

## Teacher Development: De facto Teacher Leaders for English Language Learners

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**Abstract.** This qualitative study highlighted the redefinition of roles played by secondary-level, mainstream content-area teachers involved in an English as a Second Language (ESL) professional development (PD) program. The researchers examined how the practice of becoming an emerging leader in ESL, a new discipline for many teachers, was impacted by participation in an intensive 18 month ESL PD program. Specifically, this case study focused on the participants' ability to translate newly acquired multicultural competence, second language acquisition, and ESL teaching strategies into training sessions for their content-area colleagues. The reflective statements from teacher participants following the delivery of what is termed 'turnaround training' revealed that the teachers experienced changes in professional self-concept both as teacher leaders and as advocates for English Language Learners (ELLs). This shift of teacher as leader benefits both teacher and student, according to Barth (2011) as teacher leaders experience less isolation, have more professional satisfaction for improving their schools and increased reflection about their practice. This work found that through PD, teachers' roles shifted from not just content expert but also to ELL expert and, indeed, advocate of ESL students.

**Keywords:** teachers; English Language Learners; professional development.

### Introduction

The current trend in the United States' secondary English as a Second Language (ESL) education is that of mainstreaming. As noted by Harper & deJong (2009), "ELLs [English Language Learner(s)] are increasingly placed in mainstream

classrooms for the entire school day” (p. 137) rather than spending a majority of their day situated in specially targeted ESL classrooms. For over a decade, authors have suggested that as the numbers of ELLs increase in the United States, more teachers will have ELLs in their classrooms and more teachers will be called on to meet the needs of ELLs (Duhon-Ross & Battle, 2001, as cited in Yoon, 2008). In many geographic areas, secondary educators who are typically trained and licensed to teach in specific subjects or content areas often find that every year they interact with a greater number of students who speak little or no English. Many teachers lack appropriate training to effectively teach specific academic content to students who are not fluent speakers of English (Ballantyne, Sanderman & Levy, 2008; Scalón & Lopez, 2012). As a result, ELLs are not getting the support needed in general education because many teachers do not have the skills (Yoon, 2008). This lack of support is evidenced by a persistent achievement gap – the difference between ELLs and native speakers of English (Callahan, 2005; Ballantyne, Sanderman & Levy, 2008). Thus, this study examined the effects of a professional development project that was aimed at ameliorating the aforementioned ESL professional development lacuna. As such, this study meets the call as set forth by Ballantyne, Sanderman, and Levy (2008, p. 10),

“Given the fact that the training of teachers lags behind the realities of the classroom, these misconceptions and feelings of unpreparedness are unsurprising. The recent increase in ELLs in U.S. classrooms has been rapid, and teacher education and professional development has not yet caught up with the demographic shift. There is a pressing need for education for teachers at all stages in their careers which aims to prepare or upgrade teachers’ knowledge and skills in order to close the achievement gap between linguistic minority students and their native English speaking peers.”

Responding to this call, this qualitative study highlights shifts in both thought processes and role definitions experienced by secondary-level, mainstream content-area teachers involved in an English as a Second Language (ESL) professional development (PD) program. The focus of this study was to examine how participation in an intensive eighteen month ESL professional development program promoted expertise in teaching ELLs, a new discipline for many teachers. Specifically, this study focused on participants’ experiences as they learned about teaching students with cultural and linguistic differences and became self-reported ESL *experts*. Further, as they translated their newly acquired knowledge of multicultural competence, second language acquisition, and ESL teaching strategies into training sessions for their content-area colleagues, what we call *turnaround training*, the teachers also became de facto teacher leaders on their campuses. As such, this study of the participants’ development contributed to the emerging body of literature focused on the design of effective professional development for teachers of ELLs (see also Hansen-Thomas, Casey, & Grosso, 2012).

### **The Context of the Study**

The teachers who participated in this research were purposefully selected from a group of teachers who successfully completed a professional development

(PD) program in ESL education. This program was funded by the U.S. Department of Education and served inservice teachers by preparing them to work with the ELLs in their urban secondary schools. Study findings were the result of data collected from focus group sessions conducted with 21 members of two PD cohorts. The participants were secondary teachers in mainstream, content-area classrooms who had ELLs in their classes but did not consider themselves ESL specialists at the program's inception.

The program was a collaborative effort between a large, urban school district in Texas with a student population of more than 25% ELLs, and a medium-sized Texas public university. The project, funded by an Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) National Professional Development grant, served practicing teachers through two primary components. First, the teachers successfully completed a series of three semester-long ESL-related graduate classes designed to provide knowledge and enhance the pedagogical skills required to meet the needs of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The classes, specifically developed for secondary school content area teachers, were (1) multicultural education, (2) second language acquisition, and (3) ESL strategies. After completion of the 3 graduate courses, teachers were required to develop and present training sessions to their peers – referred to herein as *turnaround training*. Program faculty provided guidance in the development and presentation of the *turnaround training* sessions.

### **The Professional Development Model**

The professional development program was based on three primary principles. First, the professional development courses were focused on the specific needs of the teachers who were already proficient teachers in their specific content area. Accordingly, the coursework and the turnaround training were tailored to meet the needs of the experienced teachers who were already familiar with the content subject and pedagogy for the general education classroom. While the teachers who participated in the program were experienced instructors of middle or high school subjects such as Algebra, Biology, or History; they were challenged to teach the increasing number of students who were not proficient English speakers.

Second, the model was developed for a long and sustained training period, which included three semesters of graduate coursework and presentation of training sessions for their colleagues. Ongoing reflective practice was incorporated into the professional development plan in order to guide participants in developing greater self-awareness and, thereby, to provoke change in their professional identity throughout the training sessions.

Third, each participant's learning experience culminated with *turnaround training*. The participant's presentation of the *turnaround training* was designed as independent practice and application of the knowledge and skills they had learned in the three semesters of coursework. This structured independent practice distinguished this model from many traditional models of PD because presentation of the *turnaround training* involved in-depth planning and required teachers to know the content, the context and their colleagues. Additionally, this model

required teachers to fully engage in self-reflection and group conversations with their content area and campus peers.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

This study sought to describe the ways in which teachers changed as a result of the professional development program culminating in the presentation of *turnaround training*. The study was guided by two questions.

- In what ways did teachers perceive a change in their (a) ability to teach ELLs, (b) professional role or (c) identity?
- To what did they attribute the change(s)?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The idea of changing professional identity served as a complex conceptual foundation for this study. The study considered whether or not (or, rather for some, *how*) teachers perceived an identity shift resulting from leading *turnaround training* that was the culmination of the year and a half professional development project. Research on teacher identity stated that it [identity] is not stagnant, that it is often shaped by "discourses, practices, and power relations." (Zembylas, 2003, p. 109). Indeed, teacher identity was seen as developing through multiple "intersective practices" (Chappell, 1995, p. 4). Therefore, teacher identity is something that is personal, evolves over time and shaped by contextual influences. (Robertson, 2009). Thus, this study used the idea of shifting professional identity as a lens to examine the participants' changes over time.

Characterized as a process and product of learning developed within particular situations, teacher identity may be impacted by meaningful membership in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Trent & Lim, 2010). Specifically, teacher identity development has been intrinsically linked to both professional practice and continued professional development (Wenger, 1998).

The professional, social or role identity of a teacher is a multifaceted one. It has been characterized by Zurcher (1983) as the amalgamation of characteristics, social roles and responsibilities as recognized by both the teacher her/himself and others. Indeed, the occupation of the particular societal role often forms the basic foundation of a teacher's self-image as it emerges and is significantly molded by interaction with others in specific social settings (Cohen, 2008; Gomez & White, 2010). Therefore, teachers' professional identity(ies) may shift when they are faced with reevaluating, renegotiating and/or re-configuring their personal identities.

Teacher identity also involves pedagogy, as it is integrally linked to the instructor's particular subject, department, and/or program. As a teacher interacts with students and other less experienced teachers, professional identity (and the plurality of it) often undergoes change and either the original is maintained or it is renegotiated (Simon, 1995). This may signify the identity of the teacher is undergoing transformation to that of a master/expert or model/mentor (Lawal, n.d.). Thus, it is not surprising that training in pedagogy, content, leadership, or otherwise will play a role in fomenting such identity shifts.

## Review of Related Literature

Professional development of teachers is defined by Sparks and Loucks-Horsley in the *Journal of Staff Development* (1989) as “those processes that improve the job-related knowledge, skills, or attitudes of school employees” (p. 41). To be judged as effective, such practices must provide guidance for enhanced teaching performance that, in turn, supplies evidence of improved student learning and achievement outcomes. During the last 50 years, the path to that end has been anything but straight. Professional development must be relevant, needs-driven and ongoing.

Traditionally, characteristics of effective staff development have focused primarily on the introduction and/or enhancement of effective teaching practices (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Yarger, Howey, & Joyce, 1980). Stereotypically, PD has been thought of as attendance at workshop session(s) where an expert presents and controls the goals, objectives, and content presented as well as the scope and sequence of all instructional activities (Joyce & Showers, 1988). These limited sessions, while well intentioned and informative of new concepts, strategies, and instructional interventions, were not always perceived as successful. Indeed, there was not much empirical evidence to support that higher student performance could be directly linked to factors learned at a PD session (Guskey, 2002). Research documenting teachers’ use of newly presented practices was often derailed due to inaccessibility, lack of legitimacy, or perceived inconsistent/incongruent of the findings themselves (Kennedy, 1997). Moreover, professional development participants rarely engaged in follow-up discussions or feedback sessions following actual attempts of practicing new strategies with students in genuine classroom settings (Loucks-Horsley, Harding, Arbuckle, Murray, Dubca, & Williams, 1987). In some instances, professional development was typically evaluated on whether or not participants enjoyed it (Guskey, 2002).

In the mid-1970s, one especially effective practice emerged when teachers were allowed to choose among differentiated training opportunities in which they were actively engaged as peer instructors and planners. By self-selecting goals and activities, teachers were more apt to buy-in to the instruction and achieve their personal learning goals (Lawrence, 1974). Sparks (1983), Wu (1987), and Wood and Kleine (1987) state this in their discussion of peer expert trainers. Indeed, Wu (1987) found that when teachers trained teachers, the professional development experience became enriched as participants reported they were more encouraged to (1) exchange ideas, (2) become engaged and interactive; and (3) receive more authentic and practical suggestions. Fullan (1982) reported the impact of such teacher-to-teacher interaction resulted in an increased ability to “converse about the meaning of change and transfer training techniques to the classroom” (p. 121).

Therefore, research indicates teachers need a more active role in their own professional development. Tom (1985) and Winters (1999) specifically suggested effective professional development included multiple opportunities for participation in collaborative processes that critically examined complex circumstances evolving in classrooms and schools. Otherwise, very little transfer of knowledge and skills was likely to occur.

### **Professional Development and the ESL Student Population.**

In a study conducted by Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, and Driscoll (2005), California teachers stated they attended few professional development trainings that focused on the needs of English Language Learners (ELLs) and the quality of such trainings was marginal at best. Participants in the study suggested that training sessions were poorly planned and organized; trainers lacked English as a Second Language (ESL) experience; that the training was not new, applicable, or appropriate to their experience and position; and that there was a lack of practical, implementable knowledge nor any follow-up training (Gándara et al. 2005).

Teachers participating in this study also stated professional development focused on instructional strategies would have been helpful to them. One result was the unanimous consensus from participants that they wanted to (1) “see collaboration as a central part of their professional development” and (2) “to observe successful teachers, collaborate and plan with their colleagues...” in an effort to avoid the pitfalls of “one-shot” professional development sessions (Gándara et al., 2005, p. 15).

### **Professional Development Trainer- of-Trainers Model**

During the late 1990s, the rapid growth in the number of limited English proficient (LEP) students in classrooms across the country resulted in an increased demand for professional development to address instructional issues associated with that unique student population (Harper & Platt, 1998). This trend continues to spiral upward (Newman, Samimy, & Romstedt, 2010). In order to meet the demand for coaching in areas such as linguistics, language acquisition, learning styles and strategies appropriate to the adaptation of materials and instruction, some districts have turned to the trainer-of-trainers PD distribution model. In this type of delivery, teams of classroom teachers attended workshops or sessions conducted by qualified/certified individuals to become familiar with new ESL strategies and instructional procedures. Following completion of a targeted amount of instruction, participating classroom teachers returned to their schools and trained their peers in the use of new techniques. Participants often received implementation guides that served as the reference resources the new trainers could utilize when they conducted professional learning sessions within their home schools/districts (Bernard & Walton, 2011).

### **Methods**

This qualitative study was guided by two questions. First, the study sought to determine in what ways teachers perceived a change in their (a) ability to teach ELLs, (b) professional role or (c) identity? Second, to what did they attribute the change(s)? The focus group was chosen as the data-gathering vehicle for this study due to both its inherent conversational style and multiple opportunities for direct participant/investigator interaction. A semi-structured questioning protocol was utilized to (a) ensure consistency in questions asked and topics covered across both cohort groups, and (b) permit interviewers to follow up on a topic if a respondent’s answer needed clarification (Harrell & Bradley, 2009).

Thus, the teachers were invited to participate in one of two 70-minute semi-structured focus group interview sessions. Each interview provided opportunities for participants to explore and describe common on-the-job experiences (Carey, 1994; Patton, 2002) from a variety of perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Participant responses were audio-recorded, transcribed, reviewed and coded for emerging patterns and themes (Wolcott, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 2005).

The semi-structured, focus group design allowed participants to share their experiences. Sessions focused on specific themes related to the PD program and highlighted participants' experiences with *turnaround training* sessions that they had (1) previously conducted or (2) prepared and scheduled to present in the future. To focus teachers' responses on decision-making, experiences and reflections during and after the presentation of the *turnaround training* sessions, the focus groups employed guiding questions that enabled participants to freely engage in additional relevant topics while the researcher solicited elaboration or sought clarification (Kamberlis & Dimitriadis, 2005).

### **Participants**

Data for this investigation was derived from semi-structured focus groups interviews conducted following the conclusion of turnaround trainings; a required component of the 18-month long PD project. The PD project was a collaborative effort between a large urban school district in Texas that reported ELLs comprised over 25% of its student population and a medium-sized Texas public university. The PD project served only secondary content teachers from the partner district by providing: (a) three graduate courses focused on following areas: ESL-focused graduate classes in Education in Culturally Diverse Environments; Second Language Acquisition (SLA); and ESL methods, and (b) professional guidance in the development and presentation of 'turnaround training sessions' to peers also serving ELLs.

Two cohort groups from the PD project were invited to participate in this study. A total of 20 school district content-area teachers from cohort 1, and 9 in cohort 2 of the PD project and were invited to participate in the focus groups. Of those who were invited to be in the focus groups, 11 took part in the first focus group, which took place in spring 2011, and 10 participated in the second focus group session which occurred seven months later, in early 2012.

Thus, interview data were collected from 21 participants (20 females, 1 male) who were members of two professional development (PD) cohorts. In terms of ethnicity, six participants were Black, one was Latina, two were Asian, and 12 were White. All study participants had completed the succession of three graduate courses and had begun or completed the 'turnaround training' portion of the program. All participants were secondary teachers in mainstream content-area classrooms who did not initially perceive themselves to be ESL specialists. They were teachers of mathematics, science, English Language Arts (for native speakers of English), social studies or special education teachers. It should be noted, in this writing, the words *participants*, and *teacher-trainers* are interchangeable.

## Findings

From the focus group transcriptions, two major themes emerged which indicated participants did perceive a change in their role and a shift in their professional identity as educators. First, participants reported both peers and campus administrators began to view them in a different light due to their increased knowledge and expertise in and about their new learned content, that is, ESL methods, strategies, and related content (such as second language acquisition theory and multiculturalism). The participants reported being seen and treated differently as a result of the new content knowledge and pedagogical skills they had acquired. Moreover, with the experience of presenting the *'turnaround training,'* the participants began to perceive themselves differently— now more as peer leaders.

### *Content and Pedagogy Expertise*

Effective leaders must be able to convey to their colleagues expertise in instruction. One participant noted, “I feel that through my successful implementation of strategies with my students I can model and provide examples of how to improve ELL instruction.” Still another shared, “I have more strategies to use to get my students reading, writing and speaking. I use the many books from our (ESL Methods) strategies course.”

As a result of the PD participation, a teacher noted, “I feel much more confident discussing why I do certain strategies in the classroom. I have often heard that these kids “can’t” do things but now I know they can.” The comments made by these teachers seem to indicate that they have not only gained confidence, but also expertise in pedagogy.

Sharing with colleagues is an important part of being an expert, “I am also seen as someone who is willing to share them because they have helped me and they have given me an excitement about teaching again.” Still another participant shared, “This is what teachers ask for. One thing our teachers ask for is hands-on activities. I passed out handouts and I got more requests, can I get some more of this, can I get some more of that?”

Still another teacher-trainer participant showed a focus on content expertise as evidenced by her comment, “My students have become more successful with using visuals. They relate their visuals to the content, words and everything. So I teach them how to use those strategies and they know how to navigate my room. If someone, I mean, if you just walk into my classroom you may think it’s—you may not understand but because I’ve learned so much about visuals and I use them in my teaching, my students know how to navigate those visuals in order to perform for me.” This teacher demonstrated a genuine shift in her use of new strategies.

In addition, one teacher indicated she now feels more secure in her content, which has allowed her to focus on the unique needs of her learners. We see that in the following comment: “Another reason my kids are successful is I know that they are learning...they’re language learners but I meet them on the level that they are and once I see that they’ve met that level, I take them up a higher notch. ...so I’m being—they are being successful because I’m meeting them where they are. If I take them up [too fast arbitrarily] like what the state requires them, I’m gonna lose them.” Thus, state-mandated requirements are an important measure, but teachers

like this one indicate they can meet those criteria when they work to meet the special needs of the ELLs in their content classes.

Finally, a teacher-trainer explained her expertise in the areas of content knowledge and delivery by stating: “A part of my agenda, because I’m the language center team leader, ...is sheltered instruction, differentiating instruction. So we go around and share about what are we doing to differentiate instruction and we tried to use those strategies in every class so the students can become accommodated to those strategies, so that they know how to use them in every content area. So that’s one thing that helps; being able to use the same strategies within all the content areas.” It appears, through her and others’ comments, that content and pedagogy learned made an impact on confidence, knowledge base, and the ability to apply appropriate methods to the appropriate situation. Because these important insights were recognized by both colleagues and leaders, the teachers’ identities further expanded and shifted in multiple, positive ways.

### ***Evidence of Identity Shift (as Experts and Leaders)***

Participants indicated an increase in confidence both within the classroom and in their practice in general. One participant noted that her students were more successful without outside intervention, suggesting growth in her classroom leadership. She stated, “I am more independent now as an ESL teacher. This is not to say that I don’t collaborate with other teachers. I just mean that I am more confident in my own ability to look to the current language acquisition research to drive my instruction, rather than the opinions of other teachers.”

Another turnaround trainer noted, “I have been able to show teachers that Jigsaw and Round Robin activities can work successfully in the classroom. I can show them that you can get all students speaking and writing.” Furthering this, one participant specifically stated, “I am more confident now to try new things, read new things and share new things with my teachers and administrators.”

The emergent leadership was evidenced in multiple ways. One teacher described what colleagues were asking “From people coming to observe me, and looking at my classroom, they are asking me, ‘What are you doing?’ You know. ‘Where did you learn this from?’ So now I’m being asked to do those short mini lessons in department meetings, I get, ‘Can you give training for the faculty?’ So I have become a leader, or, uh, the go to teacher, the resource for ELLs.” This view of teacher leadership is supported by Katzenmeyer and Moller (2011) who define this as leading within and beyond the classroom, contributing to a community of teacher learners, and influencing others toward improving practice.

Additionally, participants noted their current campus administration had begun to recognize their new role as peer leaders. One participant explained a shift in the way peers perceived her role as colleagues were now seeing her as a leader. She stated, “Well I—a lot of my colleagues came to the training that we did and they were like, ‘Why didn’t you tell us you were presenting?’ And so now they come to me for strategies, they always have but I think more so now because of this.”

Through this comment, the teacher acknowledged her newfound role as a recognized leader on her campus.

Participants began hearing validation of their new roles from colleagues and also began reflecting upon their experience and perceiving themselves in a different role. As one teacher turned around trainer stated, "And I've had people from the district bringing other people in, 'Look here, this you know, look at what's going on in here.' and I'm telling you I think I was an okay teacher before, but I know that this course has changed me for—to improve the learning and help me improve my teaching." Barth (2011) discusses several areas in which teacher leadership is essential in creating a healthy school. Included were designing staff development and inservice programs and shaping the curriculum. Illustrating this point, another participant stated, "I am now one of the teacher leaders, rather than a follower on my campus. Having led campus based training and book studies in language acquisition research and strategies; I feel that I can discuss issues regarding our students with confidence, because I have taught students various strategies in my own."

Consistently, the theme of teacher leadership emerged throughout the responses. This shows a shift in individual teachers' thinking about how they can facilitate professional development of peers and advocate for students.

## **Conclusion**

Overwhelmingly, participants reported a shift in their thinking about their roles as educators. Many found themselves becoming comfortable in the role of campus leader in a variety of ways. Through their voices, there emerged a palpable shift in their identities. Some teachers, as a result of their experience learning about ESL methods, content, and theory, revealed a tentative, or 'de facto' leadership identity.

Others appeared to accept their shifting identities as 'ESL experts' (in addition to that of science, math, social studies, or other discipline) with more gusto and confidence. Some teacher participants appeared to surprise themselves with the recognition they had gotten from their colleagues and peers as a result of their newfound knowledge. Many of these teacher leaders found that their expertise in the areas of ESL content knowledge and pedagogy increased both with students who were ELLs and their native English speaking peers. According to Barth (2011) teachers who extend themselves as teacher leaders experience less isolation, professional satisfaction for improving their schools, and new learning about schools, the process of change and increased reflection about their practice. These newfound ESL experts also began to advocate for the needs of their ELLs, working for the best interests of their students and promoting appropriate practices such as research-based strategy use, understanding the implications of standardized testing, and knowing and showing how best practices for ELLs can promote their success. Gaining, and indeed disseminating this shared sense of responsibility can work to achieve a positive and equitable experience for ELLs in public schools (Fenner, 2013).

Thus, it appeared that the participants in this program benefitted from the quantity, quality, time, and interactive nature of a tailored ESL PD program as called for by Gándara, et al. (2005). Moreover, the on the job training, as it were, allowed the teachers in the PD program to garner new knowledge while putting it into practice with ELLs in their daily lives as teachers. These characteristics are critical for successful learning. High quality PD programs must include these components, and when they are executed appropriately, participants may enjoy the benefits of knowledge development, recognition, success with students, and leadership.

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