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Research Article

A Qualitative Approach for Aspiring Leaders: Bridging Theory and Practice Together to Lead a Curriculum for English Language Learners

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Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative study was to capture the application experiences of principal interns in a fifteen-month job-embedded residence program learning to lead a curriculum for English Language Learners (ELL). This qualitative study focused on the documented analysis of principal interviews conducted by residence interns and their leadership experiences in rural, urban, and suburban schools. Findings included lack of basic ELL knowledge by district and campus administrators but found success through advocacy with assigned students. The study highlights three points for aspiring principals to acquire knowledge in when leading campuses with ELL students including language policies in schools, culturally responsive leadership, and translanguaging in multilingual classrooms. Key conclusions show current school leadership in preparation programs is built upon traditional conceptions, but true social justice educational leadership involves dismantling traditional structures.
Keywords: English Language Learners (ELL), Aspiring Leadership, Language Policy, Bridging theory to practice, Culturally Responsive Leadership, Translanguaging.

Introduction

For aspiring school principals, it is important to have the depth of knowledge and competencies necessary to lead the instruction, services, and social-emotional wellbeing of all students in their schools. In the United States, over 4,800,000 English Language Learners (ELL) were enrolled in schools during the 2014-2015 school year making up ten percent of the total kindergarten through the twelfth-grade (K-12) student population (USDE, n.d.). ELLs are a growing part of the public-school population and include a diverse racial/ ethnic composition (USDE, n.d.). It is important for both aspiring and current administrators to have the skills necessary to be instructionally and culturally sound effective education leaders for all students (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to capture the application experiences of principal interns in a fifteen-month job-embedded residency program as they become competent in leading educators and curriculum for English Language Learners in Bilingual and/or English as a Second Language (ESL) Education.

Materials and Methods

The following qualitative research study advances the work of social justice and social inclusion in the arena of authentic principal preparation practice. The study also frames the essential cultural and instructional competencies leaders require to advocate and advance the equitable education of ELL students in schools (Clayton & Goodwin, 2015). Advocacy for this study was defined based on

Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis' (2016) culturally responsive leadership that moves beyond awareness of a need into actionable steps which will address new or historical underachievement for a particular demographic of students. For this study, that demographic was ELL students.

The participants in this study are aspiring principals, or principal interns (PI) in a highly selective 15-month job-embedded residency program with a strong concentration on the leadership knowledge and practice applied in real time to lead marginalized school populations through equitable and socially just instructional leadership. The PIs in residence engaged in strategic leadership constructing actionable equity audits for ELL students in public schools they served through: (1) framing equity to drive equitable instruction for ELL students and uncover inequities around their instruction, inclusion, and social emotional well-being; (2) an inclusive systemic framework where curriculum, student engagement with educators, and engaging faculty and staff to address the learning needs of students with language needs; and (3) prepared interventions and action plans to improve the educational outcomes and access of ELL students.

The study exposed the continued day to day challenges school leaders face implementing social justice, inclusion, and equitable cultural competencies. Over the 15 months, the aspiring principals engaged in best practices, and gained firsthand a deep awareness of the complex challenges leaders who have ELL students in their schools face leading instruction and advocating for marginalized populations (Brooks, *et al.,* 2010).

School principals are expected to have the depth of knowledge and skills to lead multiple diverse populations in schools, including students with language needs. However, few leaders have knowledge for the curricular and pedagogical needs of ELL students. To address the gap in the field, university personnel involved in this study provided PIs in residence opportunities for growth and skill development in their preparation program by requiring prepared interventions and action plans to improve the educational outcomes of identified ELL students in their schools. The growth opportunities began with an interview of the campus principal, who would be leading the education for ELL students. Second, an interview with district level leadership and personnel who oversaw Bilingual or ESL Education in their specific departments. It is important to note that different districts house Bilingual/ESL in different departments. It is also important to note that the university team had two experts in Bilingual/ESL who oversaw the PI interventions.

The following two research questions guided this study: RQ1: In what ways can aspiring principals in a residence program lead instruction for Bilingual and/or ESL education students in public schools? RQ2: In what ways can principal preparation programs prepare school leaders to be equitable and socially just education leaders?

Language Policy in Schools

According to the Batalova & McHugh (2010b), 25% of children in the United States are the children of immigrants and 10.5% are English Learners (ELs). This statistic increased by 53.2% from 1997-2008. Additionally, over 150 languages are spoken by students in the United States and while Spanish is the most widely spoken in the United States by ELs, there are seven states where the top language spoken by emergent bilinguals is a language other than Spanish (Batalova & McHugh, 2010a). Today's educators must find new solutions to support the linguistically and culturally diverse students in their schools (Heineke, 2014; Stewart, 2012).

Leadership for EL

Despite the work of many well-intentioned educators, ELs remain a marginalized student population (Cummins, 2001; Olsen, 2009). The language used in policies related to ELs highlights the lack of understanding among policy-makers about who ELs are, as well as a misunderstanding of the potential that lies within their multilingualism (Ascenzi-Moreno, Hesson, & Menken, 2016). These policies often define students by language alone, with little consideration given to culture or

educational background (García & Kleifgen, 2010). But students do not arrive to us as empty vessels who we simply must pour English into to make them successful. Students arrive at school with rich linguistic repertories, cultural knowledge, and educational experiences. The complex needs of ELs often overwhelm educators and educational leaders who lack the support needed to meet the needs of this population (Boyd, 2013; Freire & Valdez, 2017).

The history of immigrant education in the United States was shaped primarily through the civil rights legislation in the 1970s and 1980s (Diem & Frankenburg, 2013; Olsen, 2009). According to Olsen (2009), the objectives of this movement focused on assimilation and Americanizing immigrants, providing equitable opportunities, and providing instruction that targeted English proficiency with little place for home languages or cultures.

The majority of policies developed regarding second-language literacy in Texas and the United States have focused on the responsibility of schools to provide support and educational access for students who are not fluent in English. State bills do differentiate between bilingual education and instruction for ESL with different goals for each. Texas' legislation for bilingual education focuses primarily on providing initial literacy instruction in the native language as an avenue for developing proficiency in English, while the legislation for ESL education focuses on the use of linguistic supports to develop conceptual knowledge while students are simultaneously developing proficiency in English (TABE, 2006).

Though these policies were developed by well-intentioned parties, the majority of these policies were framed by policy-makers who see non-fluent English speakers as being at a deficit. As Cummins (2001) explained:

> When we choose to frame the discourse about underachievement primarily in terms of children's deficits in some area of psychological or linguistic functioning, we expel culture, language, identity, intellect, and imagination from our image of the child, and we eliminate these constructs from our image of the effective teacher of these children, and from policies that might guide instruction. (p. 654).

When policies are designed with deficits in mind, practitioners become obligated to implement instruction that was designed for languages, rather than for students (García, 2017). If the goal is to provide equitable educational access, then educational leaders and policy-makers must acknowledge and respond to the intersectionality of race, class, culture, gender, experiences, and languages that influence language learning (Babino & Stewart, 2018; Murkami, Hernandez, Valle, & Almager, 2018).

These political philosophies are in direct contrast to the current research in the field of second language acquisition and can be a major determining factor between the failure of success of schools (Bustamante, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). Garcia & Wei (2014) acknowledged the changing language practices that are required to become part of today's workforce, "Today … language practices neither correspond to official national borders nor respond to a single center of power or express a unitary identity," (p. 59). Language practices no longer represent pure usages of any particular language, but mesh together social, cultural, and linguistic practices from a variety of sources to create new and unique linguistic structures that reflect the lived language of people in the 21st Century. Garcia (2014) and Burns (2012) suggested that while educational systems may be adjusting to address other 21st Century skills, educational policy and the educational community have offered little recognition to changes in languaging.

Culturally Responsive Leadership

Culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 1994) has been discussed broadly across the field of education research for the last twenty-five years and terms such as culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995)

and culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) are often used interchangeably. While these terms are similar, they do have slightly different connotations. In this article, we are guided by Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis (2016) who defined culturally responsive pedagogy as "the need for children's educators and educational contexts to understand, respond, incorporate, accommodate, and ultimately celebrate the entirety of the children they serve–including their languages and literacies, spiritual universes, cultures, racial proclivities, behaviors, knowledges, critical thought, and appearances" (p. 1277-1278).

School leaders are responsible for navigating policy, programming, and instructional leadership, among their other duties. Therefore, it is essential that school leaders have a strong understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy so that they can provide structures and supports for school-wide cultural competence (Ascenzi-Moreno, Hesson, & Menken, 2016; Brooks, Adams, & Morita-Mullaney, 2010; Bustamante, Onwegbuzie, & Nelson, 2009). Researchers have found that administrators who fostered collaborative and supportive relationships with campus stakeholders effectively modeled collaborative partnerships, creating an environment in which these relationships spread throughout the school web (Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, & Hodgins, 2007; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Muller, 2001). According to Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis (2016):

> by inviting the community to take part in important educational decisions, school leaders will have made an effort to take care of some of the larger cultural conflicts that are bound to arise between school administrators and the larger community outside school (p. 1291).

Culturally responsive school leaders must establish practices that bring linguistically diverse students out of the shadows and into the forefront of campus culture. These practices include supporting faculty in navigating ideological shifts in language learning (Ascenzi-Moreno, Hesson, & Menken, 2016; Daniel & Pacheco, 2016), providing guidance for culturally responsive best practices (Brooks, Adams, & Morita-Mullaney, 2010), and developing structures for school-wide responsibility for supporting all students (Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). This means that school leaders must abandon past practices such as the "novice-expert" dynamic between principals and ESL teachers (Brooks, Adams, & Morita-Mullaney, 2010), and strive to provide all teachers with the resources and opportunities needed to gain stronger pedagogical understandings of language learning (Cummins, 2005; Cummins, 2007).

Translanguaging in Multilingual Classrooms

Translanguaging is a theory of languaging, as well as a pedagogical approach to language learning. As a theoretical orientation, translanguaging recognizes the dynamic nature of language(s) and the many forms it takes as its users engage in meaning-making for different purposes and across various communities (García & Wei, 2014). This theory does not treat students' languages as separate repertoires to be "brokered" or "code-switched" between, but rather states that everyone has one linguistic repertoire that encompasses many languages and dialects that we move in and out of with fluidity (Anderson, 2017). Translanguaging as a pedagogical approach posits that bi/multilingualism is a gift that often goes unnoticed in schools (García, 2017; MacSwan, 2017). When adopting a translanguaging stance, scholars and educators view classrooms as inherently multilingual and would argue that monolingual classrooms do not exist. Instruction in the translanguaging pedagogy is focused on transforming knowledge (García, Ibarra Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017).

In order to understand how to leverage students' multilingualism and translanguaging abilities, it is important for teachers to first understand why students translanguage. In most documented instances, students translanguage in order to strategically participate in academic settings, but this is occurring without the explicit consent or support of the classroom teacher (Daniel & Pacheco, 2016; Martin-Beltrán, 2018). Translanguaging also occurs in sanctioned educational spaces with the full support and encouragement of the classroom teacher, though it may not be named as such (Kim, 2018; Walker, 2017). In these instances, monolingual teachers held translanguaging stances, though they

may not actually be familiar with the theory or pedagogical approach. Finally, students reported translanguaging as a means of participating in multiple communities (Daniel & Pacheco, 2016; Martin-Beltrán, 2018).

When introducing a translingual approach to a campus, teachers are often required to take up ideological shifts. Ascenzi-Moreno, Hesson, & Menken (2016) stated that the participants in their study came to believe that, "when dynamic bilingualism was at the core of student learning, teachers were empowered to make instructional choices attuned to students' entire kit of literacy skills" (p. 209). Not only does translanguaging provide a new perspective on language, but it also requires that teachers become comfortable with a concept-based approach to instruction, in which students can explore concepts from multiple perspectives and languages (García, Ibarra Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017). One of the many benefits of enacting translanguaging pedagogy is that it creates an academic space in which students at all levels of language proficiency can engage meaningfully in languaging, literacy, and learning (de Costa, Singh, Milu, Wang, Fraiber, & Canagarajah, 2017; Pacheco, Daniel, Pray, & Jiménez, 2019).

Over the past ten years, researchers have begun to explore the pedagogical possibilities made available through a translanguaging stance. Researchers have documented that translanguaging practices can successfully support meaning-making, co-construction of knowledge, biliteracy skills, culturally responsive classroom climates, and positive identities in all content-areas and at all grade-levels (Axelrod & Cole, 2018; Pacheco, 2018; Rowe, 2018; Walker, 2018). Due to past policies and programs that focused on structures such as English-only or bilingual instruction, many teachers felt that their opportunities for multilingual instruction were constrained. All teachers, be they monolingual or multilingual, are capable of adopting a translanguaging stance and enacting translanguaging pedagogy (Canagarajah, 2013; García, 2017). García (2017) said it best, when she asked:

> How can we reclaim a perspective on school language that recognizes the simultaneous subiendo y bajando of the languaging of all? How can a reconceptualization of language, and especially of the narrow definition of academic school language, promote education that would validate and shape the experiences of all students so that they can then retrieve them to construct knowledge for the future? How can schools help students reach into their linguistic past to build a linguistic future as educated human beings? (p. 257).

Methods

Qualitative research methods provide tools for the researcher to study a phenomenon within a situation (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Qualitative research design was further utilized to examine a cohort of aspiring principal PIs in a fifteen-month residence program through a multiple-case study design (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). This multiple case study design allowed faculty and researchers to focus on the phenomenon from multiple perspectives as members in the same job-embedded principal preparation residency program explored the school leadership practices for Bilingual and ESL education in public schools. The multiple case study design provided the researchers a deeper understanding of the experiences gained in advocating and leading instruction and social emotional well-being for ELL students in public schools.

In this qualitative study, the focus was on the documented analysis of principal interviews conducted by residency PIs and their leadership experiences in rural, urban, and suburban schools. Data was collected through course work assignments and analyzed through NVIVO10 searching for common themes among the PI's progress with their assigned ELL students.

The selected PIs were vetted through a school-university and a non-profit organization partnership for high selectivity. Although not part of this study, the PIs in residence also conducted classroom observations, and interviewed teachers, parents and the students in class. Additionally, they also

consulted with counselors and school and district leadership on curriculum, ELL services, and on law and policy to gain knowledge in leading Bilingual/ESL education in public schools. The partnership included five public school districts (four in Texas and one in Louisiana), sixteen campuses including elementary, middle, and high schools, and a diverse population of PIs, representing male, female, White, Black and Latin*x* identities.

The direction to the PIs was to select the most highly at-risk ELL student they could find. We wanted students who had academic issues but may also have attendance and discipline issues. The ELL student demographics were as follows. There were 9 females and 7 males. The girls ranged from 1st grade to 9th grade. The boys ranged from 1st grade to 12th grade.

Fourteen of the students were Hispanic. PIs implemented interventions in Reading, English Language Arts (ELA) and English I. Data was collected during 3 quarters, Q1, Q2 and Q3 of the 2018-2019 academic year. Also, the data was from a span between six to nine weeks.

Results and Discussion

The qualitative research study findings first pointed to the perceptions and gained knowledge of PIs in residence as they examined the realities of leading Bilingual/ESL Education in public schools. All students were able to select an identified highly at-risk student on their campuses with the assistance of either the principal mentor, assistant principal, instructional coach or department head. To advocate for a student on the campus identified in an area that is outside of your purview forces the PIs to look to their stakeholders for creating ELL goals and to monitor the progress for their selected students. It was evident that some PIs received contradictory information when trying to collaborate with stakeholders regarding instructional expectations, identifying procedures, and district policies.

Second, the findings provided a model environment for learning and educator support and exposed outdated practices, lack of knowledge and complex challenges for families and educators involved in leading Bilingual/ESL Education. As the PIs began to ask questions of campus administrators and teachers who served ELL education students, they reported unclear expectations from principals to teachers and from teachers to students and parents.

For example, some principals, especially at the secondary level, relied on either assistant principals, department heads, or the one ESL teacher to lead the annual language proficiency assessment committees or LPAC meetings where decisions for student instructional services and placements were made (TEAa, n.d.). Therefore, the principal providing mentorship to the PI could not speak to what occurred in these meetings and in some cases, almost insinuated that ELL knowledge was not necessary to leading schools. Someone with more information was always available.

It was through the collaboration with faculty members who brought Bilingual/ESL Education expertise for instruction and advocacy that allowed the PIs to learn and understand that academic success should be expected for all students including those who have language needs. Providing knowledge of law and policy based on the legal expectation for ELL students allowed the PIs to assess if their schools and districts were in compliance and most importantly, were they meeting the academic needs of their ELL students.

Third, the study found support for the first finding, aspiring administrators have limited knowledge of Bilingual/ESL Education regarding instruction, policy, and student progress monitoring of content mastery. As stated earlier, campus administrators were almost encouraged to leave the overseeing of ELL students' needs to those with more knowledge of Bilingual and/or ESL. Therefore, principals were not well versed on the needs necessary to improve student outcomes for ELL students. They also could not guide the PIs on best pedagogical practices that should be observed within those classrooms. Additionally, directors over Bilingual/ESL Education oftentimes delegated a new duty, and had limited knowledge that was specific to ELL students.

To demonstrate to the PIs concerning how dysfunctional systems create obstacles for student learning, the faculty coaches were explicit to caution them about moving outside the expected norms of their districts. In some cases, the norms were in direct conflict with policy but their job was not to take on that fight, it was to work within the confines of their districts to support the learning of all students and in this particular situation, the learning of ELL students.

Fourth, the finding in this study demonstrated the need for focused Bilingual and ESL Education experiential learning opportunities provided in the residency programs as valuable and needed for public school administrators to lead education for ELL students in public schools. The PIs learned how to best support ELL students by staying within the guidelines of statutory and administrative law via the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, the Texas Educators Code (TEC) chapter 29, and the Texas Administrative Codes (TAC) chapters 89 and 74 (TEAb, n.d.). They learned district norms and expectations and how to include parents in their children's advocacy. Each school and district were contextual and through the faculty coach, PIs were able to talk through their frustrations concerning what they were experiencing because the students touched their hearts and therefore it became personal.

Overall data findings suggest that through advocacy the PIs were able to address curricular and pedagogical issues that were impeding the learning of their assigned students and others receiving similar instructional services within the same classrooms. Through faculty coaches, professional development training, and district personnel, best practices for ELL students were learned and implemented depending on context and district norms. Of the sixteen students, 13 had academic gains in the targeted content area while three regressed. In one case, the PI had a background in Bilingual/ESL and was able to provide professional development for all teachers on her assigned campus. In another example, the PIs from that district took the issues to the district level and they received professional development. This move informed the district of the need for leaders to have knowledge on how to address the academic gaps of ELL students.

Conclusions

This study's findings first pointed to the perceptions and gained knowledge of PIs in residence as they examined the realities of leading Bilingual/ESL Education in public schools. Second, the need to provide a model environment for learning and educator support and exposed outdated practices, lack of knowledge and complex challenges for families and educators involved in leading Bilingual/ESL Education. Third, aspiring administrators have limited knowledge of ELL student needs including progress monitoring of the student's content mastery. Fourth, this study demonstrated the need for focused Bilingual/ESL Education experiential learning opportunities provided in the residency programs as valuable and needed for public school administrators to lead ELL students' education in public schools.

The findings in this study provide principal preparation programs a continued guide on how to frame leadership through inclusion and social justice, the questions to ask, and provide faculty of educational leadership programs and current school leaders examples of how to prepare aspiring school leaders to engage with public schools to improve leadership for marginalized students. Residency experiences for PIs are crucial for preparing leaders to address real world experiences as they challenge contextual norms. As this study found, principal mentors and central office personnel sometimes had limited knowledge. Therefore, context is important as students learn best practices that may contradict district norms and expectations.

The current paradigm of school leadership within preparation programs is built upon traditional conceptions but true social justice educational leadership involves dismantling traditional structures of educational leadership and re-envisioning the "how" and "who" of leadership preparation (Bertrand, & Rodela, 2018). Is there adequate research on how to adequately prepare Bilingual/ESL Education leaders who should have a deep understanding that policy and practice in schools are not

always aligned. Therefore, to truly prepare aspiring leaders to address the needs of our most marginalized students, principal preparation programs must bring theory and practice together through residency experiences where they can acquire strategies to transform current challenges in schools.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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