Rural English Learner Education: A Review of Research and Call for a National Agenda

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The number of rural English learner (EL) students and families has increased over the past decade, due in part to U.S. immigration and economic policies. Educators in rural schools face challenges associated with EL education, including obtaining resources for language teaching and learning, identifying and retaining specialized teachers, and accessing professional development to support teachers and educational leaders in EL student learning. Other challenges include communicating with non-English-speaking families to support learning. The author reviews research on the intersecting areas of rural education and EL education. The subfield of rural EL education has been underexamined across the research community, and nationally there is need to examine the backgrounds, languages, and learning needs of this group of students. The author highlights five pressing areas: knowledge of the characteristics and demographics of EL students and families across rural designations; language education approaches, models, and practices for EL students; hiring and retaining teachers of ELs in rural settings; and professional development for mainstream teachers and leaders of rural EL students. This review calls for an organized national research agenda that begins to unravel rural EL education and that offers a coherent direction for scholars, teacher-educators, and policymakers.

Keywords: bilingual/bicultural; descriptive analysis; diversity; immigration/immigrants; language comprehension/development; policy analysis; rural education; teacher education/development

In their introduction to the ninth edition of *Why Rural Matters*, Showalter, Hartman, Johnson, and Klein (2019) argued that despite national attention placed on rural America during the 2016 presidential election, with corresponding promises to improve life in rural communities, children and families living in the rural United States continue to face the same challenges as before the election: limited access to health care, technology, employment, and high-quality education. The issues affecting rural communities are not insignificant: about 9.3 million students attend rural schools in the United States (Showalter et al., 2019). Currently, about one in four schoolchildren attends a rural school, one in three schools is rural, and more than half of all districts across the United States are considered rural (Institute of Education Sciences, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014a, 2014b).

Federal policies on immigration, public health, and economics affect the resource base and context of rural schools and communities. Massey (2020) noted that U.S. foreign policies under the Bush and Trump administrations have had a rippling effect on immigrants from the Central American "frontline nations" of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua (Massey, 2020, p. 23). U.S. border enforcement policies have made it increasingly difficult for undocumented immigrants from those nations to leave the United States, resulting in a net increase in the number of undocumented immigrants (Massey, Durand, & Pren, 2015). The immigration of adults and children from Latin America has provided an economic and demographic lifeline to rural communities, countering long-term trends of out-migration and overall population decrease (Lichter, Parisi, & Taquino, 2016).

Changing demographics have generated new challenges for both immigrant families and rural communities. For immigrant families residing in rural settings, fear of deportation and family

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separation is especially acute (Coady, Heffington, & Marichal, 2017). Showalter et al. (2019) noted that rural immigrant families face extensive anxiety surrounding immigration policies and family separation, and families subsequently make purposeful decisions to limit their access to health care and educational services. In one example, Miraftab and Mcconnell (2008) found that small communities were not equipped to address the social changes resulting from rapid growth in the food processing industry. McHenry-Sorber and Provinzano (2017) reported the social challenges in one rural community resulting from expansion of the hydraulic fracturing industry. In the local schools, rural educational leaders managed these social changes through a "discourse of compliance" rather than through a lens of critical place-conscious leadership (p. 613).

One aspect of the social and emotional well-being of children and families is access to high-quality education and English language learning services. Although nationally there are approximately 5 million English learner (EL) students in K–12 public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), federal education data make it difficult to pinpoint the actual number of EL students enrolled in public school. For instance, data from 2012 indicate that more than 14% of ELs were identified as attending rural schools, or well over 700,000 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), but data from 2016 show that a lower percentage (3.8) of ELs attend rural schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016a). Recent data indicate that about 600,000 ELs attend rural schools (Hussar et al., 2020). Kandel, Henderson, Koball, and Capps (2011) found that new rural destinations are especially underprepared to provide educational supports and English learning services to immigrants. Rural settings pose additional and specific challenges for students, teachers, and educational leaders. Some of the challenges rural schools face include students experiencing poverty (O'Hare, 2009), limited educational funding derived from a low property tax base, teacher and educational leader professional development (PD), and specialized teachers for EL students (National Rural Education Association, 2016).

This article underscores the urgent need for research on educational policies and practices for rural EL students and families. I argue that the intersectionality of rurality and EL education has not emerged as a subfield of education research in ways that could inform current policies and practices to improve education for and the social and emotional well-being of rural EL students and families. Moreover, in the more recent social context of a global pandemic, serious concerns surrounding the education of rural EL students and communication with non-English-speaking parents and caregivers have emerged (Breiseth, 2020; Rani, 2020) and connectivity and across rural communities to support education (Herold, 2020; Pratt, 2020).

Although scholars in the field of EL education in general have an emerging research base on what constitutes high-quality education for ELs (Coady et al., 2020), including how to prepare teachers for linguistic diversity (Coady, Harper, & de Jong, 2016; Lucas, 2010; Nugent, Kunz, Sheridan, Glover, & Knoch, 2017), we know little about place-based, rural EL education as a subfield. In this work I examine the state of rural EL education and related research and call for a coherent national research agenda that identifies, examines, and advances rural EL education in the United States.

Rural ELs

Like the category "English learner," rural settings are not a single monolith, despite federal definitions that differentiate categories of rurality. The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) and the U.S. Census Bureau set guideline definitions for rural settings as follows: *fringe* is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, *distant* is more than 5 miles but less than 25 miles from an urbanized area, and *remote* is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area. Although these guidelines aim to enable comparisons across geographic spaces, they also pose problems for educators and researchers. For instance, within a single school district, all three designations can coexist based on a school's proximity to an urbanized center. One example is Florida, which has 67 geographically large school districts (plus seven additional schools that operate as independent "districts") and covers a land mass of about 66,000 square miles. Districts such as Collier County contain both urban and rural schools. This contrasts sharply to districts in states such as Oklahoma, which has more than 500 independent school districts and an approximate land mass of 70,000 square miles (Job, Dickey, Kirk, McCrackin, & Morris, 2017). Thus, the categories and subcategories of rurality, when used to describe school districts, reveal nuanced yet important variations across the United States. Also problematic is that the definitions of rurality frequently perpetuate a false urban–rural binary in education overall and in teacher and educator education in particular (Eppley, 2015; John & Ford, 2017).

Below I describe two primary challenges of rural EL education as a subfield of rural education and EL education: identifying and defining the subgroup of rural EL students and the need for place-based education research to improve rural EL education.

Challenge 1: Identifying and Defining the Subgroup

The first significant problem facing researchers investigating rural EL students is the challenge of identifying and defining the subgroup. As a research community, we have a robust knowledge base of rural education (Nugent et al., 2017), and significant scholarship is advanced in journals such as the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* and represented in the American Educational Research Association Rural Education Special Interest Group. We also have a strong knowledge base of EL and second language education (Coady, Hamann, Harrington, Pacheco, Pho, & Yedlin, 2007; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010; Wright, 2019), particularly work that addresses equity in identification and placement for ELs (Robinson-Cimpian, Thompson, & Umansky, 2016; Thompson, 2017). However, we have little knowledge of these two fields combined. The National Rural Education Association's (2016) research agenda for 2016 to 2021 outlines 10 research priorities. At least six of those priorities relate to rural EL students: (a) closing the achievement gaps in rural schools, (b) data-driven decision making to improve

student learning, (c) rural school and community and family relations, (d) teacher and leader recruitment and retention, (e) building capacity to meet the needs of diverse students, and (f) teacher and leader preparation. Notably, these issues are not uniquely rural, although there are significant implications of these priorities for rural communities. In addition, although capacity building to meet the needs of diverse students addresses diverse learners broadly speaking, we have virtually no knowledge of the backgrounds and abilities of students who are ELs and who attend rural schools.

One reason for the dearth of research may be the relatively small yet uneven distribution of EL students across rural settings. Small numbers of ELs make local responses to ELs' learning needs, such as bilingual education programs in which students' home languages and English are used as mediums of instruction for learning, difficult to implement. Obtaining accurate data on rural EL achievement remains similarly problematic. In Florida, for example, data from the state database offer the ability for scholars to examine EL achievement by school district or school but not by geographic designation. Moreover, policymakers from the Rural Education Research Alliance have noted that because rural districts in some states enroll fewer ELs than urban districts, "examining achievement gaps . . . requires careful consideration because of the demographic features and unique challenges of rural districts" (Culbertson & Billig, 2016, p. 2). As a result of the inability to consistently identify EL students, and capture their achievement and language learning, the subgroup of rural EL students appears overlooked.

In addition, although the federal categories of rurality are seemingly clear (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006), with the challenges noted earlier, the number of ELs is decontextualized from actual dynamic, migratory trends such as the relatively recent emergence of immigrant EL students in rural new destination settings. In 2011, Terrazas identified 14 states in the south and central U.S. regions as "new destinations" of immigrants. Hopkins, Lowenhaupt, and Sweet (2016) referred to this trend as "new immigrant destinations" (p. 408). Although more than a dozen years have passed since this terminology was first proposed in the literature, we know little about the students who are there and whether those settings continue to be new destinations for immigrant EL students and their families. Infrastructure, resources (funding, time, personnel with knowledge of students' languages), and educator preparation remain lacking in new rural destinations, and those educators are largely un- or underprepared for EL students (Lee & Hawkins, 2015).

Other data are alarmingly elusive. We have insufficient knowledge of rural EL students' first languages, their race and ethnicity, migration patterns and trends, the preparation of teachers and leaders for EL students, and the impact of teacher education on rural EL student learning. Local experiences indicate that many of the new Latinx[1] immigrant children who arrive in our rural communities speak indigenous languages from Central America, not Spanish, as educators assume. Local communities continue to experience increases in linguistic and racial diversity. For example, in *Status of Education in Rural America*, for instance, Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, and Xie (2007) noted that across all three rural designations, about 78% of students were identified as White, 10.2% as Black, 8.1% as Hispanic, and 1.5% as Asian or Pacific Islander. A decade later, data indicated that about 72% of rural students were White, 9.4% were Black, 12.7% were Hispanic, and 1.6% were Asian or Pacific Islander (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016b). Yet although these data exist on the racial characteristics of rural students, there are no accessible data sets that intersect the data with rurality, first language, and EL status.

Confounding the national research base on rural EL students is how different states across the United States identify, serve, and reclassify ELs on the basis of state-determined benchmarks of English language proficiency and content area learning (Wixom, 2014). Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, and Christian (2005) noted that EL identification guidelines vary from state to state. For example, a student identified as an EL in Florida may not be identified as an EL in Idaho, because the two states identify and "exit" EL students using different language proficiency benchmarks. Differentiated instructional practices and supports for ELs must be tailored to meet students' characteristics and learning needs, and those differ for immigrant, native-born, and indigenous populations, as well as students' first languages and literacy levels. Thus, identifying "ELs" as one homogeneous subgroup in the context of "rural" education is extremely problematic for researchers and practitioners.

Finally, confounding the definitions ascribed to rural EL students, research has not always kept pace with the shifting frameworks of English language teaching and learning and federal guidelines on EL parent engagement (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). For example, one framework currently used is WIDA[2] (Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, 2020), which sets reading and writing benchmarks and assessments for English as a second language (ESL) across 35 states. Educators acknowledge that multiple contextual factors at the individual, classroom, school, district, and community levels affect teaching and learning for EL students and how to engage multilingual families. It is possible that more research on rural EL education has been conducted but not published or publicly available due to economies of knowledge production. Thus, although scholars lament the dearth of research on rural ELs (Beesley & Sheridan, 2017; Coladarci, 2007), political economies of knowledge production subjugate rural scholarship to the peripheries of education research (Schafft, 2016).

Challenge 2: Research on Improving Education for Rural ELs

Although one third of all public schools are located in rural settings (Ayers, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014b), a disproportionate amount of research and literature on education in the United States focuses on urban or suburban schools (Williams & Grooms, 2016). The gap in education research on rural education is even more profound when considering research on EL students. In 2005, Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean could find no studies on rural EL teaching and learning. In 2019, Coady, Lopez, Marichal, and Heffington conducted a search of the literature across multiple academic

databases using the keywords *English language learners, English learners, ESOL/ESL*, and *rural*. Using the inclusion criterion of studies related to teaching and learning for ELs, they identified only nine relevant articles addressing the basic question of how education can be improved for rural EL students. Of the nine studies included in the review, six examined teacher education and practices to support EL students, and three addressed either EL students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds or policy and contextual factors that affected EL student learning.

The limited research on rural EL teacher education and practices illustrates the national need for place-based teacher education and for clearer guidance on the relationship between teacher education and rural EL student learning. For example, Hansen-Thomas, Grosso Richins, Kakkar, and Okeyo (2016) used qualitative data collection methods to examine the beliefs and experiences of rural teachers of ELs in Texas. They found that although 85% had prior ESL training, teachers felt underprepared for ELs. Among mathematics and science teachers, Hansen-Thomas and Grosso Richins (2015) found that mentoring and sustained collaboration benefited small rural schools and maximized human resources. Ringler, O'Neal, Rawis, and Cumiskey (2013) examined the use of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model—a framework for guiding instruction for ELs in mainstream classrooms—in rural schools. They found that support of the school principal was essential to implementing the SIOP PD. Earlier work by the authors (O'Neal, Ringler, & Lys, 2009) described teacher PD on the SIOP model and establishing university–district partnerships. Fogle and Moser (2017) examined rural language teacher identity. The authors found differences between foreign and second language teachers' perceptions of themselves as teachers of rural EL students. In a small study of teachers in North Carolina, Manner and Rodríguez (2012) found that an online PD delivery was a viable model for teachers of ELs, on the basis of teachers' perceptions of the delivery. Where the technology works, online PD has the potential to reach rural educators and to build capacity in teacher and leader education, but its potential effect on student learning remains unclear.

Aiming to capture the complexity of rurality some scholars have examined rural EL student learning from an ecological systems perspective. Good, Masewicz, and Vogel (2010) used an ecological theoretical framework to understand the barriers to improving Latinx EL student achievement. They found that cultural clashes and communication gaps impeded the work of teachers in a rural mountain community. Paciotto and Delany-Barmann (2011) examined the challenges associated with implementing a bilingual education program in rural Illinois by adapting human resources to the changing demographic context. The findings showed that teachers felt only heightened social inequities. Finally, Lee and Hawkins (2015) studied the context of reception of new immigrant EL students. They found that five rural school districts were underresourced, isolated, and challenged to recruit and retain EL specialist teachers.

Although these selected studies represent an array of challenges for rural education to improve EL learning, they illuminate the need to unravel what scholars summarize as "complicated challenges" (Lee & Hawkins, 2015, p. 57) and to purposefully build a coherent research agenda across complex rural settings. Effective teaching for EL student learning, including differentiating instruction and assessment on the basis of students' English language proficiency levels; connecting students' cultural knowledge and background to curriculum and teaching; and using students' first language(s) as resources for learning English are essential foundational steps toward supporting EL student learning. The field of EL education could inform more targeted and refined practices for rural EL students. In sum, although the subfield of rural EL education has surface-level demographic data on rural EL students and emerging data from research on rural teacher education, there remain many unknowns related to rural EL education overall and very little on how to improve education for rural ELs in the United States.

Areas of Need for a Focused Research Agenda

On the basis of the research just described, there are at least five pressing needs for researchers and educators of rural EL students. These include (a) knowledge of the characteristics and demographics of ELs across rural designations; (b) language education approaches, models, and practices that best support rural EL student learning; and (c) accessible, practical, and local resources to support rural ELs' learning. Two additional needs that persist across rural settings in general but remain urgent for rural ELs include (d) hiring and retaining specialist teachers for ELs in rural settings and (e) place-based PD for teachers and educational leaders of rural EL students.

Characteristics and Demographics of Rural ELs

As noted, little is known about the characteristics and demographics of EL students in rural locales and less across rural designations. In 2007, when the new classification system was created to make sense of rurality across various national data sets, EL students were noted as a single category, but no subclassifications of those students were available. Data aggregated from 2003–2004 indicated that 2% of rural students were ELs (then classified as limited English proficient) and had limited ability to "read, speak, write, or understand English" (Provasnik et al., 2007, p. 32). Today, the percentage of rural EL students as a percentage of all students in the United States has nearly doubled.

In the current educational context, school districts must demonstrate that ELs are making steady learning gains toward English language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) in addition to gains on state standardized tests at similar levels to those of native English speaking students. Although the WIDA framework and assessment system has enabled educators to make comparisons across states and school districts, because students take a similar ACCESS 2.0 English language proficiency test, state exiting benchmarks are dissimilar across the country. Each state independently determines the benchmark proficiency scores of ELs in the four language domains. Scholars of rural EL education need more nuanced data on how EL students perform in English across the three rural subcategories, as well as across geographic designations. Multidisciplinary collaborations between educators and scholars from the fields of demography,

geography, rural sociology, and economics can contribute to a more comprehensive analysis of rural EL education, with grounded scholarship that examines how rural communities and institutions shape local education for ELs.

We know that EL students' English language proficiency is improved when students are provided support and ongoing development in the first language (Cummins, 1979). A second problem, then, is where, when, and under what conditions educators can support first language literacy development for rural EL students. Language proficiency data in English and in the first language should inform the instructional, programmatic, and placement decisions of ELs. Unfortunately, many rural teachers and educational leaders lack preparation to understand this association and to use the data—if they have access to it—to make informed, data-driven decisions for ELs' learning (Coady, Harper, & de Jong, 2011). Data that all teachers and educational leaders should have access to include the native languages of EL students, first language literacy levels of ELs, native language assessments to determine what students already know across content areas, and how to use the data in instructional decision making. If rural educators do not have access to this information, they are less likely to effectively meet the learning needs of rural EL students.

Programmatic Language Education Approaches, Models, and Practices

Today educators have access to unprecedented amounts of information regarding student learning and the role of first language on second (English) language development. However, rural educators of ELs are less likely to use students' first languages for language and literacy development (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016b). Decades of research conducted by scholars of bilingual and second education continue to demonstrate how ongoing language and literacy development in students' home language is more effective than more in English only (MacSwan, Thompson, Rolstad, McAlister, & Lobo, 2017; McField & McField, 2013), yet first language literacy development is more likely to be provided outside of rural communities. Data from 2015 and 2016 indicate that rural high schools offered the smallest number of first language instructional programs to support EL students. National Teacher and Principal Survey (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) data indicated that only 62.7% of ELs in rural settings participated in instruction specifically designed to address EL learning needs. For example, Lewis and Gray (2016) found that only 5% of rural U.S. high schools offered bilingual instruction for EL students, compared with 14% in cities, the geospatial designation used in the survey. In addition, only 50% of rural schools offered ESL instruction as a scheduled class, compared with 89% of city schools. Twenty-six percent of rural high schools had bilingual paraprofessionals who spoke the students' language, compared with 55% in cities, and only 32% of rural high schools offered sheltered English instruction—a teaching approach that reduces language complexity for ELs—compared with 81% in cities. The field of EL education has moved into new and promising instructional approaches such as translanguaging (García, Ibarra Johnson, & Selzer, 2016), but we know little of how those approaches reach rural classrooms. Examining the conditions under which EL students' first language is used in instruction in rural settings could offer additional insight into the learning of rural ELs.

Resources to Meet EL Learning Needs

One of the most salient characteristics of rural schools is limited access to resources, both human and material, because of economic constraints and geographic distances. Resources for effective EL teaching and learning include curriculum and assessments in students' home languages, culturally responsive materials (Coady et al., 2020), and time for professional learning to use those materials. Tieken (2014) noted that rural schools have not kept pace with the technological and economic advances of urban settings, and the pandemic-driven push to "put learning online" has illuminated those resource disparities (Pratt, 2020). Often at odds with urban interests, rural settings have traditionally been viewed as national "problems" (Tieken, 2014, p. 15), and the standardization of public education has exacerbated this division: "Rural communities must offer the same opportunities and produce the same outcomes as other urban and suburban districts, yet many face high poverty rates and weak tax bases and the challenges of distance and isolation" (p. 21).

Related to the need for educational resources for EL student learning, Lowenhaupt and Reeves (2015) examined how instructional and organizational capacity affected ELs in new destination settings, for instance, when teachers of ELs support other teachers. Their data showed that immigrant students experience different instruction depending on their age of arrival to the United States and if they entered urban, suburban, or rural schools. Uneven access to resources such as prepared teachers and leaders, and first language assessments, in combination with different capacities for instruction and organization can disproportionately affect rural ELs. One area of research might examine the actual variation in resources and school capacity for EL students within rural designations.

Hiring and Retaining ESL Specialist Teachers

Recent reports on rural education have indicated that an immediate need across rural settings is hiring and retaining specialist teachers for EL students. Data from the 2003–2004 survey on rural education (Provasnik et al., 2007) indicate that rural public schools experience intense difficulty hiring and retaining ESL specialists. In 2003 and 2004, 5% of ESL positions remained unfilled, and 37% were considered very difficult to fill. Scholars note similar findings (e.g., Honawar, 2009), and the limited number of ESL specialists appears to negatively affect EL students in states such as Idaho and Virginia, where, unlike Florida, New York, and California, there are no requirements for EL teacher preparation.

Preparation of Teachers and Educational Leaders for Rural ELs

A related area is the preparation of mainstream and content area teachers and leaders for rural EL students. In 2002, Antuñez

found nationally that fewer than 13% of all teachers had preparation to work with EL students, yet scholars of EL teacher education have noted the benefits of preparing high-quality teachers for ELs. Like definitions of ELs, individual states also determine the amount of preservice preparation that teachers of EL students must have, as well as the amount of in-service teacher PD required of teachers to teach ELs. Florida, for example, mandates the preparation of all teachers for ELs depending on the area of instruction and grade level (Coady, Li, & Lopez, 2018). Research conducted on preparing "teacher leaders" in rural Texas holds promise for rural settings that have limited resources to hire and retain ESL specialists (Bustamante, Brown, & Irby, 2010).

Call for a National Research Agenda

Rural EL education research as a subfield of rural education and EL education has been largely overlooked in educational programs, policies, and practices. One possible reason for this may be that scholars do not necessarily identify locale using the designation of "rural" in their research title or keywords. This oversight contributes to the likelihood that some research has been conducted but is not accessible in searches conducted by scholars. How much, however, is unclear. This omission limits our collective knowledge about nuanced yet critical differences in EL education within rural settings and across different geospatial settings. A second reason for the oversight may be that disproportionate funding for research has made its way into urban settings, which are population concentrated. Dewees and Marks (2017) noted the negative implications of this trend and the associated problems that a static definition of rurality has had on American Indian and Alaska Native groups. Research conducted in urban settings has a larger impact on the academic community and on educational funders, thus repeating the cycle of overfunding and overemphasis on urban or suburban schools. Mainstream media and best-selling novels reify stereotypes of people living in rural settings (Theobald & Wood, 2016). Challenging stereotypes could be facilitated by research that challenges negative images and that systematically informs a public narrative through publicly accessible dissemination venues.

Finally, there is a need for scholars to insist on data sets that include geospatial designations as variables in their work and more refined descriptors of rurality, such as district size and proximity to urban areas. Scholars could begin by examining large data sets in conjunction with geospatial information system data that illustrate distance between schools and homes, or using complex research methods that identify social-spatial processes (e.g., Stacciarini, Vacca, & Mao, 2018). A creative combination of research methods can facilitate how we examine the social processes within rural settings and their implications for education.

There remain some unresolved questions that both scholars of rural education and scholars of EL education can grapple with. First, how can these two fields intersect and inform each other in order to harness the strengths of both? Scholars of EL education might broaden their work to examine the role of place in EL education, while scholars of rural education might narrow in on linguistically diverse students and families. Both fields are sophisticated in and of themselves and offer rich insights into the other; learning from each other makes for deeper scholarship with creative implications for teaching and on student learning.

Second, how can scholars in both fields share research opportunities and funding? It might be uncomfortable, for instance, for scholars of EL education to pursue funding opportunities and collaborative research efforts with scholars whose work is framed in rural education, and vice versa. The discomfort exposes our limitations. However, it also holds the possibility of offering new venues for research and breaking down barriers that have separated and limited our ability to leverage each field's expertise. This may be one way to network and pool resources, similar to how rural school districts have in regional collaboratives.

Third, scholars need virtual and physical venues to engage in professional conversations concerning collaborative efforts. Large national conferences such as that of the American Educational Research Association, at which scholars from both fields are present, are an example. Those gatherings, however, are traditionally held in large and costly urban settings. These costs are prohibitive to some scholars, particularly those from less funded rural institutions and junior scholars in the field. There is a need for more accessible nonurban venues for scholars of rural and EL education to come together and learn from each other.

Future Directions

This article offers a starting point and suggestions for future directions for the field of rural EL education. Researchers can work toward cross-state, national collaborations led by scholars of rural EL education who have some experience in the subfield. Scholars should consider collecting both qualitative data that illuminate the educational experiences of ELs in rural schools and quantitative data that show the actual achievement of ELs in rural spaces. Scholars can then purposefully and clearly work toward more refined research questions in order to illuminate the educational experiences of rural EL students and educators, and the social processes that occur in rural settings.

Second, research methodologists who work with big data can advocate for geospatial designations in large data sets. Scholars who work with state-level data can advocate for similar designations in publicly accessible state-level student achievement data.

Third, scholars of EL education can collaborate with geospatial information system experts who can add spatial visualization techniques that illustrate the geography of EL student learning. Many universities offer geomatics and programs in geospatial analysis. Expertise in this area is growing and urgently needed to inform scholars of education in many of our fields.

Clearly, a coherent and focused national research agenda for rural EL education is long overdue in the United States. As a field, education continues to mature and move into new and promising directions, and scholars can neither neglect nor afford to overlook populations that are increasingly influential across the U.S. landscape.

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NOTES

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[1]*Latinx* is a non-gender-specific descriptor used here to refer to people from Latin American or from Latin American backgrounds.

[2]WIDA was formerly known as World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment.

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