

Preparing Teacher Leaders for English Language Learners in Rural Settings

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The number of English language learners (ELs) across the United States continues to grow, particularly in rural and new destination settings. However, educators remain un- and under-prepared for working with ELs nationally. This article provides findings from a study of one teacher leader professional development program in a rural school district that sought to prepare educators for ELs. We describe the professional development program and the rural context of the district. Findings from this study derive from an online survey of participants. Data reveal that rural educators seek to acquire skills and strategies that go beyond the classroom setting and that enable them to connect with EL families. They also believe that teacher leaders of ELs demonstrate compassion and build social-emotional support networks for themselves as professionals, as well as with EL families.

Keywords: English learners, teacher leaders, professional development, rural education

Across the United States, more than 4.5 million students enrolled in public schools speak a language other than English in the home (Lucas, Strom, Bratkovich, & Wnuk, 2018; McFarland et al., 2018; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). Commonly referred to as English language learners (ELs), these students represent approximately 9.5% of the U.S. K-12 student population (NCES, 2018). Florida's share of EL students surpasses the national average at 10.3% (Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015); and the number of EL students in Florida has been steadily increasing over the past decade, approaching nearly 300,000 (Florida Department of Education, 2017; NCES, 2018).

Simultaneous to the growth in the EL student population, it is widely recognized that teachers who work with ELs feel under- and unprepared for the task they face (Coady, Harper, & de Jong, 2011; Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005; Karabenick & Noda, 2004). Teachers and school personnel who work in settings with diverse

students are called upon to address the linguistic, social, and academic needs of all students, including the specific needs of ELs (Calderón, Slavin, & Sánchez, 2011; Carnoy & García, 2017; Kieffer & Thompson, 2018; Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2012; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Viadero, 2009; Warren, Reeder, Nofle, Kaiser, & Jurchan-Rizzo, 2010). In fact, Karabenick and Noda (2004) report that even teachers who have worked with ELs in the classroom felt unprepared to address the language learning needs of their students. More troubling is that even when teachers felt unprepared, they are not always receptive to participating in PD related to EL instruction (Coady, 2019; Walker, Shafer, & Iiams, 2004).

Our experience and prior research in rural school settings has demonstrated that these concerns hold true for teachers in those settings and are exacerbated by the rural nature of schools, namely, the limited resources available to rural teachers, and geographic and social distances that educators and families face (Azano & Stewart,

2015; Burton & Johnson, 2010; Coady, Coady, & Nelson, 2015; Coady et al., 2011; de Jong, Harper, & Coady, 2013; Hansen-Thomas, 2018). Because rural educators have limited access to resources and professional networks that could support their work with ELs, teachers must be creative and resourceful in meeting the needs of their students. However, there is a dearth of research on preparing educators to work with ELs in rural settings (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017; Nugent, Kunz, Sheridan, Glover, & Knoch, 2017) and an urgent need to better understand both veteran and early-career (or novice) educators' roles and experiences. In particular, Burton and Johnson (2010, p. 376) noted the "absence of research on the experiences of novice teachers ... [and] as a result, little is known about teachers who enter the field of education with the intention of teaching in rural communities."

This article describes one teacher leader (TL) professional development (PD) program that aimed to prepare TLs for EL students in a rural school district in Florida. In this article, we describe our partner district and some of the challenges that the district faced in meeting the needs of its EL student population. We situate that work by noting the current rural context in which EL families reside. In this study, we asked what rural educators believe about being TLs and how can they be prepared. We describe a TL English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) PD program and present findings from a survey distributed to educators across the district regarding their beliefs about becoming TLs for ELs in their rural district.

Florida Context

Florida is typically associated with sandy beaches, abundant sunshine, and the vibrant nightlife of Miami and Orlando. However, the state is geographically diverse and includes communities that are best characterized as rural and agricultural. The U.S. Department of Agriculture describes rural communities as small towns characterized by geographic isolation from other communities, having low-density settlement patterns, and facing persistent population loss and economic distress (Education Alliance, 2017). In those spaces that are local to us, immigrant laborers, both documented

and undocumented, work in industries such as crop peanut, watermelon, and blueberry production; restaurants; and construction. Immigrants to Florida supply a steady stream of labor that supports Florida's economy and fuels its growth (League of Urban Latin American Citizens, 2017).

The school district partner with which we work represents one rural county in the state. Florida's school districts generally reflect the state's 67 county borders. The counties in the state are large, and within a single county (or school district) there is variation in what is considered rural (NCES, 2006). For instance, in southwest Collier County, the small city of Naples has the highest wealth in the state, and the rural setting of Immokalee has among the lowest population in the state. Immokalee is an immigrant-receiving site, where many newly arrived immigrants migrate in and out to pick citrus in the fall months.

Our partner district has approximately 40,000 residents and about 36.5 residents per square mile (U.S. Census, 2015). Eighty-seven percent of the county population is White, and about 9% identify as Latino. U.S. Census (2015) data also indicated that approximately 7% of the population speaks a language other than English in the home, and the average family income is approximately \$20,000 per year. The percentage of persons living at or below the poverty rate in the district is 23.7%, compared to the state rate of 16.3% (U.S. Census, 2014). However, there is some evidence that those numbers are twice those reported by the U.S. Census (Coady et al., 2011) due to the flow of seasonal workers in and out of the county, as well as undocumented immigrants, who might not be reflected in Census data.

In the 2018–2019 school year, about 200 students across K-12 received ESOL services. Consistent with Capps et al. (2015), 52% of these children were born in the United States. In the district, approximately 94% of the ELs speak Spanish in the home. EL families' ability to access early childhood education services in the district is extremely limited due to low income, coupled with limited access to reliable transportation in the rural context and, for undocumented immigrants, the fear of driving without a license.

The TL-ESOL PD project was designed to provide high-quality PD to practicing (in-service) educators who work with EL students, to address the academic challenges faced in the rural district. For example, in 2013–2014 the percentage of ELs in the district that met the state benchmarks for English language proficiency from kindergarten to grade 2 was 32%; grades 3–5, 19%; grades 6–8, 21%; and grades 9–12, 0%. State proficiency targets for those four corresponding grade ranges were 22%, 26%, 24%, and 21%, respectively. Only ELs in grades K-2 met state English language proficiency goals. More recent data indicated that none of the secondary EL students met the state benchmark in writing, and only 6% of secondary ELs met the state benchmark for reading.

The Phase I cohort of participants in this study consisted of 24 educators (19 teachers, 2 counselors, 2 coaches, and 1 principal). We elicited participation from a wide variety of educators in response to the rural nature of the district and the multiple roles that rural educators fill (Hansen-Thomas, 2018; Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005; Wenger, Dinsmore, & Villagómez, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework includes teacher leadership and high-quality teachers of ELs. Our work is situated in rural educational settings, which we view as underresourced and isolated spaces while simultaneously reflecting the strengths of the school as a community center and strong relationships between educators and students (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Hansen-Thomas, 2018; Johnson & Zoellner, 2016; Reynolds, 2017; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009).

Place-Based Teacher Leader

In general terms, there are various descriptions of TLs. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009, 2011) defined a TL as an educator who can lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, influence others toward improved educational practice, and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of leadership. Adams et al. (2013) defines a TL as a professional who goes beyond preparation of formal leadership and who

has an inquiry-based focus on pedagogical practices, a cornerstone of educational transformation and a key characteristic of a leader. They considered the TL as not only the instructional expert but also the problem solver, inquirer, and collaborative peer leader.

Ross et al. (2011) studied completers of an online TL program. Using interviewing techniques, they asked the program completers about their perceptions of the program and its impact on teachers' instructional practices. The TL program led to changes, or transformations, in the ways the teachers viewed their instruction and leadership. Their study suggested that for teachers to fully "live" these transformations, district leaders and administrators needed to create school cultures that are supportive and empowering for TLs.

TLs have a broad knowledge base of content and pedagogy and the ability to network and collaborate with other educators. The concept of teacher knowledge goes beyond U.S.-based ideologies of what teachers need to know about their craft. For example, Mercado (2002) described a key knowledge base among teachers in small schools in Mexico. Based on this work, teachers' pedagogical knowledge, or *saberes docentes*, is situated in daily practices and relationships. Wenger et al. (2012, p. 2) elaborated on *saberes docentes* as "a construct referring to teachers' pedagogical knowledge, grounded and constructed in teachers' daily experiences with learners." They emphasized the contextual boundedness of teacher knowledge within particular school cultures. Similarly, Ernst-Slavit and Poveda (2011, p. 14) explained that this perspective "invites educators and researchers alike to carefully consider educators' personal biographies and trajectories as elements that configure their teaching knowledge."

Reflecting the same situatedness of place in preparing new teachers for rural settings, Burton and Johnson (2010, p. 384) noted that "teachers need place-conscious teacher education programs." Teachers need a clear understanding of the community in which they work, as well as encouragement to connect to the community and to their local school placements (Azano, 2011; Greenwood, 2013; Gruenewald, 2003; White &

Reid, 2008). A study in rural Texas explored how TLs advocated for ELs while attempting to make connections between pedagogy and the value of place (Bustamante, Brown, & Irby, 2010) and demonstrated the pivotal role that rural TLs play in influencing changes that improve the academic achievement of ELs in rural schools. Such connections help support synergy between identity and relationships; that is, when teachers are able to connect with community members, they form the relationships necessary for their teaching situations (Reagan et al., 2019; Reid et al., 2010).

Our definition of TL for ELs draws from these concepts. In this study, we frame TL of EL students as having a deep knowledge of content and pedagogy (equivalent to *saberes docentes*), the ability to reflect upon their work, and the ability to situate their work contextually that reflects the lived reality of the students, families, and schools, specifically for rural settings. Finally, a TL for EL

students connects with other professionals and goes beyond formal preparation while sharing with, collaborating, and leading others.

High-Quality Teachers of ELs

The second construct of our theoretical framework is high-quality teachers of EL students, which we theorize consists of knowledge, skills, and practices that are beyond what high-quality mainstream teachers do (Coady, Harper, & de Jong, 2016). Some scholars in EL teacher education have noted three essential characteristics: (a) knowledge of their bilingual students' backgrounds and families, including their home language, literacy practices, and culture; (b) content-pedagogical knowledge and skills that link effective instructional practices to bilingual students' learning needs; and (c) knowledge of micro-, meso-, and macro-level educational policies and the ability to navigate those on behalf of bilingual students (see Figure 1). Similar to the

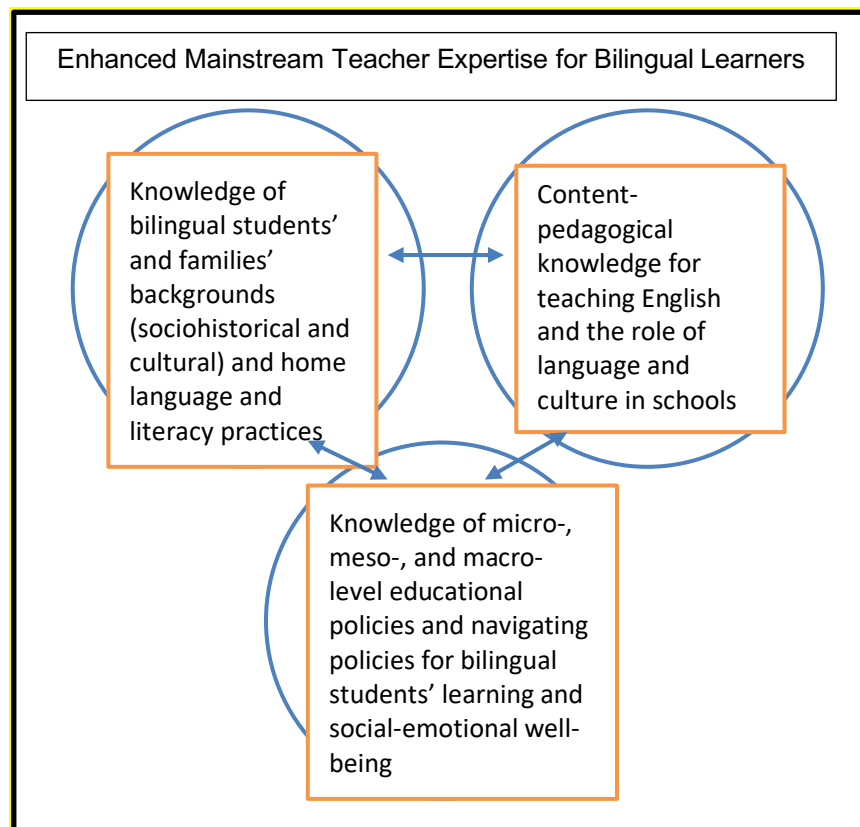


Figure 1. Enhanced mainstream teacher expertise for bilingual learners (adapted from de Jong et al., 2013).

construct of TL defined above, scholars of EL teacher education describe how high-quality teachers reflect on their practice and make ongoing changes to their instruction to ensure that all students are learning (Zeichner & Liston, 2013).

With respect to knowledge of students' language and cultural experiences, de Jong, Harper, and Coady (2013, p. 91) noted that high-quality teachers "must learn about ELs' personal linguistic histories and cultural experiences, both within and beyond school." This goes beyond simply knowing the student and suggests having a more detailed understanding of the individual child. However, the same research notes the difficulty of teachers to understand the home and background context of their ELs, including where students are from, their home literacy practices (Coady, 2009), and what education in their home country is like. We have found that teachers focus on the immediate needs of students in the mainstream inclusive classroom yet face difficulty recognizing the connection between their EL students' lives and their learning in school (Coady et al., 2016; Coady & Moore, 2010). Teachers who effectively respond to ELs' learning needs recognize that they must communicate with non-English-speaking families and in some cases address the challenges of communicating across rural spaces (Coady et al., 2015). Teachers, then, need to strengthen home-school connections that build partnerships with parents in more nontraditional ways that reflect families' strengths (Coady, 2019; Jeynes, 2003; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Niemeier, 2009).

The second essential area involves teachers' content-pedagogical knowledge, that is, their ability to modify and differentiate instruction and assessment in English for ELs, based on the student's linguistic and cultural background and learning needs. Teachers need knowledge of how the English language works and the pedagogical skills to make language input comprehensible. The pedagogical content knowledge of teachers of ELs includes a knowledge base of how the English language works, as well as the specific language used across academic content areas (Turkan, de Oliveira, Lee, & Phelps, 2014). This concept aligns with *saberes docentes* or teacher knowledge for ELs. The ability to differentiate instruction based on

ELs' linguistic and cultural background underscores the importance of knowing ELs and their families in order to connect that knowledge to student learning.

The third area that reflects high-quality teachers of ELs is teacher's knowledge of and ability to navigate educational policies and practices at different levels—micro (classroom), meso (local), and macro (national)—leading to inclusive learning environments. In rural educational settings with limited resources, teachers must be creative and perform multiple duties (Hansen-Thomas, 2018; Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005). This work includes local school district policies and procedures, as well as state- and national-level policies, such as federal acts (e.g., the Every Student Succeeds Act and federal immigration policies) that affect ELs. In the current anti-immigrant climate, high-quality teachers of ELs understand how those policies affect their students (Spring, 2008).

Our theoretical framework conceptualizes the qualities and characteristics of TLs for ELs in rural settings. Overall, this is a broad yet detailed scope of expertise that is grounded in pedagogical content knowledge for ELs, situated in its actual context, and includes inquiry, reflection, and leadership skills.

Methodology

Our partner school district follows the state-mandated requirements for the preparation of all teachers who work with ELs (Florida Department of Education, 2017). The district's chosen model for EL instruction is a mainstream, inclusive classroom model (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017). Following this model, teachers include EL students in all mainstream classroom activities and are required to differentiate their instruction in academic content areas for ELs based on students' various English-language proficiency levels. Teachers use differentiated instruction and assessments to meet the language- and content-learning needs of their EL students. The TL-ESOL PD program was designed to build a cadre of faculty and leaders with the technical skills that educators need to address significant achievement gaps in learning.

The TL-ESOL PD program itself consisted of six online courses, each 8 weeks long, with an ongoing

job-embedded coaching component. Three highly trained bilingual and biliterate (Spanish) program coordinators were hired to provide on-site support for educators participating in the TL-ESOL PD project. The six courses were adapted from an existing online TL program and modified for educators working specifically with ELs in the rural district. The courses were Guided Inquiry; Transforming the Curriculum; ESOL Methods; Meeting the Educational Needs of Children in High Poverty Rural Settings; Instructional Coaching for Enhanced Student Learning; and Teacher Leadership and School Change. Three key principles undergirded the TL program: the TL as an educational advocate, the teacher as a researcher, and the master teacher, which includes pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986).

Teachers applied to the TL-ESOL PD program via a Qualtrics online survey. All of the participants had the desire to build their skills and knowledge related to EL students and families. One of the key qualifications for participation in the program was educators' desire to become an ESOL leader for the district. We adhered to the university's institutional review board training and obtained written consent from all participants before implementing the study and releasing the survey.

The survey consisted of 16 questions and was accessed directly by educators. Nine of the 16 questions were demographic in nature and asked participants about their background and prior ESOL preparation in education. The remaining seven open-ended questions focused on three areas: participants' engagement in various school leadership activities (including mentoring or coaching) and perceived leadership strengths, their past or present experiences working with ELs, and their desired outcome, or vision for professional changes, upon completion of the TL-ESOL PD program (see Appendix A).

In total, 33 participants completed the application survey, an invitation to participate in the PD program that was distributed to all teachers and educators in the rural district, including administrators, school counselors, and bilingual paraprofessionals, by the ESOL district coordinator. About 360 teachers in the district received the

survey, indicating about a 9% response rate. One week after the initial survey was sent, a reminder e-mail was sent to all educators in the district. Because the aim of the survey was to identify potential participants in the TL-ESOL PD program, the findings captured responses from educators who believed that they would benefit in some way from the TL-ESOL PD program and who may have already been interested in embarking on a leadership PD program.

We used descriptive statistics to analyze demographic data, and we analyzed open-ended survey questions following thematic analysis and open-coding techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Initially, coding was carried out individually by three of the authors to identify recurrent themes in the data. This was followed by two collaborative coding sessions in which the different authors compared their thematic coding to ensure consistency in interpretations. We hypothesized within and across the data and returned to the data to test our hypotheses. The thematic codes identified from the data related to learning instructional strategies for ELs, connection with ELs' families, and professional learning communities. Our final analysis identified three motifs, described below, that emerged from the data.

Findings

As shown in Table 1, the program attracted roughly an even percentage of early-career (0–3 years), midcareer (4–16 years), and veteran (>16 years) professionals. Almost two-thirds (63%) of applicants represented elementary-grade-level educators, and just under one-third (27%) were middle school educators; only three represented high schools. More than one-third (36%) held a bachelor's degree, and the rest held postgraduate degrees. About half (57%) stated that they had completed the state of Florida ESOL endorsement, and one-third stated they had not at the time of the study. These data help contextualize the background preparation of the educators we worked with.

As described below, the three main themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis were related to educators' beliefs on becoming TLs in their rural school district: (a) learning new

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Teaching characteristic	Level	% of participants
Length of teaching experience in years	0-3	30
	4-12	40
	More than 16	30
Teaching level	Elementary	64
	Middle	27
	High	9
Highest educational level attained*	Bachelor of science	36
	Master's	39
	Doctorate/specialist	15
Florida ESOL endorsement	Yes	57
	No	34
	Unsure	9

Note. $N = 33$.

*Does not add to 100% due to non-responses.

or updated instructional strategies and techniques in the classroom, (b) building and strengthening networks with EL families to support their social-emotional well-being, and (c) developing professional networks with peers.

Learning Updated Instructional Strategies and Techniques in the Classroom

All of the educators that participated in this survey described their desire to learn new strategies that would enable them to help their ELs in schools and classrooms. This finding is characteristic of not only early-career professionals, as one would expect, but also among midcareer and veteran professional educators. For example, Gertrude (all names are pseudonyms), an early-career professional who works in an elementary school, noted that

I would LOVE to learn more about how to support both my teachers in teaching our ELL [EL] learners and students when learning English as a new language. I would like to learn more strategies for engaging our ELL families in the school culture and work with our curriculum to help reach more ELL students.

Embedded in this theme was an acknowledgment across the participants that the EL

students were not performing as the district expected on state standardized tests. There was a sense of responsibility for the EL students' learning. For example, Araceli noted that she "would like to learn what I can do to better learning for my ELL students as well as my non-ELL students . . . and how I can assist others in better serving the ELL students."

This finding corresponded with how educators envisioned their future work with ELs once having completed the TL program. For example, two novice educators, Barbara and Clement, described the importance of being knowledgeable of ELs and their learning needs (Barbara) and being able to expand their toolbox of strategies (Clement). A midcareer teacher, Tiffany, echoed those findings and noted her desire to acquire the skills to help her ELs succeed academically.

However, our survey found that, beyond classroom teaching skills and strategies, educators in our rural district recognized their work as multifaceted and multidirectional, moving beyond the classroom, due to the varied and multifaceted roles that they took on as rural educators. For example, several commented on being solely responsible for outreach to EL families. The most common role among the participants was

performing administrative duties such as translating, even when they had limited skills in other languages, followed by individual student tutoring during the school day or at the district's Monday night ESOL tutoring program. The tutoring program in the district was originally designed to provide a homework support structure and space for EL students. It was generally held every year for 2 months prior to the state standardized testing. However, the program was heavily dependent upon the district providing buses for the students, to resolve the problem of transportation. Parents were required to accompany their children on buses, but this policy was not always enforced, thus reducing the number of parents who came to the schools. A veteran teacher, Johanna, who taught Spanish at the secondary level, described the added administrative duties she engaged in:

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I helped write the district ESOL plan and trained classroom teachers in ESOL strategies. ... I've tutored ESOL students within my school and

translated relevant paperwork for teachers and administration. I also work as translator for Spanish speaking parents in IEP meetings and parent-teacher meetings.

Typically, those additional duties would be part of the work of specialist teachers or family liaisons. Thus, among the participants of this study, there was a strong desire to acquire both technical skills and strategies related to instruction and support for work that went beyond regular classroom expectations, such as performing administrative duties and reaching out to parents outside of the school classroom setting.

Social-Emotional Support Networks With EL Families

One of the main concerns of our participants was communicating and building connections with EL families. When asked what they would like to learn from the TL-ESOL PD program, participants referenced both EL students and families. Melissa, a midcareer bilingual tutor, noted succinctly, "I would like to know how to help students and their families more." Charmaine, an experienced professional educator in elementary school, noted that she would "like to find ways to include our ESOL families more in school functions and ... make their annual ESOL meeting more meaningful for everyone involved." Another example was described by Gertrude, who conceded, "Sometimes I feel like I am letting my families and teachers down because I don't have the resources to give them to enhance their learning environment." Melissa narrated her own experience having grown up as an EL:

Growing up as a speaker of another language, I experienced a lot of difficulty living in a rural town where any other language other than English was not accepted and looking different didn't help either. I would like to learn how to work with my peers to better relate to ESOL students and their families to feel more accepted and for their values to be respected.

Participants also felt that integrating ELs' cultures into the schooling system would support students' academic and emotional well-being. In this sense, building networks with the community

and families of ELs went beyond simply involving parents in school meetings or the annual ESOL end-of-year “multicultural event.” Rather, it consisted of building a social-emotional support system or network for EL students and families that might counter the social isolation families experienced. Mathilda, a midcareer middle school educator, summarized the need to know how to move my ESL students further, possibly through a change in the way we run our program. My ESL students, even when prompted, barely speak a word. Students at our school don’t have a class in which they can simply talk about how the language works. I need creative ways to access their knowledge and help them grow.

Approximately a quarter of the participants had prior experiences working in the field of social and emotional health care or support. For example, Tiffany, who had experience working at a crisis call center, stated that her experience with ELs involved “one year of experience working in inpatient substance abuse as a Mental Health Counselor where [she] helped to rehabilitate those who use substances.” Thus, while the participants noted that they were invested in rural EL student learning, the data further illuminated their emphasis on connecting with families and addressing the social-emotional needs of EL students and parents.

Developing Professional Learning Communities With Peers

The third finding from open-ended survey questions underscored the participants’ need to establish a sense of community that would counter the effects of the professional and social isolation they experienced in the school district, including building a support network for professional learning. Some of the descriptive language that emerged included “collaboration,” “supporting each other,” “sharing,” and “facilitating connections.” Gertrude described that she wanted to participate in the TL-ESOL PD program because

I would like to understand more ways to support English Language Learners so that I could facilitate more connection between family, students and schools. I could even see myself at the district level in the future facilitating connection on a district level.

A veteran teacher, Stephanie, noted, “I would like to further my knowledge working with the ELL population. As a team leader I would like to share the information with my fifth-grade team members.” And Mathilda emphasized the quality of social-emotional support in the context of being a leader: “I believe my strongest leadership quality is compassion.... I also understand that we’re all coming with different backgrounds, different struggles, different languages, and different educational experiences.”

These data reflect the need within the rural setting to build professional collaboration, share ideas and strategies, and build a network of social support for peers, students, and families—in other words, the realities of the context in which rural educators function. Those three things—building a network of collaboration, ideas, and social support—were not characteristic of the rural district, as described by the participants: EL students and families were not integrated into the community and often remained quiet in school and figuratively invisible in the district. Ultimately, the data revealed that educators in the district were conscious of the challenges the district faced with ELs and were eager to collaborate with their peers in the professional arena to support students and families.

Discussion: Theorizing Teacher Leaders of ELs in Rural Settings

Findings from this study pointed to two main ideas: the needs of educators to acquire instructional strategies to meet the learning needs of ELs and educators’ desire to provide a social support network for their ELs and families in the rural community. This finding intersects with theories of TLs and high-quality teachers. Wenger et al. (2012) emphasize the limited opportunities that rural educators have for PD programs and the *saberes docentes*, or pedagogical knowledge, that should be emphasized in PD programs. Based on our participants’ responses, we suggest that rural educators be provided access to opportunities for targeted EL PD, as well as having PD that aligns with the characteristics in their specific rural context, or what might be considered place-based EL teacher PD. Similar to the findings obtained by Burton and Johnson (2010), the necessity of having

“place-conscious” PD, contextualized to the realities of rural educators, emerged from our data. Some examples of the educators’ realities that also aligned with previous scholarship was their awareness of the pressures of being multiresourceful as educators (Wenger et al., 2012) and working beyond the traditional classroom setting (Adams et al., 2013).

Findings also revealed that educators in our rural district sought to understand the social-emotional needs of their EL students, their cultural backgrounds, and their families. This finding aligns with the component in the framework of high-quality teachers. Educators felt the need to strengthen home–school relationships to build partnerships with their EL students and families. Several scholars have addressed the cultural differences between schools and the families of EL students and advocate for nontraditional family engagement (Coady, 2019; Jeynes, 2003; Moll et al., 1992; Niemeyer, 2009). This finding further supports the work of Burton and Johnson (2010) in that effective teaching in a rural community entails not only the educators’ interest in working within their own context but also the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with the community.

One finding that did not emerge in the data was the need for TLs to connect academic content to the EL students’ home language. Interestingly, practicing teachers in the district overlooked the connection between ongoing first-language literacy development and transfer to English (Kieffer & Thompson, 2018), or they did not see this as an immediate issue they faced. This suggests that the participants undertook the TL-ESOL PD program more for leadership and preparation than for second-language teaching and learning. They appeared more eager to connect education to the “cultural background” of their EL students. Future course content in TL-ESOL PD programs should include a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between EL students’ first language and ESOL learning (Cummins, 2000).

Another finding from this study was educators’ sense of building professional learning communities with their peers and extending these networks to the community. Glover et al. (2016) point to geographic

isolation as one of the many additional challenges faced by rural schools compared to urban schools. Participants in this study also emphasized their sense of isolation, which required them to build professional networks to support each other. Eppley (2015) pointed to the interconnectedness of education in the rural space in which it is embedded. In this sense, Eppley suggested the school is situated at the center of the community and is a space used for educational, cultural, and social gatherings. Because of their geographic isolation, educators in this study highlighted their desire to establish multiple networks that would enable them to collaborate with their fellow peers as well as with their ELs and their families.

Finally, scholars have noted that high-quality teachers of ELs need to have a deep understanding of their students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds (de Jong et al., 2013); however, the concept of addressing the social-emotional needs of EL students is not part of the theoretical construct of high-quality teachers of ELs (Figure 1). Future research should include and examine this construct in the context of rural education with ELs.

Overall, the educators in our study, who had various years of teaching and educational experience, indicated their desire to address a wide range of EL student needs. National data indicate that the most desired area of PD for educators (57%) was “instructional strategies in my subject area(s),” and 47% sought to learn “strategies for working with families” (Statista, 2017). Our data revealed similar findings in the rural district, indicating that rural educators had similar needs to educators across the United States but faced additional challenges of isolation, transportation, and varied responsibilities in the rural setting. That educators aim to meet the social-emotional needs of ELs and their families was a surprising yet welcome finding for a TL PD program. A surprising number of participants had prior experience working in the field of mental health. It is possible that those experiences created a “lens” through which educators viewed EL students and families.

In today’s complex sociocultural and political climate, educators must be keenly aware of the broader context in which their work is situated and

the social, emotional, and political realities of EL families. In rural communities, it is both paramount and difficult to establish support networks for EL families as well as professional learning communities for educators. Wenger et al. (2012, p. 9) view teaching as “a profession which involves continual growth, and an expectation of being part of a professional learning community.” This TL-ESOL PD program seemed a first step in building resources and social networks for those educators, students, and parents.

Conclusion

This article describes a TL PD program for in-service educators working with ELs in a rural school district. We discussed the nature and challenges of rural education in Florida, where this study was conducted, and noted the rural context in which our ELs and their families live. We described the TL-ESOL PD program and the findings on educators’ beliefs of becoming TLs in their rural school district. The lens used for this study included teacher leadership and high-quality teachers of ELs. Findings from our survey suggest that TLs in the rural district recognized their work as multifaceted but prioritized the social-emotional needs of children and families. Leadership qualities highlighted by participants also underscore the need to support one another professionally and to create partnerships with their EL students, families, and the community. Although participants sought to acquire instructional strategies in general, they did not connect those to the specific language-related content or strategies required to support EL children. Implications for future PD programs highlight the need to address the connection between EL students’ languages and the use of multiple languages in schools. Similarly, implications for future research suggested investigating how teachers address the social-emotional needs of their ELs and if these should be considered an additional component in theories of high-quality teachers of ELs.

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Appendix

Survey of Rural Educators

Please state the following:

1. Name
 2. Address
 3. Phone number
 4. Email
 5. List the school(s) you current work at and grade(s).
 6. List all of the school(s) in [district] you have worked at in the past.
 7. For how long have you been teaching?
 - a. 0–3 YEARS
 - b. 4–8 YEARS
 - c. 9–12 YEARS
 - d. 13–15 YEARS
 - e. 16+ YEARS
 8. What is your highest degree completed?
 - a. High school
 - b. Associate's degree
 - c. Bachelor's degree
 - d. Master's degree
 - e. Education specialist, doctorate, or other advanced degree
 9. Do you currently hold a completed (in field) state of Florida ESOL endorsement?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Unsure
 10. What are your prior and/or current experiences with English language learners?
 11. What would you like to learn while undertaking this program?
 12. What would you like to achieve upon completion of this program?
-

13. Do you have any previous experience in training or mentoring other adults?
14. What do you believe is your strongest leadership quality?
15. Envision your future. What professional changes would you like to see that could benefit you, your school, and/or your English learners?
16. If you are aware of any extenuating circumstances which may make you ineligible or unable to complete this program, please elaborate below.