

Teacher-Leaders in Low-Incidence ELL Settings: Implications for Pre-Service Leadership Training

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s the number of English language learners (ELLs) has risen in northern New England schools over the last generation, so too has the need for teachers to work with this population. Those ELL teachers who work with English language learners in low-incidence schools are in a unique situation and have unique leadership responsibilities. They fulfill the roles of the resident expert, peer educator, student advocate, family liaison, and community educator.

One of the primary reasons for their multifaceted responsibilities is that upwards of 90 percent of English language teachers in northern New England work on their own, with limited peer support in low-incidence settings (Whiting, 2008). These settings have “pull-out instruc-

tion and/or teachers who are itinerant, conditions that result when there are not enough ELLs at one grade or ability level to sustain a stand-alone classroom or more than one ELL teacher. ELL teachers in these settings often work in more than one school.... These teachers pull ELLs out of mainstream classes, or join their students in those classes, and scaffold mainstream content work one-on-one or in small groups.” (Whiting, 2009)

The position of ELL teachers in a low-incidence school is different from other teachers and different from ELL teachers in high-incidence settings. Low-incidence ELL teachers need to become leaders in two separate, multifaceted ways. First, as peer educators and resources for their colleagues, their school administrators, and their local community, ELL teachers work with multiple mainstream teachers and administrators. Few other first-year teachers take on school-wide and district-wide relationships from the superintendent on down. Second, they lead as advocates and liaisons for their students and sometimes their students’ families, who are, more times than not, marginalized linguistically, culturally, and socioeconomically. Few other subject-area teachers are called upon to advocate for their students.

Rarely do non-ELL teachers have to juggle so many different roles and coordinate with so many different constituents. These are not optional exercises for ELL teachers in low-incidence schools. ELL teachers in low-incidence settings have to take on these roles and maintain these relationships with multiple stakeholders from their first days in the classroom. Janzen (2007) looked at English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) teachers in a variety of grades and found evidence of some of these unique responsibilities. In general, “institutional demands exacerbated the challenge for ESOL faculty.” For example, “school scheduling either made it difficult for group learners by level or gave them no choice about when students came to their classroom” (p. 713). Because of this, English language teacher-training programs should include a vigorous leadership-building component for prospective ELL teachers.

Low-Incidence ELL Teachers as Peer Educators

ELL teachers in low-incidence settings are often required to be school and district leaders. These teachers are typically the only ELL teacher in their school building and often in the district. In a 2008 survey of ELL teachers in Maine, New Hampshire, and

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Vermont (n = 168), 82 percent of respondents reported being the only ELL teacher in their school and 38 percent reported that they were the only ELL teacher in their district (Whiting, 2008). This means, de facto, they are the only ones in their districts with expertise on English language learners and their distinctive educational needs.

Because of the unique nature of their positions, ELL teachers in low-incidence schools are called upon to have voices and roles that are different from any other teacher in their schools. For example, low-incidence ELL teachers are often required to speak about the specific needs of ELLs and to address issues of language acquisition, such as the length of time it takes to acquire academic English and the difference between conversational and academic language. Even if an ELL sounds fluent, he or she could still have significant gaps in his or her academic language proficiency. This disparity in the perceptions of abilities can lead to misunderstandings of the ELLs’ needs. As a result, a principal or classroom teacher might not see the need for continued ELL services for a child. Running counter to the perceptions of those in power can sometimes be met with resistance, which requires confidence and training.

ELL teachers in low-incidence settings can debunk folk beliefs and counter resistance by working to educate other teachers about ELLs, both individually and through whole school in-service workshops. This peer education is intertwined with their role of advocacy.

Low-incidence ELL Teachers as Advocates and Liaisons

These teachers often are called upon to advocate for the child and liaise with the child’s home in ways that mainstream teachers seldom are.

ELL teachers, especially those in low-incidence settings, often deal with colleagues and community members who have little

firsthand experience with non-native speakers of English and with immigrants in general. This means addressing both pedagogical and political issues. These teachers are educating students on the margins, students who are members of linguistic and cultural minorities. ELL teachers are required to advocate for their students' best needs, which may mean anything from arguing for regular services delivered by a trained professional to persuading the school to give the program a dedicated space, but they might have to do this in an environment of resistance and bigotry. In these times of limited budgets and rising anti-immigrant sentiments, the role of the ELL teacher as advocate for the appropriate educational services is a delicate road to walk.

Working with English language learners has a social justice component. ELL teachers play a significant role enfranchising some of the least enfranchised members of the school. Since the education of ELLs, especially in low-incidence settings, often happens in small groups or one-on-one, it can be cost intensive. In an era of shrinking budgets, every dollar spent is under heavy scrutiny. Further, these lean economic times with high unemployment have also seen a rise in xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment. Anti-immigrant legislation passed in Arizona and Georgia specifically targets the education of new arrivals in public schools. Helping to educate English language learners and to enfranchise these students is therefore politicized. Teachers who do this work can expect to have to justify their presence to win over those who see their students and themselves as unnecessary burdens, taking money away from students who have, in their eyes, more legitimate claims to limited educational dollars.

ELL teachers therefore need to be informed, resourceful advocates for themselves and their students. For example, there have been several studies, highlighted in *The New York Times* and elsewhere, that indicate immigrants are a boon for the US economy. Knowing such research helps ELL teachers counter anti-immigrant sentiments.

ELL teachers, in particular those in low-incidence settings, can find themselves acting as a liaison between their students' families and the school system. These teachers work with students whose families are typically geographically isolated from larger immigrant communities and their attendant support networks. These families are often unfamiliar with the US educational system and their role in that system. Significantly, it is not uncommon for these families to be largely unaware of their rights and responsibilities in the US educational context; these families often come from home countries and cultures where teachers and principals are rarely questioned. The low-incidence ELL teacher often takes on the role of liaising between these economically and

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linguistically marginalized families and the school to ensure that their ELL students' needs are best met.

Right Out of the Box

Perhaps what is most unique about ELL teachers in low-incidence settings in terms of their leadership role and requirements is that they are expected to be leaders right out of the box. Immediately upon arrival in schools, they are called upon to be the sole expert, to advocate effectively. The leadership learning curve is steep for these new ELL teachers. Right away they are expected to work with multiple faculty members from a position of knowledge and tact, respectful of others' terrain while also advocating for their ELL students.

Although being knowledgeable and trained in one's field is not unique for any professional, taking on a leadership role, especially in the beginning of their careers, is not usually required of teachers. Typically, teachers are allowed time to build relationships and take on additional responsibilities with other teachers in a more organic way. That is, as they become more senior in their school, leadership roles might come to them.

ELL teachers must also be skilled schedulers and negotiators. Since they typically pull their students out of mainstream classes, they are often called upon to coordinate multiple schedules with mainstream teachers, often in different buildings spread out across a district. This often requires not only superior organization skills but also diplomacy. An ELL teacher must finesse classroom teachers who not only see their schedules as sacrosanct but furthermore see the time the child spends in their classrooms as inviolable and, therefore, they resist the ELL teacher's efforts to pull students out and schedule services. Although at first glance this coordination by ELL teachers in low-incidence settings might seem rather pedestrian, it requires confidence, political skills, and diplomacy nonetheless. 

Appendix A: Role Plays and Scenarios

- A.** When you arrive to pick up José for his scheduled pull-out instruction, the classroom teacher informs you that Jose can't leave because he can't afford to miss this lesson in math today.
1. Each member of the group gives an immediate response to the classroom teacher—one minute. Compare and contrast the responses. Discuss which is most effective and why.
 2. Work together to come up with a longer oral response to be delivered later that day.
- B.** The principal passes you in the hall and tells you that your 5th grader from Nepal, whom he's just seen in the lunchroom line and who's been in the US and this school just under a year, sounds just like all the other kids. He wonders how much longer you'll need to provide services for this student.
1. Everyone in the group provide an immediate response. One minute in length.
 2. Individually write a short e-mail follow-up to the principal that you'll send later that afternoon to recap and reiterate your points from your earlier conversation. Compare your individual e-mail responses. Evaluate in terms of which is the most concise and also effective.
- C.** You meet a school board member in the supermarket. The board member politely informs you that he doesn't see the need for ELL services. They cost too much money and, besides, when his grandfather came to this country, he learned English all by himself.
- Each member of the group has a minute to come up with a brief response. Compare and contrast your responses.
- D.** In a parent-teacher meeting, the mother of one of your students informs you that she doesn't want her child to receive ELL services anymore; she thinks this will label him negatively for the remainder of his school career.
- How would you respond to her concerns at that moment and then over the course of the next few weeks?
- E.** You have a 7th grader and an 8th grader that you deliver services to. During the second week in September, when you ask the 8th grade math teacher about the 8th grade team meeting time, he casually tells you that the team had their first meeting the week before and at that meeting they set their meeting time for the year for 7:30 a.m. You meet your 1st graders in the elementary school across town at 8 a.m.
1. Give an immediate response to the math teacher.
 2. Craft a longer written response to the whole team. Your letter is met with resistance.
 3. Craft a response to the principal.
 4. Compare your e-mails and responses with your partners' and discuss strengths and weaknesses of each.
- F.** Your principal asks you to deliver a 20-minute workshop on working with ELLs to the whole faculty at the next faculty meeting.
1. Discuss with your partners what you would/should include in this presentation.
 2. Work with your partners to prepare a 20-minute workshop for the faculty. Assume that there is a range of knowledge and experience in working with ELLs among the faculty.

General guidelines for role plays and scenarios:

1. Discuss the difference between and benefits/drawbacks of an oral vs. written follow-up. Discuss what makes a response effective or less effective. Discuss the goals of your response.
2. Brainstorm the arguments and positions of your interlocutors.

ELL Teacher-Training Programs: Training for Leadership

ELL teachers are typically trained in pedagogy, language acquisition, classroom management, curriculum, and assessment. Because of the unique leadership roles that ELL teachers in these settings assume immediately upon entering their jobs, pre-service programs that train ELL teachers who will work in low-incidence settings should include a strong component of leadership training. Janzen (2007) concluded that improved teacher training can better prepare ELL teachers for their multiple responsibilities. Consideration of “factors such as the discourse of the school and community, the attitudes of classmates, and the teacher’s training affect ELLs’ success ... [and] could provide ESOL professionals with the ammunition they need to act as advocates for ELLs, who

receive the majority of their schooling from faculty not trained to teach them” (p. 723–724).

This paper supports Janzen’s conclusion and finds it particularly applicable to low-incidence ELL teachers. What follows below are practical suggestions for implementing such changes in teacher training.

Since ELL teachers are expected to be leaders in a way that few other first-year teachers are, programs must train these ELL teachers in interpersonal skills, in advocacy, and in seeing themselves as confident professionals. Pre-service teacher-training programs should include hands-on, practical advice on how to establish and maintain productive relationships with colleagues

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and administrators, how to map multiple zones of power and be mindful of turf, and how to be respectful as a newcomer but also be an informed advocate.

Master of Arts programs should include exercises in promoting confidence free from arrogance, as well as problem-solving and relationship-building techniques. With newly minted teachers, it is important to help them believe in their own knowledge and also appreciate the knowledge and wisdom of others. An ELL teacher-training program can include exercises that promote awareness of negotiation techniques in the context of others' turf and accumulated wisdom. For example, leadership can be promoted by the use of role plays and scenarios on how to coordinate with mainstream teachers, the administration, community members, and school board members. Classes can incorporate specific, practical suggestions for effective relationship building and advocacy. All these will promote effective leadership for pre-service ELL teachers. In a methods class taught at Plymouth State University, where many of the graduates will work in low-incidence settings, students have role-played the following scenarios.

In order to promote professional confidence, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) MA programs should also encourage discussions on the importance of and strategies for seeking out and maintaining professional relationships with both senior colleagues and teachers at one's own career stage. For example, students should be encouraged to join regional e-lists and also peer support groups in their own communities. As noted earlier, ELL teachers in low-incidence settings often work in isolation from their ELL peers. Local professional support groups serve as a way for ELL teachers to come together to share ideas and build community with one another. These groups also allow for discussions with peers on effective leadership techniques. These groups are self-led and organized by ELL teachers who

are themselves taking on the important leadership role of professional development for one another (Whiting, 2009).

Leadership and professionalism can also be promoted at the pre-service stage by requiring attendance at professional conferences and encouraging students to become involved in professional groups and organizations. If students are encouraged to see themselves as professionals while still in school, it will ease the transition that occurs when they enter a teaching position for the first time.

As the number of English language learners enrolled in US schools continues to rise, the need for new ELL teachers will continue too. Those who will work in low-incidence settings without ELL peers and with colleagues, administrators, and community members, most of whom have little knowledge of ELLs, will need to be forceful, sophisticated, and resourceful teachers, wearing many hats. The programs that train these teachers could play a significant role in the effectiveness and success of these new teachers by incorporating effective leadership building into their curricula.

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