long? What were their classes like? What subjects were they taught? What did they do at home related to education? How were their parents involved in their education in DRC? If they did not go to school, what other forms of education did they participate in at home or within their community? Are they literate in French or their home dialect? If so, what types of materials did they read at home? What kinds of materials do they read now? Do/did they read to their children, and what kind of materials? Did their children go to school in DRC? For how long did they attend school before coming to the U.S? Was their education similar or different to what the parents received? How did the parents support their children's education in DRC? All of these questions help to give the researchers a sense of what experience the parents and students already have when coming into the American educational setting. This comparison could be valuable to help analyze the reasons for their perceptions now within this new setting. Ultimately, the questions that this research addresses will help to provide an outline of Congolese culture in the United States and its relation to the American educational system.

Chapter 3: Analysis of Parent Interviews

Introduction

For the current project, I interviewed a total of six Congolese parents from the local community: four mothers and two fathers. Of the parents interviewed, two parents were sisters and two were married. While these parents were all different in the way they perceived their children's education in the United States, there were many similarities among their responses. The following chapter documents the ideas that the parents shared with me about their children's education and what they have experienced related to their children's schooling.

Parent Background Information

The parents that participated in the interviews came from a variety of different locations within DRC and had a number of different experiences related to their own educational and professional backgrounds. All of the parents interviewed were immigrants, not refugees, to the United States. They all shared a common experience of immigrating to the United States and having to adjust to life in a new country and under different circumstances than they had experienced in DRC. The following is a short summary of similarities and differences among the parents.

Of the parents that were interviewed, all of the parents had attended school through high school and had received their high school diplomas. The majority of the parents attended public school throughout elementary and secondary school. Only one parent attended a private university preparatory high school. All of the parents had attended some college. One parent had only attended two years of university before stopping without getting his degree. One parent had completed a medical degree, studying for six years beyond high school. The other parents

had completed Bachelors degrees or the equivalent in DRC. The parents had rather varied professions in DRC. One mother had been a doctor, and her sister had worked in business. One father was an engineer and his wife worked at an airport. One mother had been a bank teller and another father had been a security guard at the U.S. Embassy in Kinshasa. The parents had also come from a variety of family backgrounds. Their parents had been professors, factory workers, and teachers.

One similarity that all of the parents shared was that when they moved to the United States, they had to take a job that, by American standards, would be seen as less prestigious than the job they had had in DRC, mainly due to their lack of English proficiency. In the United States the Congolese parents worked in a variety of professions, many with manual labor positions. One mother worked for Carle Hospital, and her sister was a bilingual aid for a local high school. Another father worked for a local factory while his wife worked in a day care. One mother worked for a warehouse, and another father worked as a welder for a local maintenance company. Many of the parents had to work long hours, often including night shifts. A majority of the parents were also pursuing some form of education in the United States. Many were attending adult ESL classes at the local community college, and one mother was studying toward her nursing degree. They all studied in addition to their employment.

The parents had all been in the United States for different lengths of time. The two sisters came to the United States in 2006, though not at the same time. One mother and another father both arrived in 2011. The husband and wife came here in 2012. All of the parents had come here because they won the visa lottery in DRC, and many settled in the local area because they already had a relative or friend living in the area who could act as a sponsor for them when they immigrated to the United States. The majority of the parents that I interviewed also lived with

other family members. The two sisters that I interviewed lived together. The husband and wife also lived with the wife's sister. Another mother also lived with her sister.

The parents' native language(s) varied slightly among the group that I interviewed. All of the parents reported that they spoke Lingala and French. The majority of the parents' first language was Lingala, and they learned French in school, as it is the official language of education in DRC. The two sisters' native language was French, which their parents spoke with them at home before they started school, but they also learned Lingala from living and interacting with others in the community. One of the mothers' native language was Swahili because she grew up in the northern Swahili speaking region of DRC. She had also learned Lingala and French in school. One of the parents noted that in DRC, the majority of the people speak a mix of Lingala and French in everyday conversation, blending the two languages together when they communicate. All of the parents reported being able to read and write in their native language, be it Lingala or Swahili, despite being educated almost exclusively in French.

The parents that I interviewed also had different numbers of children enrolled in the local school districts and at different ages. The two sisters had a total of eight children: one had three and the other five, ranging in age from elementary school to high school. The husband and wife had three children, but only two were currently enrolled in school: one in kindergarten, and one in first grade. The other mother had one son in high school, and the last father had one son in first grade.

Pre-School Practices

As Heath (1982) and Ochs and Schieffelin (1984) discuss in their work, children could have varied pre-educational and socialization experiences when they are young, depending on factors such as the culture or social class into which the children are born. One important question of this research is what potential differences exist between Congolese and American pre-educational or socialization practices that could have an impact on educating Congolese students within the American educational system. Without personally witnessing the parenting practices that the parents used with their children, it was challenging to get a sense of what the parents did with their children before they entered school, but my interviews did uncover some distinct differences between Congolese and American parenting practices with their young children before they started school.

When I asked the parents what they did with their children when they were young to help get them ready for school, several of the Congolese parents noted that one of their main roles as parents was to *éduquer* (educate) their children. In French the verb “to educate” when used to refer to parenting does not have exactly the same meaning as it would in English. *Éduquer* in French means to teach children how to behave in society, having a meaning much more related to socialization practices than schooling practices. For the Congolese parents, making sure their children know how to behave in society was very important. Several of the parents told me that one of their key roles was to teach their children what was right and what was wrong, suggesting that the children would not be able to know without their explanation. This education includes practices such as learning how to speak to different members of society and generally how to behave when interacting with others.

As the Congolese parents are so involved in this aspect of their children's pre-school education, it is not surprising that this is something they find to be very important once their children begin school. Their socialization has a large impact on discipline and other interactions that the children have in the classroom, which I will explore later in the analysis.

I also asked the parents specifically what they did at home to prepare their children for the academics that they would experience once they started school and what they remember doing with their parents before they entered school. Unsurprisingly, most of the parents did not remember very much about what their parents did with them before they went to school. However, when I asked about toys, one parent did give examples of toys she played with, which mostly seemed to have an educational purpose. She explained that she remembers playing with an easel where she could practice writing numbers. She also had an abacus for practice with counting, and blocks like Legos that she could play with. It is important to note that this particular parent came from what seemed to be a relatively wealthy family in DRC, so her experience might not be representative of what all parents had growing up. I will explore the importance that social class plays in Congolese educational practices below.

In asking the parents what they did with their own children, most of the parents could not give specific answers about what they did to prepare their children for school, apart from the socialization training explained above. While visiting the parents' houses, it was clear that most with young children did have toys in the house for them to play with, and many children watched television. A few of the parents mentioned that they had sent their children to child care or learning centers before they started attending school, which is similar to the Congolese educational system where children might attend centers similar to pre-school starting at the age of two or three. Again, it would be difficult to really get a sense of what parents do with their

children to prepare them for school without observing the parents interacting with their young children over a longer period of time.

Reading at home

Heath (1982) demonstrated in her work that children who grow up in different ethnic or socioeconomic situations can have very different pre-school preparation for education and literacy. In comparing the home literacy practices of the Congolese parents and their children with that of American families, it becomes apparent that Heath's work is very relevant when analyzing how Congolese children are prepared for school and how it might affect the children when they enter an American educational setting.

The town where the interviews were conducted, while having a range of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, would be considered a predominantly white middle class community. However, during my interviews with the Congolese parents, I discovered that though many of the parents were considered highly educated in DRC, they had experienced rather different pre-school literacy practices than traditional mainstream American pre-school literacy and continued the same literacy practices with their children.

One main difference that I discovered between mainstream American literacy practices and Congolese literacy practices was the children's exposure to written text and books before entering school. In the United States, it is quite common for parents to read to their children in the years before they enter school. As described by Heath (1982), educators often expect that children have been read to at home to some extent and have experienced written text and picture books before entering school. The bedtime story is a tradition in many mainstream American households from the time that children are very young. However, when I asked the Congolese

parents what kinds of practices they did with their children before their children enrolled in school or to help them prepare for school, none of the parents reported being read to as a child before entering school, and none said that they had read to their children before they entered school in the United States.

One mother reported that though her parents had some books of their own in their house in DRC, none of them were children's books. Other parents reported that the school gave the children a list of books that they had to read every year, which they could find at school or the library, but these books were meant for school and were not owned by the family. Reading seemed to be considered part of homework, not something that was done for pleasure, even in the more highly educated households. One parent described that even the books that she read when she was very young seemed to have an educational purpose. She described books that were supposed to help children learn the shapes and other educational knowledge as a way to prepare students for school. She did not mention having any books that were read "just for fun" or for the story.

In one particularly telling exchange, I was talking with a father about whether or not he read to his son before his son started school. He said that he did not, and when asked if that was usual for Congolese families, he responded that he did not know any Congolese parents who read to their children before they started school. When I told him that it is often expected that children are read to at home before they start school in the United States, he seemed to become exasperated and said that he wished someone had told him that reading is what is expected of parents to do before their children enter school in the United States. His reply seemed to indicate that he would have been willing to read to his son before he started school had he known that it would be beneficial or expected in the American system. Educators do not necessarily

communicate with parents about what they did with their children *before* they enter school.

Generally any information or intervention is given after the child has already begun school. To really understand what knowledge or knowledge gaps the Congolese children or any immigrant or refugee children have compared to that of a mainstream American student when they enter school, more information should be gathered from the Congolese community regarding pre-school practices so that educators better understand the backgrounds their students have when they begin school.

When asked if the parents read to their children at home, the majority of parents said that they did read books to their children, but many explained that they sometimes had problems reading to them, specifically related to their English pronunciation while reading. Every parent who discussed reading to their children at home mentioned that it was a challenge at times because they could not read words with the same pronunciation as their children's teachers at school and that their children would either have trouble understanding some words or would tell their parents that they were not pronouncing the words correctly. Some parents found this to be more of an issue than others. One mother said that she had stopped reading to her children all together because they kept telling her that her pronunciation was wrong. She just let them read on their own. On the other hand, one father described how reading to his son, though sometimes difficult due to the pronunciation, also helped to improve his own English when he realized that his son could not understand the words he was reading. He thought that reading was beneficial to both him and his child as a way to improve their English together. He explained that he often did "repeat-after-me" activities with his son where he would read a part of the book and have his son repeat it. Often his son was able to tell him the "correct" way to pronounce the words that he

knew in English if he did not pronounce them the way that his son was used to hearing the words.

Because many of the parents only talked about pronunciation problems when I asked them about reading, I began to become curious about what the Congolese parents were actually doing while they read to their children. As Heath (1982) describes, many American parents will ask questions or discuss what happens during the story as they are reading with their children. This behavior is continued at school where students are asked to answer questions about the reading, display what they understood from the text, and make connections between the text and their own lives. I asked some of the parents if they asked questions or discussed the reading with their children after hearing many talk about only reading the words, and from the information I collected, the parents did not engage with the reading beyond reading the text out loud to their children. This could be explored further as a way to help the teachers understand what the Congolese students are actually doing with readings that they assign compared to other students, especially for the lower grade levels where family reading is encouraged. This would help teachers to explain to the parents what kinds of activities students do with readings at school so that they can be practiced at home as well.

Though parents described having some difficulty with reading at home, all parents stated that they did read at home as their children's teachers required it. They described the schools sending books home with their children, sometimes even showing me some of the books their children had brought home. They were involved in reading to their children and seemed to indicate that it was an important part of their children's homework, especially those with younger children. I think more information should be shared with the parents about *how* they are expected to read to their children, and these practices should be demonstrated for the parents. As

I mentioned above, this information should ideally be shared with parents before their children enter school so that they can better prepare them at home before they are expected to perform at school.

It is important for teachers to be aware of the fact that most of the Congolese parents have different home literacy practices than mainstream American parents. In mainstream American education, parents who do not read to their children at all before they enter school might be considered uninvolved; however, as I will explain, even Congolese parents who demonstrated that they are involved and care about their children's education do not tend to read to their children at all before they enter school.

The affect of social class on education in DRC

Family class and living situation seems to have a significant affect on both the preparation that children receive for education before entering school and also on their experience with school in general. Many of the parents made comments about the effects of money and class on education in their home country and their observations about how economic class affected either their own education or the education of others around the country.

As one parent described, DRC does not have a prominent middle class. There is the upper class and the lower class. You either have money or you do not. She said that this has a great impact on how students are educated. Unlike the United States, you must pay for all education that your children receive, and you must pay upfront. This greatly limits educational possibilities for many families. As another parent explained, sometimes families are put in the position to choose which child can become educated since they only have enough money to send one child to school.

Other times the lack of money limits the quality of the school that their children can attend. The private schools, which cost much more, are the best schools; the public schools that do not receive as much money do not give the same quality education. There are no scholarships available after the economic collapse, so for those who do not have enough money to afford to go to a good school, there is no way for them to attend, even if they are academically capable of attending. This leads to a lack of upward mobility through education as only the rich have access to the best schools while poor families must send their children to public schools or not send them at all.

The type of school also seems to have an impact on the quality of teachers that teach the children. Several of the parents commented that because of the lack of money, teachers at the public schools are not paid enough and as a result are not always very motivated to teach the students. As I will elaborate more below, this lack of motivation and teacher quality was a big perceived difference that the parents observed between Congolese and American schools. For example, one of the parents explained that though French is the national language of education and that all classes in DRC are supposed to be conducted only in French, at many of the village schools, Lingala was used instead of French to teach the classes. This could have an overall impact on the students' future proficiency in French and access to higher employment or education.

Another key way that social class has an impact on education in DRC is the mentality that parents have toward educating their children and their availability to prepare their children for education. Because of the class difference, those whose parents were part of the upper class and could afford to send their children to school were involved in their children's education. However, as one parent described, the parents who were poor and needed money just to survive

were going to be much more focused on making money for living instead of preparing their children for school. While this is of course a concern in the United States as well, it is probably much less likely to be a significant issue for school districts given the greater distribution of wealth and access to free public education in the United States.

Parents also reported that due to many Congolese parents' own experiences, there is a dichotomous view of education between some rich and poor families since many rich families are educated and work as professionals, leading them to care a lot about the education of their children, while many of the poor families work as unskilled laborers and think they do not need to go to school to make money. Therefore they are less likely to be concerned with preparing for the education of their children. However, some parents also commented that most parents in DRC want their children to have a better life than they did and receive a better education. This was certainly an influence in some of the parents' decisions to immigrate to the United States, as they wanted their children to receive an American education.

It is clear that though many issues in education occur because of funding and the economic situation of school districts in the United States, economic and social status plays a very significant role in education in DRC, both in the quality of education that the public and private schools provide, and also in the role that the parents choose or are able to take in the education of their children. Those parents who come from a professional background or have parents who were educated professionals may have a very different experience with education, which transfers when they educate their own children, than parents who were not educated professionals or who came from a poor family or area of the country. As Heath (1982) demonstrates in her work, even within the United States, educators are often unaware of how social or economic status affects their students' experiences with education before and after

entering school. However these differences need to be taken into account especially when addressing a population that has such stark differences in social class and educational backgrounds.

Parent involvement in their children's education

All of the parents that I interviewed reported a desire to be involved in their children's education and expressed that their children's education was very important to them. However the amount parents were actually able to be involved in their children's education varied among the different families. There were several factors that influenced the amount that parents were involved and what they did to be involved in the education of their children.

I asked each of the parents what their own parents did with them when they were in school. The parents explained that their parents were very involved in their education in one way or another. Several of the parents had parents who were teachers themselves and remember them helping them a lot with their homework at home. One parent whose parents were teachers joked that they helped him a lot, especially in elementary school, and for that reason he was a very good student in elementary school. Other parents whose own parents worked a lot said that they had a tutor who helped them with their work after school, and that this was very common for students whose families had the money to pay for one.

One of the major factors determining how the parents were involved in the education of their children was their work schedule. Several of the parents I interviewed worked in manual labor positions that required them to work different shifts. Some of the parents reported being at home in the evenings and were available to help their children. Others reported that they had to work night shifts and therefore did not have much time to review and check homework with their

children. Some of these parents had other family members such as siblings who lived with them or older children that helped the students with their work. Some of the parents also reported that their children attended after school programs or study halls at their schools for extra help.

One father explained that he used to work during the third shift and could help his son with his homework before he went to work at night. He reported always checking to see what homework his son had and reviewing it to make sure he had finished. However, he had to change to work the second shift at his job, and therefore arrived home around 11:00 pm after his son was already asleep. The only time he was able to check over his homework was the short time in the morning before his son went to school. He reported that the school told him that he needed to be helping his son more with reading and other work, and suggested that he talk with his childcare provider to see if they could help his son do his work after school. The father talked to the provider to make sure they could give his son some more help, but during his description, you could tell that he wished that he could do more to be helping his son and would be if his schedule were different.

Several of the parents also reported that they often helped their children with their homework because it was also a good way to help themselves understand the English and material that their children learned in school. One parent said that they felt it was their responsibility as a parent to make sure that they knew what their children were learning in school. As I will explore later in the analysis, parent involvement and the desire to understand what is going on in school caused many of the parents to keep in close contact with the teachers, so they could get more information if they needed it about what is happening in school and how they could help their children at home.

Ultimately, the Congolese parents that I interviewed seemed to be highly involved in their children's education. Many of them came to the United States so that their children could receive an American education, and they were invested in the success of their children. They wanted to know what was happening at school and worked around their own schedules to make sure that their children had the help that they needed with their studies. Some of the parents told me that one important sentiment in Congolese culture is that the next generation should have a better life than the one before. Though the majority of the parents were highly educated, they wanted better for their own children and were invested in helping their children succeed and have more opportunities than they had had. The fact that the parents immigrated knowing it would be very difficult for them to have the same opportunities they had in DRC in terms of employment is a testament to their desire to provide for their children and support their future success.

One caution for teachers when thinking about Congolese parent involvement is their work situation since many of the parents must work long hours and are also studying English themselves. It is important to think about what they are doing to help their children even when they cannot be present all the time to help them themselves. The parents who were not available to help their children regretted their situation and did not like that they could not be there to help their children as it was very important to them. As with the teacher who suggested the father speak to his child care provider about getting extra school help while he is at work, it is important for the schools to help parents find a solution when they must work a lot and have no one at home who can help their children with school work.

Similarities and differences between Congolese and American schools

One major topic that I discussed with the parents was their perceptions of what was similar and different between their experiences at school in DRC and the American education system. Our discussions mostly focused on what the parents thought was rather different, as this is what they noticed the most when thinking about their experience with education in the United States.

I already discussed one major difference above when talking about how the type of school and social class have an impact on education in DRC. Several of the parents that had attended public school in DRC said that one major difference that they noticed was how the American teachers seemed to care about each student and wanted to make sure that each student understood the material. This was not always the case in DRC where the teachers were often perceived as unmotivated due to lack of pay. Another major difference that one parent discussed is class size and its impact on what the teacher can do. He said that in his public school class, there may have been fifty students to only one teacher in the class, limiting the amount of time that the teacher could focus on individual students.

Educational options also seemed to be a major difference between Congolese and American schools. Probably due to the number of students and teachers at the school, students did not have the option to take different levels of classes for their subjects in DRC. All students took the same classes within each grade level. As I will discuss, this difference became a source of confusion for several of the parents, especially those with older students, as they did not know how to choose which classes their children should take.

Instead of having different levels of classes in secondary school, in DRC there are different “tracks” that students can take where they focus on different course work. This would

be a little bit like choosing a college major in high school, mostly focusing on the coursework you would need for a future career in that subject area. For example, one parent said that he was in the biology/chemistry track in high school and another said that she followed the pedagogy track. In the United States every student must achieve the same mandatory credits for graduation within the same high school unless students attend an alternative high school such as a vocational school. This structural difference might be difficult for parents to understand and might need to be explicitly explained to the parents by the school district.

Significance of Failure

Another important factor related to differences between the educational cultures was how failure was treated within each system. There was a strong sentiment among many of the parents that American schools were too lenient with students when it came to addressing the success of students in the classroom. The mentality of the significance of failure also seemed to be different from what many American parents might think when it came to the success of their children. On more than one occasion, the Congolese parents told me that at times, giving a student a failing grade was necessary to motivate students to do better in school in the future.

It seemed that the fear of failure and the consequences of failure was a driving force in student motivation in the classroom. Because school is very expensive in DRC, several of the parents suggested that the fear of having to repeat a year of school and the consequences of what their parents would do to them if they failed motivated the students to succeed and receive passing grades in their classes. However, if the student wasn't doing well, some of the parents expressed that it would be good for the student to fail that year in school instead of being passed to the next level, which they expressed as one of the practices they noticed in American schools.

One mother told me a story about how her son was taking ESL classes in high school and had been for quite awhile. He took the test to determine whether or not he could stop taking ESL classes, but he did not pass the level required to be exempt from the classes. The ESL teacher told the mother that his English was good enough to stop taking ESL classes, but that it was just the test that was holding him back and suggested that she exempt him anyway since she thought it was not necessary for him to continue taking ESL classes when his test performance was the only factor that would keep him from placing out of the class. However, the mother told her to keep him in ESL until he could pass the test so that he could prove that he was in fact ready to be exempt from ESL classes. Until he had hard evidence that he was capable of being exempted from ESL classes, it would not benefit him to exit the program.

Another mother expressed that one major difference between Congolese and American schools was that in DRC if students fail one class, they have to repeat all of the classes again for that year instead of only the class that they failed, so the consequences of failing are much higher than just having to repeat one class again. In the United States, students will generally only be held back at the upper levels if they fail English or do not have enough passing credits to graduate. They will not have to take every class again for the year unless they fail them all. It seems that in DRC, students follow the set curriculum all the way through graduation, while here students may choose a number of courses every year. This system might be the reason some Congolese parents wonder why students do not have to take all their classes again.

Discipline

As I discussed earlier, parents thought that socialization and discipline practices were very important for them to teach their children. Related to this concern, every parent that I spoke

with shared that discipline was a major difference between Congolese and American schools, and was one of the most significant issues that they had with the American education system. Every parent that I interviewed, when asked about differences in discipline between DRC and the United States, stated that discipline was done very differently and that there was much more “freedom” in the United States regarding discipline practices.

Every parent described physical punishment as being the most utilized form of discipline in Congolese schools, especially in the lower grades. The parents’ accounts of punishment practices in DRC confirmed that if a child did something wrong such as forgetting to do an assignment or misbehaving in class, the teacher would hit the student a few times with a stick. They described this method of discipline as more serious than methods used in the United States but also necessary to teach students that what they did was wrong. The fear of being physically punished would teach the child not to do the offense in the future. The parents all seemed to wish that this same form of discipline would be performed in their children’s schools in the United States. Parents were in general rather critical of the way that discipline issues were handled at their children’s schools. The sentiment that children here have “too much freedom” was repeated several times throughout the interviews, and parents seemed to express that American discipline practices were less effective in solving or stopping student discipline problems.

One parent of a young student said that it does not work when the teacher simply yells at the students. He said that physical punishment works better because it causes the child to fear being punished. Another parent said that her son “seems lazy here” due to the lack of physical punishment because he would not be beaten for not doing his homework. Another parent said that in the United States children might only be separated from the other children for a short

period of time, which again will not instill any fear to stop the bad behavior. For the Congolese parents, a fear-driven system for discipline is viewed as the most effective way to ensure that the student will not repeat the offense. Discipline tactics such as yelling and separating do not have the same consequences for the student, and so do not discourage the student from doing the action in the future.

I asked several of the parents what they do at home to discipline the children if they are informed of behavior issues at school. All of the parents said that they would discipline the child in some way at home, but very few of the parents explicitly described physical punishment as a method they would use for discipline at home. Most of the parents explained that they would talk to the children, sometime forcefully, but very few actually stated they would hit their children as they described in what they thought should be done in school. This would be interesting to investigate further to see if Congolese home discipline practices matched school practices in DRC and possible reasons for any differences between Congolese home and school discipline practices.

Parents also discussed differences in the ways that teachers address discipline issues with the students and parents. One couple explained that their son's teachers seemed to always accuse but did not try to understand the source of the problem. They said that their son always felt as though the teacher would accuse him of doing things to other children. They were not sure why the teacher was singling out their son, but they thought that there was hypocrisy in the way that his teacher was trying to resolve the problem. The teacher kept accusing their son, but she was not actually addressing the problem with the students. They said that in DRC if there was a problem between two students, the teacher would prefer to address the problem with the students

themselves to discover the reason behind the problem. The teacher would then help to find a solution to the problem and explain to the children why it was a problem.

Another parent said something similar when describing that her son was involved in a fight at school and was suspended. She believed that the fight was caused because of racial or cultural differences between the students at school, but she said that the teachers in the United States did not address the actual problem. Her son was only suspended without them ever addressing the reason that the fight started or other underlying issues that contributed to the fight. It seems that in Congolese culture, addressing the source of the problem and reasoning with the offenders about why the behavior is unacceptable are seen as the best ways to resolve recurring problems in order to prevent them from happening in the future. However, at least from the perspective of the Congolese parents, they thought that their children's teachers in the United States sometimes punished the children without first trying to understand the cause of the issue. Without teacher confirmation, it is difficult to determine whether or not this is actually happening at school or whether there is a disconnect between how parents believe teachers are addressing conflict between students and how the teachers are actually addressing conflict.

Related to discipline practices at schools, some of the parents also commented about their views of American discipline practices in general. One parent expressed that he felt Americans were very open with their children, giving them too much freedom even at home. He explained that in Congolese culture, parents have more responsibility to "educate" their children because their children do not understand what is right for them. In this case he was referring to the French meaning of "educate" which is to raise children to behave correctly in society.

This same parent further explained that he thought his children were copying what they saw their American classmates do around adults, which he thought was at times inappropriate

and that they needed to behave differently around adults. Another parent also alluded to this perceived lack of respect towards adults and thought that because punishments were not strong enough here, her son said bad things to the teacher and was disrespectful. What is interesting about these comments is that the parents described this lack of respect for adults as a distinctly “American” problem and that their children were doing what they saw other American students doing. In acting like their American classmates, their children were viewed as sometimes speaking too freely with their parents and need to be “educated” to behave properly around adults.

Perceptions of quality of education

One rather surprising topic from the parent interviews was their perceptions about the quality of education in the United States. A couple of the parents that I spoke to told me that one of the main reasons they decided to come to the United States was so their children could receive an American education. One parent told me that in DRC, those who have an American education are often paid more and are considered to have a better education than those who were educated in DRC. The parents wanted their own children to have this opportunity to succeed by being educated in the United States.

However, during some of my earlier interviews, I started to sense that the quality of education that some of the parents perceived their children were receiving in the United States was not what they had expected before coming to the United States. Some of the parents expressed that they felt they had learned more in their classes in DRC. Some of the parents said that they had had more work in school in DRC than their children did here. They said they had to study a lot more in order to succeed and did not think that their children had to work as hard.

For example, one mother explained that she had had to know a lot more information than her son did, such as needing to memorize the entire periodic table in chemistry class while her son used a paper copy of the table and never had to memorize the information.

After hearing a few parents describe their children's education as easier in the United States, I asked one mother whether she thought education was better in DRC or in the United States. Her answer was that before coming to the United States everyone in the Congolese community thinks that the education is much better in the United States, but after they come here they think differently. While this of course is probably not what every Congolese parent believes after coming to the United States, these ideas are important and should be addressed by teachers of Congolese students. Much of this sentiment that Congolese schools are more difficult and better than those in the United States is based on the parents' own experience with learning and remembering what they had to do in school, which is different from what their children do.

From listening to the parents describe the kinds of learning activities they engaged in at school and how school was structured, it seems that in DRC, much of the emphasis about what it means to be educated is related to memorizing information. Students are required to memorize a lot of information and recite it back to demonstrate that they have learned the materials they were supposed to. However, in the United States, there seems to be less of an emphasis on memorizing and more on application of skills across disciplines or solving problems. Coming from an educational system that rewards ability to memorize, the parents might not have the same perceptions of what is difficult for their children.

There is also the matter of resources that greatly affects what students are required to do in the United States. As with the example of the mother having to memorize the entire periodic table to take chemistry tests, it could be that her school did not have the resources to provide

each student with their own copy of the table, thus necessitating memorizing the entire table. In the United States, many schools have the resources to provide students with extra materials like calculators, periodic tables, etc., which allow students to concentrate more on learning and understanding the concepts that are taught so they can apply them, rather than memorizing the information to repeat it when they are assessed.

Another difference between Congolese and American schools that some of the parents addressed was the audience that the teachers taught to in their classes. One parent explained that a major difference she had noticed that related to the difference in failing students was that in DRC the teachers taught to the top students in the class. They did not modify their teaching at all if the lower students were having trouble understanding the material, and it was the students' responsibility to understand what the teacher was teaching. They said that here the teachers often teach to the bottom of the class and make sure that everyone understands the material as they are teaching.

However, though some of the parents of older children said that they thought school was more difficult in DRC than the United States, one father that I spoke with whose son was just starting school told me that one difference that he noticed was how quickly the students were learning different skills like reading and math in his son's class. He said that his son's class was already reading sentences and learning to read and spell words, which would not be occurring yet in Congolese schools at his son's grade level. He also said that the math his son was doing was more advanced than the math that his son would be doing at his grade level in DRC. This difference could be the result of the expected exposure that students have to basic educational skills like literacy before entering school in the United States. It is assumed that students have been exposed to books and words and are not starting from zero in terms of learning how to read

and interact with text. If Congolese students have never been read to at home or interacted with text before entering school, it would probably take them a little longer to learn these basic literacy skills once they begin school. I found this difference in perspective between parents of older children and the parent of the younger child to be very interesting, and something I would like to explore more in the future.

Parent interactions with the teachers and schools

As I discussed above, the parents that I interviewed all seemed to be rather involved in their children's education and were concerned about their success in school. Likewise, many of the parents reported communicating often with their children's teachers, both to help solve problems and to become more aware of what was going on at school.

Every parent that I interviewed reported attending regular parent teacher conferences that were scheduled by the school at regular intervals throughout the school year. These meetings were an important opportunity for the parents to hear how their children were doing and to find out what they could do to better help their children in areas where they were struggling. Several of the parents that I spoke with also recalled information that they learned about their children's progress by talking with their teachers and seemed to have regular interactions with the teachers. These interactions were initiated both by the teachers and by the parents themselves, a couple of the parents even saying that they contacted the teachers a couple times a week for updates about their children. Some stated that if they ever had a problem helping their children with their homework or did not understand something their children had to do, they would call the teacher, send them a note, or even go to the school to talk with them before or after class. Most of them also stated that the teachers were the ones who initially started giving the updates, demonstrating

that they were concerned about the students' progress and wanted to work with the parents to help them improve.

Parents reported that teachers in the district seemed very willing to help them and consistently updated them about their children's progress. One of the parents reported that this was a significant difference between interactions with teachers in DRC, as it was not uncommon to be unable to see the students' teacher or even to have to pay if they wanted to be able to see the teacher. I am not sure how widespread these practices are in DRC, but this particular parent emphasized that she noticed the teachers wanted to help and meet with the parents and thought that this was a very good difference.

The parents also made comments during the interviews about their contact with the schools and involvement with school events. One concern that kept surfacing was the language barrier that made it difficult for them to stay informed about school events or other information related to school. Some parents admitted missing school functions, especially after they had recently arrived in the United States, because they received the notifications in English and had to either take the time to try to translate the information themselves using a computer or wait for a friend or family member who spoke better English to help them translate what it said.

Another parent noted that the schools seemed to cater much more to Spanish speakers, and anything that did reach the parents in multiple languages was in English and Spanish. Lack of communication in French seemed to be one issue that the parents thought prevented them from learning about what was happening at school or participating in school functions. One of the parents even said that he and his wife were considering transferring their children to the elementary school where his sister-in-law's children attended because there were more

Congolese students at that school, and there were more teachers who could communicate with the parents in French.

Given that the parents I interviewed wanted to be kept informed and spoke with the teachers often, an important consideration for the schools related to keeping Congolese parents involved is the language barrier. Most of the Congolese parents who come to the U.S. are not very proficient in English, and though many are making an effort to learn English to improve their employment opportunities, they do not know enough to understand school communication. If schools expect Congolese parents to show their involvement by attending school functions, making the information available in French is very important.

Questions or confusion about the American education system

It is clear from the above analysis that parents noticed many differences between education in DRC and education in the United States. Some differences, such as their ability to interact with the teachers in the United States seemed to be more positive according to the parents, while others, such as the discipline system and the unwillingness to fail students in the United States, were perceived more negatively. As we discussed these differences, several of the parents also reported questions that they had about the school system in the United States as well as aspects of their children's education that confused them. Some of the questions and confusions were related to what happened in classes or how their children were learning, while others related to the education system itself and how their children progressed in school.

Some of the parents described during our interview that they noticed that their children's teachers did not grade all of their homework, and they wondered why that was the case. They said that in DRC, teachers always grade homework assignments. It might be important for

teachers to explain to parents what their reason is for giving homework if they do not plan to grade every assignment and what the incentive is for the students to do homework that will not be graded. One parent told me that one of her questions for her son's teachers was why he was not receiving more homework in subjects that he was struggling with. Specifically she said he was having significant trouble in Biology and said that he should be receiving more homework to help him understand the material better and to get more practice. She seemed to think that his teacher did not want to give him more homework, but it was important to her that he get more work.

Another source of confusion for some of the parents related to the schedule of classes during the day and during the school year. One parent said that she did not understand the school schedule and what happened during the school day. Many schools post a daily bell schedule on their website which states when students begin and finish school, change classes, eat lunch, etc. It would likely be helpful to inform parents of this schedule and where to find it, especially for those parents coming from a different country whose school schedule is very different.

Related to the confusion about the schedule, another mother commented that she was confused why her son changed classes every semester and did not continue the same classes all year. She did not think it was possible for him to learn everything that he needed to in that short amount of time. If she had more information about the daily schedule and how many hours of each course he had per semester, it might be clearer whether the course length is appropriate. This also relates to the issue of explaining electives and the high school credit system, which might not be clear for parents coming from a country that uses a set track system in high school. The local high school websites illustrate in their handbooks the course sequences and the credits

required for each grade level. This information could be useful for parents who have similar questions about what their children are doing everyday throughout the school year.

A large concern that several of the parents had, especially those with secondary level students, was that they did not fully understand the level system in American schools. As I mentioned previously, in high school in DRC students can choose a “track” which allows them to focus their study on a particular subject area. However within each school or each track, students take the exact same courses as their peers. The concept of college prep, honors, and advanced placement courses seemed to be rather unknown to the Congolese parents, and several described confusion about their children having to choose courses in school.

One parent commented that she did not know what level her son was in for his classes. She knew that he had to choose his classes, but she did not know what the difference was between each level. She also mentioned that she always seemed to be informed of her son’s classes after he had already chosen them. She felt that choosing classes was a decision that she should be involved in and that they needed to make the decision together. She also told an anecdote about going to the administration to try to change one of her son’s classes so he could have a different teacher. She said that when she tried to ask, she was told that they could not change his class, even though she knew of other students who were able to change their classes. The situation confused her, and she wondered why she was not helped. While it is difficult to determine what happened, especially from the school’s perspective, it could be even more difficult for her to understand why her son could not change classes if she is not familiar with how schedules are decided and how students are placed in different classes based on their schedule choices.

Another parent reported that she did not know which academic track her children should be in. At her daughter's elementary school, the classes seemed to be split so that they combined certain grade levels together in classes. Because of this, the parent did not know how her daughter would progress. If she took classes with 3rd and 4th graders and did well, why did she have to take 4th grade classes again the following year? This is also unfamiliar to me as someone who is generally familiar with the American school system, so it would become even more important for parents who are unfamiliar with this system to obtain information about how the system works and know how to interpret it.

Coming from a system that does not differentiate students by the level of classes that they take, this confusion about what academic level of difficulty their children could and should be enrolled in could be particularly challenging for parents and could have undesirable consequences for their children. If parents assume that there is only one English class per grade level for example, they might not question the fact that their child is in 8th grade English, not knowing that there is also an honors 8th grade English class. Many of the parents, especially those who were very educated in DRC, expect that their children will go to college, and higher education is important to them. Not being aware that there are different class levels earlier in their children's school career could put them behind later on as they are getting ready to apply to college. The level distinctions should be made clear to parents early on, and parents should be kept informed, regardless of their English proficiency or the proficiency of their children.

Finally, one of the parents who had been in the area for many years and who had many children who attended local schools said that something that had confused her in the past and still confused her a little bit was why her children spent so much time in ESL. She said that in the past she had thought her children were missing what they needed in their regular classes by

going to ESL and wondered how they were going to learn that material. She said that her children's teachers had explained that her children were still learning what they needed to from their regular classes, but maybe in a different way such as using pictures or other materials they could more easily understand. It seemed as though she understood this explanation but was not completely sure that her children had not missed any of the math that they needed.

It is interesting to note that this is the only comment of confusion about ESL that I received from the parents, and it came from the parent who had been in the country the longest and was the most proficient English speaker. When I asked the other parents if they had any concerns with their children being in ESL or had any questions about it, they all said that they were happy with the ESL instruction that their children had received and that it was very beneficial for their children. Some of their responses were as simple as the fact that their children did not speak English when they entered school and now they do. Others commented that it was beneficial because their children's ESL teachers were the ones who contacted the parents the most and updated them on issues that their children were having in school.

Suggestions for the schools

Related to questions that parents had about the school system, some of the parents also gave suggestions about what they thought the schools could and should be doing to assist ESL parents in better understanding the school system. One major theme that emerged from their suggestions was the need for additional language support, both for the children and for the parents themselves.

The couple whose children attended elementary school suggested that their school hire more ESL teachers who spoke French. They compared their children's school with that of their

sister's children. Their sister's children attended a school with a higher Congolese population that had an ESL teacher who spoke French. The parents believed that this was an advantage that they wanted their children to have as well. They believed that their children would receive more support at school if the ESL teacher spoke French. Part of this suggestion could also be related to their own desire to be able to communicate with someone at the school who spoke French so that they could be better informed of the progress of their children.

Several of the parents, especially those who had been in the country for fewer years, discussed difficulties that they had understanding school communication and having challenges staying informed of school events due to a language barrier. Several mentioned having to attempt to translate communication using the Internet or waiting for another family member or friend to come and help them understand the message. I could tell that this made a few of the parents feel alienated or excluded from the school communication. One father told me that he felt he would be much more successful here if he spoke Spanish instead of French and that the system seems to prefer Spanish here. Some of the parents suggested it would help them be more involved with what was happening at school if they received communication in French. In a school district that has so many different languages represented in the student and parent bodies, this could of course be challenging for the school district or individual schools to provide translated information; however, I think for major school district events or important communication from the schools, especially those that occur every year, it might be beneficial to translate the documents in advance and keep the documents up to date at schools that have significant Congolese populations.

Finally, one of the mothers made the suggestion that a parents' ESL course offered by the school district could help to increase ESL parent involvement with the schools and help the

school district communicate better with the parents. Many parents reported taking ESL classes at the local community college but still reported significant issues with using and understanding English. As the language barrier was such a significant concern for the parents, I believe that any opportunity they have to use and improve their English would be beneficial and help improve ties between the school district and ESL parents. It could be also be a good opportunity for the school district to address ESL parent concerns and help them better understand what their children are doing at school. As was found in a school-based ESL program in Colorado, teaching ESL parents English and American school culture simultaneously significantly helped the parents to improve their English skills and their understanding of American schools (Waterman, 2009). After the time that the parent interviews were conducted, the local school district did pilot such a class for district parents. The objective was to teach parents English while also helping to develop their knowledge of the American educational system. I would recommend that the school district continue to invest in resources for this class and further promote the class in future years to help build parents' school literacy (Gaitan, 2012).

Conclusion

From my interviews with the parents, there was one comment in particular that I thought was especially telling about the challenges that Congolese families might face in immigrating to the United States.

One mother, whose son was currently in high school, shared her perspective about what it was like to raise her son in the United States. I asked her whether she thought she would ever move back to DRC, and she told me that she wanted to because most of her family was still there, but she could not see herself moving back anytime in the near future because her son

wanted to be a police officer and work with forensics. When I asked her if he would not be able to do this in DRC, she said that if they were in DRC he would be pressured to follow her career path and work with computers. She said that in DRC it was common for children to continue in the same field as their parents and that her relatives often called from DRC to try to convince her son that he should do something else instead of his desired career path. She wanted to respect her son's choice, but she also told me that his choice scared her, and she worried about his safety. This desire to stay in the United States so her son could pursue his own choice even though she wanted to move back and was not comfortable with his choice really struck me because it demonstrates her investment in the happiness of her son at the expense of her own happiness.

This sentiment of immigrating so their children could have a better future was apparent in all of the parents that I interviewed, and it resonated with me as something incredibly important to recognize when trying to assist ESL parents, not only the Congolese, but those from all parts of the world. Many come to the United States to better the lives of their children and families, knowing the opportunities they had in their home country may never be available once they immigrate. Their children may adapt to a culture they do not always understand, and they may not understand or know how they are supposed to help their children succeed. While these may seem like obvious considerations for those who work closely with parents of ESL or foreign students, it is still incredibly important to continue to consider.

Chapter 4: Analysis of teacher interviews

Introduction

While the Congolese parents were able to provide valuable information about their perspectives of education in the United States and the issues that they and their children have related to education, the parents may not always be able to provide much information about what actually happens at school or know what issues might be unique to their child or that are common among all Congolese students. For this reason, I also interviewed two teachers within the local school district who both teach at the middle school level. It was important for me to obtain more information about what issues Congolese students have in their classes, how Congolese students might differ from other populations of ESL students, and what they perceived or have experienced in their interactions with the Congolese parents. Interviewing the teachers also provided an opportunity to compare teacher responses with information stated by the parents to see where they agree with each other and where there are differences in perspectives or expectations that should be addressed by the teachers and school district to help provide better services to the Congolese students and families. Below is a summary and analysis of the teacher comments from the interviews, with suggestions given for what still needs to be done to help the Congolese students succeed.

Teacher Backgrounds

Teacher A is an ESL teacher at a local middle school. She has been teaching for 28 years, but the 2013-2014 school year was the first year she served as an ESL teacher. Previously she taught English and Social Studies at the middle school level. Her current middle school is the fourth middle school that she has taught in. She taught four periods of ESL writing, one

period of what she calls “flex,” a literacy enrichment class that incorporates content and materials from other subjects into writing instruction; and one period of oral English practice with low-level ESL students.

Teacher B is the teacher of a new center in the local school district that serves students who have had interrupted formal education in their home country and are relatively new to the United States. The center serves primarily middle school level students, with some upper elementary school level students as well. Like teacher A, this was her first year in her current position. Previously teacher B had several other teaching experiences. During undergraduate school she taught middle school children in France for four years. She then did student teaching at a community college teaching a free community English class. She also held several positions within the local school districts before her current position. She was a substitute teacher for a year and a half for elementary level bilingual classes, mostly in rural areas. She also taught at a local high school teaching French and English composition. She then had a job as a teaching assistant at a local high school for ESL tutoring, where she focused on literacy development and student workshops. She did not originally apply for her current position but was contacted by district administration to fill the position, which she accepted.

One caveat for the analysis of teachers’ experiences in this chapter is that both teachers interviewed were currently in their first year of teaching the student populations reported. While some of their comments describe experiences prior to their current positions, many of their observations came from their first year in their current position and do not necessarily come from long-term observations about Congolese students. Therefore, while much of the information they provided seems to be applicable to the Congolese population in general, it is not possible to say that their observations of future classes would not be somewhat different based on

differences in individual classes. However, as this was their first year, they could also have been more astutely observing their classes and students, trying to form helpful generalizations they could use for future years.

Composition of their classes

Each of the teachers described what the composition of their classes was like. Teacher A reported that in her different classes combined she had seventeen Mexican students who mostly came to the United States as small children or were born in the United States. There were also seven students from Korea, three from Guatemala, six from DRC and other students from China, Israel, Turkey, Spain, and Brazil. The teacher also noted that there were about ten to eleven students from DRC total in the middle school, several of whom were not enrolled in ESL classes. While this project focuses specifically on Congolese parents and students, it is interesting to note the diversity and number of different languages represented in the ESL program. Given the school's proximity to a major university with many international students and professors as well as the town's diversity through immigration, the local school districts have a student population that is maybe more diverse than what might be expected for this size community in the Midwest.

In the program where teacher B teaches, there were ten students total. Two students were from Guatemala, two from Peru, two from Angola who were half Congolese, and four from DRC. All of the students in teacher B's class reported having an interrupted education in their native country for various lengths of time and had varying literacy and academic skills levels when they entered the program. The teacher said that two of her students were reported to come in with no literacy skills in any language, including one Congolese student. There were two students who reported low literacy levels in all languages and one Congolese student who had

relatively high literacy skills. The teacher reported the rest of the students as having mid-level literacy skills in comparison with the rest of the students in the class. Though all of the students were reported to have an interruption of at least two years in their education, it is clear that the literacy and academic levels of these students varied greatly within this one class.

The language background of the students also varied, even among Congolese students. Teacher B is a fluent French speaker and often gives support during class in French as needed. She told me, however, that it took her almost an entire year to assess which students actually spoke and understood French competently. Though French is the official language of education in DRC, as illustrated by the parent interviews, not every child grows up speaking French at home, and some village schools might not abide by the government mandate that all schooling be conducted in French. If students are missing years of education in DRC or grew up in poorer villages, it becomes difficult to predict their oral and literacy skills in French. According to teacher B, all of the Africans in her class, both Congolese and Angolan, were native Lingala speakers. She explained that the students seemed to speak with each other in two main forms of Lingala: what she called “easy” Lingala, which is a mix of Lingala and French, and “hard” Lingala, which is pure Lingala without French. This description of Lingala use corresponds with what parents reported about social language use in DRC. Some of her Congolese students seemed to speak and understand French much better than others depending on what language they spoke at home and how much education they received in DRC. This population of students could be more difficult to assess or assist because teachers or administrators who often interact with other Congolese students might assume that all Congolese students are proficient in French when this might not be the case.

Another interesting note is that because the center where teacher B instructs is an alternative center for students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) whose age places them into middle school, some of the students from the center also attend the middle school where teacher A teaches. While this does not affect my analysis, as I did not ask about any students individually, it should be considered that when I talk about two different settings within the school district, some of the issues from each institution might apply to the same students.

A very important consideration when interpreting the analysis of the Congolese students in teacher B's class is that their educational situation, both in the DRC and the United States, may not correspond exactly to much of the information gathered during the parent interviews. None of the parents that I interviewed had children with limited formal education, and while I was unable to make conclusions about the parents' perceived social class, I imagine that several of the children in teacher B's class grew up with less access to educational resources, perhaps because of their families' socioeconomic status in DRC or where they grew up within the country. However, while their situation may be somewhat different than the children of the parents that I interviewed, the information gathered about these students is important to understand what issues these students may have specifically and what issues they share with the other Congolese students in teacher A's classes and the children of the parents whom I interviewed.

Academic performance of Congolese students

In my conversations with the two teachers, we discussed what the Congolese students were like in class and what issues they noticed that the Congolese students had in class or with the American education system in general. While there were some similarities in the

observations of the two teachers, as the teachers taught in a rather different context, there were many differences in their observations about the Congolese students at school. The following section details their observations of the Congolese students in terms of their academic performance and certain academic issues that seem particular to the Congolese students, as well as observations about what the Congolese students are like socially within the school.

I asked each of the teachers to describe what the Congolese students were like in terms of their school performance and whether the teachers noticed anything different about the Congolese students' academic skills. Some of the teacher comments were similar to each other, but given the two different settings in which the teachers teach, there were some important differences between their answers.

Teacher A reported that all but one of her Congolese students seemed to come to the United States with strong literacy skills. She said that from what she could tell, most of her Congolese students had more affluent backgrounds with parents who were professionals in DRC, such as business people or lawyers, and who were highly educated. Therefore most of the students reportedly "knew how to do school" already when they entered school in the United States. She also reported that improving their English seemed to be important to her Congolese students and that they asked questions in class, had long term goals involving education, and many were thinking about college in the future. This report supports many of the comments made by the parents during the interviews, all of whom were educated, and most of whom were professionals in DRC. All of the parents reported working on school assignments with their children, and most reported coming to the United States in part so their children could receive an American education and go to college. As the mentality seems to be that the next generation should strive for greater than the previous, it is not surprising that most of the Congolese students

at the school seemed to be concerned about their education and gave importance to their future, possibly in part because of the desires of their parents.

Teacher A also noted a few areas where Congolese students seemed to struggle in class. She reported that most of her Congolese students did not seem to be “computer literate” or have any experience using technology before coming to the United States. Given the economic situation in DRC as well as the possible lack of resources that schools can provide, they might not have the same exposure to technology that most American children have in middle school. Teacher A did say that they were very quick to learn how to use the technology and that they often made use of technology in her classes and at school.

She also said that the Congolese students needed additional help with test-taking devices such as learning how to fill in bubbles on a multiple-choice test or using strategies to solve problems on tests. As these test taking methods are not universal, the students could need some extra preparation or support when taking tests, especially standardized tests or other high stakes tests which employ these testing methods. Students in the United States generally learn these test taking strategies and test formatting early in their school career, especially with the current importance of standardized testing in American education. It is important to note that especially with these students who otherwise seem to have high literacy and academic skills, teachers need to be careful not to make assumptions that Congolese students are able to do everything that American students with a similar level of academic performance can do, such as use computers or correctly navigate different types of tests. Otherwise, the Congolese students might not be given support that they need to succeed and fall further behind in these skills as they progress. A small amount of support in these specific areas would be what they need to help them catch up.

Because teacher B teaches SIFE and a smaller number of students, she provided much more information about what her students were able to do and what they had a lot of difficulty doing in the classroom. As I previously mentioned, the students in teacher B's class had varying literacy levels in both their L1 and in English and missed differing years of schooling in DRC, from only missing a short amount of time to only attending a year or two of school total. As I discuss teacher B's comments about her Congolese student academic abilities and issues, it is important to remember that none of the parents that I interviewed had students who could be considered SIFE, and therefore some of the discussion might not directly apply to their children. However, I think that this information is important to document and can serve as a catalyst for further research to help educators understand the diversity of the Congolese population and address the range of needs that these students may have when they enter school in the United States.

Teacher B reported that a major component of her teaching at her center involves building academic skills that can help students succeed in their mainstream classes as well as assist them to further develop their math and literacy skills and help them compensate for the period of schooling that they missed in their country of origin. As she described it, she dedicates much of her time building "skills for the sake of skills," meaning that much of her focus is helping the students acquire the academic skills that they will need to help them be successful in their other classes. Students work to put items into categories, take notes, or follow directions instead of only focusing on learning new information. It is important to help the students improve their literacy levels and learn English, but teaching them the skills that they will need to learn independently and to be successful in the different tasks they will be assigned is essential to helping them integrate into and understand American classes. Teacher B said that the American

school system demands that you adapt to changing environments in the classroom, and her job is to help her students understand what is expected.

The first idea that teacher B reported when I asked about issues that her Congolese students had in an American school is that they came from a culture that emphasizes oral production over written production, whether their parents are educated or not. She reported that most of her Congolese students always wanted to give their answers orally. She works a lot with the students to help them express themselves in writing when it might seem contradictory to the students because in their mind they should be able to just tell the teacher the answer. She commented that this kind of behavior was not manageable or expected in American classes, and therefore it is something that she focuses on consistently when she conducts her classes.

Probably because of the students' desire to demonstrate their understanding orally, teacher B reported that her Congolese students in general had good oral production and liked to perform and use their voices in class. They enjoyed music and dancing. She also said that for those students who had attended more school, they generally had very good math skills. It seems logical that math skills would transfer most easily as there would not be as great a language barrier if students learned math in French. During one of the parent interviews, a parent mentioned that while some of the problem-solving methods that are taught in the United States were a little bit different, such as how American schools teach long division, the parents could generally understand math and help their children with it. Teacher B said her students also generally had good page presentation, meaning they seemed to care about what their work looked like and wanted it to look neat and organized. This could be a skill that is valued in Congolese schools, but more investigation is needed to determine which characteristics of student work are most valued in Congolese schools.

However, teacher B also discussed areas where many of her students struggled and the skills she emphasized during her classes. She said that some of her students had been in school for most of the time that they were supposed to be in school, but they still lacked what she considered fundamental skills, such as putting items into columns. Related to this, she said that some of her students who missed more school also had great difficulty with graphic organizers and analyzing visual information like charts and graphs. She spent time in class practicing skills such as taking notes and copying from the board as well as analyzing information from visual aids. She also noted that some students had difficulty memorizing information. This could possibly be because if they are unfamiliar with school practices, students with limited education might not be used to memorizing information that is not necessarily relevant to their daily lives. The concept of needing to know information for the future might not be as important as needing to know what is important for the here and now.

Finally, an area that both teachers described as being difficult for Congolese students is adjusting to American discipline practices at school. I have already discussed this topic at length regarding parent perspectives of discipline in the United States. Teacher A told me that some of the students did have discipline issues, and it could be difficult for them in a system where it becomes the students' responsibility to behave instead of discipline being more externally driven by corporal punishment. Teacher B commented that the American system of discipline is so complicated for ESL students in general, giving the example of an experience when she had to help a student who was going to be punished by means of a student jury at the high school level, and the student was very confused about what that form of punishment meant and the consequences of the punishment. Teacher A did say that most student behavior issues seemed to end after report cards because grades are very important to the Congolese students and they

want to have good grades to succeed. It seems that when the students cannot see the consequences of issues like misbehavior, the fear of bad grades becomes their motivation for good behavior. Regardless of whether behavior issues are observed by teachers, it is very important that discipline practices be explained to the students as well as the parents, especially regarding what the consequences of the discipline will mean for the student and how it will affect them in school. Otherwise punishments that generally affect non-ESL students who recognize the meaning of the punishment might go unnoticed or misinterpreted by the ESL students.

Ultimately, it is apparent that though the two teachers both teach in the same school district and at about the same grade level, their perspectives about the Congolese student academic proficiencies are rather different. While both teachers commented on strengths that the Congolese students have in an American classroom, teacher A seemed to have an overall opinion that the Congolese students “know how to do school,” while teacher B acknowledged several basic academic skills that her Congolese students have difficulty with, especially those who have had large gaps in attendance at school in DRC. For this reason, it is important that we do not make generalizations about academic skills that Congolese students should bring with them to the United States as there is a great educational disparity in DRC, and we do not always know what kind of educational experience the students have had in their home country.

Social Observations of Congolese students

Both teachers commented about friendship and community and its effect on Congolese students in school. Teacher A noted that in general, one issue that her recent immigrant students faced is making friends. She said the students usually try to make friends with other students from the same language background or cultural group as they are. She found this to be true for

the Congolese students as well. Teacher B commented that the Congolese students in her class seemed to be good at making friends and interacting well with others. She noted that in her class, the separation of friends tended to be by gender instead of by race, with groups of friends consisting of mainly girls or mainly boys. From her class and from what she knows from the students' other schools, she said that the girls also tended to make friends with other ESL students while many of the boys, who happened to play on organized sports teams, were more likely to make friends with non-ESL students than the girls were.

Group size seemed to play some role in student relationships in each school. Teacher A reported that one issue that she had with all her ESL students, not just her Congolese students, was that there seemed to be an "us versus them" mentality that caused some issues among students from different language and cultural groups. She noted that groups of students had some trouble trusting other students who spoke a different language and that it was common to hear accusations such as, "They're talking about me," made between different language groups. She said that with the help of her students, she implemented two new class rules, so students had to raise their hands to ask permission to use their native language in class, and the students were not allowed to make fun of anyone's native language. She reported that the students seemed to be doing much better since these rules were implemented and that the use of digital translators has helped her students help themselves with language issues instead of having to ask another student and use their native language. It is good to see that this behavior was addressed in teacher A's classes and that the students were receptive to changing their behavior. This type of behavior is not uncommon among students of any background and could become a problem in classes with any sort of mixed group of students, be it from different races, social classes, or language backgrounds. Promoting acceptance and prohibiting discrimination among students

not only benefits groups such as ESL students, but should be emphasized at a school or community-wide level.

Related to friendship and acceptance among the students, both teachers also discussed their perceptions about the role of community in the lives of the Congolese students. Teacher A explained that she observed Congolese students who had been in the United States for a longer period of time helping students who were new to the country. They helped them with tasks such as getting to classes or understanding their schedules. It is as if the more experienced students became a guide for the new students. The teacher said that the school does not make this kind of arrangement, and that she suspected that the parents or community members made arrangements for their children to help each other. This practice of assigning experienced children to help new community members exemplifies the collective and connected nature of the Congolese community and their sense of responsibility to help each other.

Teacher B also made similar comments, noting that from her observations, the Congolese community maintains its collectivism and is a close-knit community. She commented that her students seemed to depend on each other and helped each other a lot at school. I know from volunteering at the center where teacher B teaches that she employs some student-led assistance in her classes by pairing students to help each other, with higher level students assisting lower level students to complete tasks or learn material.

Teacher B also commented that the collective mentality that the Congolese community maintains in the United States might make it more difficult for Congolese parents to raise teenagers in the United States. She used the term “wrap-around” to say that in Congolese culture members of the community are very connected and seem to incorporate everyone into a collective group, whereas in the United States, teenagers seem to be treated more as an isolated

group, not yet a part of adult society. As I noted from some of the parent interviews, I heard comments from parents who thought their children were becoming more American and making their own decisions about what they wanted to do, something that differed from Congolese culture, and something the parents seemed to be uncomfortable with. I did not have an opportunity to ask any Congolese parents what their perspective was about the more individualist American culture and how it affected their child-rearing practices in the United States apart from the comments that the parents had already provided, but this effect would be something to explore further in future research.

Each teacher had slightly different observations about the perceived social status of their Congolese students when compared to other students at their schools. Although teacher A commented that the norm for most of her ESL students was some degree of poverty, she said that from her observations, most students in middle school seemed to be judged by how they dress, which was used to determine social status at school. She said that most of the Congolese students seemed to fit in with the other students because of how they dressed, and they were not perceived as poor because they dressed well. Dressing well to go to school or go out in public could be something that is important to the Congolese community and something they try to maintain once they immigrate despite the economic challenges that they have.

Related to perceived social class, teacher B commented that while her students seem to have a similar social status in the United States, she perceived some differences in behavior that led her to think that some of her students came from different social or economic backgrounds in DRC, such as working class families as opposed to professional families. While she did not know for sure what her students' backgrounds were like in DRC, she made an interesting comment that immigration becomes a factor that seems to equalize the Congolese community in

terms of social status in the United States. She believed that it might also make the differences that the Congolese families bring with them even more important, even if the differences are only noticeable to those within the community. Those who come from similar backgrounds within DRC might want to demonstrate their previous social or economic class or distance themselves from others of different social or economic classes. This desire to affiliate with or distance themselves from other members of the local Congolese community could both strengthen relationships and potentially cause some conflict among the Congolese students.

While it is important for the teachers to be aware of how students adapt socially to American school environments and to living in a new socioeconomic context, it is also important that they are aware of past experiences that the students could be bringing with them to the United States, particularly if there is a risk of previous trauma. Teacher A explained that though for the most part she did not know very much about the lives of her students before they arrived in the United States, she could tell that some of her Congolese students might have experienced some kind of trauma before coming to the United States. With civil war and political unrest, trauma becomes a possibility for the Congolese students and their families, regardless of their social status or background in DRC. Her students did not discuss any sort of past trauma, and she believed that they hid it or were told not to talk about it by their parents. She gave an example of a Congolese student in her class who would not sit anywhere in the classroom that was visible to anyone outside of the classroom. It can be difficult to know how to help students with past trauma, especially when the students or their parents do not feel comfortable talking about it. However, teacher A was aware that trauma could be an issue for some of her students, which is an important step in ensuring that those students are assisted in whatever way is necessary. It is very important that teachers be aware that some of their students could have had

traumatic experiences before coming the United States. If the district is not already advising teachers that this could be an issue for some of the students, especially for those from countries that have been at war, it should be something that the teachers are made aware of.

While teacher B acknowledged that some of her students could have had problems related to poverty or the civil unrest in DRC before coming to the United States, she also said that something she particularly noticed about the Congolese students is that they knew how to feel good, meaning that most of the time they seemed to be very happy in her class and with each other. She commented that she admired her students' ability to care for other people despite any past problems or hardships that they may have gone through.

Observations and expectations of parent involvement

In order to compare what the teachers observe or expect from parents of their ESL students, and particularly from their Congolese parents, with information the parents provided about their own expectation, I asked the teachers to describe their expectations and observations of Congolese parent involvement. Some of the information that the teachers provided was similar to what the parents described in their interviews. However, there were some perspectives that seemed to differ between what the teachers expected or observed and what the parents expected or reported doing with their children. These differences, as I explain below, can serve as a basis for what parents and teachers can further address with one another to try to better align their expectations and practices and to better serve the Congolese students in the school district.

When I asked teacher A about her impression of the Congolese parents, she generally had very positive things to say about their involvement in their children's education. As I mentioned previously, she thought that with the exception of one of the parents, most of her Congolese

parents were well-educated professionals in DRC. She observed that she generally had fewer issues with the Congolese students with educated parents than she did with other groups of students whose parents were not as educated. She also referenced behavior that she noticed in the Congolese parents that demonstrated they were involved and supported their children's education. She noticed that most of the Congolese parents went online to check their children's grades, and the parents came to the open house and parent-teacher conferences. She noted that in her first year as an ESL teacher, she had perfect attendance at parent-teacher conferences for the first time in her teaching career, demonstrating that not only the Congolese parents but all the ESL parents made an effort to come see her.

Overall, she said that the Congolese parents as a whole seemed more involved than other groups of ESL parents and expected their children to be working hard in school. This is perhaps unsurprising as many of the parents reported that one of the factors that led them to immigrate to the United States was so their children could attend school here. However, as I noted, the majority of the Congolese parents at the school seemed to be educated themselves and probably highly valued the opportunities that education could give their children. Being educated, they also probably had more ability to provide support for their children when they had issues with material at school. However, as demonstrated by comments made by teacher B, this is not necessarily the case for all Congolese parents in the school district.

Teacher B had much to say about Congolese parent involvement and had several observations about issues that Congolese parents might have in navigating American education. First, in stark contrast with the observations made by teacher A, teacher B commented that from what she had noticed, the Congolese parents did not generally help at all with their children's homework. This also contradicts the reports made by the parents I interviewed, who all reported

helping their children with homework as much as they could. Parent level of education could play an important role in the help they can give their children as the parents of children who missed years of school are also more likely to be less educated than the professionals that teacher A described and possibly than the parents that were interviewed as part of this project. Teacher B said that the parents reported that they wanted their children to succeed, but they did not seem to be engaging with their children in what they had to do at home. The teacher explained several possible reasons for this perceived lack of engagement by her Congolese parents. First of all, she commented that several of the parents seemed to think that their children just read the textbook to learn all the material that they needed. In American education there is an emphasis on making connections and using information from outside sources to support what is being learned in class. I discussed above that resources could play a role in this emphasis as schools here might be generally more able to provide other resources to the students in addition to textbooks than schools in DRC.

Related to this lack of understanding about what students do in school, teacher B commented that there seemed to be a misconception among the parents that all their children were learning at school were facts. This could explain some of the parent comments about school in the United States being less challenging because students do not have to memorize as much information. If students in DRC are expected to display their knowledge by repeating facts they have learned, parents might not understand why students are expected to make connections or think critically instead of repeating information they have learned, and these skills may seem less rigorous or unnecessary to the parents. Helping the parents understand why certain skills are valued and why students do not always have to memorize as much information seems to be an important goal for the teachers and school districts in order to better serve the Congolese

students and parents. This could be very beneficial for all parents to learn, especially those who did not attend school in the United States.

Teacher B also commented that grades seemed to play an important part in the parents' involvement, and they were concerned about the grades their students receive, mirroring teacher A's comments that her Congolese parents very actively checked the grades of their children. However, the importance of grades was difficult for teacher B, as most of her students could not perform at grade level due to interrupted formal education. She explained that the students in her class would generally not perform very well in a regular classroom setting, and it was difficult for her to have to explain to the parents what the actual academic level of their children was in certain subjects. She described one parent who became very upset when she told him the math level of his child because it was very far below grade level. This would be a delicate balance that the teacher would have to navigate. If she gives the students grades based on actual grade level, many would do very poorly. She does not want to discourage the students who are making efforts to improve and have a lot to catch up with to succeed at grade level. However, if the parents see that their children are doing well in her class, they might assume that their children do not need the extra support or that they are performing at grade level, which is not what the grades represent.

Many of the parents I interviewed commented that it would be good for the students to fail if they were not performing well, and they wondered why the teachers did not fail more students here. For students who are already so far behind grade level and are missing key academic skills when they enter school, always comparing them to others at their grade level might mean that they never pass and would not continue to progress. In situations like these, it

becomes especially important that parents are made aware of what their children's grades truly mean and what level of academic proficiency their children have despite their grades.

In her observations about parent involvement, teacher B also expressed some of the same concerns that several parents had about not understanding the choices that they can make for their children and not being informed about what might be best for their children. She observed that while some of the parents could make decisions for their children about schooling, they were not always informed about some aspects of the educational system in the United States and were likely to make uninformed decisions about what was best for their children. For example, as I discussed above, with student grades for teacher B's class where most of the students have limited formal education, the parents might not be aware of what grades mean in the United States and could make decisions that negatively affect their children if they come to the wrong conclusions as a result of the grades. Teacher B shared that she had fears that these kinds of misconceptions about American education would spread because of sharing inaccurate information within the Congolese community and that the parents would begin to blame the wrong factors for issues that their children might have in school. Providing more information about choices that parents can make and what parents need to understand about American education seems to be an area that both parents and teachers agree should be improved or emphasized within the district as Congolese parents attempt to navigate school in the United States.

A final important factor that the teachers acknowledged which affects parent involvement is family life and parent employment. Teacher A expressed that very few of her ESL students lived in houses and that the norm for them was some degree of poverty. Teacher B expanded on this idea and said that she saw how much the Congolese families have to manage already apart

from education. The parents must work many hours which leads to trying to fulfill many short term goals such as paying rent and providing resources for their families instead of trying to accomplish more long term goals such as education or learning English themselves. These comments mirror concerns from the parents that they worked many hours and at different times of the day, which made it difficult for them to provide support for their children's education at home, even though helping their children was clearly something that was important to all of them.

Communicating with the parents

During the parents' interviews, all of the parents reported communicating with their children's teachers and many on a regular basis. The teachers also discussed their communication with the Congolese parents, especially the ways that they communicated with the parents at conferences and convey information to the parents throughout the semester. As I previously stated, teacher A reported that she communicated with the parents most at the open house and parent-teacher conferences, where every parent was present. At the parent-teacher conferences she discussed issues with the parents such as student progress and any behavioral problems that the students were having. There were French-speaking interpreters at the conference that assisted her to communicate with the parents and helped parents express their concerns. We did not discuss in detail what happened at the parent-teacher conferences or what issues that the parents raised during their conversations. She did give an example of a father of a girl who was misbehaving in class who expressed frustration during a conference because of the different discipline practices in the United States, again echoing the belief that children have too much freedom in school in the United States.

If teacher A had any issues related to the students during the semester, she reported sending a message to the district parent liaison to have it translated and to then contact the parents. Teacher A did not speak French, so this is what she did to make sure that parents received and understood the message. Having important information translated aligns with the suggestion that several parents made of making sure more information for the parents is translated into French. That way they can stay informed without needing an outside source like a friend or the dictionary to help them understand the communication. It would be interesting to find out how much communication from the school is sent to the parents in their native language from this particular school. I do not know if translating communication is something that only the ESL teacher does, or if other teachers from the school send information in this way as well. It would also be interesting to find out how much time generally passes between when the teacher sends information to the liaison and when the parents receive the information, to see if there is any significant delay in the time the French-speaking parents would receive information in comparison to other parents at the school.

Teacher B provided much more information about communicating with the Congolese parents. This could be in part because she had a smaller class and fewer parents to contact, as well as her need to closely monitor the progress of her students and work with the parents to help the students adapt to education. She told me that her impression when she accepted the teaching position was that she was supposed to have a significant amount of contact with the parents and work with them in order to help support the students. Because she speaks French, she often called the parents directly if there were issues at school, and she reported that if they are called, they always come talk with her. The parents also contacted her about issues, just as many parents reported doing in their interviews. Because teacher B spoke French and could

communicate directly with the parents in most cases without the use of an interpreter, communication seemed to be more efficient between teacher B and the Congolese parents.

Teacher B also made an interesting comment about school district communication with the parents. She said that generally when something is translated by the school district for the parents, they do a direct translation of whatever is intended to go to American parents as well. The district does not “code” the message or change it to better explain the message to international parents who might not be as familiar with American educational practices. As I will discuss below, writing materials for ESL parents in a way that helps them better understand the information that they receive would be one suggestion for the school district. It could help improve parent involvement and understanding of what happens at school and help parents better understand what they should be doing for their children at home.

When specifically discussing communication at parent-teacher conferences, teacher B also made several comments about her interactions with the parents and the expectations that the parents seemed to have when discussing their children. When discussing behavior issues with the parents at conferences, she explained that it seemed to her that in some cases the parents seemed to want their children to make some sort of public promise to her that they would behave better, instead of handling the situation privately. She had noticed that the parents seemed to view the children as a reflection of themselves, and they could seem very hurt when their children had discipline issues. As I explained above, Congolese parents generally feel a great responsibility to “educate” their children to behave correctly in society. If their children’s behavior becomes an issue, this could also be face-threatening for the parents when they speak to the teacher. They might feel the need to publicly address the issue to demonstrate that they will help to resolve the

problem. It was apparent that the teacher felt uncomfortable with such a public display during the conferences, as discipline is generally a more private matter in the United States.

A final note about communication with the parents that affects both teachers is teacher A's comment that when questioning Congolese students and parents about whether the students had missed any schooling in their home country, the district seemed to get more accurate results about the amount of school attended from the children and not the parents. Teacher A conjectured that the parents of these students might believe that their children will not receive as good an education if they admit to interrupted schooling, and they may be perceived as behind the other students. To help prevent misinformation in the future affecting the support that the SIFE receive in the district, it becomes important for the teachers and district to communicate to the parents the benefits of accurately answering questions about interrupted schooling so that students receive the proper support at both the center where teacher B teaches and in their mainstream classes.

Expectations and suggestions for the parents

I asked each of the teachers what they expected or suggested that the parents do to help their children. The suggestions included practices that the parents could do at home as well as how the parents might need to modify their approach to education in the United States. Teacher A's suggestions to the parents included checking their children's assignment planners when they get home from school to become aware of the assignments that they have every day. The teachers encourage the students to write assignments in their planner to help them remember, but it will take reinforcement from the parents to make sure that they are consistently using their planners and complete everything they need to every day. She also recommended that the

parents enforce some sort of consequence for their children if they are not using their planners, to help ensure that they keep themselves organized about assignments. This is good advice for any parent, but especially when students are entering a new school environment where everything is new, it could be more difficult for them to stay organized and remember what assignments they have on a daily basis. Checking planners is also a good way for parents to ensure they know what their children are assigned instead of having to ask their children and trusting that they remember everything.

Teacher A also advised parents to encourage their children to attend homework club and after school programs to get extra support with their work and to make sure their children attend if they say they will go. She commented that her school had had some attendance issues at the after school club with parents being unaware of whether or not their children had attended. She said that the school started texting the parents about student attendance at the after school program and attendance improved. The after school programs are a good opportunity for ESL students to receive some extra attention with their work and help the parents ensure that their children's homework is done, especially if parents are having some trouble assisting their children to complete assignments in English.

Teacher B expressed some concerns about parent planning for their children's education. She commented that planning ahead seems to be something that Congolese parents struggle with when it comes to their children and their own interactions with the school district. As stated previously, teacher B understood that the Congolese parents have to try to accomplish a lot of short-term goals when they immigrate, as there are many immediate needs that their families have. However, she also expressed that there are times when the parents should be planning ahead for events that are approaching for their children at school. The example she gave, as she

was interviewed shortly before the district's spring break, was that she believed that several of her Congolese students' parents did not have any plan for how they would accommodate their children being at home all week and arrange for child care. She encouraged the parents to become informed about what they would be responsible for planning throughout the year, such as the school breaks. Part of this request would probably require that the parents be shown how to access the school calendar or where to access the information that they need to know about the school schedule or events that differ from the normal school schedule. Another example she gave of planning that parents should be responsible for is bringing someone who can interpret for them if needed whenever they come to talk with teachers or administrators at school. She explained that it is common for parents to come to the school and have to wait until the school can find a translator to address their concerns, which can take time. She said that if parents come to the schools and know from going to the schools in the past that communication in English will be an issue, it would help them and the school if they are able to bring a family member or friend who is more proficient in English to help them, saving the time of having to find a translator. Of course this might not always be an option for parents who are very new to the United States, but it is something to consider, especially if they have previous experience coming to their children's schools to talk with the teachers.

A final suggestion from teacher B relates to the parent's perceptions about what living in the United States will be like or what they believe school will be like for their children. She acknowledged that there are many areas of American culture or American school culture that Congolese parents and students might have difficulty understanding, as it will be different from what they are familiar with in DRC. However, she also stated that it is important for parents to not assume that everything will be the same. She thought that if parents acknowledge that there

might be differences at school, as the United States and DRC are different places, it might make it easier for them to accept differences in educational practices and expectations for their children. This suggestion is a challenging one for parents. On one hand, the easiest thing someone can do in unknown situations is to refer to what they know best, in this case their home culture. They might also assume that what they know is an acceptable alternative to what they witness or experience unless told otherwise. For this reason, it is especially important for the school district and teachers to help in part by noticing what issues the Congolese students are having so that in the future they can quickly address these issues with future incoming parents. They may also want to encourage parents from the beginning to try to notice differences between the United States and DRC and ask the teachers about them. That way parents may understand teacher expectations more quickly and will be better prepared to help their own children in the American education system.

Suggestions and concerns for the school district and fellow teachers

In doing this project, one important goal that I had was to provide information for the teachers and administrators as to how to best serve the local Congolese population. An important component of this goal was to ask the teachers that I interviewed what advice or concerns they had for fellow teachers and the administration about how to meet the needs of the Congolese students and their families and how to best support the teachers who worked with these students. The two teachers that I interviewed were able to discuss several concerns that they had about serving the Congolese students and also suggestions for what they thought the administration or other teachers could do to improve the service to these students. Some of the

suggestions related to do what could be done to better serve the students in the classroom, while others had more to do with what could be done outside of school to support the students.

Both teachers suggested that the district could modify how they assessed the academic level and needs of incoming Congolese students and the goals that they set based on those assessments. Teacher A commented that the school district seems to be much more comfortable assessing the needs of elementary school students than they do with incoming middle school students. She explained that she felt that because students have more time in elementary school, teachers can take more time to actually assess student proficiency and academic levels and have the time to work with the student to improve specific academic areas that students need to improve. However, she said that for students who enter American schools in middle school, it feels as though the teachers have to figure out “on the fly” what needs students have and how to address them in a shorter amount of time. She wished that there were better ways to assess incoming middle school students before the students start school that indicate what the student needs were and how best to serve those students. Modifying the assessment process could be beneficial to all incoming ESL students, not just the Congolese students and would help the teachers address student needs more efficiently as soon as they started middle school.

Related to assessing student needs, teacher B made the suggestion that the administration could reset goals that they have for low-literacy students to allow them to better participate in school with the other students. She noted that these are the students that are often excluded or fall behind because they cannot possibly perform at grade level with the other students. Low-literacy students are a particularly difficult group to serve and often have a more difficult time progressing than other ESL students. While much more work needs to be done to research how

to better serve low-literacy students and SIFE, reassessing the goals for what these students are expected to achieve might allow teachers to better help them accomplish those goals in class.

Teacher B also commented that the school district could possibly incorporate literacy teaching into more classes or have classes that focus on literacy at the secondary level as literacy is often something that ESL and many non-ESL students struggle with as they progress in school. She noted that greater focus on literacy would be beneficial for all students and help other teachers realize what literacy skills are required to succeed in their courses, as literacy might not be an area of focus for subjects other than English, even though literacy skills are important to success in any class. Teacher B also suggested that the district could incorporate more ESL content classes or more native language support for new ESL students into their curriculum so that students with low proficiency levels in English have access to the content material at their grade level in their native language as they build their English proficiency. Teacher B acknowledged that other factors such as state standards or district resources could make it difficult to accomplish goals such as these, but that in an ideal situation, these at-risk students would receive more native language support as they adapt to American schools and improve their English proficiency.

In a final note about what can be done in classes to better instruct the Congolese students, teacher B commented that it would be beneficial for mainstream teachers in the district to better understand what it is to be an ESL student and the unique challenges that they have in school. She commented that the responsibility to understand what the students are experiencing cannot fall solely on the ESL teachers in order to help the students in the way that they need. However, she also noted that helping the mainstream teachers understand that ESL population better needs to come from an open conversation between everyone involved in teaching ESL students and can

not be something that is mandated for the mainstream teachers as this would lead to tension between the teachers, and mainstream teachers might resist being told how they need to teach ESL students. Open communication between all teachers and administrators that is driven by questions that can be solved together as opposed to the transfer of knowledge from one group to another seems like the most appropriate way to conduct such interactions with the goal of improving instruction for ESL students.

Teacher B also had several suggestions about ways that the school district could more effectively provide services to the Congolese students and their families and how they could better communicate with the Congolese community. Her first suggestion was that the school district could hire someone who can act as a social worker to advise and inform the Congolese population about how to best prepare their children for success in school in the United States. She commented that in her experience, many of the ESL students do not have the same access to social services as other students, with the excuse being that there is a language barrier that prevents many social service workers from assisting ESL students. Hiring someone who has knowledge of the Congolese community and can communicate directly with the students and parents in their native language could greatly improve how they are supported in the school district. Teacher B also acknowledged that it would be helpful for the parents if interpreters for the Congolese parents were more easily accessible and could respond more quickly when needed. While not the largest group of ESL students, there is a significant number of Congolese students and families, so having an interpreter available quickly when needed would help ensure that problems and questions are dealt with when they occur instead of having to wait until the district can find an interpreter.

A final important suggestion that teacher B made was that if the teachers and school district want to better communicate with the Congolese community they cannot assume that the parents will come to ask what they need to do differently or how to help their children succeed. As I discussed earlier, teacher B was concerned that some parents might not expect that American schools will be different from Congolese schools. Many parents also work long hours and may not be available to come to school functions or meetings with the teachers. In order to assist the parents and share necessary information so they can better understand American education, it needs to be done on terms that are feasible for the parents. However, teacher B also made an important observation when she noted that while it is important to go to the parents, this responsibility cannot always be that of the students' teachers. She commented that as a teacher, she always feels the importance of making her role very clear to the Congolese families. She feels she cannot be responsible for childcare or providing transportation to parents, as her primary responsibility to the family is as their child's teacher, and the parents need to recognize this. While it is important to think about what more could be done to assist ESL families, if teachers' roles become misinterpreted to be more than teachers can feasibly do, it will put further pressure on the teachers to devote themselves to more than is possible given the number of responsibilities they already have.

Chapter 5: **Conclusions and Implications**

Throughout my analysis, I have discussed the major findings and conclusions from interviews with the parents and teachers. I would like to focus on several of the findings that I believe are especially significant for the parents and teachers of Congolese students and could help the school district better support the Congolese students and their parents.

One area of concern for both the parents and the teachers is discipline. Every parent discussed discipline as an area of concern in educating the Congolese students. The American discipline practices, which do not include physical punishment, seemed ineffective to them, and they did not seem to understand how those practices could correct bad behavior. They felt that the American practices conflicted with their own style of discipline and that the lack of physical punishment caused their children to feel that they could misbehave at school and at home. From the parent interviews, it was clear that their children's behavior was very important to them and they felt that it was a reflection of themselves. The teachers acknowledged that American discipline procedures were complicated and difficult for the students to understand.

Since this issue seemed to be so important throughout the interviews, I think that this is an area that should be addressed with both the parents and the students' teachers. Parents should receive more information about why physical punishment is not considered acceptable in the United States, and what the American punishments for bad behavior are meant to teach the students in order to help prevent misbehavior in the future. It may also help teachers understand how they can explain what the consequences of behavior issues mean to parents and students if they know more about the parents' perceptions of what discipline should be like at school, and what discipline practices the students are used to at home or school in DRC.

Another significant finding from the parent interviews is what home literacy practices are utilized in the Congolese households both prior to and after children start school. It was clear from the interviews that the Congolese home literacy practices differ significantly from the mainstream American literacy practices as outlined in Heath's (1982) work. The Congolese parents did not read with their children prior to their children entering school, and they generally do not have a lot of children's books at their houses besides those that the schools sent home with the students. Most parents reported reading to their children at home once they started school, but most focused on their own pronunciation as a challenge for them while reading and did not seem to go beyond just reading the words to include practices like asking questions or confirming that the children understood what was happening as teachers might expect from mainstream American reading practices.

When American children enter school, while they still usually do not know how to read, it is likely that they have had some kind of introduction to literacy and engage in pre-literacy practices at home with their parents starting at a young age. They are not starting from zero when they arrive at school. While they learn to read, it is likely that the schools are building upon skills they already have from reading with their parents, and one could assume most mainstream American parents have some knowledge, if not explicit then implicit, of literacy building skills used by the school from their own experience as American students.

In contrast, the Congolese students, especially those who are just starting elementary school, are probably not arriving with as many pre-literacy skills since their parents have probably not been reading to them at home prior to coming to school. The parents might also have trouble reinforcing the literacy skills taught in school since they would be unfamiliar with American literacy practices, and in DRC, it seems to be the school's responsibility to teach

children how to read. Books might be seen primarily as a way to impart facts and information that the students will need to be successful in their classes, and literacy might not be emphasized as a form of entertainment or as a separate skill that extends beyond gathering information.

For these reasons, teachers of Congolese students may need to more explicitly instruct parents about how to help their children gain the necessary literacy skills at home to be successful in American schools. They may need to show them what to do while reading to their children and how to reinforce what types of literacy activities are done in schools. Teachers of older Congolese students should acknowledge that these students might not have as strong a foundation in the necessary literacy skills and provide extra support to help these students build and practice the skills that are so fundamental to American education.

As teacher B described in her interview, literacy is so important to every subject in American schools, not just in reading or English class. While Congolese students might seem like very good students that already arrive with many fundamental academic skills, they could struggle because of these important differences in the education systems. We often think more about teaching young children how to read, but if the older children know how to read but maybe not in the sense that the American education system demands, they could struggle with many aspects of education in the United States.

If the school district is in contact with any Congolese parents of pre-school age children or community centers that serve these children, it might also be beneficial for them to inform the parents that it is expected that parents will have read to their children and share books with them before they even enter school in the United States. It was clear from the interviews that Congolese parents are willing to do whatever they can to ensure the success of their children, and would probably be willing to do whatever is expected before their children enter school if they

knew that it was an expectation. As one father of a first grade student noted, the children seem to learn these types of skills more quickly in the United States, and in part this observation is probably true because they are assumed to have exposure before school begins. This exposure could greatly help the young Congolese students and give parents more confidence in helping their children gain the skills necessary for educational success.

In addition to promoting more at-home literacy practices in English, the school district could encourage parents to use their first language with their children to help promote first language literacy practices at home. While materials in Lingala would probably be difficult to access in the United States, most families also spoke French with their children, which would be an easier language to find. Parents should be aware of the benefits of learning and being literate in multiple languages, especially for young children who are just starting to develop literacy skills in school. Several of the parents said that they wanted their children to become proficient in English before learning French, but parents might be more able to help their children in French, also enforcing the skills that their children will need in English. This might also help parents feel that they are helping to maintain their own culture and empower them to believe that they can help their children with their education even if they are unfamiliar with the American school system and other assignments that their children might bring home.

Related to the assumption that most Congolese students do not enter school with the same foundational skills that most American children would have, it is very important for teachers of Congolese students to realize that their Congolese students could come to the United States with a vast range of educational backgrounds. As demonstrated by the differences between the information provided in the two teacher interviews, the Congolese students could be perceived as either very competent academically compared to many of the other ESL students or to lack basic

academic skills, which places them far behind grade level when they enter school. This difference depends on how many years of schooling these children actually received in DRC and whether they attended public or private school in DRC, since there is a large disparity between public and private education as described in the parent interviews.

While there is of course a difference in the overall quality of education a student will receive in the United States based on where they attend school, these differences might seem small compared to the educational disparity of the Congolese schools. Teachers should be made aware of these differences and attempt to gather more information from the parents and students about what the schools were like that they attended in DRC. Just because a student went to school for as many years as they should have does not mean that they received the same education as another student who went to school for the same amount of time. This will also warrant some more careful observational research by the teachers in class to assess the needs of their Congolese students as they arrive in the United States. That will be the only way to determine what skills these students bring with them and what skills they are lacking, regardless of how many years of schooling they report when they arrive.

Parents also need to be made aware of what academic skills are particularly valued in the United States, and what skills are emphasized in American education that might be different from what is emphasized in DRC. Several parents seemed to believe that school was easier in the United States because students did not have to know as much information or memorize as much material as they had to do in DRC. Some seemed disappointed in the quality of education because of these differences. However, parents might need some more information about why students are not required to memorize as much information or what it means to be educated in the United States. American schools promote many other skills such as critical thinking or

problem solving which might not be as much of a focus in cultures that value knowing a lot of information as the mark of an educated person. If their children are struggling, they might assume it is because they need to know more information instead of the fact that they might have difficulty expressing their ideas or finding solutions to problems. If schools can express to the parents how and why these skills are enforced in American education, it might help them to realize why their children are struggling and how these skills will be of value to them as they continue their education.

Regarding communication between the schools and Congolese parents, language support seemed to be an important issue for many of the parents, especially those who had arrived more recently and whose English proficiency was still not very high. The parents noted that language was a significant problem for both their children and themselves. Some wanted their children to attend a school that had more French support within the school. Others complained that it was difficult for them to know what was happening in their children's education since they had to wait for notifications to be translated. All of the parents I interviewed were studying English, and learning English was very important to them, but we can't assume that the language they are learning in classes is the language they need in order to understand school communication or official school documents.

While I know that the district offers help in translating communication and making sure that parents are made aware of events, it might be a good idea to analyze what kind of communication parents are receiving in French and how efficiently they receive the communication to see if there is any room to improve the current system of communication. The district contains parents with many different first languages, making it difficult to provide the same support to every parent, but since the Congolese community is such a large minority, it

might be good to assess the resources that they currently have and determine if the system of communication could be bettered in any way. Depending on what is found by assessing current communication practices, it could even better communication with all ESL parents if it can be made more efficient and ESL-friendly. This would include translating documents in a way that makes the content as well as the language more understandable for non-American parents.

Since the language barrier was such a significant factor for many of the parents, I commend the school district for its support of parent language learning by implementing a parents' ESL class through the district. The aim of the class is to deliver content about how the American school system functions while also promoting language learning. I think this will be a valuable resource for ESL parents of all backgrounds and something I believe the parents that I interviewed could benefit from. This will be a good resource for parents who not only want to practice their English, but also need more information about American school practices such as testing, choosing classes, the school schedule, and other concerns that parents of students in the United States need to understand. I would also encourage the district to be proactive and hold orientations for parents if they are not already doing so in order to transmit this information to the parents before their children begin school in the United States. Parents should be taught how to access this information online and whom they should talk to if they have any questions about these practices. It will mean that district employees need to be able to articulate their reasoning for why educational practices are done the way that they are, which could help to ease parent concerns because they do not know the reasoning behind the current practices.

There are some other ways in which the district can assist the Congolese community and other ESL parents to help them transition to living in the United States and raise children in the American academic system. As I previously mentioned, teacher B recommended that there be

someone who can serve as a social worker or liaison to the Congolese community to help them adjust and to gain more information about what the district can do to support them. They would be able to address concerns that the parents have about the education of their children, assess what kinds of resources the parents have to support their children, and help inform the parents about what they can do to support their children and adjust to living and studying in the United States. The social workers could help connect the parents with others who can help if they are having difficulty due to work or school schedules. They could help both parents and their children adjust to and understand American culture by counseling parents about how they can address their children becoming culturally different from themselves and the children about how to maintain and navigate the two cultures. The social workers could also help the school gather needed information about what the parents' and children's lives were like in DRC before immigrating to the United States, helping to determine whether trauma could be a factor in their lives and education and the types of assistance that specific families might need to help them better adjust to their current situation.

The district could also help new students by implementing a "buddy system" as described by teacher A, where more experienced students could help the new students adjust to their new environment. I am unsure about whether the district already implements these types of practices, but I think adding an extra layer of support for these students and their families will be the key to helping them feel more comfortable and more engaged in their education. It could also help them to feel less dependent on others as they are able to more quickly navigate this new environment and become accustomed to the differences. This could alleviate some of the concern that the Congolese parents depend too much on the teachers to help them and overstep the boundaries of what the teachers should be doing to assist them and their children.

Finally I think that though the ESL and Congolese community are minorities within the school district, it is important for all district teachers to have some knowledge of their issues and how to best help them, both socially and academically. Teacher B made a good point when she said that often the burden to understand how to help these students falls solely on the ESL teachers who already have more than they can handle at times. It will always be important to have an open dialogue where teachers can share their perspectives without feeling that they are being mandated or forced to change their practices or learn how to assist a group that they may not be as comfortable assisting.

While the parents had several concerns about the education of their children in the United States, they also had much to say about what they liked about the district and how their children were benefiting from the education the district provided. Every parent seemed to be encouraged by how active the teachers here were in communicating with the parents and addressing any issues that their students had in classes. They seemed to find this open communication as a welcome change from schools in DRC where it was difficult to contact teachers. They felt comfortable asking questions to their children's teachers and talked to them frequently during conferences and at school about what their children were struggling with and how they could help. It is encouraging to hear that the parents feel so comfortable speaking with their children's teachers. This open communication should continue, and teachers should know that it is helping the Congolese community adjust to education here.

ESL teachers should also know that though there was some confusion about what happens in ESL classes, the majority of parent comments regarding ESL were very positive. They could see their children becoming more proficient in English and knew that they were getting the language support that they need at school. As the parents were all either very

proficient in English or studying English themselves, language acquisition is important to them and they seem to believe it is key to their success. Anything that the ESL and non-ESL teachers can do to promote proficiency development is seen as valuable. Parents reported having the most contact with their children's ESL teachers and felt comfortable communicating with them about their children's progress. More could maybe be done to explain what occurs in ESL classes and how it supports the ESL students, but the overall perception of the quality of ESL classes in the district seems very positive.

Project limitations

While I believe that the current project is successful in addressing many of the issues that are important to assisting Congolese parents and students as well as teachers of Congolese students, there are some limitations to the project which affect the overall conclusions drawn from the analysis. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the analysis and research conclusions and could be addressed in future research.

The first limitation relates to the population of parents who were actually interviewed for the project. Initially, I had hoped to interview a larger sample of parents to have more opportunity to compare their answers and to obtain a wider range of information about experiences and perceptions that the Congolese parents have. However, given the difficulty in contacting parents who work at many different hours and who may have difficulty making plans using English, we were only able to interview the six parents discussed above.

I had also hoped to interview both visa-lottery winners and refugees to compare their experiences and perceptions. However, more of the families who are currently arriving in the area are lottery winners, and there may not be as many refugees who still have children who

attend school in the local district. This is an important consideration because the experiences and perceptions of refugees could differ significantly from those who won the lottery, and could affect the analysis of parent perceptions as it is described in this project.

Another consideration for interpreting the current data is that I was unable to make contact with any parents of students with limited formal education or parents who themselves had limited formal education. Teacher B provided a lot of information that was specific to the SIFE population, and obtaining a parent perspective about those observations could be invaluable to a new program like hers, which aims to provide support for an at-risk population of students. It would also be very valuable for other teachers in the district who are trying to support those students in mainstream classes, especially if they are only accustomed to assisting the Congolese students who have not had limited formal education.

Related to the data from teacher interviews, I was only able to interview two teachers who were both at the middle school level due to lack of principal or administrative responses and the short period of time in which the project needed to be completed. It would be ideal to interview more teachers of Congolese students and at multiple levels of teaching, from elementary school to high school. While it was valuable to be able to compare and contrast the teachers' responses from the same grade level and in two different teaching environments, this analysis could be expanded in the future to include more teachers with a larger range of experience: from elementary to high school and from many years of prior experience to more recent experience with the Congolese population.

Considerations for future research

After completing this project, there are several areas where more research could be done to add to the current research and expand the information provided in this paper. One area of research that I believe could be very beneficial to the school district is a more in depth analysis of the population of parents and their children that are less educated or have missed years of school in DRC. While this population may be more difficult to find and contact within the community, it is also the population that probably needs the most support and explanation from the school district about what to expect from education in the United States and how they can best support their children at home.

It would also be beneficial to the analysis to further investigate what discipline practices the Congolese parents use with their children at home and how it compares to discipline practices at school. While both the parents and teachers interviewed acknowledged that the practices differed, it could be useful for addressing perceived discipline problems if teachers know more about how their Congolese children are disciplined at home. This would perhaps help them better explain to the students and parents what the American discipline practices mean and how they can be reinforced to promote better behavior.

Another area for further research would be to try to gather more information about what Congolese schools and classes are like from observational research of Congolese classrooms. For this project, I was forced to rely on parents' explanations of personal experiences that happened many years in the past or from what they experienced as parents of their own children. I do not know how current their knowledge is of Congolese educational practices, and as the parents did not have experience as educators themselves, it would be interesting to know more about what the pedagogical practices are currently like in DRC from the perspective of an

educator. It could also be helpful for this analysis to be better informed about differences between private and public as well as urban and rural schools in the country.

Related to gathering more information about the Congolese schools, it would also be very beneficial for teachers to find out more about the Congolese home educational practices. I asked parents what they did at home to help their children with schoolwork, but more evidence could be gathered through observational research to determine more specifically how parents are helping their children and how similar to or different from mainstream American practices it is. This would also be an opportunity to observe differences in home educational practices within the Congolese community related to parents' level of education.

One final area where I believe more work could be done is to analyze what differences there are for both Congolese parents and students depending on when the students enter school in the United States. Parents of elementary students would probably need different kinds of support from the district than parents of high school students, and the students would come with different kinds of academic experiences depending on the time they left school in DRC.

Final note

It is my hope that the information provided in this paper can be utilized in a positive way by the school district and by all those who are involved in the education of the Congolese students. There is certainly more work to be done to analyze educational challenges that are specific to this group of students, but this project may serve as a resource to better serve the Congolese students, their parents, and their teachers. Ultimately, it is my wish that the perspectives of those parents and teachers who are involved in educating Congolese students be

valued and used in open dialogue to help improve the way that Congolese students and all international students are educated both locally and across the United States.

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