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## Emerging Teacher-Leaders for English Learners: A Professional Development Model in Rural Florida

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## Introduction

One of the most pressing issues facing scholars and educators today is the growing number of English learners (ELs) in rural areas of the US. Rural school districts consistently experience limitations in human and financial resources, especially for EL students (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Glover et al., 2016; NREA, 2016; Preston, 2018; Provasnik et al., 2007). Currently, more than 4.5 million students enrolled in public schools speak a language other than English in the home, which represents approximately 9.5% of the K-12 population in the US (Lucas, Strom, Bratkovich, & Wnuk, 2018; McFarland et al., 2018; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). Florida's share of EL students surpasses the national average at 10.3% (Ruiz Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015), and that number has been steadily increasing over the past decade, approaching nearly 300,000 students today (Florida Department of Education, 2018; NCES, 2018). At the same time, nearly 50% of all school districts in the US are classified as rural (Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017), and one-third of all public schools are located in rural areas (Ayers, 2011). The continuous influx of ELs in US rural public schools has implications for teachers' instructional practices as they face numerous challenges to address their academic, linguistic, and literacy needs (Calderón, Slavin, & Sánchez, 2011; Lucas et al., 2018; Samson & Collins, 2012).

Our familiarity and prior investigations in rural educational settings indicate that these issues hold true for teachers of ELs working in rural areas and are exacerbated by the rural nature of schools, namely the limited resources accessible to teachers, and the geographic and social distances that educators and families face (Author, 2013, 2015, 2019; Azano & Stewart, 2015; Burton & Johnson, 2010; Hansen-Thomas, 2018). However, despite the urgent need to prepare teachers and educational leaders, research in rural areas, particularly in professional development (PD), has been limited (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). Moreover, little is known about the various contexts and specific needs of rural educators to support EL student learning (Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017; Fogle & Moser, 2017; Nugent, Kunz, Sheridan, Glover, & Knoch, 2017; Wenger, Dinsmore, & Villagómez, 2012), because most studies on education in the US are conducted in urban or suburban schools (Williams & Grooms, 2016). Burton and Johnson (2010), for instance, describe the "absence of research on the experiences of novice teachers ... [and] as a result, little is known about teachers who enter the field of education with the intention of teaching in rural communities" (p. 376). As part of their mission to support rural education, the National Rural Education Association (NREA) has articulated a five-year research agenda that includes both the preparation of specialist teachers for EL students and for educational leaders in rural schools (NREA, 2016). In other words, there remains a dearth of knowledge

on how best to meet the cultural, linguistic, academic, and social needs of ELs in rural areas.

This article describes an emergent and ongoing PD model for in-service teachers based on a five-year national professional development (NPD) grant-funded project. The PD model aimed to prepare high quality teacher-leaders for EL students in a rural school district in the state of Florida. In this article, we describe our partner district, the design of the PD model and its implementation, and findings based on the participants' reflections of their overall experience of the project.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Three key principles undergirded the teacher-leader PD project: 1) the teacher leader with specific pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) for teaching EL students (Ernst-Slavit & Poveda, 2011; Mercado, 2002; Turkan, de Oliveira, Lee, & Phelps, 2014; Wenger, Dinsmore, & Villagómez); 2) the teacher leader as an educational advocate with a stance of equity and activism based on critical reflection; and 3) the place-based teacher leader with a clear understanding of the community in which they (will) work, and a connection to local school placements (Azano, 2011; Gruenewald, 2003; White & Reid, 2008). Place-consciousness is essential to teachers' work, because the educational policies that teachers and leaders navigate, the instructional practices they implement, and the social processes that characterize rural schools directly influence their decisions (John & Ford, 2017).

#### **Teacher Leader with Specific Pedagogical Content Knowledge**

The first principle involves teachers' ability to modify and differentiate instruction and assessment for ELs, based on the student's linguistic and cultural background and needs. Teachers need knowledge of both how the English language works and the pedagogical skills to make language input comprehensible. The pedagogical content knowledge of teachers of ELs includes a deep understanding of how the English language works, as well as how to ensure that language is 'visible' across all academic content areas (Turkan et al., 2014). This concept aligns with *saberes docentes*, or teacher knowledge for ELs. Following the work of Ernst-Slavit and Poveda (2011), *saberes docentes* refers to the personal and professional knowledges that teachers tap into to guide instruction on behalf of multilingual children. The ability to differentiate instruction based on ELs' linguistic and cultural background underscores for EL teachers the importance of truly knowing ELs and their families, in order to connect that knowledge to students' learning.

#### **Teacher Leader as an educational advocate**

Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) defined a teacher-leader as a professional with four distinct qualities. A teacher-leader can lead within and beyond the classroom; identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders; influence others toward improved educational practice; and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of leadership. Research on teacher-leaders has demonstrated how teacher-leaders transform educational settings. For example, Ross et al. (2011) interviewed completers of a teacher-leader online PD program about their perception of the program. They found that in order for the teacher-leader PD program to generate change, district leaders and administrators needed to foster supportive school environments. In her work building bilingual teacher-leaders in a central Texas school district, Palmer (2018) identified similar qualities across her study participants. She found that bilingual teacher-leaders of EL students were reflexive of their practices and engaged in ongoing inquiry, collaborated with colleagues in co-constructed ways, and advocated for educational equity and change on behalf of their bilingual students. In addition, bilingual teacher-leaders engaged took on the additional role of acting as cultural and linguistic brokers, developing an awareness of their own and their students' identities.

McDonough (2015) described the relationship building process between teachers and students as messy, uncomfortable, and difficult. This is essentially an "entanglement among rational knowing, feeling, and doing as a result of engagement with others" (p. ix). McDonough uses the term 'entanglement' as a metaphor for critical consciousness, which she described as "a non-linear complex process" (p. 70). McDonough extends critical consciousness from being passive, knowledge, to "performed" activism. This work aligns to Freirean pedagogy in that action or performed activism is predicated upon critical reflection. As a socially situated construct, teacher-leaders for rural EL students are in a process in which teacher-leaders base their work on a stance of equity and *spatial* consciousness, build collaborations with colleagues around them, and are advocates for EL students. Following Palmer's contribution, teacher-leaders for EL students also act as cultural and linguistic brokers for students from diverse backgrounds.

Drawing from this research, we define rural teacher-leaders of ELs as teachers who not only have deep knowledge of content and pedagogy, but also have an ability to reflect on their practices, collaborate, and lead to build a stance of advocacy for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

#### **Place-Conscious Teacher Leader**

Howley and Howley (2007) described the essence of rurality through the metaphor of *terroir*. Derived from the French language, the term *terroir* captures how the characteristics of geographic spaces are integral to and intertwined with identity. For example, the aroma and characteristics of a particular wine are directly related

to the earth, the vines, and the climate from which it is grown. If the same grapes were grown in two different locations, due to its connection to a geographic space—the terroir—the wines would be notably different. Howley and Howley noted that “the more unique characteristics of a place, the more likely it is to contribute to terroir” (2007, p. 7). Terroir refers to not only a sense of place but also to the products of that place. Similarly, who people are, their ontology or identity and their ways of knowing and participating in the world, is integral to place. Terroir reminds us of the need for place-consciousness (Gruenewald, 2003), which refers to not only the work we do but also the people with whom we interact, their identities, and their knowledge of the world.

### **Partnership with a Rural District in Florida**

The site for this project took place in a rural school district in the state of Florida. Although Florida is typically associated with sandy beaches, plentiful sunshine, and the lively lifestyles of Miami and Orlando, the state is geographically diverse and includes communities that are best described as agricultural and isolated. Our partner district is characterized as an agricultural community where peanut, hay bale, watermelon, and palm tree industries thrive. Immigrants, largely from Spanish-speaking Central American countries, supply a steady stream of labor that supports the state’s economy and fuels its growth (LULAC, 2017). However, in rural schools, ELs are considered ‘low density’, referring to the ratio of ELs to native English speakers that is below the national and state averages. To illustrate, in 2018-19, our partner school district had 5,204 students, of which nearly 200 were identified for ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) services. In this district, the number of EL students fluctuates and can often increase by 40% with seasonal agricultural work. The district has approximately 40,000 residents and about 36.5 residents per square mile (US Census, 2015). Eighty-seven percent of the county population is White, and about 9% identify as Hispanic. US Census (2015) data also indicate that approximately 7% of the population speaks a language other than English in the home, and the average family income is approximately \$20,000 per year. The percentage of persons living at or below the poverty rate is 23.7%, compared to the state rate of 16.3% (US Census, 2014). Because there is a variable flow of seasonal workers in and out of the county, as well as undocumented immigrants, who might not be reflected in Census data, there is some evidence that those numbers are twice those reported by the US Census (Author, 2011).

EL families’ ability to access early childhood education services in the district is extremely limited due to language barriers, low income to pay for full day care, and limited access to reliable transportation in the rural context. The educational program model for EL support services in public schools is inclusive classrooms.

In inclusive classrooms, a qualified mainstream teacher differentiates instruction for students who have varied learning needs and/or who are from different language backgrounds. In the district, 155 teachers of 340 total district classroom teachers were in-field by holding either a state mandated ESOL endorsement or were ESOL certified.

Despite these endorsements and preparation, EL student achievement continued to lag behind that of ELs across the state and well behind that of native English speakers. Student achievement for the ELs was significantly below the state average on both the state standardized assessment (the Florida Standards Assessments [FSA]) and the English language proficiency test (the ACCESS 2.0). In 2018, only 6% of the district's ELs met the English language proficiency benchmark for speaking, 18% met the benchmark for reading, 48% for listening, and only .5% for writing. Moreover, in 2018 about 45% of third grade ELs did not meet the minimum level 2 requirement for promotion to fourth grade based on the English Language Arts reading assessment.

With these contextual realities in mind, this emerging PD project was designed to provide a high-quality, comprehensive program that would prepare educators to work with EL students in rural settings and, subsequently, develop leadership and advocacy roles within their own schools. Additionally, the PD sought to inform participants through a transformation into teacher-leaders who teach, lead, and mentor other specialists on their school campus through two phases. Phase 1 followed participants through six graduate level courses over a year and a half. Phase 2, a coaching phase, followed the participants as they mentored fellow teachers and specialists through a collaborative project aimed at improving learning for EL students. This paper focuses on Phase 1.

### **The EL Teacher-Leader PD Model**

The thrust of the PD was for teachers to become reflective practitioners, examine their current pedagogical practices, and make instructional changes to improve EL student learning. Phase 1 had several components to achieve this goal, including six online (later hybrid) graduate level courses specifically for rural educators; on site coaching; and collaborative projects.

### **Participants**

The participants consisted of 21 educators from a wide variety of professional backgrounds including reading coaches, principals or vice principals, and guidance counselors in addition mainstream to classroom teachers between grades 1 and 10. The rationale for the broad background-base was that in rural school districts, educators play multiple and varied roles, and building leadership capacity across

those roles (Preston, 2018) would more likely result in a richer overall experience for the district with an increased likelihood for educational change. To understand the participants' motivations for joining the PD project, in the application for Phase 1, we asked educators about their prior experiences with EL students and what type of leader they wished to be as a result of the project. This data revealed that about half of the participants wanted to provide more social-emotional support to EL students and wanted to build family partnerships. About a quarter of the applicants stated that they had prior experiences working in the field of social and emotional health care or support and that seemed to guide their motivation to participate. Though many participants expressed similar advocacy stances, they were intertwined with a view of language learning rooted in assimilation rather than as a process built upon students' home languages and cultural backgrounds as starting points for learning.

### **PD Coursework**

The six PD courses were delivered over five consecutive semesters and were adapted from an existing university teacher-leader program and modified for participants with the guiding principle that these educators were working specifically with ELs a unique rural district. The courses consisted of a specific sequence of Guided Inquiry, Transforming the Curriculum, ESOL Methods, Meeting the Educational Needs of Children in High Poverty Rural Settings, Instructional Coaching for Enhanced Student Learning, and Teacher Leadership and School Change. Each course lasted eight weeks. The PD began with Guided Inquiry because we aimed to foster an 'inquiry stance' among the participants throughout the coursework phase. The coursework phase also included a job-embedded coaching component provided by Program Coordinators (PCs) that offered ongoing, onsite feedback to participants as they completed coursework and worked on incorporating new knowledge to their pedagogy. Importantly, the three PCs were assigned to work in grade level clusters across distant locales in an effort to build grade level expertise for teacher-leaders of ELs. PCs worked 20 hours a week with financial support (mileage reimbursement) for traveling between the different rural schools to which they were assigned, and all were bilingual and biliterate in Spanish. In addition to providing on-site coaching support, the PCs and the project director took on additional tasks to support school communication with families and to interpret at parent-teacher meetings. This included translating home newsletters for teachers, report cards, and providing expertise with newly arrived immigrant EL students to determine if students were literate in Spanish. Through this process, the goal was for participants to build skills as teacher-leaders with support networks.

Participants completed a satisfaction survey at the conclusion of each course which provided valuable feedback to their experiences. After the Guided Inquiry course concluded, additional modifications were made for the subsequent courses in response to the participants' wishes to engage with students and families on a more personal level. Thus, the following courses included narratives of immigrant family experiences in their journeys to the US and other counter-narratives to the anti-immigrant sentiment that was constantly in the media.

The third online course, Meeting the Educational Needs of Children Living in High Poverty Rural Settings, was also modified. The "Poverty" course had three main objectives: to understand the links between immigration, poverty, rurality, and ELs; to understand the lived reality of ELs and their families in their community; and to advocate for ELs in high-poverty rural settings. The weekend meetings included a field trip to a local palm tree nursery that was owned by an immigrant, Spanish speaker who had lived in the community for about 15 years. During lunchtime, participants ate at a local immigrant Chinese family's restaurant as a way of supporting immigrant businesses. These activities were specifically designed to bring a local, rural focus to the static, urban-centric course content for teacher-leaders of ELs. The course content centered on narrative nonfiction such as *Enrique's Journey* (Nazaro, 2007) and *The Same Sky* (Ward, 2015), with supplemental readings from a course textbook on educational poverty.

## **Methods**

At the outset of the coursework, we asked participants several questions through focus group interviews. The purpose of these measures was to inform us about the teacher-leaders' perceptions of their individual and collective experiences throughout Phase 1. The participants in the first focus group ( $n = 8$ ) were comprised of one school principal, one guidance counselor and six classroom teachers. The focus group interviews took place in one of the partner district's elementary school's media center on a weekday evening. Sixteen of the Phase 1 participants were present and were split between two groups. The focus groups were audio recorded and notes were taken by the project's external evaluator to avoid bias in answering the questions. The evaluator asked the participants to answer and discuss the following research question: what word, phrase or moment comes to your mind when you think about the overall professional development experience with the professional development? They were also asked to describe what they felt was most significant in the PD project to support EL students. We also collected the data from the online discussion boards from the PD courses and collected survey data at the end of each of the two years.

## **Data Analysis**



For analytic purposes, we employed content analysis to identify emerging themes and important information. Transcripts from the audio recordings were reviewed several times for accuracy and to synthesize the collection of responses. The data were then mapped and interpreted. Guided by the theoretical underpinnings of the PD, namely place-based teacher-leader PD, the analysis sought to determine in what specific ways the teacher-leaders reflected on the overall experience and the role of place in their learning for rural EL students.

## **Results**

### **Emerging Teacher-Leaders**

Participants readily offered key words to capture their overall PD experience by identifying a moment or word that encompassed the PD experience. The group expressed similar feelings towards the coursework's rewards and challenges. One participant noted that the entire PD in the coursework had been a type of epiphany, describing that learning through the content was insightful since her prior cultural knowledge was limited due to her geographical location.

Enlightening was actually the word that came to mind for me because I think a lot of those initial classes opened our eyes to the experiences that our students were bringing with them. I have grown up in a rural community, so I don't have a lot of outside experiences. So, it helped me to be more empathetic to my students and think about what's going on when they leave my classroom, not only what goes on in my classroom.

Another participant described how

...the content really got into the idea of the poverty of migrants, and what they are going through, as well as, some of the cultural differences that they bring with them that we may not understand in our culture: ways that they interact, classroom management, strategies that may actually be hindering the students.

During this discussion, other participants visibly nodded in agreement. There was consensus that this content was valuable due to their lack of accessibility in rural communities. Another participant noted that the course content was key in opening their minds to cultural differences.

The book studies were very impactful to me. The discussions that we had in that course on the books that we read in groups. I thought they were very enlightening to the experiences that are students have.

The participants also recalled the format change from online to face-to-face for part of the coursework in order to address the challenges of time and the issue of distance. One participant described that “the face-to-face classes were better and more beneficial and more eye-opening for us because we could share with each other, we could talk, yeah, about what we've learned.” Another participant echoed, “It wasn't more of busy work as real extra. It was being able to pull in real-life situations with our kids.” Overall, most participants agreed that the modifications to the coursework were positive.

Despite the positive reports, some participants identified a feeling of insufficiency and the need to engage in more advocacy and learning. Several remarked that though the coursework had been empowering and initiated critical thinking, they still wanted more. One participant, a veteran teacher with 20 years of experience, put it like this,

We still have these lingering questions now that have arisen from those conversations. And so now we're still seeking answers through additional classes and coursework. But I think it did its job in wetting our appetite to seek out more answers.

Not only did the educators agree, they elaborated on the specific challenge of assessment practices for EL students. Particularly, they unanimously agreed that a great challenge to their pedagogy is understanding how to assess ELs in the context of high stakes testing and summative classroom assessments. One teacher remarked that “it's so hard to take the instructional practices that they are working their butts off to do and then work on how you tailor your assessments,” a point that evoked a collective nod in agreement.

### **The Teacher-Leader as Educational Advocate**

Noted earlier, the evaluator began with asking participants to reflect on their original intention for joining the PD project and their ideas about how this goal had been achieved or not. He then asked them to select a word, phrase or overall experience that, in their mind, exemplified the overall experience in the PD project thus far. Several participants reported a feeling of progression, clarifying that their initial intention was too broad to encompass the knowledge that unfolded over two years of coursework. From the start of the interview, it was evident that the knowledge gained from the coursework had transformed the teacher-leaders thinking. The first participants pointed out how she went from thinking within their classrooms to moving beyond that space and replicating their success in a school-wide manner.

For me, the goal evolved. So initially it was just to learn more and know more about my students. And then it was realizing that just having that knowledge is not enough if it doesn't change practice. So, the goal really evolved into what can I do differently now, not just for me, but to create a model that can be replicated in other classrooms.

This participant's answer opened a discussion about how mindsets, in general, were changed. Participants noted feeling a sense of mind expansion. For instance, one responded by connecting how local and national policies directly impact the education of ELs as a direct result of the courses, while another remarked about feeling empowered and emboldened to affect change.

We've spent a lot of time in classes changing our own mindset, using books to go back and reframe the way we think about things. And we've had extensive dialogue about how our political views or whatever could affect the way that we interact with certain kids.

Another participant commented similarly,

I see teachers who are struggling with students who are trying to acquire English language and feeling like they can't do anything. And I feel like this has shifted my perspective from a feeling of empowered to help them, help other teachers and help those students.

The participants also reported that in an effort of inclusion of ELs and their families, two of them requested that the school's administration add announcements in Spanish on their school's marquee, which was viewed by anyone driving by the school. Figure 1 illustrates pictures provided by the participants and how the school marquee was modified as the first non-English speaking signage at a school in the rural district.



## Discussion

The participants revealed emerging qualities of teacher-leaders through reflection, ongoing inquiry, and educational advocacy (Palmer, 2018). Importantly, all of the 21 participants began to engage as professional teacher-leaders and took on additional roles in the district to support their EL students and families. They realized that in rural settings, the multifaceted roles that educators played meant that they needed to expand their own work to advocate for EL students and families. Thus, through the PD, the teacher-leaders grasped the nature of rurality, reflected on their perspectives towards ELs, and identified the need for leadership beyond the classroom to affect positive change for ELs that transcends the classroom experience. Reflecting on context (rurality and place-consciousness) also evoked a desire for more human interaction among each other, which occurred with the online courses being modified with face-to-face components and demonstrated what McDonough (2015) deemed as a shift between passive and “performed” activism. A cornerstone of the work of teacher-leaders is their focus on educational transformation. These emerging teacher-leaders displayed qualities of advocacy through small but collaborative and purposeful acts in their schools, such as the bilingual announcements on the school’s marquee. They also reached out to local community members and partners to assist with interpreting at parent teacher nights and to organize health fairs in Spanish.

Another example of the district’s transition was the participants’ ongoing inquiry process with their own instruction and work. Despite an extensive set of courses, the teacher-leaders recognized the need for ongoing development of content knowledge. Several participants noted their awareness of poverty and cultural differences but sensed a more profound examination was necessary as they move forward. About 1/3 of the participants also wanted to learn Spanish to support their ability to communicate with students and families. They were challenged by issues of assessment and the need to deepen their knowledge of ESOL practices.

Although research on how a body of knowledge is translated into effective EL instructional classroom practices is limited, McDonough (2015) has argued that the appropriation of the EL specialized instructional knowledge is complicated and often does not occur sequentially. Perhaps this initial realization for the teacher-leaders represents a point in a process of transformation that, as McDonough (2015) contends, is “non-linear” (p.70). In other words, teachers’ ability to appropriate knowledge is constantly shaped by several factors, including their beliefs about students, contextual aspects of their instructional practices—in this study, rurality—and their own understandings of their responsibilities in the classroom.

## Conclusion

Over a two-year period, 21 participants engaged in coursework and experiences aimed to build relationships with other educators and families and to improve EL student learning in the rural district. Data derived from online discussions and focus groups indicated that the participants found the program, which addressed issues of poverty and rurality that were specific to their unique environment, to be highly engaging and transformative to their everyday practices. The teacher-leaders continue to identify ways to create expertise in the district by networking in advanced coursework and by coaching fellow teachers and specialists in their school. Outcomes from this program demonstrate that PD programs for rural teachers and leaders should consider (a) adapting the content of the coursework to include nonfiction narrative in addition to traditional textbooks; (b) consider the format of the PD from online to hybrid or face-to-face to build interaction and professional learning communities; and (c) ensure inclusion of diverse community members by engaging families, diverse educators, and leaders in order to build a place-specific PD program. As a result of the two-year coursework, ten of the 21 participants continued to advanced degree programs (Masters, Specialist, or Doctorate) to advance their knowledge on rural EL students, demonstrating their long-term commitment to rural EL students and families.

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