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Creating Inclusive Learning Communities for ELL Students: Transforming School Principals'
Perspectives

Katie Brooks, Susan R. Adams, Trish Morita-Mullaney

Abstract

School-level administrators are often concerned about tertiary supports for English language
learners (ELLs), such as translating signs and school documents or offering Spanish classes for
their teachers. Although modeling and learning the heritage language(s) of the ESL population
can be helpful, its focus on language differences can limit our considerations of broader systemic
challenges that impact the success of ELLs in our schools. This article shares the dialogues that
school administrators are having about ELL students and discusses the use of social justice and
equity focused professional learning communities as a way to transform this discourse to address
the broader systemic inequities facing our ELL students. The authors share their insight from
their work with administrators as they transform from talking about surface level issues they
encounter in their work with ELL students, to deeper discourse about relations of power in
schools.

The Social and Educational Context

The topic of changing schools to become inclusive, supportive educational communities for
English language learner (ELL) students is a pressing issue facing schools in the Midwestern
region of the United States. Midwestern states that have not experienced large numbers of
immigrant students over the past several decades now have the fastest growing numbers of
immigrant students in the country (Capps et al., 2005). The National Center for English
Language Acquisition (NCELA, 2006) reported that in 2005–2006, ELL students comprised
10.3% of the enrollment in public schools, an increase of 57% over the past decade.

The state of Indiana is considered the third fastest growing ELL state among the 50 states in the
nation (NCELA, 2006). Since 1999, the population of ELLs who have limited English
proficiency has grown from 9,114 students to 46,417 students in the 2008–2009 academic year
(Indiana Department of Education Division of English Language Learning, n.d.). This increase
constitutes a 409% growth rate in this ten year period. Only 325 Indiana teachers are certified to
teach the 46,417 ELLs, creating a student/teacher ratio of 143 students to 1 licensed ESL teacher.
Despite the cultural and linguistic assets that ELL students bring to US schools, the schools are
struggling to support their needs. ELL students lag significantly behind native English speaking
(NES) students on standardized test scores and high school graduation rates (Fry, 2007; Orfield,
Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). Because of the achievement gap between ELL and NES
students, as well as the shortage of licensed ESL teachers, it is clear that the needs of ELLs
cannot be met by licensed ESL teachers alone. Content area teachers and school administrators

must collaborate to create shared instructional leadership to support ELL students in reaching high levels of academic achievement.

ELL Students and Instructional Leadership

Building principals are the primary gatekeepers for educational change (Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, & Hodgins, 2007; Fullan, 2001). Tupa and McFadden (2009) found that when central office and school-level administrators applied a "web of instructional leadership," student achievement as measured by standardized assessments increased (p. 555). This instructional web included central office personnel, curriculum specialists, building level administrators, and all teachers. Through this shared responsibility across all instructional levels, all teachers were intensively trained in effective instructional techniques for ELLs and held accountable for their implementation. School administrators were also trained in effective pedagogy for ELL students and were responsible for holding all teachers accountable for implementing research-based instructional practices for these students.

The ESL Teacher and the Administrator: The Expert/Novice Relationship

Unlike the shared leadership concerning ELL student education expressed by Tupa and McFadden (2009), in the majority of the schools, past and present, with which we have worked, the ELL students are seen as the primary responsibility of the ESL teacher and ESL program. Recently, a building principal commented, "I just know that my ESL teachers are doing a great job. They address student needs and family needs. They do a great job." Although this administrator trusted and admired the work of his ESL faculty and staff, his acknowledgement illuminated the perception that ESL teachers are the only educators with the expertise to adequately and appropriately meet the needs of ELLs. In many schools in which we have worked, the ESL teacher becomes a social worker and de facto administrator in addition to being a language and culture broker between students and adults. This expert–novice relationship can undermine school change initiatives that target the integration and achievement of ELL students by releasing other teachers and administrators from the responsibility for building their own capacity to support and teach ELL students (Davila, 2005; Hoo-Ballade, 2004).

The struggle to communicate with ELL students and their families is an example of non-ESL teachers' and administrators' deferment to the expertise of ESL teachers. ESL/bilingual paraprofessionals, teachers, and administrators are often the primary point of contact with ELL students and their parents because they either speak the languages of their students, have the resources to find someone who can, or can find ways to communicate even if they do not speak the parents' language. One ESL teacher commented,

> If it's a case conference, [or] a discipline issue with a child, someone will come to our ESL staff and we will arrange for the need. Sometimes, our program staff is doing more connecting with families and communities than we are with serving ESL children.

As a result of this attention to home–school communication, there is often a perception that the primary role of the ESL program is to connect with the communication needs of content area teachers and administrators. This focus on home–school communication on behalf of other educators diverts the already limited time and energy of ESL teachers and paraprofessionals away from meeting the academic, cognitive, and language development needs of the ELL students.

Because classroom teachers, deans, and administrators usually do not speak the language of ELL parents, they often are frustrated and fail to understand one another, even when they have a translator. An ESL teacher reflected,

> So, we called the parents to let them know that their child was having discipline issues. Then, the parents had some questions I could not answer. So, I had to go back to the requesting administrator to get more details. It was back and forth for a bit and then I was able to convey the reaction of the parents to the requesting administrator. In the end, it was a big telephone game. The intent of the message was getting lost.

When school administrators do not have direct access to or relationships with ELL students and their families, they may misunderstand ELL student needs and perspectives or they may make decisions that do not take into considerations the needs of their ELL students and families. Often the result is an increasing gulf between the home and the school, with neither group understanding the other.

The Marginalization of ESL Educators

Rather than being a part of the web of instructional leadership described by Tupa and McFadden (2009), ESL teachers and paraprofessionals are often marginalized from other teachers and excluded from discussing systemic decisions regarding their students. One of the administrators who is currently working with us commented that

> At [our middle school] we isolate our ESL class. The students walk to the 7th grade hallway to attend class in the first classroom as you enter the area. Our ENL teacher is very dedicated and qualified, but she does not introduce the students to our school climate.

Perhaps one of the causes for the ESL teacher's isolation is the geographic location of her classroom. In large buildings, ESL teachers who are not in close proximity to mainstream teachers will not benefit from a quick connection in the hallway to discuss an ELL student's learning. Scheduling meeting times to discuss strategies, issues, and progress often is difficult because ESL teachers do not always share common planning periods and are not available for team meetings with the content area teachers and administrators of their students. Without these regular discussions, content area teachers and administrators make decisions without a full

understanding of how their decisions will impact ELL students. This results in further marginalization of both the ELL students and the ESL teacher.

This quote further implies that the principal believes that it is exclusively the ESL teacher's responsibility to help integrate ELL students into the culture of the school, which is problematic on several levels. First, in a shared responsibility situation, the administrator and content area teachers would also feel responsible for integrating the school and the ESL class would not likely be so isolated. Additionally, in a situation in which the ESL teacher is marginalized herself, she has few opportunities to help her students connect to the school community. A shared-leadership orientation to educating ELL students would address these concerns on multiple levels.

The geographical and scheduling barriers for ESL-content area teacher collaboration can create a situation in which ESL teachers have few opportunities to help content area teachers support ELL students, but this distance separating ESL teachers from mainstream teachers is more than just geographical in nature. Mainstream teachers are well-versed in the curricula of their content area(s), whereas ESL teachers are trained in the constructs of second language acquisition (SLA) and the related instructional methodology. Because content area teachers have little or no SLA training of their own, it is unclear to many teachers what the role of the ESL teacher is. A classroom teacher reflects, "I'm not sure what they do in that room. I know that the ESL staff really loves the students, but I'm not sure how they get their points across to them."

When ELL students are mainly seen as the responsibility of ESL teachers, paraprofessionals, and ESL administrators, the ESL educators can become marginalized within a school or school district. ESL teachers may feel close to ELL students and their parents, but their relationships with their colleagues can become more distant. Many ESL teachers feel isolated and unsupported. One of our ESL teachers explained,

> There have definitely been an incredible number of obstacles and disappointments in my job as an ENL [English as a New Language] teacher that led me to feel I was only here for the students. These frustrations also led to my assumption that I was the only staff member in my school (other than any other ENL personnel) that cared about ENL concerns deeply enough to really do anything.

Even when ESL teachers try to build bridges with their colleagues, these attempts are not always welcomed. Another ESL teacher reflected,

> I try so hard to talk to teachers about how I can assist them with teaching their ESL students, but they stopped listening to my requests a long time ago. I was so excited when I first started, but now, I just feel alone. So, I enjoy my students by myself with my ESL staff. I take joy in knowing that I am there for them.

When ESL staff embody this "martyr" role and accept sole responsibility for all the needs associated with ELL students, the professional development of other teachers and administrators

remains limited. Instead of allowing counselors to enroll new ELL students, the ESL staff takes care of it. If an ELL student needs a lunch ticket, the cafeteria staff calls in the ESL educators to fill out lunch forms and to untangle red tape. When an ELL student has a conflict with another student, the ESL educators, not the school administrators, mediate the conflict. Effective professional development models will find ways to interrupt this expert–novice relationship and create a new paradigm for teaching and serving ELL students, a paradigm in which all educators share responsibility for supporting these students.

Building a Stronger Professional Development Model

Although some professional development initiatives are helping teachers to learn about new ways of teaching, meaningful education reform requires more than just an introduction of new teaching approaches. In addition to the instruction and implementation of new teaching approaches and techniques, Fullan (2001) insisted that "changes in actual practice along the three dimensions—in materials, teaching approaches, and beliefs, in what people do and think— are essential if the intended outcome is to be achieved" (p. 46). Furthermore, Cummins (2001) argued that all teachers and administrators in schools must:

- Change their view of the languages and cultures of ELL, integrating students' language and culture into curriculum and instruction,
- Accurately assess ELL students,
- Focus on critical thinking skills in which students learn to question the world around them and work to make a difference in their communities, and
- Build relationships with parents of ELL students.

These facets of change run contrary to what is common practice in many schools across the country, as well as in other parts of the world (Cummins, 2001). If real educational change is to occur, educators must form communities in which they have deep, sustained, and challenging conversations about teaching and learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Hord, 2009; Schmoker, 2006). Educators need the time and space to be able to have difficult discussions to examine their underlying assumptions about the languages, cultures, and experiences that their ELL students bring to the school community and how they can integrate these student assets in ways that better prepare all students for our increasingly global world.

Because of our past experiences and our knowledge of the schools in which we were going to collaborate, we designed our current change initiative and professional development program to include, as a foundation, the creation of small professional learning communities in which educators meet regularly to talk about their work and the work of their students (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2009). Our current initiative is called Project Alianza and is funded through a Title III National Professional Development Grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Project Alianza is a professional development partnership between Butler University and its partner school districts. This project will increase the capacity of university and public school faculty to serve the growing number of ELL students in Central Indiana through a

comprehensive professional development program. University faculty and public school faculty are building capacity to create educational communities in which the social and cultural integration, academic engagement, achievement, and language development of ELL students is supported and ELL students are valued as community assets.

As a requirement for a school's participation in the grant, at least three teachers from each participating school must participate in our professional development sessions together. At least one school administrator from each participating school must attend regular meetings with us. A school administrator can choose to participate with the teachers or in an administrator learning community group with us. In all of these groups, educators examine their work and the work of their ELL students through lenses of social justice and equity. We have structured conversations about their instructional and/or leadership dilemmas to find new, more effective ways to support our ELL students. In the fall, we focus on creating inclusive schools and classrooms. We use the Cummins (2001) empowerment framework described above to guide the content of our fall professional development sessions. In the spring, we focus on providing supportive content-based instruction. Our work in the spring is informed by the CREDE Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy (Doherty et al., 2002), the work of The National Writing Project (www.nwp.org), and the Sheltered Instruction Observational Protocol (SIOP) Model (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2007). All participants are designing and implementing school and instructional change projects designed to make a difference in the educational experiences of their ELL students. These change projects are informed by conversations the educators have with ELL students who are struggling academically and/or socially in their schools.

Working With the Administrators

Recently, our discussions with administrators have deepened. Where we initially spent much of our time talking about surface level issues like translating documents, grading policies, and a perceived Latino gang problem, we now explore the integration of culture into the curriculum, the development of heritage language classes, and ELL student engagement, and we investigate contributing factors for ELL students' marginalization in the school community. One administrator, who has been taking the professional development classes with her teachers, commented,

> I cannot express too often how difficult this class has been for me. I have always accepted my role of citizen, mother, and educator and been proud of my accomplishments. I have willingly read books and articles on diversity and culture. I have attended programs and workshops on those same topics and actually left feeling good about my contributions and attitudes. My egocentricity is what made this class so difficult. There was something unique about the way the material was presented and the choice of activities that forced me to rethink my obligations. That makes me uncomfortable.

Even though these discussions have sometimes challenged her, this administrator is one of our most eager participants and says that our time together with teachers is one of the highlights of her week. She used to avoid questioning her underlying assumptions about diverse learners, but is now willing to change her beliefs and professional practices as she learns from her students. She is now also having different conversations with her faculty and is becoming an advocate for her ELL students. She explains her new-found courage,

> Project Alianza has given me the confidence to step into the middle of conversations I have long avoided. I enjoyed reading the articles, but I appreciated the discussions and activities. I felt like a student for the first time in a long time of taking classes. For once, I did not feel like I was regurgitating information that the professor wanted to hear. I was challenged to think and to form opinions and to look at myself as a citizen, a mother, and an educator.

This administrator is starting to view herself as an instructional leader responsible for ELL students. Although a few administrators have withdrawn from the project because of the more challenging conversations, the administrators who are still working with us are engaging deeply and, in some cases, are driving the discussions.

Administrative Change

Teachers, especially ESL teachers, are noticing a change in their buildings and school districts because of administrative support. ESL teachers are getting greater credibility and access, not only to their building level administrators, but also to central office administrators. One of our ESL teachers shared with us,

> Project Alianza has opened doors for me to discuss ENL concerns in the most positive way I can with people who can actually change things. As a result of Project Alianza, I've had the opportunity to communicate more with administration, other staff, the director of curriculum, and other members of the [school district] administration office who make financial decisions. For the first time this year, I feel like [the school district] cares and they want to help through our limited resources. I honestly feel like we're trying to do more and we're asking how to do it better. I admit that I was part of the problem for thinking so negatively about how our district views ENL students. With a more positive outlook, collaboration, and better communication, I can see that we might be able to make some necessary changes without extra money or more resources.

Although at the time of this writing we have only completed Year 1 of implementation, we are starting to notice a shift in the ways in which school administrators see their role in supporting ELL students. Administrators better understand key issues in creating inclusive schools and in supporting academic language and academic development for ELL students. They are also starting to listen to and collaborate with their ESL faculty and staff to a greater extent. ESL teachers and staff are feeling much more included, appreciated, understood, and supported within

the school community. A web of shared leadership, similar to the one described by Tupa and McFadden (2009), is emerging in the school districts with which we work.

Because the Title III grant extends over 5 years, we intend to continue to deepen our relationships with administrators and our grant participants, building local capacity and creating a mutually beneficial relationship of shared responsibility on the part of ESL teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and university faculty. Collaborating with teachers, building communities of trust and respect with administrators, and allowing the time we all need to think and learn together—these are the elements that Fullan (2001) maintained are necessary to interrupt and change "what people do and think … if the intended outcome is to be achieved" (p. 46). Our intended outcome is the interruption and removal of barriers that have historically prevented ELL students from becoming welcomed, valued, and integral members in their schools and their communities. Our work with administrators is the way we are beginning to open the door for these ELL students to achieve and excel academically.

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