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Interrupting the Professional Schism That Allows Less Successful Educational Practices with ELLs to Persist

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Abstract

Different worldviews, different histories of induction into teaching, presumed differences in responsibilities, and different emphases in pre-service and in-service preparation have all long contributed to enduring schisms that keep general education (or mainstream) teachers and English language support faculty from coordinating and finding common cause in their efforts. This division has been at the cost of impeding many English language learners' (ELLs) academic success. So, given that ELLs consecutively or concurrently negotiate these too-often separate schooling subworlds, it is imperative to overcome historical divisions and to conceptualize all teachers as needing (a) to be willing to see ELLs as part of their charge, and (b) to build the skills and capabilities to serve such students well.

Although No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) has directed more attention to the academic performance of English language learners (ELLs) and former ELLs than ever before, it has not necessarily improved that performance. One important explanation for this is the difference in sense of professional task—who should teach ELLs, how ELLs should be taught, what ELLs need to know—that persists between English as a second language (ESL)/bilingual teachers and so-called *mainstream teachers* in many American school systems (Miramontes,

Nadeau, & Commins, 2011). Because of this schism and the status quo educational structures that continue related to it, many ELL students fare less well at school than other student populations. Remedying this schism requires sustained, transformative, professional development that supports the reimagining of how schools should support ELLs. This development must help all teachers develop ELL-responsive pedagogical knowledge; it must compel educational administrators and teachers to see ELLs and former ELLs as collective responsibilities; and it must improve program alignment between special language support services and the mainstream that ELLs transition into.

In this article, we first trace how a schism in professional orientation came to be. We then sketch how and why it has persisted even in the face of much more explicit attention to the academic fates of ELLs, before considering both some promising new initiatives—like the growing attention to content knowledge expertise within ESL/bilingual teacher professional development circles and the increased attention to ELLs among various content area teacher professional organizations—and the hazards these initiatives nonetheless face in relation to the complex bridging task that would support more successful transitions for ELLs. Ultimately we describe how, through professional development, existing educator professional identities and schooling practices need to be disrupted for ELLs and former ELLs to more successfully negotiate their ways through school.

Why ESL/English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)/ELL Teachers Have Historically Been Separate/Marginal

The task of schools working with students whose first language is not English is practically as old as the conduct of formal schooling in the United States. One can find debates among the founding fathers (Justice, 2008) and early 19th-century American leaders like Lyman Beecher and Horace Mann (Proefriedt, 2008) about official languages and the role of schools in teaching English as part of teaching students to be American. However, the idea and resultant systematic practice that such learners might gain from adapted instruction is much newer. Under a Cold War logic that Cuban refugees deserved to maintain their first language (Spanish) so as to be ready for a return to Cuba as soon as the Castro regime fell, the arrival of Cuban refugee students in the 1960s occasioned the creation of federally supported bilingual education programs (Mackey & Beebe, 1977; Malakoff & Hakuta, 1990). Shortly thereafter, Senator Yarbrough of Texas led the drafting of the 1968 Bilingual Education Act when he argued for using transitional bilingual education to work particularly with low-income students from Spanish-speaking homes. However, the main impetus for schools to intentionally adapt instruction for ELLs came from the 1974 *Lau v. Nichols* US Supreme Court decision. *Lau* expanded the signature 1954 *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision's invocation of the 14th Amendment's promise of "equal protection under the law" to mandate that school districts needed to identify students whose proficiency in English was not yet adequate for them to learn without modification through the medium of English in a regular classroom. Put more plainly, it meant that school districts were required by law to identify students who were ELLs and to make special accommodations for their instruction. Although there was, and is, substantial heterogeneity among who

counted as an ELL (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005), a legacy of *Lau* is that, from a policy perspective, certain students are ELLs and other students are not.

Lau came at a time when immigration to America was resurgent after a relative lull from 1924 to 1965. In most cases, *Lau* precipitated districts' creation of programs, although the 1968 Bilingual Education Act and/or obvious need had already compelled some districts to offer targeted programming for ELLs. Not surprisingly, even in high-immigration gateway cities and states, this usually meant that a small, new, ELL-dedicated staff had the primary responsibility of teaching ELLs English, often in pull-out arrangements.

Higher education, in sync with state policies, steadily moved to create certifications and/or endorsements in bilingual education, ESL education, and the like in the 1970s and '80s, particularly in border states such as Florida, Texas, and California. In turn, the 1990s saw a wave of new state-level ESL certification programs in the interior parts of the United States (Sayers, 1996; Simich-Dudgeon & Boals, 1996). Simultaneously, federal rulings—i.e., the 1988 Civil Rights Restoration Act and the Office of Civil Rights' Civil Rights Enforcement Policy of 1991—gave impetus to existing ELL-serving programs to provide high quality services (Berube, 2000). So, by the late 1990s, the ELL-oriented staff in most US states had formal professional mechanisms, in complement with direct experience, to develop and hone expertise in working with ELLs. There were a few exceptions, largest among them the state of Pennsylvania, which long resisted adding ESL as an endorsement area (Zehr, 2000).

Meanwhile, because of this special staff, most teachers at most schools felt much less pressure to change/develop new skills, as meeting the needs of the growing ELL enrollment was readily conceptualized as someone else's task (Hamann, 2008). Not only were ELLs often a peripheral or marginal concern at most schools, but the specialized staff members who served them often were comparatively marginalized, as well (Grey, 1991; Valdés, 2001). Because initially identified numbers of ELLs were usually small at the time districts started their programs, when specially trained teachers were first hired they often began work as itinerant instructors—i.e., working with a small number of learners in several buildings. In urban systems with dozens of schools, several itinerants often composed the early ELL-response faculty and they usually had more in common with each other than with the stationary mainstream teachers at the various buildings where they worked. Not surprisingly the educators of ELLs quickly learned to find professional counsel and fellowship with each other, rather than with their general education colleagues. These patterns of collegiality readily continued even as faculty formally dedicated to the education of ELLs became large enough to support stationary placement within a single school.

Teaching Whom

Although these patterns emerged first in districts where growth in ELL enrollments was most significantly and obviously transpiring, as the 20th century came to an end, the growth and spread of *the new Latino diaspora* (Hamann & Harklau, 2010; Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2002) and refugee resettlement (Lee, 2005) meant that this pattern repeated itself in an ever-growing number of districts. In both such environments, the response to newcomers was often inexperienced and improvisational, but, because of the legal clout of *Lau*, often

a first response was to find a teacher who could be charged with working with ELLs (Berube, 2000). Promising new work (Bruening, 2012) on school responses to ELLs in low-density districts—i.e., districts where less than 2% or less than 20 students are identified as ELLs—also finds the initial response to ELLs improvisational. So, although this dynamic of improvisation has been named in the literature for decades, it is still extant, at least in low-incidence locales.

Depending on when, where, and per which legal code, the students identified through the *Lau* decision have been variously known as limited English proficient (LEP), potentially English proficient, English learners, ELLs, ESOL students, and ESL. Even though the history of these various terms is interesting and often controversial, our point here is not to revisit this history but rather to acknowledge that the students we refer to as ELLs have sometimes been referenced by other titles and that all of these students fit or have fit a legal definition of students meriting adapted instruction per the *Lau* decision.

We say “fit or have fit” because who counts as an ELL has become more complicated in an important way because of NCLB. That act mandated in 2002 that school districts needed to track how ELLs fared, as a subpopulation, on content-area tests in reading, writing, and math. Acknowledging the absurdity of measuring in English the proficiency in reading, writing, and math of students who, by legal definition, are not proficient in English, as Abedi (2004, 2005) and others (e.g., Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003) have done, this mandate also created a second quandary of logic, because ELLs can achieve out of their ELL status. That is, when ELLs become sufficiently proficient in English that they no longer need modified instruction, they are no longer ELLs. So if a school district succeeds with a given ELL and that student proves proficient in reading and writing in English, the student is no longer an ELL. This hazard was remedied in 2006 when then-Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings decreed that, for accountability purposes, exited-ELLs (“former LEPs”) were to continue to be counted as ELLs on standardized test score results for the two years after their program exit (Department of Education, 2006).

This has meant that the continued academic success of students identified as ELLs (but no longer in special programming) became directly dependent on their continued success with mainstream educators who were not necessarily overtly prepared for, or oriented toward, working with students who were not native speakers of English. Although ostensibly the NCLB modification would give both sides—i.e., mainstream teachers and those with special training to work with ELLs—a joint stake in how ELLs fared, it could just as easily make the relationship between the sides more fraught. As we have previously reported (Hamann, 2008), it was not uncommon for mainstream teachers to judge that the exited-ELLs they were receiving still had English language comprehension issues and that, as such, they were not ready for the mainstream. (See also General Accounting Office, 2001.) In the same research, we found that it also was common for the specially prepared teachers of ELLs to feel that they had exited students from their program who were ready to succeed only to be let down by the apparent nonresponsive instruction by mainstream teachers.

At the time NCLB was passed (i.e., January, 2002), the number of teachers who had identified ELLs in their classes was rapidly increasing, with almost 43% of all teachers having at least one in their class, three and a half times as many as in 1991–1992. Of these 1.27

million teachers, 23.2% had bilingual, ESL, or other ELL-related certification and 5.6% had a masters or doctorate in a relevant field; but 9.8% were working with just provisional certifications. Also, 39.9% reported having had no in-service development related to ELLs in the last 5 years and an additional 20.8% of teachers reported less than 10 total hr of in-service related to ELLs in that period. Schools with more than 30 identified ELLs had higher percentages of new teachers than did schools with less than 30. Middle school and high school teachers of identified ELLs were substantially less likely to have had significant training for working with ELLs than their elementary colleagues (Zehler et al., 2003).

There is evidence to suggest that these numbers of teachers unprepared to teach ELLs have dropped, as teacher preparation programs and even state departments of education mandate (albeit slowly and sporadically at this point) that all teacher candidates train to teach with ELLs in all classrooms (Platt, Harper, & Mendoza, 2003; Telez & Waxman, 2006). Further, programs for the professional development of in-service teachers on the topic of teaching with ELLs in mainstream classrooms is a booming industry with seminars in the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008) and Hill and Flynn's *Classroom Instruction That Works with English Language Learners* (2006)¹ text and workshops (which follow Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock's, 2001, ubiquitous, in-service text, *Classroom Instruction That Works*). Still, some critics have pointed out that the quality and impact of preservice and inservice preparation, at this point, may remain lacking (e.g., Harper & de Jong, 2009), and we cannot yet be assured that the hours teacher spend in professional development or preservice training yield a return in teaching-with-ELLs expertise. Quantitative measures of professional development (i.e., the number of hours or courses teachers endure) should be augmented with qualitative measures of teacher learning (or uptake) and successful instruction with ELLs.

Building Responsiveness

As we move to consider how school responses to ELLs might be improved, it is important to remember that there is a substantial and longstanding body of research showing that ELLs can do well at school (e.g., Ernst, Statzner, & Trueba, 1994; Lucas, 1997; Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Walquí, 2000). Moreover, there is emerging research and guidance that highlights the overlap between some change strategies that are currently being targeted at mainstream teachers—e.g., a focus on literacy development across the content areas—and those practices that work particularly well with ELLs (Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2009; Meltzer & Hamann, 2004; 2005). In brief, this work highlights that, just as struggling readers often gain from explicit attention to the vocabulary, text structures, and discourse features particular to a discipline (think *hypothesis*, *lab report*, and *thinking like a scientist*, for science), ELLs also often benefit from this overt scaffolding of how language is used within a content area.

ELLs' current relative lack of success illustrates, then, that key educators have lacked needed information and skills to serve ELLs well, that they have lacked the will to serve ELLs as well as other students, and/or that the current arrangement of most school systems inhibits many ELLs' prospects. As we have noted previously (Hamann, 2008) and here, in most districts there has been little likelihood that mainstream teachers would see ELLs as

appropriately within their charge, absent leadership that disrupted this dynamic (Miramontes et al., 2011). There has also been little evidence that special program teachers wanted to share too much of their task with the mainstream teachers. Yet, neither of these postures is inevitable, and both can be interrupted, although perhaps only with difficulty.

Leadership, if provided, can compel different and better outcomes for ELLs. In a crucial comparative study of 11 districts that saw substantial growth in their ELL populations between 1980 and 1990, Dentler and Hafner (1997) noted that the three districts that saw their standardized test scores rise during that period all were led by administrators with expertise on ELL-support issues. Dentler and Hafner's study did not find that intensive professional development, per se, helped districts succeed in the face of changing enrollments. The three improved districts had intensive professional development, but so, too, did the five they studied that lost ground. (Three of their 11 districts neither improved nor declined.) As one key then, in the successful districts the intensive professional development was purposeful and coherent, rather than scattershot. It was selected or guided by those who knew what they should be guiding and it was mainstream, not marginal.

Fortunately, current ESL/bilingual teacher preparation policy may also be playing a critical role in bridging the professional schism between such teachers and their general education counterparts. The certification of ESL teachers, as an example, is conducted solely through add-on endorsement programs in 19 states, and is one of two or three options for licensure in 45 states (Reeves, 2010). This means that those receiving an ESL endorsement must already (or simultaneously) be certified in a primary, non-ESL area such as elementary education or a secondary content area (e.g., social studies education). These add-on endorsement ESL teachers, then, are both mainstream and ESL teachers, thus well-positioned to bridge the schism (although institutional cultures in schools will affect the likelihood of bridging or not). Further, when experienced mainstream teachers become ESL teachers through an add-on endorsement, they may bring political clout with them from the ranks of the mainstream to the often-marginalized ESL classroom. Through its very induction practices, then, ESL teacher preparation may be working to lessen the divide.

At the same time, we should consider some promising new initiatives—like the growing attention to content knowledge expertise within ESL/Bilingual teacher professional development circles. TESOL (Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages), for example, reorganized its *PreK–12 English Language Proficiency Standards* in 2006, dividing ESL standards not only by age and English proficiency level but also content areas: math, social sciences, science, and language arts. Similarly, many teacher organizations focusing on content areas also have increased their attention to ELLs. For example, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (2008) declares:

Students who speak a first language other than English or have related cultural differences must not face special barriers to learning mathematics. Every student's cultural heritage should be accepted and celebrated for the diversity that it brings to the learning environment. Expanded opportunities should be available to English language learners (ELL students) who need them to develop mathematical understanding and proficiency. Mathematics teachers should have

knowledge of content and pedagogy that support ELL students, including an understanding of the role of the first language.

Within the teacher preparation program of our own university (University of Nebraska–Lincoln), because of an overhaul begun in 2008, ESL methodologies are now infused into all elementary-level, content area methods courses. For example, students in math methods courses might be taught how to recognize the specific technical language of math, and how to break this language down for their students as well as use nonlinguistic supports to make the math content more comprehensible. In addition, teacher learners would be taught how to prepare language objectives for their math lessons in addition to content objectives, to ensure that language is being taught through the math content. Moreover, all preservice elementary education majors are required to take a course in teaching ELLs in elementary schools, which has as its ambitious objectives that teacher candidates will:

1. demonstrate an understanding of the second language acquisition processes of school-aged learners;
2. be able to identify the general language demands of school (academic English) and some of the linguistic demands of individual content areas (e.g., the English of mathematics, science, social studies, language arts)
3. demonstrate an understanding of the ways culture and minority (ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and other) status can impact ELLs' language acquisition, academic achievement, and identity; and
4. identify linguistically and culturally responsive teaching and create instructional plans for elementary school ELLs that take into account how children learn second languages, learners' social and academic needs, and learners' cultural backgrounds.

The course described, however, is only one part of our model for preparing preservice elementary educators. Additionally, all content area methods courses are infused with an ELL focus wherein teacher-learners continue learning about content-specific language and ELL-responsive math, science, social studies, and language arts pedagogy. By sharing the responsibility of preparing all teachers well to work with ELLs, all elementary education faculty members provide a model for interrupting the schism between mainstream and ESL educators.

A second promising initiative is the rise of ESL/ELL coaching. In a coaching model, ESL specialists offer mainstream teachers support for teaching with ELLs, often coming into the general education classroom to assist, diagnose, offer advice, and even model teach. Such on-demand, in-classroom professional development offers immediate assistance to teachers and rectifies many of the complaints about decontextualized, one-shot professional development initiatives. Both of these initiatives are built on the founding principle that all teachers are responsible for ELLs' educational success (Lucas & Villegas, 2010; Miramontes et al., 2011).

Yet, as a reminder of both how new and how still-challenging efforts like this are, we have yet to require any preparation for ELLs as part of the preservice education of our future secondary content teachers. Ultimately, it will be through preparing teachers for both sides of the ESL/mainstream divide, through overcoming cultures of separation between these types of teachers, and through recognizing the joint challenge and responsibility for working with ELLs that practice and outcomes will be improved. This is an issue of professional knowledge, to be sure, but it is also one of will.

Note

1. This volume's starting point is the constructivist equation that learners (including students and teachers) make sense of the new using what they already know. It then follows that in identifying the tie-ins between existing understandings and the new knowledge to be mastered that it helps to evoke learners' biographies. This text is full of rich examples and vivid illustrations. It is intended for use by teacher professional learning communities and would serve well for that task.

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