

Meeting the Needs of English Language Learners: Perspectives from Arizona's Latino/a Teachers

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Abstract

It has been long established that Latino/a teachers have unique capacities to advance educational trajectories for their English language learner (ELL) students. However, while the Latino/a ELL student population continues to expand in numbers, the number of Latino/a teachers entering the teaching profession remains small. In this empirical research study, we center our attention on Arizona's Latino/a teachers, their pre-service trajectories, and in-service experiences with ELLs. Specifically, we asked participants to reflect on their experiences during pre-service preparation and in-service practices as these relate to students who are learning English. We conclude this article with a number of salient themes, which further confirm the possibility that Latino/a teachers are an imperative necessity to improving academic experiences for ELLs, especially in Arizona.

Introduction

For many students, having a teacher of the same linguistic and cultural heritage as their own may not only offer a sense of belonging, validation, and pride, but also support learning through cultural tools the teacher brings into the classroom (Villegas & Lucas, 2004). Considering the above, the contemporary landscape of our schools' demographics paints a vivid racial disconnect between teachers and their students (Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012).

To that end, Latino/a students are the fastest-growing segment of school-age children in the United States, and roughly 25% of all students attending public schools in the nation identify themselves with Latino/a heritage (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Additionally, 10% of the nation's school-aged students are classified as ELLs, although this percentage is not evenly distributed across states or local geographies (Aud et al., 2013). States educating higher numbers of ELLs tend to occur in the Southwestern region of the United States and in urban areas (NCES, 2014) where the majority of ELLs are native Spanish speakers (NCELA, 2011). In essence, all teachers must now face the reality that during their careers they will work with ELLs, and therefore must be prepared to meet the needs of these students; to do otherwise would be demographic denial (Gutiérrez et al., 2002). That being said, however, the teaching force of the nation's public schools only slightly mirrors the racial makeup of the students they teach. Although the teaching force has evolved and diversified demographically over the last several decades—e.g., 17% of teachers in today's schools are minorities as compared to less than 9% in 1986—clearly it is not representative of student demographics (Boser, 2011; Feistritzer, 2011; NCES, 2009).

In this empirical study, we center our attention on Arizona's Latino/a teachers by looking at their pre-service preparation and in-service experiences with ELLs. Our choice to focus on Latino/a in-service teachers is grounded in evidence that these educators have unique capacities to advance ELL educational outcomes (Boser, 2011; Gómez, Rodríguez & Agosto, 2008; Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012; Monzó & Rueda, 2001; Nieto, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). We asked participants in the study to reflect on their experiences, needs, and challenges in working with ELLs. Accordingly, we framed this study with the following overarching question in mind: What are Latino/a teachers' insights in working with ELLs?

In the following sections, we provide a brief overview of the current state of educational outcomes for ELLs, illuminating the demographic imperative of looking towards Latino/a teachers as a viable resource for improving these outcomes. We then describe the context of Arizona as a state leading the nation in strict mandates for working with ELLs, and lay out the conceptual framework guiding our examination. Finally, we

report the findings from our survey study and discuss predominant themes.

ELL Academic Achievement: Locating the Problem

The need for a highly skilled teaching force to address ELL needs is quite pressing. Research documents that ELL students have some of the most dire learning outcomes out of all student population subgroups (Kohler & Lazarín, 2007). It is well documented that ELLs are trailing behind their English-only speaking peers and receive a distinctly different educational experience than their counterparts (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Rumberger, 2008). The dropout rates among ELL students, especially in secondary schools, continue to rise, and the persisting academic achievement gap between ELLs and their English-only speaking peers has not changed significantly in years (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Rumberger, 2008; Rumberger & Gándara, 2004). In addition, studies show that ELLs are at a disadvantage in access to qualified teachers, rigorous instructional materials, and updated facilities (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Rumberger, 2008; Gándara & Merino, 1993); ELLs also lack monitoring services available after they are reclassified to fluent English proficient (Bailey & Heritage, 2014; Bailey & Carroll, in press; Parrish, Perez, Merickel, & Linquanti, 2006).

In an effort to ameliorate existing and persisting issues associated with ELL achievement factors, some scholars have turned their attention toward Latino/a teachers—a population that reports a greater degree of readiness to work with and address the needs of ELL students (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005). This shift in attention is largely attributed to the alarming fact that in many parts of the United States, ELLs are taught by teachers who are not adequately prepared to address the language and academic needs that these students bring into the classroom (Barron & Menken, 2002; Faltis & Valdés, in press; Kindler, 2002; Reeves, 2009; Téllez & Waxman, 2006).

Latino/a Teachers within the Teacher Demographic Tapestry

As student demographics shift and swiftly erase the concept of minority groups, the public school teaching workforce has remained relatively White, female, middle class, able-bodied, and monolingual English speaking (Gómez, Rodríguez, & Agosto, 2008). Roughly 40% of the nation's student population is non-white, yet only 17% of teachers are (Boser, 2011). As of 2011 there were approximately 3.3 million K-12 public school teachers, of whom 76% were female, 83% white, and 44% under the age of 40 (USD OE, 2010). Boser (2011) found that every state in the nation had a student/teacher diversity gap (calculated by subtracting the percentage of nonwhite students from the percentage of teachers of color), and these gaps were considerably higher in states with more diversity, e.g., Arizona. Likewise, Texas and California have high Latino/a student populations (with California taking the lead and Arizona included in the top six), yet the percentage of white teachers hovers between 75% and 80% (Gómez, Rodríguez, & Agosto, 2008).

Age and years of experience add an additional layer of potential tension to the teacher demographics. Many teachers are facing classrooms that are significantly different from those they encountered when they first started teaching (García & Stritikus, 2006). Reports indicate a rapid shift in recent trends for teachers with more than 25 years of experience. This population has dropped by 10% (from 27% to 17%), while the percentage of teachers with less than five years of experience rose to 26% between 2005 and 2011 (Feistritzer, Griffin, & Linnajarvi, 2011).

Connected to this shift, Latino/as are the fastest-growing ethnic group entering the teaching workforce (Feistritzer, Griffin, & Linnajarvi, 2011), with prospective teachers demonstrating higher rates of ethnic, language, and gender diversity. The percentage of Latino/a teachers is currently estimated at 7% nationally (NCES, 2009), which is up from 3.7% in 1991 (Galindo, 1996). However, these teachers tend to fall into the segment of the teaching population with five or fewer years of experience (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005), which also tends to be the population with the highest attrition rates. Additionally, according to Zumwalt and Craig (2005), teachers of color tend to come from lower socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds than do white teachers, and more than 50% work in urban schools and in areas with lower SES factors. In contrast, only 28% of white teachers work in urban schools and in areas with low SES (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). In fact, Zumwalt and Craig (2005) estimate

that 79% of Latino/a teachers work in predominantly minority schools.

Teacher Preparation for ELLs: Why Latino/a Teachers Matter

Empirical studies are limited on the subject of Latino/a teacher readiness to work with ELLs. In order to examine the intersection of a specific teacher subgroup and teacher readiness, we examined scholarly works on what preparation teachers need in order to successfully instruct ELLs (Cody, Harper & de Jong, 2011; Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly & Driscoll, 2005; Polat, 2010) as well as relevant literature on Latino/a teachers. Our brief synthesis of these works points to a number of competencies that teachers must have in order to work successfully with ELL students (see Figure 1) and confirms that Latino/a teachers are an under-researched resource in teaching ELLs.

We found an overwhelming agreement for the argument that teachers must possess specialized cultural and pedagogical skills (García, 1996; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Zeichner & Melnik, 1996) to work with ELLs, one of which is the ability to communicate and engage with students as well as their families and cultural communities. Latino/a teachers (and paraprofessionals) have been found to more commonly possess these characteristics and engage in *confianza* (relationships of mutual trust) practices that form strong bonds (González & Moll, 2002). For example, Latino/a teachers tend to place strong levels of importance on building personal relationships with students and attending to the whole child, which encompasses social and emotional along with academic needs (Galindo, 1996; Monzó & Rueda, 2001). Monzó and Rueda (2001) attribute these relationships of *confianza* to engagement practices that are closer to Latino/a students' home interaction styles, which include approaching tasks cooperatively; translanguaging, or the simultaneous use of multiple languages to communicate (García & Wei, 2014); playful corrections and/or reprimands; and the use of *cariño* (affection) (Shannon, 1995). Many Latino/a teachers and paraprofessionals use interactional styles with their students in the classroom that are similar to those of their own home culture. Further, Latino/a teachers have attributes that more readily allow them to engage with families and communities. Monzó and Rueda (2001), for example, reported that many Latino/a teachers lived near the community where they taught, and all of them spoke Spanish and English.

Another characteristic of ELL teacher readiness is competencies in and knowledge of language mechanics, forms, and uses, as well as a clear understanding of how to integrate and teach these critical aspects of language (Snow & Wong-Fillmore, 2000). An advantage that many Latino/a teachers bring to instruction is being bilingual in English and Spanish. This matters for two important reasons. Not only are they able to provide support to many ELLs in their first language, but they also understand that the students' first language plays an important role in learning and are typically more accepting of ELLs' using their native language in the classroom (García-Nevarez et al., 2005). Latino/a teachers also seem able to better differentiate between students with learning disabilities and students who are still developing English proficiency, often times prior to referrals for Special Education supports (Maxwell-Jolly & Gándara, 2006). This differentiation is invaluable with ELLs, given ample evidence that ELLs are disproportionality classified with learning disabilities (Abedi, 2009; Artiles et al., 2005; Sullivan, 2011).

Lastly, teachers must have a level of self-competency pertaining to addressing the needs ELLs bring into the classroom and sound content and language pedagogical knowledge that centers on how to instruct these areas (García, 1996; Bunch, 2013). Aside from being a positive role model for diversity, empirical research suggests Latino/a teachers positively impact minority student achievement (Clewell et al., 2005; Flores et al., 2007), which stems from cultural and linguistic experiences (e.g., patterns of interaction, use of time and space, conversational turns) similar to those of minority students (Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012). Hence, Latino/a teachers are more likely than white teachers to connect classroom instruction to students' everyday lives (Galindo, 1996; García, 1991) by embedding this knowledge into their curriculum and assessments, as well as by framing the classroom community with interaction styles more familiar to the students (Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012).

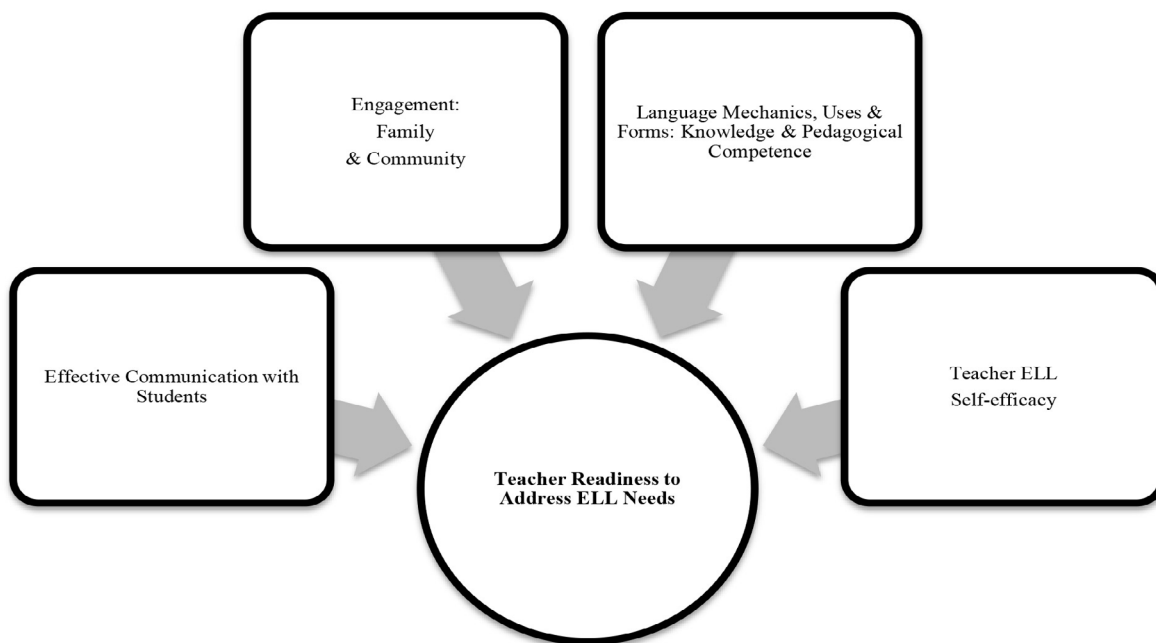
As the population of Latino/a as well as ELL students continues to grow, more attention toward Latino/a

teachers as a viable solution to addressing issues associated with the achievement gaps is long overdue. This layered review of the literature on teacher readiness to work with ELLs, as well as what we know about Latino/a teachers and changing demographic trends in today's classrooms, suggests that Latino/a teachers are imperative to improving the academic outcomes and experiences for ELLs.

Conceptual Framework

To further illustrate what comprises teacher readiness to work with ELLs, in this section we present a conceptual framework (Figure 1) reflecting our review of the scholarly works as presented above and what teachers need in terms of preparation in order to be successful in classrooms where ELLs are present. This framework, which outlines four key areas impacting teacher readiness to work with ELL students, guided our conceptualization of the study, survey instrument development, and analysis of the emergent trends reflected in the findings and discussion sections of the article.

Figure 1: Factors Influencing Teacher Readiness to Work with ELLs



Arizona Context: A Case in Point

Arizona is one of six states leading the nation in both Latino/a and ELL student enrollment (Payán & Nettles, 2008), with more than 465,084 Latino/a students, which amounts to roughly 44% of the state's public school P-12 enrollments (Milem, Bryan, Sesate, & Montaña, 2013). Yet Arizona's teacher demographics are more reflective of the national statistics of 80% white and 13% Latino/a (NCES, 2011). Arizona is one of six states (the others are Alaska, California, Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania) with ELL competency coursework requirements for teacher certification. Although arguably well intentioned, the university/college course requirement to build these competencies is minimal (Long & Adamson, 2012). The current guidelines for teacher certification are limited to two Arizona Department of Education (ADE)-approved courses that center on policies and instructional methods pertaining to ELLs. Pre-service teachers are minimally exposed to

the realities of contemporary Arizona classrooms with ELLs, where a hit-and-miss tactic is prevalent (Long & Adamson, 2012; Okhremtchouk, Newell, & Rosa, 2013).

Moreover, the focus on Structured English Immersion (SEI)—the only methodological option supported by ADE—in Arizona teacher preparation programs provides a distinct and at times inaccurate perception of best practices that shape teacher readiness to work with ELLs, as reflected in the literature and synthesized in Figure 1. One example of this is that, as a result of Arizona's 2000 Proposition 203, instructional use of any language other than English is prohibited for all Arizona teachers working with ELLs (for a detailed description of Arizona's SEI program, see Gándara & Orfield, 2012). ADE-required policies and practices distance Arizona's Latino/a student population from their heritage and thus from effective learning strategies, directly impacting academic achievement. Considering the contemporary landscape of Arizona classrooms and state policies impacting teaching practices, and being aware that Latino/a teachers tend to place strong levels of importance on building personal relationships with students and attending to the whole child (Galindo, 1996; Monzó & Rueda, 2001), we went to the source—Arizona's Latino/a teachers—to inquire about their ELL classroom practices.

Methods

The data reported in this study were derived from an open-ended segment of a larger Arizona statewide survey. A stratified representative sample was collected (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970) from 283 participants, 52 (18%) of whom identified with Latino/a heritage. In this study we report insights solely from the participants of Latino/a heritage. We report these 52 teachers' day-to-day realities in working with ELLs—their challenges and their best practices in addressing ELL students' needs as well as data on heritage, language, and professional background.

Design and Survey Instrument

We utilized a cross-sectional survey research design method (Sapsford, 1999) to create our survey. The first section of the survey used structured questions to collect demographic data (i.e., ethnicity, gender) and data related to participants' pre-service preparation (i.e., education background, exposure to ELLs). The second section used seven unstructured open-ended questions asking teachers who currently worked with ELLs to share classroom practices that had been proven to be most effective in addressing the needs of ELLs. This qualitative component of the survey was used to acquire a deeper understanding of in-service teacher realities as they pertain to addressing the needs of ELLs (Gay & Airasian, 2003), and was designed using our conceptual framework (Figure 1).

After the instrument was designed, we sent the survey to four reviewers who met the same criteria as our sample (Arizona practicing teachers) for examination and feedback to further inform the instrument. In addition to providing general feedback, the reviewers were asked to comment on how well the survey instrument covered, as well as conveyed, the four key areas reflected in our conceptual model. The survey instrument was then modified based on the reviewers' comments and suggestions. After implementing feedback from the reviewers, we conducted a focus group interview with five in-service teachers to further inform the survey instrument.

Population and Participants

Population. To accurately represent the in-service teacher population, we utilized a stratified random sampling technique to proportionally sample districts based on teacher concentrations including those teachers who work in high-ELL districts. Although 409 teachers completed the entire quantitative portion of the survey, not all contributed to answering the open-ended questions. In part, this could be attributed to the open-ended segment of the survey being directed at only those in-service teachers who were working with ELLs at the time of the survey. Two hundred thirty-eight participants completed the open-ended questionnaire, of whom 52 identified with Latino/a heritage. The insights from the Latino/a participants are

reported in this study.

Participants. All participants (n=52) identified themselves with Latino/a race; 49 selected “Latino/Hispanic” category and three reported “Mixed-race” with Spanish being a heritage language learned through home/primary language exposure. Eighty-seven percent (n=45) of the participants were female and 13% (n=7) were male. Additionally, 71% of the participants had taught for more than seven years and therefore were considered seasoned professionals. Other trends (participants’ educational and professional backgrounds, pre-service preparation, etc.) are reported in the findings section below.

Procedure and Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Green & Salkind, 2008) for the demographic data and constant comparative analysis with theoretical memo writing (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982) for the qualitative portion of the data. For the qualitative analysis we first used a built-in feature in Dedoose software to create a codebook (i.e., code, definition, and example) of parent codes (Saldaña, 2012) based on the initial readings of the participant responses. The constant comparative method allowed us to break down the data into discrete “units” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and code them into sub-codes (or child codes) under our parent codes. The researchers then met to begin the second cycle of our coding process—axial coding—to rename, drop, and/or regroup codes into meaningful categories, resulting in 25 child codes (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). The coders then recoded the entire dataset using the final axial coding categories. Coders independently coded the full set of responses, and a reliability analysis was conducted to ensure agreement. The Kappa coefficient was reported at .82, which suggested a “very good” strength of agreement among raters (Altman, 1991).

Finally, the qualitative demographic and categorical variables (i.e., ELL exposure factors during pre-service and in-service) were analyzed using descriptive statistics. All analyses were run using frequencies and percentages in SPSS (Green & Salkind, 2008). These reports were then used to juxtapose demographic trends with the open-ended survey findings.

Findings

Here, we first report findings from the self-reported data, offering insights into participants’ language and heritage, education backgrounds, and pre-service as well as in-service experiences. We then detail key findings from our survey, and end this section with overlapping trends between these reports.

Descriptive Report: Heritage, Language, Education, and Professional Backgrounds

The descriptive statistic findings (see Table 1) indicate that the Latino/a teachers in this study reported being somewhat fluent Spanish speakers (85% with at least a little fluency compared to 15% with no fluency), and their fluency was the result of family or primary exposure rather than coursework (86% of those with fluency). Latino/a teachers were also well prepared academically, with over 75% teaching for seven or more years. Slightly more than half had elementary teaching certification, 44% held master’s degrees, and 23% had BLE or ESL endorsements. Fifty-six percent (n=29) of the participants reported their pre-service preparation resulted in their being either “well prepared” or “prepared” to teach ELLs—yet according to their years of experience and teaching credentials, they surpassed the state’s SEI endorsement requirements. One interesting area of possible concern was the contradiction between pre- and in-service exposure to ELLs. The lack of access to in-service demographics that would reflect their in-service realities may indicate a shortcoming in teacher preparation placement practices.

Table 1: Heritage, Language, Education and Professional Backgrounds

	<i>n</i>	%
Spanish Fluency	44	85
Very Fluent	29	66
Somewhat Fluent	13	30
Little Fluency	2	4
Not Fluent	8	15
Spanish Acquisition		
Family/Primary Exposure	38	86
Other	6	14
Teaching Experience		
10+ years	24	46
7-10 years	13	25
4-6 years	4	8
1-3 years	11	21
Teaching Credentials		
Elementary teaching credential	31	60
Secondary teaching credential	10	19
BLE or ESL emphasis	12	23
Master's Degree	29	44
K-8 or K-12 teaching	8	16
ELL Pre-service Preparation		
3+ courses	36	70
Pre-Service Exposure to ELLs		
Much exposure	32	62
Some exposure	10	19
Little exposure	5	10
Very little exposure	4	8
Teacher-Reported Readiness to Work with ELLs based on pre-service preparation		
Well prepared	16	31
Prepared	13	25
Somewhat prepared	16	31
Not prepared	2	4
Not at all prepared	4	8
In-Service Exposure to ELLs		
Much exposure	48	92
Some exposure	2	4
Little exposure	1	2
Very little exposure	1	2

In-Service Experience: Key Themes

After careful analysis of semi-structured open-ended responses, we present our findings in the four most salient themes described below. It is important to note, however, that a vast majority of teachers reported that they relied on their heritage to structure and facilitate instruction in classrooms with ELLs. The salient instructional practice of making instruction relevant and applicable to ELLs was evident through both individual and collective responses to the open-ended questions. Therefore, reliance on one's heritage served as an overarching theme for all subcategories in our reporting of findings. It is important to note, however, that we are not making concrete recommendations, but rather reporting findings with this overarching theme as a viable and underexplored possibility.

Pedagogical knowledge and strategies. When we examined strategies used in the classrooms with ELLs, teachers overwhelmingly reported that they often relied on their primary language skills to explain, clarify, or frame instructional practices in a way that was suitable to students' learning needs. What was mentioned less often, however, was how students might use their first language (L1) in the classroom to support their target language (L2; in this case, English) learning. The use of the primary language was frequently reported and, in some cases, was deemed essential to ensuring academic success and growth. In the following data excerpt, the teacher understands that the students' L1 may provide him/her with a valuable formative assessment tool: "I determine what students know about content in L1 [Spanish] first to determine how to teach them L2 [English]." Another teacher demonstrates understanding that English only can act as an instructional barrier: Sometimes it [Spanish] is the ONLY way to explain a concept or a word. Otherwise there IS NO CONNECTION [capitalization in original data]. I am lucky to know Spanish to bridge English language learners into the world of English. Another teacher summarized this key strategy to ensure learning with "incorporation of native language as much as possible in the content area."

With the above in mind, however, many teachers reported, referenced, or viewed SEI strategies as a key to learning the English language, and many reported ADE guidelines for SEI instruction as viable and useful tools. For example, one participant quoted the ADE's SEI strategies verbatim:

Always establish language objective. Always use the 50/50 rule (students speak 50% and the teacher speaks 50%). Pushing students to their productive discomfort level. Always remember the teacher does nothing the students can do themselves.

Others explained variations with responses such as "interaction with students, and having them answer using complete sentences."

Teachers also stressed the importance of integrating cultural diversity into classroom and curricular practices. Some participants integrated cultural diversity superficially by teaching about world cultures and languages (e.g., geography, foods, holidays, dress); one explained that "whenever possible I incorporate units in which various cultures are explored," and another used "celebrations and investigations into other cultures through fiction and nonfiction texts, cooking, art projects, and written communications with other cultures." Others integrated diversity by asking students to reflect on and share about their own culture and heritage: "I have made a lot of effort to integrate diversity in the classroom by studying the different cultures and celebrations students and their families have." One participant commented:

We have activities where the students get to share celebrations or traditions their families share. I share with them my traditions and I also tell them of how I embraced the American culture without forgetting my own culture; I tell them that having two cultures can be very fun and that we can get the best of each culture.

The participants also described incorporating diverse cultural perspectives through reading selections and other curriculum, sharing strategies such as "multicultural readings and activities that include students' cultures as well as others [cultures] unfamiliar to the students" and "access to material that is culturally diverse."

Effective communication with students. Similar to the reports described in the previous subsection, teachers acknowledged and strongly emphasized that a common heritage and ability to speak students' primary language facilitates their capacity to understand their students. Participants explained how their ethnic and/or linguistic heritage facilitated their ability to effectively engage with their students:

I am Latina and grew up in a tough neighborhood. I grew up in a single parent home and faced tough situations. I can tell stories from my childhood and my ELLs' faces light up to know that I have gone through the same things. They start to share their stories and we just connect.

Another statement highlights the importance of one's heritage in bridging the communication gap:

Since most of my students are from Mexico, we understand each other perfectly. My mother is from Mexico. I don't really do anything different in my classroom but I do think the students regardless of ethnicity are comfortable in my room.

Another participant further emphasized the importance of shared heritage, explaining, "Since I come from a Mexican background, I have an upper hand in understanding my students. I have excellent rapport with them." Others commented on how their exposure to cultural differences (although not necessarily claiming the same ethnic or linguistic heritage) helped them facilitate current instructional practices and, thus, better understand their students:

I have grown up on the south side of Tucson, usually at low income schools, my parents have worked at low income schools with majority ELL populations. I have tutored students at Title I schools for years. I have asked students what they need from me and moved from there forward.

Another comment not only emphasizes the importance of knowing one's students' heritage, but also speaks to the value of this knowledge that may impact teaching practices in classrooms with ELLs:

If the teacher has strong cultural knowledge, then the teacher knows how to approach the student and how to set goals. If the teacher doesn't, then the teacher just feels bad for the student and tends to lower expectations and therefore hurts the student.

Translanguaging, or "hybrid practices of languaging bilingually" (García, Makar, Starcevic & Terry, 2011, p. 33), was prominent throughout participants' responses and was viewed as an essential component of teacher/student communications. Translanguaging was used not only to teach content, but also as a means for building relationships and for making communication with students more effective. One participant explained the importance of "having [an] instructor who is compassionate in their students' struggles in an English dominated world," while another described:

Initially, make ELL students feel comfortable by speaking to them in Spanish to gain their respect and confidence in me so they can reciprocate. If they feel comfortable, they then start asking more questions if they don't understand a math concept.

Engagement with student families. Nearly all teachers stressed the importance of parental engagement and a need for a welcoming atmosphere to guarantee parental involvement, with explanations similar to this participant's:

Every parent has a great impact in their children's learning. It is crucial that as an educator you communicate that with parents and always have an open door for parents. I always try to stay positive and always motivate the parents to strive for the best.

A vast majority of the participants, however, also felt that this engagement entailed schooling the parents or setting expectations for them (largely around homework expectations or supporting in-class learning). The statement below directly speaks to this notion:

I expect their [ELLs'] parents to show up at conferences and donate a minimum of 1 hour a month to come into the classroom and watch a lesson. Most are embarrassed to come in, but a few do to listen and learn English. I hand out a list of websites and books and have even checked out Dora the Explorer DVDs to learn at home (for parents). I am happy to say that I have a 100% contact rate at conferences each and every time for five years straight.

One participant commented, "This [family engagement] is important to help families and communities support the children and provide an environment at home that encourages learning." Another stated, "The parents need to be able to support you as a teacher. ELL students must practice at home as well, so if parents are not involved, it makes it difficult to continue growth."

Parental involvement was conceptualized as a directive as compared to a facilitative or a more reciprocal approach (with the exception of a few outliers) by emphasizing how parents must either learn, be taught, or be expected to contribute. A couple of conceptualizations about parental engagement that instead focused on building relationships of mutual learning are highlighted in the following statements:

I love talking to parents. I love making phone calls home and being invited to family functions. If there is no family support, it is very difficult to have a bridge that links school and home. To me this bridge is very important so the line of communication must be there.

All my students are aware of the different cultures in our classroom. At the beginning of the year all parents are asked to write a letter to me explaining their home lives. Almost 100% of the time parents talk about their culture and traditions as it relates to their child.

Challenges. One of the greatest challenges reported by the participants was figuring out how to meet the needs of a range of language proficiency levels (in both LI and English) while simultaneously supporting academic goals that were set before them. These challenges were expressed in the following quote:

The greatest challenges in instructing ELLs after entering the teaching profession is to have my students achieve academically at the same time they are learning a second language. The educational system is very cruel. I have felt very frustrated when I see that due to the lack of proficiency in English, my students stay behind academically within the time frame that teachers have to teach determined amount of content, :([sad face emoticon in original data source].

Related to this, several participants reported challenges with the newcomers or those students who are identified as “pre-emergent” in the English language. One teacher identified these challenges as “teaching students who don’t speak English and do not have any or very little education in their own language.” Another noted, “Initially when I taught third grade, it was extremely hard to teach English, especially when it came to writing. I had students who had never been in the US and it was their first year in a school in the US.”

The other overarching challenge, which was prevalent, was the politics undergirding ELL instruction and assessment practices that overburdened students. Some criticized the ADE’s policies. One teacher contrasted the benefits of teaching language through content rather than the ADE’s program, which emphasizes teaching language as the content focus:

The politics of teaching ELLs in Arizona are nasty and xenophobic. Besides that, instructing ELLs is a blessing particularly when you get to teach them not from a pure language perspective but as they learn content area knowledge such as math and science.

Another highlighted segregation issues and how these impact learning:

The way the law indicates that English language learners are not to be mixed with English-proficient speakers. Exposure to the language is vital, and when ELL students are only with other ELL students, that does not happen.

Finally, participants reported challenges associated with teacher training and holding all teachers accountable for addressing ELLs’ needs. One explained:

... they [ELLs] end up getting failing grades due to lack of SEI strategies not being implemented in those classrooms. Many times our Pre-Emergent, Emergent, Basic level students are mistaken for being “slackers, not motivated, not trying hard enough, misbehaving” when really they are very capable but are not able to understand the language spoken much less process at those higher levels, so therefore the level of English must be differentiated and content presented at a lower level for the ELL student in a Mainstream class. For this to happen, much more professional development must be provided for those teachers who have few ELLs in their class and feel the need or support in this.

Another stated, additionally expressing frustration at not having a voice in her school’s practices:

Others not following the guidelines given. They take classes and learn and place it under a rug. So many teachers do not have the patience for our ELLs, and it is sad to know we take the same professional development classes and they still constantly complain about how low our kids are.

This really angers me. I am not afraid to tell parents what teachers to stay away from at the end of the school year either. If I would not place my own child in a class, why should they? Thank you for giving me this opportunity to express my thoughts. Sometimes it appears that no one listens. I hope that these responses will help you and honestly scare or weed out the teachers who really don't belong in education.

Overlapping trends. The participants overwhelmingly reported that their heritage and language background served as a great advantage and strength in the classroom with ELLs. Their education and seasoned teaching backgrounds were impressive and far more substantive than the minimal competency requirements mandated by the state. However, there was an evident disconnect between what participants reported as essential tools in the classroom in helping ELLs learn the English language (i.e., SEI strategies, which are limited and are subtractive in nature) and what was actually practiced in their classrooms, e.g., using students' primary language to help facilitate academic learning, incorporating diversity into classroom curriculum and teaching, and relying on their heritage to engage in community building in the classroom and assist with teacher/student interactions. In other words, what the teachers learned as part of their training and reports as useful was not necessarily what they inherently and intuitively viewed as best practices or did in classrooms with ELLs.

Another interesting finding was an apparent lack of a facilitative approach to parent/teacher engagement. It was vividly apparent that similar heritage and linguistic backgrounds served as a strength in classrooms with ELLs and in building student/teacher relationships, but very little or nothing was said about how similar heritage and linguistic backgrounds helped participants facilitate parent/teacher relationships. In fact, many teachers (with the exception of two) fell back on a more directive approach to parents—traditionally exercised by the mainstream culture.

Finally, even with arguably strong pre-service preparation, which should have facilitated deep understandings of key concepts pertinent and essential in classrooms with ELLs, and while accounting for participants' heritage and language factors, little over half of the Latino/a educators in this study reported that they were well prepared to work with ELLs in their pre-service preparation. This could be attributed and linked to limited exposure to ELLs during their pre-service years. In other words, strong knowledge, similar heritage and language background, and understanding of best ELL classroom practices from a theoretical point of view may not be enough. The practical component and opportunities to use what is learned as well as inherited through one's background in a diverse classroom may be the missing link related to ELL readiness. It is also possible that cultural and linguistic heritage are not acknowledged as educational tools and strengths in teacher preparation programs; although all of the participants reported drawing on these strengths, they went largely unsanctioned and unacknowledged.

Discussion

English-only without “Only”: Heavy Use of LI in Classroom Instruction

Despite imposed regulations through ADE directives stemming from Proposition 203, an overwhelming majority of teachers relied on their primary language to support ELLs in order to ensure learning. Some explicitly pointed out that the political context in which they operate was nothing short of revolting and devalued them as professionals. Others were unapologetic about using students' primary language to facilitate instruction. This finding aligns with prior reports on using primary language to facilitate academic achievement (García-Nevarez et al., 2005; Villegas et al., 2012) and using students' heritage to connect instruction to students' everyday lives (Galindo, 1996; García, 1991; Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012). In other words, these Latino/a teachers sent a clear message that they would do what is best for their students despite imposed regulations. These Latino/a educators are rightfully doing what they deem best for their students by, essentially, subversively challenging rigid state mandates regulating instruction in the classroom that contradict their own professional judgment. Despite the fact that by doing what is best for their students, these teachers risk being reprimanded or even dismissed.

Heritage & LI vs. Arizona's SEI

A majority of participants reported relying on their heritage to facilitate instruction in their classrooms with ELLs. Some Latino/a teachers embraced their ethnicity and/or language skills as an asset for teaching ELLs. Others described how they used translanguaging in the classroom for the purposes of building relationships and safe learning spaces as well as to ensure that students understood academic content. That being said, there is a considerable disconnect between reports of relying on language and heritage to facilitate classroom instruction and at the same time listing principles of SEI as effective tools for instruction. As discussed earlier, the ways in which SEI instruction is prescribed by ADE are largely subtractive and, thus, designed to ensure the loss of not only a primary language, but also one's heritage (Gándara & Orfield, 2012; Long & Adamson, 2012). This disconnect can be perceived in several ways. One way to view this finding is as an adjustment to the current ADE policies dictating instruction—a need to state what is perceived as “correct” while at the same time engaging in practices that teachers deemed best for their students. Another way to view this is that participants implicitly challenge the current system by showing resistance and creating “safe places” for their students in the classroom environment that they can control and where they can make a difference. Concurrently, Latino/a teachers shield themselves from scrutiny, which could potentially harm them professionally. In either case, this finding needs further exploration to determine its root cause.

Diversity: Key Factor Facilitating Classroom Instruction

Along similar lines, the participants overwhelmingly reported that they made attempts to celebrate diversity in the classroom to strengthen classroom community, which is consistent with prior reports (Galindo, 1996; García, 1991; Villegas, Strom & Lucas, 2012; Villegas et al., 2012). However, while the majority of the participants reported either supporting or teaching diversity, there was little mention of using diverse knowledge as an instructional tool in classroom planning or instruction. This could be attributed to lack of knowledge in this area and of modalities that serve as essential tools in aiding this process. This finding could help inform teacher education and professional development practices.

Instructional Challenges

For the most part, Latino/a teachers participating in this study faced many of the same challenges all teachers working with ELLs face (i.e., figuring out how to meet the needs of a range of language proficiency levels while simultaneously working under prescribed academic goals, political constraints, and lack of resources). Tellez and Waxman (2006) describe one essential characteristic teachers need to effectively work with ELLs—advocacy. It is not enough for teachers to just teach; they must also serve as advocates for their students (Faltis, 2014). Especially since many teachers today serve student populations with histories of restricted access to both resources and high achievement outcomes, it is essential that teachers view themselves as advocates for language diversity and emergent bilingual students during both pre- and in-service teaching.

Additionally, perhaps many reported instructional challenges stem from the fact that SEI principles are not adequate to ensure proper differentiation of instruction among learners of various levels while at the same time ensuring that students progress academically in various subjects. In order to explain this better, we must circle back and remind ourselves what concepts are deemed appropriate by state mandates and ADE as compared to what scholarly works say on this subject. No matter how many times one drills Arizona SEI principles, they are simply inadequate to bridge content, language, and academic achievement.

Engaging Students and their Parents

Who is engaging whom? Student engagement was focused more on facilitative practices with a central focus on diversity and on ensuring that diversity was embedded in classroom instruction. Additionally, participants reported that they relied on their heritage to ensure sound pedagogical practices and address social factors in

classrooms with ELLs, supporting prior research on Latino/a teacher engagement with students (Galindo, 1996; Monzó & Rueda, 2001). On the other hand, participants' view of parental engagement is prescriptive, demanding, and expressed in forms of directives. While the literature focusing on teachers using students' community knowledge as resources, the teachers in the study overwhelmingly conceptualized family and community engagement as something the parents were supposed to do or learn how to do, with the teachers holding the resources, rather than viewing parents as a resource or building a mutual relationship of teaching and learning. This interesting finding could be attributed to multiple factors including school culture, influences budding from mainstream perceptions, and possible generational gaps (i.e., the immigrant generational gap separating teachers and students' parents) and merits further exploration.

Political Constraints and Lack of Resources

The ideological climate of “Turn White and Speak English Politics” (Okhremtchouk, 2015) is hard to fully conceptualize unless one lives it and shares the heritage of targeted populations. The following insight from one of the participants describes this notion best: “The politics of teaching ELLs in Arizona are nasty and xenophobic.” To subversively teach, knowing that the political context outside of the classroom is detrimental to ELLs, is heroic. It is important to remember that teaching, especially for the population of Latino/a teachers in Arizona, encompasses more than just ensuring that students learn facts and figures: these teachers are also tasked with restoring their students' pride and belief in themselves. In other words, these educators are charged with the additional responsibility of helping their students to see their role in society — what strengths they offer, their capacity to learn, and the expectations others hold for them — while struggling to survive in a system that attacks and dismisses what they and their students hold dear: their heritage.

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