LSS Spotlight on Student Success

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Effective Professional Development Programs for Teachers of English Language Learners

by

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One of our greatest educational challenges continues to be improving the education of English language learners (ELLs). Presently, about 56% of U.S. public school teachers have at least one ELL student in their class, but less than 20% of the teachers who serve ELLs are certified English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual teachers (Alexander et al., 1999). Furthermore, the National Center for Education Statistics (Lewis et al., 1999) found that most teachers of ELLs did not feel that they were prepared to meet the needs of their students. In another national survey, 57% of teachers responded that they either "very much needed" or "somewhat needed" more information on helping students with limited English proficiency (Alexander et al., 1999).

Tedick and Walker (1994) suggested that preservice teacher education is largely to blame for this condition. In their view, teacher education has overlooked the importance of validating home culture and students' first language. This oversight encourages beginning teachers to view language as an object rather than as a complex process; they focus myopically on effective methods rather than considering overarching language development (Bartolome, 1994). In recent years, teacher education has responded to these charges, creating courses and programs that promote a more organic and process-oriented view of language learning (Hedgcock, 2002). However, preservice teacher education, often hindered by state-mandated abbreviated programs, routinely falls back to a methods-only approach.

The wide knowledge base needed to teach ELLs (see Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Fradd & Lee, 1998; Hymes, 1974) suggests that preservice teacher education cannot be expected to "take care of" the needs of ELLs. Clearly, school systems must augment teachers' knowledge of ELL instruction through extensive professional development opportunities that span many years. Teachers of ELLs must have a strong understanding of language acquisition and of the concept of communicative competence and know how language function forms the basis for ELL instruction. They must be content area experts as well as language teachers, able to restate questions, paraphrase concepts, and summarize key ideas in English. As teachers of immigrant students, they must understand the processes of cultural growth and adaptation. Teachers of ELLs must also be experts in the development of curriculum, the proper use of a range of assessment strategies, and technology. Finally, they must have a keen knowledge of classroom, school, and community contexts, and be willing to act as advocates for ELLs.

Because many new teachers are underprepared and many veteran teachers wholly unprepared for teaching ELLs, school districts nationwide have initiated professional development programs for inservice teachers. In this article, we describe briefly four programs showing particular promise and make recommendations for school systems seeking to enhance teachers' knowledge of English language teaching.

Professional Development Programs

Although ample research indicates that the most effective professional growth opportunities (a) have topics that emerge from teacher interests, (b) require long-term commitments from all parties, and (c) engage in clear measurement and evaluation of goals and teaching targets (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998), few studies directly focus on the effectiveness of professional development programs for teachers of ELLs or English language development (ELD) teachers. However, four professional development program models have been widely cited and described as exemplary programs that improve ELD teacher quality (e.g., Leighton, et al., 1995).

The first program is at Balderas Elementary School in Fresno, California. Faced with an increasing ELL population, this school collaborated with the faculty of a local university. Balderas teachers were offered the opportunity to take graduate classes paid for with categorical funds and designed to support graduate-level coursework related to school programs. The goal of the coursework, which was tailored to Balderas and its students, included designing a custom language program for students and learning how to teach ELD. Specifically, the teachers

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investigated hands-on science instruction, emphasizing growth in teachers' content knowledge and skill in using content-based ELD methods. As a result of this program, for example, two kindergarten teachers reorganized their story hour classes into native-language groups.

The second program, the Funds of Knowledge for Teaching (FKT), assists teachers in creating academic materials, strategies, and activities that substantially build on what students know and can do outside of school. FKT creates opportunities for teachers to (a) learn the methods of ethnography and use their knowledge in home visits, (b) analyze the content and methods of typical school lessons, (c) engage in collaborative study, and (d) create instructional units that use the content and methods of home learning to inform the content and methods of school learning. Participating teachers use the contexts, skills, and information familiar to students in the development of their lessons.

The third program, at Starlight Elementary School in Watsonville, California, serves a largely Latino population whose families often depend on agricultural work. As a demonstration site for the Center for Research on Excellence and Diversity in Education (CREDE), the school has the opportunity to engage in many professional growth activities. In particular, the upper grade teachers have developed several comprehensive literacy/social studies units designed to improve student reading and writing skills while utilizing student knowledge in a critical literacy framework. The focus in this school is on the pragmatic aspects of ELD as well as making certain that academic content is linked to students' lived experiences.

Pradl (2002) describes the pedagogical growth among ELD teachers participating in the Puente Project, a school-wide initiative designed to increase the number of Latino youth who attend college. Beginning with a commitment to strengthen professional development and encourage reflective practice, Puente teachers learned how to make the writing process and portfolios work in their classrooms, largely by integrating Latino literature with texts from the traditional literary canon. Teachers reported that their professional growth created a balance between literature and writing. They grew more capable of creating conditions for authentic dialogue among students, which, in turn, encouraged high-quality written work from the students.

Policy Implications

These four exemplary professional development programs for teachers of ELLs suggest that professional development for ELD teachers must be comprehensive and systematic at all levels. Further, they have served to inspire more recent reforms in the professional development of ELD teachers. Most notably, Gonzalez and Moll (2002) have demonstrated that engagement with FKT provides ELD teachers with a meaningful and powerful tool to connect students to the curriculum and also to English learning. Hart and Okhee (2003) recently reported on a successful professional development program that relies upon features of each program described above to enhance ELLs' science learning. As further evidence of the power of these models, Starlight Elementary School was honored by the U.S. Department of Education with a Program for Professional Development Award in 2001, one of only five handed out that year.

The professional development programs we have summarized provide meaningful learning experiences for the teachers involved, but programs building on these successes must pay close attention to the research documenting effective teaching methods and programs (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Roessingh, 2004).

The task of preparing all teachers for the increasing number of ELLs will require a renewed effort by both preservice teacher education and school systems. The underachievement of ELLs cannot be tolerated in a nation that prides itself on the successful integration of its immigrants.

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