

Webinar Transcript

The Growth of English Learners in Rural Areas: Research on Challenges and Promising Practices in Schools

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DOUGLAS GAGNON: So welcome. Title of this webinar, The Growth of English Learners in Rural Areas, and we're looking at research on the challenges and promising practices in schools.

So here are the goals of the webinar. First up, we'll start with some demographic data that shows how rural areas have been changing since the turn of the Millennium, and in particular, the pretty rapid growth of new populations, many of whom are English learners. And then we'll look at the research. We'll turn things over to our presenters and they'll review the current research on some of the challenges that rural schools face, meeting the needs of ELs, and in particular, we'll focus on teacher development and family engagement as two of the big factors there. And then we'll highlight some of the promising strategies that have been identified in research that schools might use to help meet these needs of English learners.

So my name's Douglas Gagnon, and I'll be facilitating the webinar. My colleague, Doug Van Dine, will be coordinating and helping to sort through questions. And then our presenters are first is Dr. Holly Hansen-Thomas, and she's a professor and program coordinator of ESL and bilingual education at the Texas Woman's University. And then we also have Dr. Maria Cody, who is an advanced associate professor of ESOL and Bilingual Education, and she's at the University of Florida. So many thanks and welcome to our presenters.

So let's start with some groundwork here in terms of what's going on in rural America and why this brings us to this webinar today. So this is some research that came out of Ken Johnson, a former colleague of mine from the Carsey School of Public Policy at UNH. And he was looking at changes in the aughts and found that the minority population accounted for 83 percent of the non-metropolitan or, roughly-speaking, rural population gain. And that amounted to nearly 2 million more minorities in rural areas. And meanwhile, the white population only grew by less than half-a-million.

So we see here, this bar graph on the right, the dark blue is the overall proportion of the population. So we see that even with these changes, the white population is still roughly four fifths of the total non-met population. But when we look at the change, which is the lighter hatched bar graphs here, we see that the change is very much composed of the Hispanic population. And actually, you see that the population of other minorities— not Hispanic or

black or Asian, they're actually growing faster than the white population. So presumably, a number of those individuals are also English learners.

And really, this change in the overall population really understates the changing face of schools, because children are generally thought of as the vanguard of demographic change. So here we have a couple of different pie graphs. The one on the right is looking at the racial composition of the adult population; the pie chart on the left is the racial composition of the child population.

So we see that for adults, the white population as of 2010 was over 80 percent of the overall, but meanwhile for children, the white population is only about two thirds in non-metropolitan areas. And we see the significant part of that nonwhite population that's Hispanic. And since these data have come out, more regular data questions since the ACF generally show that this trend is continuing, but it'll be interesting to see with the 2020 census exactly how these trends have played out.

So what is all this demographic change mean for rural America specifically? Well, for many rural communities, it's provided an incredibly important demographic lifeline. So it is— in some places has countered trends about migration and natural decrease, and really revived economic life.

So Daniel Lichter coined the phrase, Hispanic boomtowns to refer to areas that used to be struggling significantly, and new industries have moved in, oftentimes things such as meat processing plants are pointed out that have drawn Hispanic populations and really revived certain local rural economies that otherwise could be in dire straits. So they've certainly given rural areas new life in many instances.

On the other hand, it can create challenges as well to have such rapid increases in populations. So one finding that's pertinent here is that nearly 72% of rural immigrants speak English well, meaning the remaining 28% don't speak English very well. And specifically for rural places, many rural schools lack infrastructure for educating ELs.

So it could be the case that many urban districts that might have higher proportions of ELs, but are dealing with more established communities that have been around for generations and also have deeper networks of support and programs internally to support those learners. And then specifically, because of rurality being smaller and more remote by definition, that makes rural schools— it creates an extra challenge for them to kind of find, develop, sustain new supports.

And then there's just kind of how rural is generally different, in particular, structural challenges related to poverty. So there's this finding that rural poverty looks different, it's oftentimes higher rates of poverty, concentrated poverty, and intergenerational poverty. And so even when comparing what might look relatively similar rates of poverty, it can often take on a different tenor in rural places.

So those are some of the advantages and benefits— some of the benefits and challenges that come along with all this demographic change. So we thought we'd open it up to our participants to kind of have a discussion— and this is both to try to engage folks that have signed in and also give our presenters a little understanding of the work that folks are doing and some of their own experiences with this change and the change in how it affects their partners that they work with.

So here are some questions to kind of seed our discussion. So first, have you had any experience with these demographic changes in your work with the states in your region? And specifically, have your partners experienced any of these challenges? And then how are your partners working to address the needs of ELs in general, perhaps? Or how are they trying to address these needs in rural settings particularly?

So I'll open that up to the floor. I don't know if anyone has any thoughts to share. Just a reminder, there is a Q/A box that you can use to type your question in. Alternatively, you could also just hit the Hand Raise button, which is just to the left of the Q/A box, and that'll just help us facilitate the conversation that way. And just a reminder, you mics are now live, so just be aware of that. So give folks a second to think about these, and please jump in if you have any thoughts.

So I do see Caroline. Did you want to share some of your thoughts on this?

CARRIE PARKER: Sure. So, I'm Carrie Parker. I'm with REL Northeast and Islands, and I actually am the facilitator of the Cross-REL English Learner Working Group. And so one of the things that we've been talking about is the incredible diversity of EL and EL experiences, but we have not actually talked very much about the experience in rural areas.

In the Northeast and Islands, the rural areas tend to be in the northern part of the region more in Maine, but I also am doing a fair amount of work in Connecticut, and there, what people are experiencing is low incidence population. So the district might not necessarily be rural, but they have very few English learners, and so therefore, very few resources with which to meet their needs, so the challenges seem to be a little bit similar.

But we actually are not finding a lot of really concrete strategies or ways to find ways to provide resources in ways that are different necessarily than the more urban regions where we generally work.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Yeah, thank you. That's a really good point, that sometimes it might only be a few English learners and that presents its own bucket of challenges, really. And I'm sure this will probably be a really good point to come back to as well once our presenters kind of share their findings on this work, so that's something that we can probably come back to as well.

Were there other thoughts from the group? I know that myself, my own experience, I spent some time with the Delaware Department of Education, and these changes where we're very

much at the forefront of the thoughts of the state agency there. In southern Delaware there was a tremendous rise in poultry packing plants that brought many Hispanic immigrants to a region that was otherwise pretty homogeneous decades ago.

And so trying to kind of leverage state supports to support some of the lower income schools that were facing those needs was certainly a challenge that I didn't experience firsthand, but it was something that was seen as an important challenge that would that would be addressed in years to come.

MARIA COADY: Doug, can I just jump in for a second.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Please do.

MARIA COADY: Hi. Hi, Carrie. This is Maria Coady. And hi, Doug and everybody here. I just thought I would reply and say hello first because I actually worked in the Northeastern Islands Regional Lab years ago at Brown University, and familiar with the great work that you all do up there. I wanted to mention that the low incidence setting that was sort of coined I think in 2000 Barney Berube up in Maine is an issue for us, of course, in rural settings, and we're referring a little bit to these groups of English learners as low density settings as well because of the association with space and place in rural spaces.

But I'd just like to throw in here that as I go and present, some of these are very pragmatic strategies that maybe could be adaptable to your less rural but low incidence settings in Connecticut. So hopefully those will be adaptable and I'd like to keep in touch on that and see how they apply to your contact.

CARRIE PARKER: Thank you.

HOLLY HANSEN-THOMAS: I see also—this is Holly. Hi, Holly Hansen-Thomas—that Jason notes that the problem in the Northwest has been the challenge of recruiting teachers prepared for teaching ELs.

And that, I think along with what Carrie had just said with very often they're just one or two English learners in a school district, I've been working with some in-service teachers in small and rural school districts, and I've noticed that lately it's been quite effective to have— if you have one or two teachers who are engaged with training, and they are— for example, I'm working with one student who's working on her master's in ESL. And she is a rural teacher, and she is doing professional development that's essentially grassroots. And this seems to be making positive headway in her school.

CARRIE PARK: Yeah. This is Carrie again, that's actually— we've seen that also in Vermont, particularly with superintendents who have— or principals who have really raised the profile of ESL teachers to have them be teacher-leaders in that content area for example.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Any other thoughts? I think that was probably actually a pretty good transition to our next slide, which is our next presenter. So basically, we'll be turning things over now to discuss these things further. So up first will be Holly, and she will focus on the role of the teacher primarily in meeting these challenges, and then we'll turn things over to Maria and she'll focus more on family engagement.

So without further ado, go ahead, Holly.

HOLLY HANSEN-THOMAS: Okay, thanks. So again, I'm Holly Hansen-Thomas and I am a professor of ESL and bilingual education. And I also serve as the program coordinator and associate dean for research at our university and our college. And one of our big— a big focus in our research agenda here in our college is working with rural schools because where we are, where we're located. We are surrounded by a number of small and rural school districts, so it sounds quite important to me.

And a number of years-- about eight or so years ago, I started working with English language learners in rural settings because I had been doing a lot of professional development in urban areas and noted that the teachers were saturated with training and professional development. But when I started working in smaller and rural school districts, I noticed that the teachers were really craving it and indeed really needed it. So there is a need.

Overall, English learners in rural and small areas are, as we know, a rapidly-growing population throughout the English-speaking world. ELs in rural areas face challenges, and not the least of which is that they're demographically and geographically isolated. And because, as we noted, there are usually very small numbers of ELs in rural schools, teachers and administrators often do not have the appropriate background or experience in working appropriately with ELLs.

So faced with an inadequate educational situation, many ELs in rural schools, as we know, struggle to learn that language, academic content, as well as the cultural and educational norms of their community. So these are really some of the challenges that we see.

As we go on— next I'm going to— oh, let's see. I am trying to advance, which I did very well before. Yes, Okay. So— yeah, I think there's a bit of a lag, sorry.

So over the next few minutes, I'll be visiting with you-- I'm going to go over some of the definitions that we use when talking about English learners in rural areas. I'll touch on the numbers a little bit more— Doug did a little bit, I'll get more specifics about English learners in rural areas.

We'll talk about who are English learners in rural areas, and then get into what we know and what we don't know about them. I'll note some of the challenges that teachers and students are dealing with, and I'm going to focus on a couple of studies that I along with some colleagues have conducted in our work in preparation for and in working with English language learners and their teachers in rural areas.

I have had the fortune of having several large, federally-funded projects through the Office of English Language Acquisition, the National Professional Development Project, and so a lot of these data come out of that.

So what is rural and why does it matter? Well, rural education matters because 50 percent of all school districts in the nation are classified as rural, and 33 percent of public school children in the US attend a school designated as rural.

So what is rural? There are different rural designations according to federal guidelines. We have fringe rural districts, which are more common, and that's just about five miles or less to the closest urban area. We have distant rural areas which is between five and 25 miles to a local urban area, and there are fewer of those. And then remote are these school districts that are far and away, over 25 miles from urban areas. So this is how we designate federally rural definitions.

English language learners, there are many acronyms to define and to use when we're working with English language learners—a lot of terms here. We say ELLs, English language learners. More commonly these days we just say ELs-- English learners. But then also, a sort of more-- a somewhat newer term that's used in the research and in the literature is emergent bilingual, it's also EBs.

And Ofelia Garcia came up with this term, and a lot of researchers really support this because it's positive, inclusive, and recognizes the strengths and the values that English learners bring to the educational setting. But overall, English language learners are defined as those who speak one or more English languages in the home.

We know also that the federal government still uses the term LEP, this acronym is still used, but this evokes a deficit perspective and it's not used quite as much. But sometimes it's difficult to identify some of the data because there are so many terms used.

So let's look at some of the numbers. We're going to consider the numbers as related to ELs and ruralities. So the percentage of rural EL students we know is relatively small when compared to those in urban settings. We've got 10.4 percent of the 4.7 million identified ELs are in rural settings, and that's in comparison to close to 40 percent of ELs in urban areas. In 2007, Provasnik and some colleagues identified that two-- or noted that 2 percent of rural students were ELs, but today in 2019, those numbers have doubled practically. So it's a small population, but still growing.

It's predicted that one in four public school students will be an EL by 2025, and that was a few years ago, so that has increased somewhat. And at the same time dropout rates for ELs have increased and graduation has decreased in particular in rural areas because— we'll talk about some of the reasons why we think that is.

Okay. Next I'm going to discuss who some of our ELs in rural areas are and in what types of communities that they live. Okay. I'm sorry, I'm getting used to this platform. Right, okay.

English learners in rural and small areas are a rapidly-growing population throughout the US, throughout the English-speaking world in many areas, and particularly in the US, changing mobility patterns result in immigrant families seeking a safe place to live. With abundant jobs in meat packing, dairy industry, ranching, farming and the like, US rural communities attract recent immigrants who generally hold low proficiency in English. They don't necessarily need language for many of these jobs—or English language for many of these jobs that they're doing.

Many of the immigrants new to such areas in the US and other parts of North America are Spanish speakers from Mexico or Central America, but others come from cultures that may be perceived as even more foreign by local rural inhabitants. And this issue of local contexts of reception is something that some quite relevant in the literature.

ELs in rural areas are coming from states like Ohio, Wisconsin, Texas, Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, North Dakota, Wyoming, and more and what's happening in schools is that teachers who've never had experience with ELs from diverse backgrounds are finding these small but very concentrated groups in their classes, and they lack experience with appropriate ways to meet those students' needs.

In fact, related to what Carrie had mentioned before, I recently published an article entitled, "Help, I Have Two Students in My Rural Class— Two English Language Learners in my Rural Class." And so, because there are very small numbers of ELs in rural schools, teachers and administrators don't have the appropriate background or experience.

So what do we know about these students? Well, we know that rural educators of ELs are less likely to use students' first language for language and literacy development. And the research shows us that that is important. We use the first language to help support and develop language literacy, bi-literacy in the target language of L2.

Rural high schools offer the lowest number of first language instructional programs or approaches to support English learners. And we know also that—this is relatively new data here—only 62.7 percent of ELs in rural settings participated in instruction specifically designed to address ELs' learning needs. So because the population has traditionally been small of ELs in rural areas—or in some cases, non-existent—rural teachers well-trained in ESL methods are not commonplace. And this was noted by Strange, Johnson, Showalter, and Klein in 2012 and still holds true, I would say.

Carrying on more about what we do know well. Only 5 percent of rural US high schools offered bilingual instruction for poor students in content areas. And while in high schools and secondary levels there is somewhat less bilingual education than in elementary areas, it's much, much more palpable. And many more students are—many fewer students are getting that support—English language learners in rural areas.

Only 26 percent of rural high schools offered a bilingual paraprofessional, whereas such supports were available at a much higher rate in urban areas. And only 32 percent of rural high school students offered sheltered English instruction as compared to a much, much higher

percentage in urban high schools. And sheltered instruction is a teaching approach that reduces language complexity for ELs and is often— it's taught in the content areas.

Other appropriate sheltered or pedagogies that are appropriate for English learners that were are not seeing very commonly in rural schools is culturally-responsive pedagogy, culturally-appropriate pedagogy, or research-based strategies such as trance languaging.

But what do we not know about ELs in rural schools? A lot. We have a foundational understanding of the research as regards ELs in rural schools, but it's not deep nor is it wide. Those of us who work in this area are indeed also calling for a national research agenda to help fill out these gaps in the literature.

We also do not know specifically who are the ELs in rural schools. We know some are coming from migrant communities. But where? And some of that's unclear. We don't know how they're doing in school and how they are responding to some of the supports if in fact they're having them. And we're also lacking information on how to best serve these students and their teachers.

Recently they— the NREA named some challenges, and these challenges that arise include high poverty rates, transportation difficulties with some of those schools that are in very remote areas. There's less resources. There are a lack— a serious lack of certified ESL professionals. And in fact, an important and strong need that I've been calling for for professional development for teachers of English learners, and as well, also leadership.

There are fundamental challenges that arise as a result of these issues. There's a strong disconnect between the ELs' families and the receiving communities with regard to language, education and sociocultural norms, as well as a general paucity of resources to serve the students. So in the next few minutes I'm going to focus on a couple of studies that I conducted with colleagues on rural ELs as regards to PD.

So the first study I'll discuss ELs and rural teacher preparation. It's more a quantitative study. And the second study is a more qualitative study, and I'll be sharing some of the insights that our teachers who engaged in a professional development program with us shared.

So the first study that came out in professional development and education in 2016, it was titled, "I Do Not Feel I'm Properly Trained To Help Them," and one of our teachers said that. Rural teachers' perceptions of challenges and needs with English language learners. Our questions for that study were these. What is the experience and preparation of teachers of ELs in rural areas? We wanted to know if there was a correlation between prior education, training, or experience with regard to teachers' knowledge regarding ELs. And we also wanted to know what the teacher's greatest challenges were in their work with ELs.

So as I mentioned, this data came from— we were doing preparation for our work with our NPD-funded project. We surveyed— we got data from 10 rural and small schools in North Texas. Overall, we had response rate— we had 179 participants return our surveys. Of those,

there were 159 elementary, middle, and high school teachers and 20 staff members, administrators, and counselors.

There were 137 females, 22 males, and the response of our participants really mirrored the typical teaching force throughout the nation, and in particular, in Texas. Most teachers were English speakers. Close to 60 percent have been teaching for over 11 years, and the majority were white females with a bachelor's degree.

A survey was sent out to these teachers, and it was based on the ESL supplemental test, the certification test that teachers take to be certified. And we broke it down into— the first 16 questions focused on participant's experience in training with ELLs and demographic information, and those we examined or analyzed its frequencies. And then there were 51 of the questions on competence on language concepts and language acquisition, ESL instruction and assessment, foundations of ESL education, cultural awareness, and so on.

And what we found was that 77percent of the teachers had fewer than 10 percent of English language learners in their classroom. 15 percent of the teachers had no ESL training at all. However, 50 percent of the teachers were ESL-certified. And I'll tell you that quickly that in the state of Texas, teachers can simply go take the test and use a book to become certified. So my understanding is that's how the school districts dealt with the federal guidelines that was necessary to meet the needs of those English language learners.

Regarding competencies, 25 percent of the teachers indicated lacking knowledge and literacy strategies. Just a little over a fourth of the teachers perceived themselves as not at all competent at understanding ESL assessments. Another fourth believed that they did not have the ability to understand and interpret the research, and 33 percent also indicated a lack of knowledge-- so one-third, more than a third had a lack of knowledge.

And overall, 85 percent of the teachers who had indicated having some training said they still felt underprepared to work with the English language learners in their classrooms. But we did also want to know if there was any correlation between prior training and their responses regarding the competencies, and what we did find was that teachers with two or more college classes did perceive themselves as more effective in applying instructional methods and teaching strategies as being more efficient in helping transfer knowledge from their first language, their L1 to their L2. And they really had a better understanding of the cultural language diversity than those who did not have training.

We also examined— we asked some open-ended questions, and with regard to those, teachers indicated that their greatest challenges was their students had a lack of academic vocabulary. The teachers couldn't communicate or had problems communicating with teachers and parents, and they were not given any time to prepare their lessons to work collaboratively. So what these data revealed was that training is key and the teachers really felt inadequately-trained to work with them. So they indicated a need.

We found that also teachers whose certification was obtained by testing only lacked skills that they really needed to be successful. And also in the state of Texas, and I believe many of the other states that you were all in, Spanish is an important second language, and these teachers indicated wanting to have a grounding in Spanish to help them communicate with their students. And we in our professional development program were able to do that, but just on a very, very small scale.

The next study was based on the work that we did in training with our in-service teachers— it was a mentoring program between math and science teachers who had ESL professional development training and those who teach ELs but didn't have training. So we put our rural teachers who taught math and science together with a colleague on campus, and they helped do some training— as we discussed earlier in our question section, they were sort of organically working together.

It was co-mentoring or learning and they worked together, as they said, to identify our students' struggles—that is, the struggles of the students on their campuses. And some of the big struggles that emerged from— the fact that their students were coming from poverty. There was racism. They noted monolingualism and monoculturalism, and a paucity, of course, of trained teachers. And these are struggles that were identified by those teachers themselves.

Some of these main findings that we noted in their discussions together is that our teachers noted that ELs were misidentified in their school, but this was very surprising. They were surprised that this could have happened, and that these teachers noted that they really needed to be aware of that.

They also indicated that it was important that their students be able to preserve their primary language, but the teachers also said that they did not know how to help them.

They said technology was important in differentiating instruction and planning appropriate instruction for their students, and they also noted that having language objectives which is something that's important in sheltered instruction, was important, and we had done some work on that in our professional development program.

So overall we noted that our teachers had some shifts in their identity, and there was some lessons learned. Teachers gained knowledge and they said some very interesting things. They felt in particular that—I like the second one about working with them in—has made me understand that [INAUDIBLE] doesn't mean I don't have knowledge to share. And so there were some epiphanies and some positive experiences that came out.

And finally, we in Hawkins and the NREA came out with some other important issues that-- many of these we've talked about so far with these problems with just local contexts of perception, ELs often are a low priority for funding and we've seen that throughout, there's a lack of access to professional development, and those things need to change.

And finally, also family engagement, and comprehension of family challenges arts are some important issues that needs to happen, and I know that Maria will be talking about that momentarily.

So going forward. I maintain that we need to fill the halls with research, and as educators, teacher educators, administrators, it's our responsibility to share this in order to teach and support ELLs in rural areas. I'm not sure if we have time for questions or we'll go on to Maria's section at this point?

DOUGLAS GAGNON: No, we certainly have time for questions.

HOLLY HANSEN-THOMAS: Okay.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: So again, same rules apply here, feel free to, if you have a question, to type it in, or you can raise your hand. And I have a question already, so maybe I'll just kick things off. But I was wondering if you had any suggestions for low-hanging fruit in terms of what states can do at the state level to try to support some of these teachers in handling this challenge.

So I assume that really it requires a comprehensive solution, but is there anything that just seems particularly right. But I don't know it would be about the educator prep level in terms of looking at standards, or maybe could be trying to support more bilingual peer educators or— has anything really stuck out to you as a rather straightforward first step solution?

HOLLY HANSEN-THOMAS: Well, I think integrating into—at the teacher preparation level, at the university level, integrating preparation—ESL classes requiring those for— that's for pre-service teachers. So that's dealing with teachers who are not yet in the field, but we have— and I know in many, many— just many, many educator preparation places in terms of at universities there is this new requirement that pre-service teachers have the need to take classes in ESL methods—second language acquisition.

Because as we noted before, there's a big difference between taking classes and having several semesters and many hours' worth of training and borrowing a book or renting— checking out a book and going to take a test. So the universities and educator preparation programs can and are doing that. I know also in the state of Texas, in particular where we are, many teachers aren't getting jobs unless they have ESL training. And those who are doing it coming from universities have to have the coursework first. So that's important.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Jason.

HOLLY HANSEN-THOMAS: Yeah, Jason has a comment. Our region especially, Idaho has a fairly high proportion of refugee emergent bilinguals in rural areas. Were you able to look into the different needs of teachers working with SIFE students? We haven't found much in rural areas. Not yet, but I think it's important, and that's something that's very— that we really need to. We need to incorporate that into this national research agenda that we're looking at.

I have worked with newcomers, but most of the newcomers I've worked with have been— and teachers who work with newcomers, those have been in urban settings because there are a lot more newcomers there.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: And Pam, did you have a question? I thought I saw your hand raised for a moment. Not sure. Maybe it was inadvertent hand raise or maybe—

PAM BUFFINGTON: Can you hear me now, Doug?

DOUGLAS GAGNON: We can.

PAM BUFFINGTON: Yeah. Yeah. I'm a co-PI on— and that's a funded project that is designed professional development for mathematics teachers to serve English learners better, and we use a lot of visual representations as well as language access and production strategies in that.

And so I'm particularly interested in what you learned—the lessons learned from your rural math and science teachers, their receptivity, and the types of strategies that were embedded within that work, and mentoring that you noted.

HOLLY HANSEN-THOMAS: Mm-hmm. So, well I can tell you that when we developed the project, I only had eight rural—and this was for secondary in particular, so middle school and high school—I only had eight school districts that were willing to participate. But as you know, very often there aren't that many teachers in the school. So the math teacher, maybe there's two or three, and there also maybe an administrator and there also maybe a custodian.

So it was it was somewhat difficult to get the teachers who were willing to give the time that we were expecting of them. Because we were also-- as I mentioned, we were funded we had funds through this NPD project, we were able to get all of the-- we offered three-- for online graduate classes. We provided all of the teachers with computers, and we found resources-- we had a course on multiculturalism. We had a course on ESL methods and strategies. We had a course on second language acquisition, and then this mentoring course where we were effectively trying to multiply the effect of our training.

So one thing that was useful is that once we got the teachers to buy in— first, as I said, we only had eight districts, we ended up contacting more and more and we ended up working with 21 rural school districts. And there was a variety of different designations of rural somewhere. As I said, more were fringe than remote.

But once we got the teachers to buy in and make the commitment to take these graduate classes with us at the university over a year, this mentoring piece was very useful. They worked collaboratively with others who maybe didn't have the time. One math teacher didn't have the time to take a whole series of ESL-related classes at the university, but then they were able to do the sharing.

And they shared throughout the year that they were taking the courses with us, and that was useful for this organic kind of PD from within. It's not the university people coming in and doing it, it's colleagues working with colleagues. So that was useful. And these were all math and science teachers.

PAM BUFFINGTON: Great, thank you.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Well thank you so much, Holly. And I think we'll pass it over to Maria now.

MARIA COADY: Okay. Great. Thank you, everybody. I am going to— whoops— advance— there we go. Okay. I think I have control now, there's a little delay.

Thanks for having me today. I'd like to extend the conversation a little bit into what others are referring to as engagement, family engagement, and engaging rural multilingual families. The image from this particular book is with a community partner that we have in a rural school district.

And I should say contextually that in Florida, our districts are similar to our county lines. So we have 67 school districts in the state of Florida. And within a school district, because the landmass area is so large, some of our districts, like Holly was saying, are fringe rural. And even within the same district, we may have remote rural schools.

And what I've found is within the context of a single school district, the needs are greatly varied. So there's no one size fits all okay. There's a delay, and sorry about that. So like to talk a little bit about where is rural and what is rural, just-- so beyond using some of the federal definitions of remote rural and fringe rural spaces just to complicate a little bit the conversation. So we know that rural is complex and it's highly debated in the literature, and I like the work of Green and Letts to describe a little further and deeply about what is happening in rural places.

The reason for that is because of the differences across rural places and a need to understand the social processes and the way rural spaces and schools function. So there's not a single monolith, and for that particular reason, when we talk about family engagement, it's more about understanding the way— the resources within a community and also the way the community functions, and the role of emergent bilingual or multilingual families in those spaces.

So it's highly contextualized. I like the metaphor— at the bottom here you see the metaphor of terroir. That is the work of Holly and Holly who talk about terroir as similar to the geographic space and the way the soil, the land, the place and the space all come to interact to produce, for instance, a very highly-refined wine. So the local space and place is really subject to all of those factors that create identities and the social processes around them.

So in the next slide, who are multilingual families? Well I use the term multilingual in part because what I've found particularly in Florida, but in other places— and related to Jason's comment about SIFE children and families, we see families who come to our region and location who maybe speak Spanish as a language, but actually speak indigenous languages in the home. Many of us are experiencing the effects of international migration patterns.

I can say here in Florida, in our remote rural places, we see families— we're not sure exactly how and why they come to these very rural places, but we do see that they speak indigenous languages, have some very beginning levels or knowledge of Spanish and literacy practices in Spanish, and are put into grade-appropriate or age-appropriate classrooms and really have had interrupted schooling and have difficulty accessing the language of instruction or instruction to the medium of English.

Again, this is very contextualized, because in the state of Florida, for instance, the state in its recent ESSA plan has refused to allow native language assessments. So in rural spaces, one of the things teachers tell us repeatedly is that they want access to native language assessments or assessments that reflect the home languages of children so that they can target their instruction to what they know and what they need to know. So I think that's a non-negotiable, but again, it's all very highly contextualized and subject to the laws of our state and the requirements in the local school district.

So that's why I use the term multilingual. I also want to extend this notion of family, because in our communities, families also include extended family members, and that could be tios (uncles) or tias (aunts) and sobrinos (nephew) and sobrinas (niece), and other people in the community that are part of the caregiving of the student and of the child.

Some of the families reflect refugee backgrounds and are asylum-seekers, and we have many-- more than 50 percent of our families are non-immigrant US-born, and that brings with it a multitude of different orientations toward issues such as immigration and feelings of belonging. So those are other factors that seem to affect the way that families feel engaged and want to be engaged in our community settings.

From the beginning, I just want to acknowledge that families have knowledge of multiple languages, different literacy practices in the home, different knowledge bases about culture and the role of schools. And so that is something that we try to understand as we begin to engage families in our community.

Okay. So as a way to synthesize that, some of the areas that seem to be affecting the way we conduct multilingual family engagement is knowledge and awareness of the physical access that families have to schools. That is the place in which they inhabit, as well as the space surrounding the school.

So for instance, in rural communities, in our rural communities, some of the kids get on the bus very early in the morning and are on the bus for 90 minutes to two hours in order to actually

arrive at school, and that's because the space is very broad and vast, and so the school as a place means to accommodate that transportation.

Another factor is the language that families use and the way they prefer to communicate and to access schools. The schools in Florida typically follow an inclusive classroom model, and so the teachers are mainly monolingual English speakers with a little bit of knowledge of how other languages might work.

We have required teacher preparation in the state of Florida surrounding English language learners since 1990, but that doesn't necessarily mean that teachers feel comfortable or have the knowledge base to use different forms of communication or to engage in practices that are best-suited for immigrant multilingual families or multilingual families in their communities.

So the issue of language is an important factor, and it's important for us to understand what languages and literacy practices are occurring in the home. And the third issue, of course, is culture, and there's a broad umbrella because families have different orientations and stances, as well as understanding and awareness of the role of different school members and the roles of some of the leadership in schools, and so that's a knowledge— that's a learning curve for many of the families that are new to our community.

Okay. So in this particular slide, I'd just like to demonstrate what we found in some work that we've done under an NPD grant like the kind that Holly has talked about. We actually went to educators and we asked them, what are some of the factors and the challenges that you face in engaging multilingual families and what they say? And then we also went to our multilingual families in the rural setting and asked them, what were some of the challenges that they faced?

And so without spending too much time or going through the entire list, which is an abbreviated list from the book, you can just look quickly and see that both educators and families have a sense of wanting to build relationships with the other, as well as figuring out ways to build trust. So that goes beyond just communicating, but a sense of engaging in the social and emotional and academic well-being of the child and the children and their families, and ensuring that that happens through ongoing communication that's deeper and richer and is relational— is relational kinds of trust.

Other things that happen, though, with our families is that they have a sort of hierarchy of needs. They are really working very hard. In our case they're working picking watermelon right now, and there's a peanut industry nearby as well as horse farms. Many of them work on horse farms and stables well into the evening, and so accessing school is difficult for them. They usually make time and try to make time to get to parent meetings, but it's not always easy, and so that's something that they would like to prioritize more.

And educators understand that and do help to break down some of the misconceptions and barriers, but they do wish they had more interpreters and cultural resources in the community.

Okay. So I'd like to briefly go through what I see are five components of rural multilingual family engagement, and I'll break this down really succinctly one by one. But the reason that I sort of theorize with these five components is because I've found over the years that some of what seems to be communication barriers exists because we haven't stopped to think about who families are and what they already know, and then really specific ways of addressing those barriers.

And so I think a more holistic approach of number one, recognizing the variability across multilingual families and the differences in rural settings will help to form a foundation for moving into effective family engagement. And here, I'd like to emphasize that some of the earlier models that we see on family engagement that are not multilingual in nature or don't address issues of rurality, they don't particularly work for us.

So for instance, things like parents reading bedtime stories to their children, which we think is a really important literacy practice, and I would argue is a very good practice, that particular practice might not fit the culture or linguistic background of the families that we work with. Another thing that we see as a traditional way of engaging families is for families to be physically present in the school for parent meetings or PTA meetings and so on.

And those are things that rural multilingual families either don't necessarily understand culturally or aren't sure how to do culturally or linguistically. Some of the research in this area, for example, of meta-analysis conducted by Jaynes in 2003 indicates that some of the most important things families can do is to have ongoing conversations with their children at home surrounding the importance of education. And he has found that that is one of the single most important factors and ways that families can support their children in school.

Okay. So breaking these down into five little components, I'll just go through these and give you what this component says and an example of how it works in practice. So for the first one I've talked about already previously is that educators learning about families' languages, cultures, and listening to their stories. So that is really important, the idea of listening and being very specific with what families already know and the languages and literacy practices that they use.

So this means going beyond assumptions about Spanish being a dominant language, for instance, and understanding indigenous varieties or other language varieties in the community and the literacy practices in the home. So for instance, I had a family a few years ago that spoke to me verbally in the home. The parents wrote and could read Spanish, but some of the more important literacy materials in the home was, for instance, a bible that was written in Otomi, which is an indigenous language that comes from the High Plains area of Mexico.

This was a sort of a prized literacy— literary possession of the family, and it symbolized for them who they were. It was very important for them to have important literacies that were in languages that they were familiar with. But one of the things our families say when we listen and the stories they tell is right now in our immediate context is the issue of immigration. For

the past two or three years, we've seen lots of fear in our communities, and families want support and want to know what they should do in the context of immigration.

Many of our families are mixed-status families with some born in the US, some of the children born in the US, others not, and so there's a lot of misconception about what to do. And we've created a variety of materials for them to understand immigration issues in the US, and also to be able to have some security around immigration such as powers of attorney that were translated for them in the event of a deportation raid.

They also want to know how schools work and who they can trust and build relationships with, so that's paramount, I think, to the work that we do to get started.

The second area that I theorize here is that educators need to reflect on family strengths and resources and seek community members' input. And so in order to do that, it means not only listening, but understanding the way that the community functions. So many of the immigrant families, for instance, contribute to the economic—and Doug talked about this—the economy, the local economy by working in home-building industries, in the restaurant industry, working in agriculture for us in this area, as well as in fishing industries nearby here. So we know that that's what they do, and they know a lot about the way the community functions.

They also build strong social networks in and among each other, and that's a resource that we like to tap into when we disseminate some of our materials. Almost like a train-the-trainer model, but we call these these promotoras, and as a way for the community to use their social networking as a resource.

The example on this slide here is something that we did recently with families in our fringe rural school. We had families who were there and available come into the school, and we asked them what they wanted to know about the way schools functioned. Some of the families indicated that their children were facing experiences of bullying, and they wanted to know who they could talk to when they had this problem— if they could talk to anybody about this problem.

So as a way to get started, we actually took what we would think about as the roles, like the principal, assistant principal, and a bilingual paraprofessional, and we translated those roles— just a brief description of those roles—and we had people get together in small groups and talk about the role. So we use oral communication and oral literacies to describe those, and then have them write down or have a partner write down the name of the person that they could communicate with in the school.

So we wanted for them to build ways to understand how schools function, as well as specific names of people that they could communicate with when they had problems or if they had problems with their child, or ways to get resources and communicate with the school. So we try not to take anything for granted in this case.

The third bubble here, though, is one where educators communicate and reach out to build relationships with families and culturally and linguistically-responsive ways. So I really love this work because, to me, it connects what we theorize about culturally and linguistically-responsive pedagogy—teaching and materials—and actually create materials that make sense for our community.

So one of the examples here is a fotonovela. A fotonovela is a graphic novel that we create that is culturally and linguistically responsive, and if you look to the right side of this screen, you can see here an example of pictures— these are photo pictures that have these little bubbles that have dialogue in them.

What we do with the dialogue is create them in languages that families can read—if they can read, if they're print-literate—and also use very reduced text so that it gets to the essence of a communication between two members in the community as a way to solve a problem. So the fotonovelas actually look at an issue or a problem that families say that they are facing, and provide step-by-step solutions for them to be able to resolve the problem.

In this particular example, the fotonovela is called Como lo leo, that means, how do I read it? And it's, how do I read, in this case, the report card? So we took a report card that was written in English that our rural partner uses. We actually whited out the name, and we kept the grades and so on, some of the comments there. And later in the fotonovela, we translated into Spanish, for parents that can read in Spanish, but we break down a communication between a parent who knows how to read the report card with communication— with someone in the community who wants to know how to read it and what to do with that information.

So these are usually three, four, five-page documents that are pretty good size. It could be 8 and 1/2 by 11 or a little bit smaller. And we create these materials for families. We never go and just hand these out. I have to say, that is not a practice that we find works. We actually try to use these materials and inform other people how to use them, and use them directly with families-- that could be extended family members as well. And we walk through them step by step.

And what's really interesting is, when we do this on a parent-teacher night or when the report card is being distributed, parents will come in with a report card and say, [inaudible] Ya Veo (I already see), I already see. We have them hold up the report card of their child against the translated one, and they really go back and forth and can understand the way their child's report card reads and help them make sense of what the meaning is and what they need to know from the report card. So it's been very useful.

A couple of other things that we do is hold, of course, adult ESL nights in churches and non-school places where they feel safe, especially in this anti-immigrant climate. And we've done things— like we've built little free libraries and put bilingual books available in front of churches for people to take and leave as print materials they can use in the home of the children.

In the next slide, the fourth circle, the fourth bubble here is educators using knowledge of family strength and their backgrounds to support student learning. So this builds upon the prior slide of learning about what families already know, and here we extend it a step further to support the children in school.

So the strengths, though, of our rural community and the families is that they have strengths and resilience, they have a lot of trans-border communication knowledges. The family network is a main resource, and among Latino families— and clearly that's not all in diverse settings where we have refugee and asylum-seekers also in the community, but among some groups. Familismo or the notion of family is the strength of the child. We've seen this in educational practices, actually— or thinking skills in the way families are a resource for learning for children to demonstrate their knowledge.

So we talk about social networking, and many of us might remember some of the earlier work in 1992 by Luis Moll that is Funds of Knowledge. I'd like to go back to that work, because it is very insightful in the kinds of knowledges that families have as resources and ways they communicate with each other. Families also have knowledge of the labor community, agriculture in our space, food, fishing, and livestock industries.

One of the guides, and one of the things that come out of the work as a way to connect those knowledges, is what we call a La Guia. This is a document that is a little bit longer— it's about 10 or 12 pages long. And if you just can see on the right side of the screen, you'll notice that this bilingual material actually has medical and social services in Levy County—in Condado de Levy.

And where we put the diamond, those black diamonds there, is where families in our community can ask for someone in the community who speaks Spanish. So families, we actually show them how to— if they have, for example, a dental issue—we provide the guide and we have them go through the guide and identify a dental service and which ones actually speak a language that they know.

One of the problems with these kinds of materials is that they get quickly outdated in rural setting sometimes with the language resources. So we try to update these annually. And we don't just assume that these resources—language resources and bilingual resources—are available in the community. We call in advance and speak with people and test them before we put anything in print.

And some of these materials, just to answer Jason's question, are available online on our Project STELLAR website. And I can add some of the more recent fotonovelas onto the website. And you can access them and adapt them. We are very happy to share them as ways for people to use this knowledge in their own communities.

Okay. And the fifth bubble here is educators advocating for equity and change. And we're finding more and more that issues— I mentioned of immigration and politics are really affecting the way families function. The fear that they face in rural communities and trying to network in and amongst each other, as well as with schools.

In Florida, we unfortunately have a legislature that just passed anti-sanctuary cities and— or a ban, a statewide ban for anything that looks like a sanctuary city. So our families are really concerned about what that means for them, and we are trying to understand better right now the role of schools in this particular climate and environment.

And so we're learning and we're passing the information on as we go. We do work a lot with community partners. So for instance— and you can go to their website, too, the Rural Women's Health Project is a phenomenal community partner. They engage families in rural settings and they have a lot of resources also on their website that you could access.

I'd like to also work with schools and talk with them a little bit about developing something called or similar to a parent manifesto. We call it a family manifesto. It sounds very leftist, but in fact, what we'd like for schools to do and educators to do when they— is to develop a plan for multilingual family engagement and ways that in their school they can engage families in ways that are culturally and linguistically-appropriate and that tap into the resources of families and the social processes and the resources of the community.

So interesting, we've had schools that are monolingual schools actually change the front signage of the schools and the placards so one side is in English, another side is in Spanish, or in another language. So when families drive up to the school, they actually see that a language that they can read is there right on the welcome signage. And so it's sort of in that spirit that I move to the next slide about reflection and action, and really being able to tie into how schools function, and in particular, communities.

I should note that schools in rural settings have a lot of strengths, as well as face the issues that were raised earlier about resources. We see the same thing. In agricultural settings, when some of the local school property taxes is intended to be used for schools, but local properties are-- agriculture farmland that are taxed at lower property bases and a lot of the public land is churches in Florida, then we see that there's a very reduced tax base. So rural schools are really under-resourced just off the top, just based on local property taxes. And so this is a definite challenge.

However, schools also act as community centers, and we distribute health care— we distribute food backpacks on Fridays in the schools, but also we use the schools as a setting for health fairs where we do blood pressure and diabetes checks. Another thing for schools, as community centers in our location, schools often are the one place where there can be funeral services held and things like that, because there are either no other services or families can't afford a funeral home for—

And so the schools have multiple functions and strengths, and that's families. Not that they come in traditional ways to schools, but we use the schools as spaces where we can combine events for families to be present. And when we combine events, we do have quite a good turnout with families that'll come in.

Okay. So again, in this slide, we're sort of checking assumptions and challenging traditional practices and family engagement. And again, I just want to underscore that traditional practices won't necessarily work in rural schools.

And finally, we think about the home literacies and means of communication, I'd like to underscore here some work of colleagues where they talk about school-home-school communication. So this is an ongoing way of communicate— schools needing to initiate and families communicating back, and then schools reaffirming and communicating again back with families so that the process is circular and continues.

Just one more slide I'd like to leave you with here is. I call it a one-task challenge, but I really like this work where I actually stand— we stand in the front of a school and look at the school as we approach it and think about and reflect upon ways that the school actually opens up and is welcoming to rural multilingual families.

And so I like to call this is taking a field trip at your own school. But just starting with a lens of like what's happening here culturally, what's happening linguistically. And our schools, for example, Meet the Teacher Night with parents meeting the teacher right before back to school. I've gone in the past and seen families come in not really know where to go. So things like signage that is very visible with arrows that might be multilingual or bilingual will help families know where to go, and signage in a language that they can read is very, very welcoming.

So they're happy when they're able to go and understand and not feel like they're not part of the community. That goes a very, very long way. And so I encourage people to sort of go into the school with an open lens, and draw a map as you would— a family would going into the school. And figure out ways that families feel that they are reflected in the signage, in the imagery of the school environment, and using multiple languages and cultural resources to welcome them into the school.

So okay, hopefully I didn't talk too long here. But I can pause here and ask if anybody has questions or comments. And I put up here a few I think culturally-relevant and linguistically-relevant materials that you also might be able to access in your communities.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Thank you so much, Maria. It looks like Jason has a question. To what extent is research around parent engagement and migrant aid programs able to support family engagement among ELs?

MARIA COADY: Yeah, let me talk about that here for a second. In fact, yesterday I just came from a meeting held at our Migrant Ed Office. So in North Florida where we're pretty rural all over, we have a regional Migrant Education Office. They actually have portables behind the back of one of our local schools in a more semi-urban setting. But they do travel— we all try— As you know, we all travel out a lot. And so we network very, very much with Migrant Ed.

So now one of the issues in North Florida, for instance, is that— I don't know if you all remember, but years ago when Migrant Ed qualification changed from five years— families had

to migrate more frequently than every five years to every three years—we lost a lot of families who had access to those services at that stage. And also, migrant— in terms of Migrant Ed, our families, quite a few of them have settled out and no longer qualify. So they prefer to settle out in this area where there's enough work for them so that the children don't have to keep moving.

But we do work with them. The reason we went to Migrant Aid Office yesterday was to rethink for this year coming up new ways to engage families around this really important issues of immigration and trauma. So we're planning, for instance, on hosting pre-pre-planning. So in Florida, that for us, that's in July, and we're going to invite people from all over North Central Florida—that is, the ESL, ESOL coordinator, guidance counselors, our Migrant Ed people will be there, as well as some community liaison people to talk about trauma and informed care for families that are new to the region, and also to talk with them and educate them on issues of immigration.

So Migrant Ed is a partner for us in all of these activities and provide really important cultural linguistic resources. They also keep us informed about newcomer families. A few weeks ago, we found some young children about 12 years old that were picking on migratory farms. So, of course, we brought them into school so that they could be in school and not picking on farms. But they work with us to help us— engage families. It's a very symbiotic relationship.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Thank you. Were there other questions from the group? Thank you so much, Maria. Thank you again, Holly. And thank you to the attendees, those of you that chipped in added a lot of color to this presentation and we really appreciate it. There will be a survey going out, so if you could just fill that out quickly, that'd be great.

And that's all we have. So thank you again for joining us, and hopefully we'll be in touch soon if you have any questions or follow-up. Thank you.

AUDIENCE: Thank you.

HOLLY HANSEN-THOMAS: Thank you so much.

MARIA COADY: Thank you, everybody.

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