Article

Encountering Spaces of Resistance When Implementing Research-Based Strategies for English Language Learners (ELLs)

Xaé Alicia Reyes[1] and Eliana Delas Rojas[1]

Abstract

This article discusses research findings from follow-up studies on the effects of purposeful programming designed to prepare educators who participated in either of two professional development federal grants funded by the U.S. Department of Education (REALL 2007 and LEAD 2012) to address the needs of English Language Learners (ELLs). The qualitative data gleaned through focus group interviews and responses to questionnaires collected in these studies describe both educators' sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994) and their students' transformations as they experience success. The longitudinal data collected over a 6-year period include narratives of resistance encountered by the grant participants in spaces such as schools, districts, and the broader community, and how these challenges were approached.

Keywords

critical pedagogy language teaching, language studies, teacher education, curriculum studies, culturally relevant pedagogy, organizational communication, diversity and multiculturalism, education polic

Background

Educators from vulnerable districts, often described in the media as districts with "failing" schools and high levels of poverty, were selected to participate in federal grants for professional development funded by the U.S. Department of Education (REALL 2007 and LEAD 2012) over the last two decades. Close to 100 teachers, counselors, and school psychologists have completed the program in one school of education's curriculum and instruction department under the bilingual/bicultural education strand at a northeastern research intensive land grant university. Another 15 grantees are currently completing the 2-year program. These grants intensify educators' preparation and experience, enabling them to acknowledge the diverse backgrounds of their students and to apply research-based theories to their everyday practices for addressing their students' needs. The grant proposals focused on designing curricula and lessons that build on English Language Learners' (ELLs) prior knowledge and skills through emphasis on sheltered instruction, math literacy, and contextualized teaching. The skills learned through the enhanced curriculum helped educators develop an understanding of the contextual variables that may influence ELLs' successful participation in the school cultures. As grant participants are in the process of acquiring these skills, they are also gaining a support system among peers engaged in similar work. Some of the contextual variables coupled with the media depictions of the "failing" schools, constitute spaces of resistance where our grant participants must strategize with allies to overcome these challenges.

Effective teaching to meet the needs of our ELLs requires leadership and vision by supportive and enlightened administrators knowledgeable in language acquisition theory and methods (Torres, 2006), in content specific strategies (Rojas, 2010), and who have clear understandings of contextual circumstances, and student engagement–parental involvement relationships (Crespo, 2010; Epstein, 2001; Gaetano, 2007) that complement the goals of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, every element listed here requires communication and positive relationships among all participants that are often absent, which bring about spaces of resistance. It is evident that the aspects related to student and parent voices need to be strengthened within teacher preparation programs and professional development of *all* teachers considering the widespread and increasing presence of ELLs in classrooms. In daily interactions with educators and community members, there are expressions of frustration and disappointment on both sides, regarding the lack of sensitivity to cultural and linguistic differences that have become normative in our urban settings and beyond. Even though these differences have been widely documented and discussed in research and many recommendations have led to revamping of teacher preparation coursework and field experiences (Reyes &

[1]University of Connecticut, Storrs, USA

Corresponding Author:
Xaé Alicia Reyes, University of Connecticut, UBox 3033, 249 Glenbrook Rd., Storrs, CT 06269, USA.
Email: xaealicia@gmail.com

Carjuzaa, 2006; Rojas, 2010), there are disappointing outcomes in many of the districts, and access to higher education is still a challenge for ELLs, Latinos in particular, who continue to be underrepresented in U.S. colleges and universities as reported by the Pew Hispanic Center (Lopez, 2009).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's data, projections through 2050 indicate an increasingly diverse nation where, between 2010 and 2050, the Hispanic population will grow from 49.7 million to 132.8 million, an increase of 83 million or 167%. The group's share of the nation's population will almost double, from 16% in 2010 to 30% in 2050. Given this reality, we need to consider results from the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress, which show a substantial gap between the scores of ELLs and non-ELLs in reading and math for both fourth and eighth graders. To address this, the Center for Public Education synthesized the research in a summary titled "Preparing ELLs for Academic Success," which stated the following: Academic English is key to student achievement, especially in secondary grades; students with formal schooling in their first language generally become proficient in English more quickly than those with no such schooling; and bilingual programs tend to be more effective.

The Center for Public Education affirms that public schools bear the major responsibility to address the disparities discussed above. Indeed, changing demographics pose a number of challenges for schools, most notably the need for highly qualified bilingual teachers and teachers of ELLs; for high-quality preschool programs, especially for young children whose first language is not English; to address gaps in such areas as dropout rates, test scores, high school completion rates, and college entrance rates; for outreach to Hispanic and immigrant parents and older citizens; and to address issues of equity in resources among schools.

While the number of Culturally Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students, many of whom are ELLs, has grown exponentially across the United States, the academic achievement of these students has continued to lag significantly behind that of their language majority peers. The Improving America's Schools Act (the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) called for all students to meet the same high academic standards, but a later congressionally mandated study reported that ELLs receive lower grades, are judged by their teachers to have poorer academic abilities, and score below their classmates on standardized tests in reading and mathematics (Moss & Puma, 1995).

Students have difficulty in school for a number of reasons. One contributing factor may be a mismatch between the needs of the students and teacher preparation. Zeichner (1993) and Crawford (1993) find that most teacher preparation colleges do not train undergraduates to work with linguistically and culturally diverse students. The 1993-1994 Schools and Staffing Survey (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997) shows that while teachers in regions with higher concentrations of ELLs are more likely to have received some preparation geared to the needs of ELLs, there are many teachers in all parts of the country who have received no preparation at all. Furthermore, though almost one half of all public school teachers may anticipate educating ELLs during their careers, only 12.5% of these teachers have 8 or more hours of relevant training (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). These findings reflect growing evidence that most schools are not adequately meeting the challenge of educating CLD students. In fact, the National Council for Teacher Quality's (NCTQ) 2013 review, found that in spite of the attention teacher quality has received in recent years, teacher preparation has stayed "remarkably off the radar" (NCTQ, 2013). In addition to limited English skills, ELLs come from a variety of linguistic, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. ELLs differ in their expectations of schooling, the age that they arrived in the United States, and their personal experiences both before and after their arrival. ELLs' characteristics also have an impact on their academic achievement and influence the type of instruction they need to be successful in school. To meet the challenge of educating these students well, fundamental adjustments must be made in teacher education, school-based programs, curricula and materials, and instructional and assessment practices. Professional development for capacity building is the key to such change.

The U.S. Department of Education mandated policy changes such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) 2002, Race to the Top (2009), and Common Core (2010) often create additional challenges and disrupt initiatives that are being implemented before they are even allowed to flourish and produce results. These policies also contribute to resistance to a more humane treatment of ELLs, such as English language support and extended time or exemption from standardized testing, that are seen by many as practices that are incompatible with raising test scores and increasing the profiles of their schools and districts to that of high performing schools. This has been the case over the past 10 years, and this is the rationale for our program initiatives. The curricular design discussed here has included a variety of approaches to improve English proficiency while strengthening native language literacy, grounded in constructivist pedagogy and theoretical frameworks such as the Zone of Proximal Development theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and language acquisition theories involving comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985) considering levels of proficiency such as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency Skills (CALPS; Cummins, 1999). Given the research on bilingualism by Hakuta (1987) and others, and the documented lived experiences of bilingual professionals, there is a commitment to support development of English proficiency without eradicating the native languages, which enhance students' learning and life opportunities in the ways bilingualism and biculturalism have enhanced the lives of many professionals.

To document outcomes and revise the program curriculum where needed, data were collected from grant participants during annual focus group sessions and through surveys distributed and emailed to graduates. Findings are discussed below, and their analyses have produced modifications that will help meet participants' needs more effectively as well as identify any patterns of resistance that emerged and how these have been addressed.

Summary of Findings

The following section synthesizes the themes as these emerged from data sets collected through online and hard copy surveys emailed and sent through regular mail to program alums. Other data were collected through recorded focus group sessions that took place after annual cohort meetings, and these were later transcribed and coded. Focus groups were facilitated by researchers who were not program participants who also assisted in the data analyses. In addition to these data, reflections have been gathered in courses along with feedback from evaluation forms distributed at events sponsored by the program. The three themes that emerged, namely, transformations through new knowledges and pedagogies, why the focus on Spanish and Latino issues in some regions of the United States, and district-specific designs, are discussed below. Some of the responses to focus group questions are also included.

Transformations Through New Knowledges and Pedagogies

According to the surveys used in this study, more than half of the participants who responded to questions regarding their reasons for applying to the programs were motivated to participate because they were concerned about developing advocacy skills for assisting ELLs and their families. The communication with parents and colleagues was a concern when trying to address the needs of ELLs. In some cases, parents expressed strong desires to have their children in monolingual English classes so they would become English dominant quickly because these parents had "bought into" misinformation that led them to believe that bilingual education would limit children's learning of English. Thus, resistance from educators that held these same beliefs was solidified by parents who had no information regarding other approaches. Although the respondents identified persistent needs in development of leadership and communication skills before joining the program and during their coursework, the responses to focus group and survey questions indicated that halfway through the program, participants had already developed some leadership skills and increased communication with colleagues regarding professional concerns and pedagogical approaches. Evidently, their new knowledge and the ability to discuss theory and research have been helpful for these dialogues and initiatives and in providing other information for parents to gain their support. Many educators and community leaders realized that arguing for fairness and equity without sharing examples of what works and what are better alternatives for curricula and school programming, was ineffective. Duncan-Andrade (2009) pointed to this in discussing Freire's pedagogy of hope stating that many urban teachers may feel frustrated about social inequality but are unable to express it or infuse it into their teaching. Hence, the focus on developing background knowledge about curricula that is research based and that has proven successful. In classes and conferences, grantees learn how to share these examples in ways that are comprehensible to the broader community while maintaining the scholarly terminology for our academic partners to engage in dialogues and support these programs. Respondents stated that they were better equipped to discuss reasons and theories that informed their classroom choices and their modified strategies for communicating with students, parents, and colleagues in ways that led to overcoming their resistance to new initiatives.

Why the Focus on Spanish Language and Latino Issues in Some Regions of the United States?

In the past, educators often complained about the focus on Spanish in spite of many other languages having a presence in their districts, which created some resistance to initiatives being brought back to districts. In addition, some participants continue to hear colleagues and community members state that they had to "sink or swim" with no bilingual programs to help them. To negotiate these patterns of resistant, educators in the programs learn about historical circumstances throughout the United States that made basic communication in rudimentary English suffice for the industrial jobs that were abundant in other eras (Haynes, 2002), while emphasizing that jobs today require more sophisticated communication and academic skills. In addition, the cognitive benefits of language learning (Hakuta, 1987) have been highlighted, as well as an understanding that the scaffolding process involved in developing second language proficiency relies on a strong foundation in the native language. Researchers believe educators can help students more effectively if they tap into students' prior academic knowledge, concepts, vocabulary, clarity regarding true and false cognates, and grammatical structures from the first language to support second language development.

There is a need for support for all non-English speakers, and where the proportion of speakers of other languages is present, efforts are made to identify resources and personnel to support ELLs in their native languages. Yet, the increasing number of Spanish speakers throughout the United States propels the need to provide support for Spanish language speakers and embrace opportunities to encourage bilingualism in districts where demographics are increasingly Latino/Hispanic. In fact, Spanish courses have been offered periodically within the program, based on program participants' requests. When the language instruction is focused on school

jargon and using the communicative approach, these courses have influenced the grantees' sense of effectiveness. In their responses, those who were monolingual claimed they benefited from developing some basic vocabulary and word recognition. Hence, English dominant grantees became more comfortable with Spanish spoken around them as they overcame their own resistance to Spanish. As with instruction for ELLs, differences in Spanish competency levels surfaced and meeting the goals for all participants was challenging. In a sense, Spanish communication challenges were a sobering experience for most participants who were then able to relate to their own ELLs' experiences when they are placed in English only environments. They know that they can continue encouraging English comprehension and usage but are more understanding and patient with their students who are still working on transitioning from their native language into the second language and, eventually, to biliteracy, as they learn English. Furthermore, these experiences with another language seem to enhance possibilities for acceptance and encouragement of multilingualism and global perspectives, which often encounter resistance in the United States.

District-Specific Designs

The specific needs of the districts targeted by the grants are taken into consideration in designing grant proposals, and district representatives are consulted throughout the process. Some districts are less resistant and more involved with the grants than others. It is evident that the newly acquired knowledge and skills among the participants may provide information that challenges the state of affairs regarding policies for receiving non-English speakers in many districts. These dynamics create pressure for better understanding and greater support for the students among administrators.

Some of the recommendations from grantees are related to logistics that are beyond the control of program leadership. The variety and sequence of courses offered is dependent on state requirements. The location for courses is conditioned by the larger number of students needing the courses in different locations. Whenever the proportion of students near another campus is higher, every effort is made to hold classes there at a time convenient for the majority of students. As for research and library knowledge, the program encourages independence; hence, all grantees are provided with library skills workshops to update their technical skills in accessing electronic databases. Once this training is completed, graduate student appropriate knowledge is expected of all grant participants.

The bilingual/bicultural program has consistently organized conferences, brought in speakers, and invited the educational community at large and other stakeholders to participate in colloquia to address issues that affect ELLs. Feedback about the program's effectiveness was positive overall, and this is expanded on by respondents who state their satisfaction with the flexible design of the curriculum that allows for adjustments to fit each particular community.

Responses Gleaned Through Focus Group Sessions

In efforts to triangulate data, the information gleaned through surveys and interviews were compared with data gleaned using similar questions through focus group sessions conducted after cohort group meetings held annually. Participants responded to prompts in a free-flowing conversation style that allowed them to add to colleagues' responses and to think of aspects they may not have considered when responding to surveys or interviews individually. Some of the prompts and the responses appear below.

Students were asked the following questions during focus group sessions:

What were your professional goals before you came to the program? How have these goals been changing as you attend the program, if they have changed? What is helping or has helped you understand bilingual education?

- As a certified teacher, I also was a participant in the alternate route of certification, so this is my preparation for my masters and I'm hoping to develop an ESL program for participants.
- I think we just get a more comprehensive look on what it entails and perhaps the battles you are going to be facing as you go on into a school system and the resources you need to access on your own, primarily to be a successful bilingual or TESOL teacher.
- Yeah. I think through the coursework you understand and get prepared to face these questions uh where we have so many negatives about the whole bilingual program. It prepares you to how to go about understanding the program and make sure other people understand it.

What are some of the traits of a good teacher of diverse learners? Many respondents reiterated basic teaching principles in addition to new knowledge:

- Open-mindedness, the ability to listen without necessarily responding so initially to listen, without judgment.
- I think understanding, caring, all that.
- Know your students. Umm, it is key and very important. And I think this program opens up your mind to really know your students and know who they are.

What are the strengths of the program?

- I think that the professors have a wide variety of experience here and that's really helpful, to have people

that have had as much umm experience in different school districts, in different countries, and telling it like it is I think is valuable.

- The professors are also very approachable and make themselves available. I have home phone numbers from some of them and email addresses definitely . . .
- You learn a lot about methods of teaching English Language Learners, I think you know the whole course was based on methodology and strategies and what to use in going back, why it's good, why this is good, and why do you need to do this and know through research that this works. I learned that sometimes, a lot of people, including myself, sometimes say, I wonder if this works or not and through the course, you learn through research and so forth, and you go WOW, I needed to see it to believe it (laughs) so, you know, it did help me out in that sense.

How do you feel about support and/or resources throughout the program?

- Going back to professors, they are very supportive, and that's one of the keys. You know, they support you throughout the program, they make you feel as though you are a part of something which they are involved in and they will be riding along with you right up until the end.
- . . . and I think it just, after every course, it just widens up my knowledge and I just put it into practice.

Although neither of these remarks speak directly to the question of support and resources, it seems that the word "support" triggered thoughts of being supported by faculty as a salient theme. Participants view the knowledge and skills acquired as resources for their craft.

Students also shared their satisfaction with bilingual conferences and events. Many noted that they enjoyed meeting authors of books they had read in class. Students also noted that the changes in the program staff sometimes affected their advising and sense of continuity and yet they understood that efforts were made to resolve these issues.

And a final remark summed it up:

- Well I think this program is very valuable so I give my 110% support, and I think every year, there should be a new grant and a new program and new kids and new adults, and go through this program and be able to experience what we did experience.

Generally speaking, the feedback obtained from graduates, some who completed the program a number of years ago, and who have been applying their new learning in their practices, was positive and complimentary to the program. Many acknowledged feeling more confident in their skills and in their ability to advocate for ELLs with their knowledge of best practices and research supported approaches.

Conclusion

After examining all of the aggregate data and comparing the earlier years of feedback to the most recent, there are marked differences. The more recent groups have developed a greater sense of community and commitment to the issues faced by ELL populations. The modifications made in the program have been in tune with the needs mentioned by the respondents. In addition, earlier graduates have mentored the newer participants, and this has made the newer cohorts feel more empowered and supported.

Graduates mention specific skills such as differentiation, a variety of learning theories, and several methodological approaches to second language teaching in ways that demonstrate their expertise and the influence of their coursework for their professional lives. However, they navigate the spaces of resistance created by unsupportive policies, and unsupportive misinformed colleagues and community members. Their statements reflect a sense of empowerment as they retool to go back into their schools and activate the teaching and learning strategies and understandings gleaned through the program that they are able to model in their districts. The data, collected through continuous and consistent activities to obtain feedback, have informed decision making to build up and strengthen the design and articulation of the goals and objectives of the program. It is clear that more practitioners are in need of the opportunities for professional development offered by these programs to strengthen their self-efficacy and overcome resistance. In an era where public education is under siege, Boyer's (1996) call to reconceptualize scholarship in American universities to make them inclusive of the problems and concerns of communities, professional development grants have already embraced this calling. His recommendation is to adopt a scholarship of engagement characterized by *discovery* of the issues affecting communities, *integration* of these issues and their stakeholders into curricular design, *sharing* of work and strategies with communities, and *applying* best practices learned from collaborative research and teaching.

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Author Biographies

Xaé Alicia Reyes is a Professor of Education and Latino Studies whose foci include bilingualism, qualitative research, critical pedagogy, and media studies and their intersections with educational equity and access. Her work has appeared in the Journal of Latinos and Education, Hispanics in Higher Education, and others. She has taught in Thailand, Puerto Rico, and presented in Europe and Latin America.

Eliana Delas Rojas, is an Associate Professor in Curriculum and Instruction and Math-LEAD Project Director /Principal Investigator in the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. She is internationally recognized for her expertse in Ethnomathemathics, and culturally relevant pedagogy. Her publications have appeared in Perspectives in Gifted Education and Educational Foundations and others.