

ADDRESSING THE TEACHER PREPARATION GAP FOR ELS: A MEMO FOR TEACHER ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHER EDUCATORS & POLICY ADVOCATES

Erica Bundy

Vanderbilt University

English Learners (or ELs) are the fastest-growing student population in US public schools (Grantmakers for Education, 2013). ELs are students who know or communicate in a language other than English at home. Currently, over half of public-school general education teachers in the United States have at least one EL in their classroom (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Despite these rapidly changing demographics, teachers remain underprepared to serve ELs.

The following memo is intended for school administrators, teacher educators and educational policy advisors. It first explores the problem space then reviews relevant research on the various methods that schools, universities and public policies can address the teacher preparation gap. Afterwards, it suggests a three-prong solution to reduce this gap through in-service preparation, pre-service preparation and increased funding. The final section addresses potential limitations.

The Issue

In addition to the growth of the EL student population, trends indicate that migration patterns are expanding outside of “traditional” major cities (Quintero & Hansen, 2017). Thus, it is possible that every teacher will have at least one EL in their classroom during their career. Teachers are not prepared for this reality. The underqualification of teachers to meet their needs is one explanation for the achievement disparities for EL students (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008; Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010). Seventy percent of states require no extra training for serving EL students other than the minimum required by federal law (Education Commission of the States, 2014). In a national survey, less than 30% of teachers report that they have had any training to teach ELs, and nearly 60% report that they “very much” need or “somewhat need” more professional development (PD) to teach ELs effectively and improve EL academic performance (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008; Waxman et al., 2004).

There is little evidence that this preparation gap will narrow in the next ten years. In 2018, the US Department of Education reported to Congress that 76,000 EL certified teachers will be needed in schools in the next 5 years, but there is a shortage of prepared teachers. The report also found that only five states were able to meet their EL growth goals (as cited in Mitchell, 2018). Without this training, teachers are unprepared and feel unequipped to address the unique linguistic and cultural needs that ELs bring with them into the classroom (Filmore & Snow, 2000; Harper & de Jong, 2004). The compounding effects of increased EL population in mainstream classes with teachers who do not know the best methodologies in serving these students is contributing to the failure of our educational system for these learners.

There are three methods by which the US can address the teacher preparation gap: pre-service training, in-service professional development, and policy support. In exploring relevant research in each of these areas the following questions will guide the review: Are these methods effective? Are these methods prevalent enough to effect change and close the preparation gap?

Synthesis of Research

One area of need is pre-service teacher training. Pre-service preparation programs vary widely at different institutions (Quintero & Hansen, 2017), and teacher educators are still exploring the best methodologies to translate theories to practical application opportunities. Islam and Park (2015) analyzed how prepared their pre-

service teachers became to serve the linguistic and cultural needs for ELs. The researchers found that the graduate students were able to conceptualize the second language acquisition (SLA) process, relate the SLA process to their work with students, and learn how to differentiate instruction. Thus, some pre-service training is effective in building the capacity to use culturally relevant teaching strategies to address the linguistic and cultural needs of ELs.

While this study is promising, it is not a consistent finding across the pre-service research field. Daniel (2014) found that pre-service teachers were afforded practice opportunities in using linguistically responsive pedagogy in their interactions with students and their families. However, within the relationship between a mentor teacher and a teacher candidate, serving ELs was not discussed. Mentor teachers were not modeling how to scaffold for ELs, were not collaborating with the EL specialist, and were not modeling caring relationships with ELs. Research about effective EL pre-service programs is inconsistent across the field.

Additionally, it is evident that these pre-service experiences are not permeating most of the teachers' professional training. Fewer than 20% of teachers who teach ELs have an English as a Second Language (ESL) or bilingual certification even though 56% of all teachers have at least one student classified as EL (Waxman, Téllez & Walberg, 2004). These statistics result in ELs being three times more likely than other student groups to have a teacher that is unqualified or uncredentialed.

Another possible solution is to train in-service teachers through PD. Goldenberg and Coleman (2010) found that among the factors associated with higher academic achievement for ELs, PD is one of the most impactful school and district elements. PD sessions take a variety of formats from short on-campus staff meetings, to small peer-learning communities, to extended formats at conferences for teacher volunteers. Similar to university pre-service programs, in-service PD varies widely across schools and states. Regardless of format, prevalence is again an issue. In a PD study, only 27% of teachers surveyed received training on teaching EL students; out of all the topics surveyed, teaching EL students was the least prevalent. Moreover, of the teachers who did receive some training, 65% attended eight or fewer hours throughout the school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Generally, for any sort of training to result in changes for teacher behaviors and habits, it must be thorough and extensive. The National Literacy Panel (August & Shanahan, 2006) suggests that effective PD must produce changes in teachers' pedagogical decisions, in teachers' mindsets, and in students' learning outcomes. Additionally, to produce these outcomes Waxman et al. (2004) suggest that EL PD "should include demonstration of theories of language, *sustained coaching* [emphasis added], and evaluation programs measuring teacher implementation and impact" (pp.

2-3). Coaching provides the bridge from knowing *about* strategies that support content and language development to *applying* those strategies in classroom contexts. Research has shown that PD, and specifically teacher coaching, is successful at changing teacher actions (Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010; Knight, 2005; Mellom, Portes, Straubhaar, Balderas, & Ariail, 2018; Penner-Williams & Worthen, 2010; Russell, 2015; Teemant, 2010). After just three semesters of coaching, Penner-Williams and Worthen (2010) found that teachers were more effectively able to apply EL-focused strategies into their classrooms. Coaching can also affect teachers' mindsets. In a study about teachers' beliefs about ELs, the researchers found that prejudices and cultural assumptions were still prevalent for teachers in the New South, but training and coaching was found to alleviate the negative biases over time (Mellom et al., 2018). Across the research, inservice PD with coaching is shown to be most effective to equip teachers of ELs to develop the mindsets and instructional supports necessary for EL success.

Congress has attempted to address low EL achievement and lack of teacher preparation through increased funding. In December 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law. This act shifted funding for ELs from Title III to Title I, adding more money and hopefully more incentives for schools to improve EL outcomes (García Matthewson, 2016). ESSA also changed the way schools classify, assess and report the academics and population sizes for ELs. Quintero and Hansen (2017) note that although funding is improved through ESSA, teacher training for ELs is not directly prioritized. In 2018, a new bill was introduced into Congress called the Reaching English Learners Act. This bill is hoping to provide a partnership with institutions of higher learning to develop quality programs and federal grants for teacher candidates to attend these programs (H.R. 4838, 2018). Currently, only 11 states offer incentives for teachers to earn an ESL teaching license (US Department of Education, 2010). However, the bill as it is currently written, provides no guidelines or mandates for what these "quality programs" entail, so the amount of curriculum variability in these programs remains an issue (Johnson & Wells, 2017; Quintero & Hansen, 2017). Currently, policy support for teacher preparation currently lacks prioritization and clarity around teacher preparation for ELs.

Proposed Solutions

In 1992, Ronald Parrish, the president of Oregon TESOL, remarked that the two major problems for ESL programs are the lack of a teacher certification requirement and the marginal status of ESL teachers (Grundy, 1992). As diversity in the US continues to grow, every teacher is now an ESL teacher, but the lack of certification and

marginalization remain prevalent. Addressing the teacher preparation gap for EL students requires a three-pronged approach. First, schools and districts need to invest in EL-focused PD and coaching. Second, there needs to be a standardization of the pre-service requirements and practicum experience. Third, legislation should increase the amount of funding allocated to supporting EL programs.

Because most teachers lack the proper certification, schools must address the needs of current EL students urgently and not hope for more qualified teachers to come out of pre-service training programs. Schools can better prepare their current staff by hiring dedicated EL coaches. Furthermore, existing PD programs must be enhanced. In-service training must be more aligned to research, tied to practice, and, some even argue, part of the teacher evaluation process for the unique needs of ELs to be met by all teachers (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Johnson & Wells, 2017; Samson & Collins, 2012; Téllez & Waxman, 2005).

The existence of a professional organization or journal would help increase the collaboration among EL coaches and mainstream teachers by elevating salient issues. The organization can also hope to bridge the connection from researchers to practitioners. This organization or journal could host its own website with practical research, resources, exemplary unit and lesson plans, and observation protocols. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) provides a similar service for English Language Arts and Literacy teachers. The proposed organization would focus on ELs and support all content areas. With more resources readily available, and with membership widely advertised through the Department of Education, teacher leaders could be more connected, feel more effective, and broaden their impact across schools and classrooms.

Secondly, there should be a standardization of the pre-service requirements and practicum experience. Requiring certification or minimum EL- and SLA-focused credit hours can help elevate the prestige of the EL teacher position (Grundy, 1992) and better meet EL students' needs in the mainstream classroom (Quintero & Hansen, 2017). After requirements have been established, the pre-service experience must also be normed in order to enhance training of all pre-service teachers. Samson and Collins (2012) call for the "consistent and specific guidelines" for EL students' oral and academic language development and sociocultural needs, and these guidelines be written into the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education's (NCATE) standards and teacher evaluation rubrics. This would reduce the variability in pre-service EL preparation. In addition to the standards, many believe that teacher efficacy and empathy for ELs can be improved by a pre-service practicum experience (Dong, 2004; Ballantyne et al., 2008; Johnson & Wells, 2017). These experiences must be regulated through selection of excellent teacher mentors, observation of both pre-service and mentor teachers

working with EL students, and reflection of applying theory to practice (Daniel, 2014; Islam & Park, 2015).

Lastly these first steps will require additional funding that is proposed in new legislation. The Reaching English Learners Act should pass alongside another piece of legislation that should address the financial needs of teacher preparation. Pre-service programs will require additional funding to enhance instructional materials, compensate exemplary mentor teachers for practicum experiences, and hire more professors. In-service programs will require more money to hire EL coaches, and the professional organization dedicated to mainstream teachers of ELs and EL coaches will require funding so that resources may be free and accessible to all. Through this three-pronged approach, we can hope to better prepare teachers for ELs.

Future Research & Limitations

There needs to be more research on EL education. Future research should continue the line of inquiry presented in many studies here, including prevalence and efficacy of preservice and in-service programs. Many studies cited in this memo are nearly a decade old, so it is important that the education community keeps a pulse on the trends of teacher preparation and PD. Research should also explore methodologies that foster successful EL student outcomes. August and Shanahan (2006) in their review of research for the National Literacy Panel found a dearth of experimental studies comparing instructional methods for ELs. The National Literacy Panel was then unable to make many explicit instructional recommendations. Without research to back instructional methods, it will be difficult to improve teacher training.

There are a number of limitations to the suggested three-prong approach. The changes in in-service PD would need to be comprehensive, so one limiting factor is time. Teachers nationwide have fewer opportunities to engage in sustained PD compared to past years (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010). The talent pool of pre-service faculty or in-service coaches may already be limited, thus meeting the increased demand for these professionals may be difficult. Additionally, given the current political climate, especially regarding immigrants and ELs, it is difficult to imagine the sweeping change and huge financial investment to be supported by the Department of Education or by Congress.

Perhaps the greatest limitation of these three proposals is how broad it attempts to reach. On a small scale, it is easy to imagine the one university reworking its pre-service program, or the one middle school to hire an EL coach to plan quality PD. However, small scale change isn't enough. We are losing our talented emerging bilinguals to school failure and high drop-out rates (Mitchell, 2018; US Department of

Education, 2010). While small change is progress and will impact individual lives, we must adopt an approach that ambitiously attempts to meet the needs of all of our students. Our EL students deserve the best education we can provide, and this three-pronged approach will better address their educational needs.

References

- August, D. & Shanahan, T., eds. (2006). *Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Ballantyne, K.G., Sanderman, A.R., & Levy, J. (2008). *Educating English language learners: Building teacher capacity*. National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition & Language Instruction Educational Program, George Washington University. Retrieved from: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED521360.pdf>
- Daniel, S.M. (2014). Learning to educate English language learners in pre-service elementary practicums. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 41(2), 5-28.
- Dong, Y. R. (2004). Preparing secondary subject area teachers to teach linguistically and culturally diverse students. *Clearing House*, 77(5), 202-206.
- Education Commission of the States (2014). *What ELL training, if any, is required by the states? 50 State Comparison*. Retrieved from: <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestNB2?rep=ELL1415>
- Filmore, L.W. & Snow, C. E. (2000). What teachers need to know about language., 1-42. Retrieved from <http://login.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/62339188?accountid=14816>
- Frankenberg, E., & Siegel-Hawley, G. (2008). Are Teachers Prepared for Racially Changing Schools? *UCLA: The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles*. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/39r7g0rb>
- García Matthewson, T. (2016). *4 ways ESSA will change how schools serve ELL students*. Education Dive. Retrieved from: <https://www.educationdive.com/news/4-ways-essa-will-change-how-schools-serve-ell-students/428266/>
- Goldenberg, C. & Coleman, R. (2010). *Promoting Academic Achievement Among English Learners : A Guide to the Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Grantmakers for Education (2013). *Educating English language learners: Grantmaking strategies for closing America's other achievement gap*. Retrieved from: https://edfunders.org/sites/default/files/Educating%20English%20Language%20Learners_April%202013.pdf
- Grundy, T. (1992). ESL/Bilingual education: Policies, programs and pedagogy. *Oregon School Study Council*, 36(4). Retrieved from: <https://files-eric-ed.gov.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/fulltext/ED355786.pdf>

- Harper, C., & de Jong, E. (2004). Misconceptions about teaching English-language learners. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 48(2), 152-162.
- Islam, C., & Park, M. (2015). Preparing teachers to promote culturally relevant teaching: Helping english language learners in the classroom. *Multicultural Education*, 23(1), 38-44.
- Johnson, T., & Wells, L. (2017). English language learner teacher effectiveness and the common core. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(23), 1-24.
- Knight, J. (2005). A primer on instructional coaches. *Principal Leadership (Middle School Ed.)*, 5(9), 16-21.
- Mellom, P.J., Portes, P.R., Straubhaar, R., Balderas, C., & Ariail, M. (2018). "They come with nothing:" How professional development in a culturally responsive pedagogy shapes teacher attitudes towards Latino/a English language learners. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 71, 98-107.
- Mitchell, C. (2018, October). Most States Failing to Meet English-Learner Academic Targets, Report Finds. *Learning the Language EdWeek Blog*. Retrieved from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/2018/10/states_struggle_to_meet_ell_academic_targets.html
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2014). Number of public school teachers and percentage of public school teachers who taught limited-English proficiency (LEP) or English-language learner (ELL) students, by selected school and teacher characteristics: 2011-12. *Schools and staffing survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *Teacher professional development by selected teacher and school characteristics: 2011-2012*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Penner-Williams, J. & Worthen, D.G. (2010). Coaching and implementation level of English language learner strategies in teacher practice. In C.J. Casteel & K.G. Ballantyne (Eds.) *Professional development in action: Improving teaching for English learners*. (pp. 21-24). Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition & Language Instruction Educational Program
- Quintero, D. & Hansen, M. (2017) *English learners and the growing need for qualified teachers*. Brown Center Chalkboard. Retrieved from: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2017/06/02/english-learners-and-the-growing-need-for-qualified-teachers/>
- Reaching All Learners Act, H.R. 4838, 115th Cong. (2018).
- Russell, F. (2015). Learning to teach English learners: Instructional coaching and developing novice high school teacher capacity. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 42(1), 27-47.
- Samson, J.F., & Collins, B.A. (2012) Preparing all teachers to meet the needs of English language learners: Applying research to policy and practice for teacher effectiveness. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED535608.pdf>
- Teemant, A. (2010). Measuring the effectiveness of an ESL coaching model. In C.J. Casteel & K.G. Ballantyne (Eds.) *Professional development in action: Improving teaching for*

- English learners*. (pp.17-19). Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition & Language Instruction Educational Program
- Téllez, K., and Waxman, H. (2005). Quality teachers for English language learners. Laboratory for Student Success. Philadelphia, PA: Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory. Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED508447.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education (2010). *Meeting the needs of English learners and other diverse learners*. Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/english-learners-diverse-learners.pdf>
- Waxman, H., Téllez, K., & Walberg, H. (2004, May). Improving teacher quality for English language learners: Reports and next-step recommendations from a national invitational conference. *The Laboratory for Student Success (LSS) Review: A Catalyst for Merging Research, Policy, and Practice*, 3(1), 1-3.
- Wei, R. C., Darling-Hammond, L., & Adamson, F. (2010). Professional development in the United States: Trends and challenges. Dallas, TX: National Staff Development Council.