Rural Educational Contexts: English Learner Students, Families, and Teachers

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Abstract

The current charged and divisive sociopolitical climate is a disharmony of voices, viewpoints, and experiences. However, many realities and experiences remain absent from conversations about educational policies and practices. This presentation addresses the education of rural English learners, their families, and their teachers, whose experiences and "truths" have been virtually absent from the broad landscape of educational research. In their absence, little is known about how rurality intersects with English learners and how "post-truth" discourses affect teachers and students. This paper aims to bring voice and broaden views regarding the intersection of rurality and EL education in the US. One diverse subgroup in rural settings are emergent bilingual students, described here as English learners (ELs). Despite the fact that scholars have noted the increase in number of EL students in non-urbanized, non-traditional 'new destination' settings, commensurate research has not been conducted [1]. Data show that nearly 15% of EL-identified students reside in rural settings [2] in the US. And although rural EL students constitute nearly 5% of the overall K-12 public school students, their experiences as well as those of their teachers and families remain underrepresented in the research on education [3]. This paper aims to bring voice and broaden views regarding the intersection of rurality and EL education in the US.

Keywords: *Rurality, English Learners, Emergent Bilinguals, Families, Teachers*

1. Introduction

The growth in the number of EL students in the United States, coupled with a shortage of highly qualified educators to teach them, is one of the most pressing issues in public education. Between 2019 and 2021, Idaho experienced a 1.2 percent increase in K–12 enrollment [4]. Yet, over those three years the EL student population in Idaho grew by approximately 24 percent. There are 21,237 English Learners ELs in Idaho who speak over 150 different native languages and dialects [5][6]. Most ELs speak Spanish as their first language while Swahili, Arabic, Russian, and Kinyarwanda are also four of the top native languages represented in Idaho's classrooms [6]. Four in ten public schools in Idaho are located in rural communities and almost one in four students attend a school located in a rural district [7]. Statewide, 72.9 percent of the districts are considered rural. Rural schools continue to experience a variety of educational challenges that directly affect student academic progress. Teachers in rural communities often operate in isolation, salaries are low, and they often lack educational opportunities due to geographical isolation. The challenge to provide contemporary professional development to acquire the needed instructional practices to better educate ELs is known [8].

This presentation examines how participation in a yearlong professional development (Rural Education Development Opportunities) project changes teachers' perceptions of their preparation to teach English language learners (ELs) and engage culturally and linguistically diverse families. We compare Rural Education Development Opportunities (REDO) participants' responses on surveys before joining REDO to their responses after completing REDO to understand how participation in REDO might be associated with changes in their knowledge, confidence, and use of instructional practices and competencies focused on culturally and linguistically diverse students. However, for the purposes of this presentation, I will focus on competency. REDO Project is a teacher endorsement program at Boise State University (BSU) partially funded through an Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) National Professional Development (NPD) grant from the U.S. Department of Education. REDO provides Idaho teachers with online courses to earn an English as a new language (ENL) or bilingual teaching certification. REDO has four goals:

- Increase the pool of highly qualified culturally responsive teachers in Idaho

- Increase participants' use of evidence-based interventions to improve English learner's progress in reading and writing
- Increase participants' knowledge and use of modeling strategies and co-teaching with colleagues
- Improve participants' engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse parents, families, and communities

From 2016-2021, BSU recruited 151 in-service teachers in five cohorts, exceeding its proposed goal of 120 teachers. As of November 2022, 133 teachers had completed coursework, with 90 earning their ESL certification and 17 earning their bilingual certification in Idaho. In 2016 BSU partnered with four Idaho school districts. As REDO grew, additional participants came from 20 other Idaho school districts (18 of them were rural school districts). Among participants, 75 percent identified as white and 16 percent as Latino.

2. Rationale and Conceptual Framework

REDO is grounded in socio-constructivist theory, arguing that a prerequisite for change in teacher practice is direct engagement in active learning. Teachers need to design and try out teaching strategies, examine evidence of their own student learning, and collaboratively engage in problem-solving [9]. Educators learn through their interactions with other professionals and curated content [10]. Teachers also learn through multiple lenses: content knowledge of the subject or topic and pedagogical knowledge of how to teach it [10]. As shown by Risko and colleagues [11], programs that emphasize "learning by doing" produce more significant increases in teacher knowledge, beliefs, and practices compared to programs that only address knowledge and beliefs. REDO activities involve teachers' active participation in learning strategies [12] and working with student data [11]. REDO is a sustained, structured model [13] that provides educators with year-long learning, practice, implementation support, and reflection. REDO employs an approach consistent with the elements of effective professional development identified by Darling-Hammond and colleagues [13]—it is content-focused; includes active learning, collaboration, modeling, and coaching and expert support; and provides opportunities for feedback and reflection. The REDO curriculum was designed with a deep conceptual understanding of second language acquisition (multilingual). It provides multiple opportunities for teachers to connect the assignments to their actual practice, explicitly addresses their context of practice, encourages them to gather evidence from multiple sources, and helps them make sense of student data for instructional decisions.

Additional related frameworks inform program design: culturally responsive teaching [14]; [15]; culturally sustaining pedagogy [16]; the translanguaging literacies framework [17]; the dual-capacity building framework [18], and the community cultural wealth construct [19]. REDO was intentionally designed to engage teachers in developing cultural awareness [15]; [20][21]; intercultural competence [22]; and enacting the three strands of translanguaging pedagogy [23]. The program affirms the value of culturally diverse points of view and the benefits of multilingualism in society. The program articulates a strong position supporting linguistic pluralism in schools that promotes culturally sustaining environments for students and affirms the role of families in teaching and learning.

3. Methods

We conducted a formative evaluation to support the implementation and continuous improvement of REDO, as well as a rigorous evaluation of the program's impact on student achievement, guided by five evaluation questions (Table 1).

Table 1. Evaluation questions and data sources

	Evaluation question	Data source
1	How do program participants perceive their preparation to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students and related classroom practices after participating in REDO?	Surveys of participants
2	To what extent do school principals and other instructional leaders perceive REDO to be effective in developing teacher capacity to instruct culturally and linguistically diverse students?	Surveys of instructional leaders
3	To what degree do program participants perceive that REDO is effective in preparing them to engage with culturally and linguistically diverse students	Surveys of participants

	and their families?	
4	How do teacher participation in REDO and teacher ESL certification impact English learner students' English language proficiency and achievement in English language arts (ELA) and math?	Student-level data from the Idaho State Department of Education
5	How do teacher participation in REDO and teacher bilingual certification impact English learner students' English language proficiency and achievement in ELA and math?	Student-level data from the Idaho State Department of Education

In this paper I focus on evaluation questions 3, seeking to understand how participation in REDO changes teachers' perceptions of their preparation to engage culturally and linguistically diverse families. Surveys were administered to REDO participants when they enrolled in the program (baseline), when they completed the REDO coursework (post), and annually after program completion. The purpose of these surveys was to understand changes in participants' preparedness to teach, engage, and support culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families. To understand the depth of knowledge, we asked participants to rate themselves on a four-point rubric (novice, apprentice, practitioner, advanced) and examined changes in the percentage of participants who rated themselves as either practitioner or expert from baseline to completion. Similarly, to understand how confident REDO participants were using these practices we focused on REDO participants who felt "confident" or "very confident" using each practice.

- Large changes: 54 or more percentage points difference from baseline to post-survey
- Moderate changes: 41 to 53 percentage points difference from baseline to post-survey
- Small changes: 20 to 40 percentage points difference from baseline to post-survey
- Inconsequential changes: Less than 20 percentage points difference from baseline to post-survey

The cut off points for each measure are based roughly on quartiles, with large changes fitting into the fourth quartile, moderate changes in the third quartile, small changes in the second quartile, and inconsequential changes in the first quartile.

4. Outcomes

Confidence as teachers and advocates of culturally and linguistically diverse students

> *My role has evolved to one of social/cultural/linguistic advocate for my students. I better understand the legal and political issues that impact the educational context of many culturally and linguistically diverse students. Armed with this new knowledge, I am able to advocate more effectively for these students and their families.*
> *-Cohort 1 REDO participant*

The second largest area of growth for participants after completing REDO was their confidence as teachers and advocates of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Participants responded to survey questions about how their confidence in their role as teachers and advocates of culturally and linguistically diverse students changed as result of participating in REDO.

Participants reported large increases in their confidence in three areas related to culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families. After completing REDO, most participants responded that they were confident or very confident in their ability to support culturally and linguistically diverse students by incorporating research into teaching (61 percentage point increase from baseline) and engaging parents in their child's education (58 percentage point increase). Participants also reported large increases confidence promoting bilingualism, biliteracy, and multiculturalism in the classroom after completing REDO (57 percentage points).

Participants reported moderate increases in their confidence in six areas related to culturally and linguistically diverse families. Participants from all five cohorts showed moderate growth in their confidence reaching out to culturally and linguistically diverse families by conducting home visits (51 percentage point increase), developing culturally specific relationship-building strategies (51 percentage point increase), and developing two-way communication strategies (50 percentage point increase).

Participants from all five cohorts reported small changes in their confidence to be advocates for culturally and linguistically diverse students to be assessed for gifted and talented programs (39

percentage point increase), understand court rulings (38 percentage point increase), and facilitate activities that enhance family engagement (37 percentage point increase).

Finally, after finishing REDO all but one participant (99 percent) reported that they felt confident or very confident to create a caring, supportive, and warm learning environment for culturally and linguistically diverse students. However, this area showed inconsequential growth, only 16 percentage points, because most teachers (83 percent) felt confident or very confident at baseline, limiting the possibility of growth.

5. Conclusion: Toward Sustainability

After completing REDO, participants reported positive changes in their use of, and confidence in 49 practices and competencies focused on culturally and linguistically diverse students. Participants reported the largest changes in their knowledge and confidence as effective teachers and advocates of culturally and linguistically diverse students. These include their knowledge of local issues impacting culturally and linguistically diverse students, supporting English language development, and assessment best practices. It is difficult to guess the extent to which participants will sustain these changes long after they have completed REDO, continuing to feel knowledgeable and confident that they are effective teachers and advocates, and use the practices they learned in REDO. However, we do know that three years later, cohort 1 and 2 participants are sustaining many of the REDO instructional practices. Fewer participants used the practices as often or felt the same confidence as they did on completing the program. However, most of the practices or competencies (26 of 35) showed growth greater 20 percentage points from baseline, suggesting that they have indeed been sustained. In particular, participants appeared to sustain their use of the six instructional practices which showed the most growth from baseline (figure 11). For example, 80 percent of cohort 1 and 2 participants continued to feel confident to promote bilingualism, biliteracy, and multiculturalism in their classroom three years after completing the program

These findings suggest that REDO has met its goals of increase the pool of highly qualified culturally responsive teachers in Idaho, and increase participants' use and knowledge of evidence-based practices to improve culturally and linguistically diverse students' academic progress and confidence to engage with culturally and linguistically diverse parents, families, and communities.

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