

High School English Language Learner (ELL) Teachers:  
Departments, Roles, and Agency

Aliza K. Fones

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Reading Committee:

Dafney Blanca Dabach, Chair

Ana Elfers

Manka Varghese

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Aliza Fones

University of Washington

**Abstract**

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Aliza K. Fones

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Dafney Blanca Dabach, Ph.D.

College of Education: Curriculum and Instruction

The work of English language learner (ELL) teachers is a central component of the education ELL students receive. Because of systemic barriers to equitable education, ELL students at the high school level have not historically met achievement benchmarks at the same rate as their non-ELL peers, as indicated by lower rates of graduation, post-secondary matriculation, and achievement in content area assessments (August, Shanahan & Escamilla, 2009; Callahan, Wilkinson & Muller, 2014). As federal, state, and district policy makers respond to these challenges, the need to better understand the work of ELL teachers—on the ground—only increases with the implications of policy reforms for ELL instruction. Because ELL teachers are often organized into departments at the high school level, there is a greater need to understand how the context of ELL departments shapes the work ELL teachers do, along with the influence of their own agency. Simultaneously, the complexity of ELL teachers' work calls

for on-going professional learning, creating a need to examine not only how departments shape the work these teachers do, but also what opportunities they have for continued growth through professional development. Finally, there is need to know more about the interactions between ELL teachers and school administrators who often make decisions about school-based policies that have important implications for ELL teachers' work.

While there is a body of literature that examines the work of high school teachers and high school department structure (e.g., Little & McLaughlin, 1993; Siskin & Little, 1995), there is little research that specifically addresses high school ELL departments and teachers.

Additionally, there is literature about ELL teachers' instruction and pedagogical practices (e.g., Valdés, 2004; Walqui, 2006), but less so related to the roles, collaboration, professional learning, and agency of these teachers at the high school level. To address these gaps, the following research questions guide this study:

1. How are ELL departments structured in two comprehensive high schools within the same district? What are the roles of ELL department heads, and what are their experiences of agency?

2. How do high school ELL teachers in two schools participate in professional learning communities (PLCs)? What topics are taken up in these meetings, and what are the possibilities and limitations of ELL teacher learning in PLCs?

3. How do school leaders support high school ELL departments and teachers, especially as related to the integration of ELL departments into the school building and the learning outcomes of ELL students?

This investigation, comprised of three separate articles, uses a multi-faceted framework that draws from literature on high school teachers' work and department organization, teacher

agency, and sociocultural approaches to language instruction. The purpose of this research is to better understand the organization of ELL departments, the work and agency of high school ELL teachers, the professional learning and collaboration of ELL teachers, and the contexts and actors (such as school leaders) that shape their work. Methodologically, this qualitative study draws from interview data with ELL teachers, district personnel, and school administrators as well as observational data from classrooms and staff meetings. Findings indicate that the organization of ELL departments shapes the roles and responsibilities of ELL teachers, which has implications for the classes and services offered to ELL students. The agency of ELL teachers also shapes their work, and offers both opportunities and constraints for their practice. Related to ELL teachers' participation in PLCs, findings demonstrate that the foci of the PLC in each building varied widely from a focus on administrative tasks to a focus on instructional tasks, with overlap in the area of student learning, and that teacher expertise was important for teacher learning in these meetings. Finally, this study found that school administrators play a vital part in supporting the work of ELL teachers and departments, especially related to the integration of the ELL department within the school building, and educational opportunities for ELL students. The findings of these articles hold promise for improving structure, organization, and support of ELL programs, departments, and teachers at the high school level. The articles that comprise this dissertation provide an analysis of the roles, experiences, and situated participation of high school ELL teachers in order to better understand their work as part of a growing field of research on educational opportunities and access for ELL students in the United States.

## Table of Contents

	Page
<b>Introduction</b> .....	12
<i>References</i> .....	26
<b>Article 1</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<b>What Shapes the Work of High School English Language Learner (ELL) Teachers?: A Qualitative Study of Teacher Agency and Department Organization at Two Comprehensive High Schools</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<i>Literature and Framing</i> .....	32
<i>The Role of Departments in Shaping of High School Teachers' Work</i> .....	32
<i>Theories of Agency</i> .....	34
<i>Conceptualizing High School ELL Teacher Agency</i> .....	37
<i>Methods</i> .....	39
<i>Sampling and Timeframe</i> .....	39
<i>Participants</i> .....	42
<i>Data Sources</i> .....	43
<i>Data Analysis</i> .....	45
<i>District Context: Lake Valley School District's ELL Program</i> .....	45
<i>Findings</i> .....	48
<i>Similarities and Differences in the ELL Departments at Metro and Fields High Schools</i> .....	48
<i>Differences in Roles and Responsibilities of ELL Teachers at Fields and Metro</i> .....	55
<i>The Opportunities and Constraints of High School ELL Teacher Agency</i> .....	57

<i>Discussion</i> .....	65
<i>Implications and Conclusion</i> .....	66
<i>References</i> .....	69
<b>Article 2</b> .....	<b>73</b>
<b>Inside the “Black Box” of English Language Learner Professional Learning Communities: Possibilities and Limitations from Two Urban High Schools</b> .....	<b>73</b>
<i>Literature and Framing</i> .....	74
<i>Teacher Learning in Communities</i> .....	75
<i>Methods</i> .....	80
<i>Setting</i> .....	81
<i>Participants</i> .....	82
<i>Data Sources</i> .....	83
<i>Data Analysis</i> .....	87
<i>Limitations and Positionality</i> .....	91
<i>Findings and Discussion</i> .....	92
<i>Fields High School’s ELL PLC: Changing School Demographics and New ELL Teachers</i> .....	96
<i>Topics and Tasks of PLC Meetings</i> .....	96
<i>Patterns of Participation in PLC Meetings</i> .....	99
<i>Metro High School’s ELL PLC: An Established Department and Veteran Teachers</i> ....	100
<i>Topics and Tasks of PLC Meetings</i> .....	101
<i>Patterns of Participation in PLC Meetings</i> ,.....	103
<i>Topics and Participation Across Sites</i> .....	104
<i>Possibilities and Limitations of ELL PLCs Related to Teacher Learning and District Professional Development Policy</i> .....	105

<i>Implications and Conclusion</i> .....	107
<i>References</i> .....	109
<i>Appendix: Codebook</i> .....	114
<b>Article 3</b> .....	<b>117</b>
<b>A Framework for School Leaders’ Support of High School ELL Departments and Teachers</b> .....	<b>117</b>
<i>ELL Education: Changing Policies and Changing Populations</i> .....	117
<i>The Struggle Between Integration and Isolation of ELL Departments</i> .....	119
<i>Methods and Context of Study</i> .....	120
<i>Principal Aaron at Metro High School</i> .....	123
<i>Assistant Principal Harper at Fields High School</i> .....	125
<i>Considerations and Recommendations for ELL Leadership</i> .....	126
<i>Collaboration, Responsiveness, Awareness, Framing, and Trust (CRAFT)</i> .....	127
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	131
<i>References</i> .....	133
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>136</b>
<b>Appendices</b> .....	<b>140</b>
Appendix A: Interview Protocols .....	140
Appendix B: Observation Guides .....	147

List of Tables

	Page
<b>Article 1</b>	
<b>What Shapes the Work of High School English Language Learner (ELL) Teachers?: A Qualitative Study of Teacher Agency and Department Organization at Two Comprehensive High Schools</b>	
Table 1. District and School ELL Personnel .....	43
Table 2. District and School Demographics .....	47
Table 3. Roles and Responsibilities of ELL Department Heads in Two High Schools	56
 <b>Article 2</b>	
<b>Inside the “Black Box” of English Language Learner Professional Learning Communities: Possibilities and Limitations from Two Urban High Schools</b>	
Table 1. Participants in ELL Professional Learning Communities .....	83
Table 2. ELL Professional Learning Community Meetings .....	85
Table 3. Percentage of ELL Meeting Time .....	94
 <b>Article 3</b>	
<b>A Framework for School Leaders’ Support of High School ELL Departments and Teachers</b>	
Table 1. District and School Demographics .....	122

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## Introduction

I recall how excited I was to begin my first year as a K-12 ELL teacher in a small, rural, school district in Oregon. A few weeks before the start of the school year, having heard nothing from the district, I called the front office of the elementary school to ask about my classroom. She told me that I did not have a classroom, but rather an “office” that I shared with the physical education (P.E.) teacher. The office turned out to be a small, windowless closet where I had a desk and a bookshelf, and where the P.E. teacher had her equipment (and sometimes a pet snake). I was disappointed, but I thought that perhaps I would have a classroom at the middle school or high school, where I would also be teaching. I called those buildings, only to hear that again there was no classroom for me. I remember being confused, as if it was an oversight that would be corrected as soon as someone found out. At the middle school, the problem of not having a classroom was solved by letting me teach in the kindergarten classroom when it was empty in the afternoons (imagine my middle school students sitting uncomfortably in small chairs, surrounded by the trappings of a typical kindergarten classroom). At the high school, there was no space whatsoever, but upon hearing this, the librarian made space in a book closet for my students and me. I finally asked someone what the previous ELL teacher had done, if he had had a classroom, and I was told that he had a cart that he pushed around to the different places where he taught, like the lunchroom when it wasn't being used, or the hallway, or whatever free space he could find. With enough persistence, I found teaching spaces by the end of my first year. In my second year, a school counselor handed me an envelope that contained the results from an audit of the district ELL program that had happened the year before I arrived. The counselor told me that she suspected the district had not wanted to share this with me. The report contained civil rights findings related to, among other things, the fact that ELL students

were not being served in classrooms, and were without curriculum and materials. The findings stated clearly that the burden of lack of space must be shared equally by all students.

This story is just one of the many ways that I was witness to ELL students being denied access to the same resources and opportunities as non-ELL students. This was when I first became curious about the system-wide and organizational aspects of education and the way that they not only affected my students, but my work as a teacher. Issues of policy and equity were omnipresent in my work, and the decisions made by the district about the services of the ELL program affected my work at many different levels, and certainly affected the experiences and education of the students I worked with.

The work of high school English language learner (ELL) teachers is an important factor in the educational experiences of ELL students, a population growing in number and diversity (Migration Policy Institute, 2016). Because of systemic (and systematic) barriers to equitable education, ELL students at the high school level have not historically met achievement benchmarks at the same rate as their non-ELL peers, as indicated by lower rates of graduation, post-secondary matriculation, and achievement in content area assessments (August, Shanahan & Escamilla, 2009; Callahan, Wilkinson & Muller, 2014). As the nature of ELL teachers' work continues to shift to meet the changes in the ELL student population (as well as changes in federal, state, and district policies), the need to better understand ELL teachers' work increases given the implications for ELL instruction, school-level ELL programs, department organization, and the instruction of ELL students.

There is a body of literature that examines the work of high school teachers and high school department structure (e.g., Little & McLaughlin, 1993; Siskin & Little, 1995), but little research that specifically addresses high school ELL departments and teachers. There is also

literature about ELL teachers' instruction and pedagogical practices, but less so at the high school level, especially as related to the roles, collaboration, and agency of these teachers. This study contributes to existing literature by examining the roles and experiences of ELL teachers within the ELL departments at different high schools within the same district, the organization of their work, professional learning, and their interactions with building administrators. The purpose of this research is to better understand the work and agency of high school ELL teachers, the organization of ELL departments, the professional learning and collaboration of ELL teachers, and the context and actors (such as school leaders) that affect this work. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How are ELL departments structured in two comprehensive high schools within the same district, what are the roles of ELL department heads, and what are their experiences of agency?

2. How do high school ELL teachers in two schools participate in professional learning communities (PLCs)? What topics are taken up in these meetings, and what are the possibilities and limitations of ELL teacher learning in PLCs?

3. How do school leaders support high school ELL departments and teachers, especially as related to the integration of ELL departments into the school building and the learning outcomes of ELL students?

Using a multi-faceted framework that draws from literature on high school teachers' work and department organization, teacher agency, and sociocultural approaches to language instruction, this study examines context and experience of high school ELL teachers in an effort to better understand their work as part of a growing field of research on educational opportunities

and outcomes of ELL students in the United States. Analysis of interview data, classroom and meeting observations, provides insight into the forces that shape the work of these teachers.

My goal in undertaking this study was to better understand the complex context in which high school ELL teachers work. As the diversity of our society increases with new populations of immigrants and refugees, the tapestry of our public schools is being woven with new cloth. It behooves us to acknowledge these members of our communities and their contributions, whether they be intellectual, cultural, linguistic, economic, all the above, or otherwise. Our public schools are one of the main socializing forces for young people in the United States, and for English learners, their experience in schools includes time spent with ELL teachers.

What I have witnessed in my work with high school ELL students and their teachers is a desperate need for education that is more responsive to the variation within the population of high school ELLs. Often that responsiveness is left entirely to the ELL teachers, who with limited guidance and resources, attempt to provide the educational opportunity that is the legal right of their students. Additionally, aside from providing classroom instruction, high school ELL teachers are often counselors, advisers, tutors, interpreters, liaisons, advocates, and much more. I remember scouring staff rooms and supply closets for anything I could use in my classroom; I called publishing companies for sample curricula because the district did not have one; I drove my students to local college fairs; I interpreted every phone call, teacher conference, and meeting with Spanish-speaking students' families; I filled out financial aid paperwork (for students who were documented immigrants) and brainstormed options and resources for those who were not.

To better understand these issues and conditions in education, I conducted a small pilot study in 2013 where I observed two high school ELL teachers in districts with a high percentage

of ELL students. I observed their classes, looking at the curricula and materials that they used, and how they designed their instruction to be responsive to their students. I also interviewed them about their work as ELL teachers, what brought them to the work, and their experiences teaching high school ELL. Specifically, I wanted to know more about how they taught and their autonomy as ELL teachers, which I suspected was different than the experiences of other content area teachers. What I found was that while their positions as ELL teachers afforded them a certain level of autonomy, there were also contextual forces related to the district, school and department structures, as well as individual agency that influenced their work. To further develop these ideas, I designed my dissertation study to delve deeper into these issues of agency, structure, and teachers' roles.

The contributions of this research include a better understanding of not only the important work that high school ELL teachers do, but also the context in which they do it and some of the forces that shape it (namely agency, department structure, professional learning communities, and collaboration with administrators). While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine student experiences and outcomes in this context, by beginning with an understanding of ELL teachers' roles and policy implementation, we can better understand the current learning context of high school ELL students.

### **Summary of Study Design**

I designed this study to capture the complexity of ELL teachers' roles, as well as the variable and changing district and school contexts in which they work. This study includes aspects of qualitative design (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2005), and case study (Yin, 2013). These research traditions lend themselves to the research at hand by providing methods that provide detailed description and analysis of the experiences of high school ELL teachers, and the

contexts in which this takes place. I employed a variety of interpretive practices that allowed entry into these interconnected facets of the research problem and a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). This dissertation is written as three separate articles, each addressing a different aspect of the research problem, each responding to distinct research questions (noted above), and each written with a different framework, data set, and audience in mind. The three articles are (in order):

1. What Shapes the Work of High School English Language Learner Teachers?:  
A Qualitative Study of Teacher Agency and Department Organization at Two  
Comprehensive High Schools
2. Inside the “Black Box” of English Language Learner Professional Learning  
Communities: Possibilities and Limitations from Two Urban High Schools
3. A Framework for School Leaders’ Support of High School ELL Departments and  
Teachers

### **Synopsis of Articles**

Below is an abstract for each of the three articles. The three-article format is apt given the multi-faceted nature of the research and the importance of speaking to these different aspects of high school ELL education: department organization and teacher agency, teacher learning and expertise, and the work of school leaders in supporting ELL programs. The first two articles present empirical data and findings related to the work of high school ELL teachers, while the third is a practitioner piece that provides a framework for school leaders’ support of ELL teachers and by extension, students.

## **1. What Shapes the Work of High School English Language Learner Teachers?:**

### **A Qualitative Study of Teacher Agency and Department Organization at Two Comprehensive High Schools**

High school ELL teachers occupy a unique place in the United States public school system. The work of high school ELL teachers is often seen as distinct from the work of their content-area colleagues, in part due to the subject matter, in part due to the students that they teach, as well as the way that they are positioned within the school (Creese, 2005; Olsen, 1997; Valdés, 2004). As our understanding increases of the factors that impact high school ELL student outcomes, so do the ideas of how to best educate this population of students. There is a growing body of research that addresses the importance of course-taking and placement—especially at the secondary level (Callahan, 2005; Callahan, Wilkinson & Muller, 2010; Dabach & Callahan, 2011), as well as research into the importance of teacher placement into ELL classrooms (Dabach, 2015). However, an understudied and related area that is part of the same conversation is the work of ELL teachers, specifically the factors that shape their work. In this article, I focus on two of these factors: the organization of the ELL department and its positioning within the school context, and the agency of ELL teachers themselves. Drawing from literature on teachers' work in high school departments (Little, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001), the work of ELL teachers (Harper & DeJong, 2009; Valdés, 2004), and teacher agency (i.e., Lasky, 2005), I address the following research questions: first, how do ELL departments at two high schools vary within the same district? Second, in what ways do the roles of the ELL teachers vary at two high schools within the same district? Finally, what are the opportunities and constraints of agency in the work of high school ELL teachers, and how is the work of high school ELL teachers shaped by this agency?

I analyzed the structure of two high school ELL departments, the roles and responsibilities of ELL teachers, and the agency of the ELL department heads. Findings indicate that the ELL department organization varied between the two schools, which along with opportunities for teacher agency, shaped the work of the ELL teachers. Additionally, teacher agency posed certain constraints on ELL teachers' work. These findings have implications for the way that schools and districts organize ELL programs and departments, which in turn has implications for the experiences and outcomes of high school ELL students.

## **2. Inside the “Black Box” of English Language Learner Professional Learning Communities: Possibilities and Limitations from Two Urban High Schools**

One promising context for teacher learning is the professional learning community (PLC). Research supports that the learning and professional development (PD) of high school teachers is a major factor affecting the educational experience of students (Horn & Little, 2010), and that PD for elementary grade-level teachers of ELLs can be effective (DeJong & Harper, 2005; Fillmore & Snow, 2000); yet, there is scant research about high school ELL teachers. This qualitative study examines four ELL department meetings (PLCs) that took place in two high schools within the same district, where there was a district PD policy that established PLCs across all schools. This study addresses the following research questions: What topics emerged during ELL PLC meetings and how were they taken up by meeting participants? How did participants engage and participate in ELL PLC meetings; and, what are the possibilities and limitations of high school ELL PLCs for ELL teacher learning? I analyzed teacher participation at these meetings and the major themes and topics that emerged. Findings indicate that the foci of the PLC in each building varied widely from a focus on administrative tasks to a focus on instructional tasks, with overlap in the area of student learning, and that teacher expertise was

important for teacher learning in these meetings. This article contributes timely understanding of a context of ELL teacher learning, and the potential for ELL PLCs to support both teacher and student learning.

### **3. A Framework for School Leaders' Support of High School ELL Departments and Teachers**

High school ELL students' academic success depends on both their access to and support in content area coursework and their successful acquisition of English. The goal of this article is to develop understanding of the role of building administrators in supporting ELL departments and teachers by addressing these questions: How can administrators support high school ELL departments and teachers? And, how can administrators support the integration of ELL departments, teachers, and students into the school? This article reports on a qualitative study that took place during the 2015-2016 school year and examined the roles and experiences of high school ELL teachers and their implementation of district ELL program policy at two large, urban, linguistically diverse high schools within the same district. I present two cases, one for each high school and school leader who worked most closely with the ELL department. Across both schools, the school leader's knowledge and support of the ELL program was key for the work of the ELL teachers, and by extension, the experiences of the students. Five major themes in the work of school leaders emerged from the data: collaboration, responsiveness, awareness, framing (how the ELL program, teachers, and students were positioned in the school), and trust. To address the gap in the literature surrounding the role of school leadership in the outcomes of high school ELL departments, I propose a framework for administrators' support, including considerations and recommendations for practice, with the goal of increased integration of the

ELL department, and access to educational opportunities and improved academic outcomes for ELL students.

### **Methodological Orientation**

My research is situated within the qualitative methodological tradition and this influenced every aspect of the study, from the research questions, to the study design, analysis, and ultimately, the interpretation. Located within the broad genre of qualitative and interpretive research, my methods reflect this tradition, as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2008):

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world.

This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

(p. 4)

And, as both a researcher and educator, it is important that I locate myself within the research itself and how I relate to it given my own experiences, perspectives, and understanding. This relationship of the researcher to the research calls to mind the work of philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer who provided the following allegory: “The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving”.<sup>1</sup> My role as a researcher was not as distinct and removed as the white-coated, clipboard-carrying image that the word “researcher” itself may conjure; when I entered school settings to observe and talk with the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Charles Taylor’s (2011) “Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes”

participants, I also interacted with custodians, librarians, parents, paraprofessionals, and others. I was not simply observing something that was fixed in the distance, I was moving and participating within a dynamic social setting. Understanding the subjective nature of research is the first step in engaging in research in a thoughtful and conscientious way. In fact, the hallmark of qualitative research is the way that it “features researchers themselves as observers and participants in the lives of the people being studied” (Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland, 2006, p.3). At times, I have thought that I was moving closer toward an answer or goal, but those horizons were necessarily moving and changing as I moved and changed. During my interactions with the teachers and administrators who I observed and interviewed, my view of the horizon changed, and I am grateful for the perspectives and insight that they shared.

Engaging in qualitative research in education settings means making the world of teaching and learning visible to an audience outside of the school, an audience for whom the workings of the education system are not intended. Because of this gap that exists between those who are in the school setting and those who are not, I took extra care to describe the setting and context of this research as I observed it, utilizing the “ethnographic past” (e.g., LeCompte, 1992) in my writing to indicate that what I observed was but one moment that has already happened and does not reflect ongoing circumstances and events.

### **Representation of ELL Education in Educational Research**

Specific to the study of ELL teachers and students is an important issue of representation: the terms used to describe students who speak languages other than English. In this dissertation, I chose to use the term “English language learner” or “ELL.” I made this decision based on the terminology that was being used in the research setting (and more broadly in public school settings). While I made my choice for practical reasons, this language is problematic because it

presents a deficit framing of students and places the emphasis on what students cannot do or are learning to do, as opposed to framing them based on their assets and skills, such as the other languages that they speak. Gaining traction in scholarship are the terms “emergent bilingual” (García, 2009) and “multilingual” as descriptors of these students. These terms acknowledge students’ skills and identities as speakers of more than one language. This terminology also helps to de-center English as the dominant language by giving value to other languages. The reader will also notice that I cite other authors who use “English learner” (“EL”) and “English as a second language” (“ESL”). These labels are similarly problematic, the latter being especially outdated and out of use. Attending to the terminology that we use to describe students is relevant to the conversation about their educational experiences; these terms reflect values and perceptions of students that extend beyond simply being a label.

### **Limitations**

As with all research, this study has limitations that I raise here. By design, this study focuses on the work of high school ELL teachers, the structure of ELL departments, and the district-level policies that affect their roles. Through interviews with district ELL administrators, building administrators, and teachers, I attempted to account for various perspectives involved in the education of high school ELL students. However, what this study does not include is the perspective of the students themselves, whose experiences are directly impacted by the above-mentioned actors. Future (and complimentary) research could examine the same topics and issues from the perspective of students.

Additionally, it is important to note some limitations in the data itself. In both school sites, I was careful to be conscientious about the ELL teachers’ interest in participating in my research, and at Metro High School, only one of the four ELL teachers agreed to be interviewed,

and three of the four consented for me to observe their classrooms. Without interview data from all of the ELL teachers at Metro, I cannot account for their experiences. Also, while I was able to attend many different meetings at the district, building, and department level, I only attended the meetings that I was invited to. Attendance at more meetings would have provided more perspective and scope of the nature and content of meetings (this is especially relevant to the third article).

With regard to the time frame and setting, this study presents a snapshot of two schools within one district, during one school year. An underlying premise of this study is that examining the district-level policy and ELL programs (alongside federal and state-level policies and programs) is important to understanding the education of ELLs. Due to time and resource constraints, this study looked at only one district during one school year; future work could compare districts to develop fuller understanding of the district-level context of ELL education, and also examine span two or more school years to see how ELL programs and services change over time (especially given that another premise is that ELL policies and programs are constantly shifting in an effort to adapt to changing policies and populations).

### **Positionality**

I acknowledge my positionality as a researcher in relation to the context and participants that this study took place in. As a researcher coming from a university into the school environment, I was an outsider in the settings where I gathered data, and for many, researchers represent traditions and institutions that have historically had a negative impact on minoritized and marginalized populations. I was also aware during data collection that my relationship with the research was influenced by my previous experiences as an ELL teacher and teacher educator. Perhaps in positive ways, these experiences provided me perspective and understanding of

teachers' work that I leveraged in my interactions with participants. I am also bilingual, and my experiences learning a second language contributed to my interpretation of events in the ELL classes and meetings that I observed.

### **Final Notes for the Reader**

Thank you, reader, for your patience and understanding with this format of a dissertation, comprised of three separate research articles. It is likely that aspects may seem slightly repetitive as I am drawing from the same study for each of the three articles. While the three articles are presented here in one document, their future form will be as distinct articles that stand alone. Please also keep in mind that the third and final article is written for a practitioner audience, and adheres to standards regarding length and style for practitioner-oriented journals. Finally, thank you for taking the time to read this work. I am fortunate to have been able to devote the past five years to learning about and understanding something that I think is so important to our society, and I am glad to share this work with you.

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## Article 1

### **What Shapes the Work of High School English Language Learner Teachers?:**

#### **A Qualitative Study of Teacher Agency and Department Organization at Two Comprehensive High Schools**

English Language Learner (ELL) teachers occupy a unique place in the United States public school system, and at the high school level, this uniqueness is even more salient. The work of high school ELL teachers is often seen as distinct from the work of their content-area colleagues, in part due to the subject matter, in part due to the students that they teach, as well as the way that they are positioned within the school (Creese, 2005; Olsen, 1997; Valdés, 2004). High school ELL students see many teachers throughout the day, but in this article, I focus on the teachers whose role in the school is as an ELL teacher, responsible for teaching English language development (ELD) classes and/or administering other services that are part of the ELL program. There has been an increase in attention paid to content-based approaches to language teaching (Valdés, 2004), but ELL teachers' roles continue to be an important part of ELL students' educational experience. While the instruction of all teachers is governed by standards and increased accountability under federal guidelines, there are also state-level English language proficiency standards that ELL teachers must adhere to. In other words, depending on the circumstances, the high school ELL teacher may do double duty ensuring ELL students are able to successfully acquire English language proficiency, as well as achieve academic success in content areas (e.g., Walqui, 2010). Add to this the variation that exists with a population of high school ELL students (i.e., the variety of home languages and countries, home language proficiency, English proficiency, high rates of mobility, and academic experience), and the work

of high school ELL teachers is revealed as not only unique, but complicated and constantly changing. The purpose of this study is to better understand the forces that shape high school ELL teachers' work within this complex context.

This article examines the work and experiences of high school ELL teachers (specifically, their agency) within the context of their district, school, and department. In this way, both the external condition of context, and the internal condition of teachers' agency, are addressed. There is an important tradition of research related to the agency of language teachers, specifically second language teachers, including ELL teachers (e.g., Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Palmer & Martinez, 2013; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). The underlying importance of this topic is rooted in not only understanding the experiences of these teachers, but also the related educational opportunities (or lack thereof) of the students they serve.

As our understanding increases of the factors that impact high school ELL student outcomes, so do the ideas of how to best educate this population of students. There is a growing body of research that addresses the importance of course-taking and placement—especially at the secondary level (Callahan, 2005; Callahan, Wilkinson & Muller, 2010; Dabach & Callahan, 2011), as well as research into the importance of teacher placement into ELL classrooms (Dabach, 2015). This work demonstrates the importance of both the designated ELL teachers who work with high school ELL students, and the organizational context within which these teachers work. However, an understudied and related area that is a part of the same conversation, is the work of ELL teachers, specifically the factors that shape their work. In this article, I focus on two of these factors: the organization of the ELL department, and its positioning within the school context, and the agency of ELL teachers themselves.

As districts and schools have changed their ELL programs to meet the needs of an increasing and increasingly diverse population of ELLs, the work of ELL teachers has changed, too. Some school districts are opting for the placement of ELLs into mainstream classes with their non-ELL peers (a process referred to as “mainstreaming”). Others provide what is known as “sheltered instruction,” where course content is presented in specific ways intended to be more accessible for ELLs by differentiating the instruction (Dabach, 2014). Many school districts also provide leveled English language development (ELD) courses focused on the students’ language acquisition. Recently, some districts have pursued a co-teaching model where a certified content area teacher co-teaches a class with an ELL teacher so that the dual needs of language and content learning can be addressed simultaneously. In many districts, such as the one where this study was conducted, the ELL program model implemented a variety of these approaches, depending on the ELL student population, funding, resources, leadership, and available staff at each school. Each of these different approaches to ELL education requires different things of the ELL teachers.

To better understand the work of high school ELL teachers, and the factors that shape it, I developed the following research questions:

1. How do ELL departments at two high schools vary within the same district?
2. In what ways do the roles of the ELL teachers vary at two high schools within the same district?
- 3a. What are the opportunities and constraints of agency in the work of high school ELL teachers?
- 3b. How is the work of high school ELL teachers shaped by their agency?

This article explores the factors shaping high school ELL teachers' work, specifically, the opportunities and constraints related to department organization and teacher agency. In the following section, I present an overview of the literature that I draw from to frame this study, as well as a conceptualization of high school ELL teacher agency used to understand and analyze the data.

### **Literature and Framing**

While a number of factors shape the work of high school ELL teachers (such as the population of ELL students, and the implementation of ELL policy at the building level), I focus in this study on the school and department context, as well as the agency of the ELL teacher. These two areas offer distinct but complimentary ways to understand both the external and internal forces at play in the work of high school ELL teachers. The work of high school teachers is an important area of study, given both the high stakes for students and the resulting reforms aimed at the high school level. The significance of the high school context was at the heart of McLaughlin and Talbert's (2001) seminal research, which aimed to understand "the problems, and the potentials, of improving high school teaching by taking the perspective of teachers who were grappling with the challenges of preparing their students for lives in the twenty-first century" (p. 3) in the context of a "more academically and culturally diverse student population than ever before in the nation's history" (p. 1). As such, what do we know about high school teachers' work? The following section describes the importance of the organization and structure of departments in shaping teachers' work.

### **The Role of Departments in Shaping of High School Teachers' Work**

Part of the research into the various influential aspects of teachers' work at the high school level has included research into the organizational and structural determinants (Johnson,

1990; Little & McLaughlin, 1993), which at the high school level is most visible in the existence of departments. The high school department is a crucial aspect of students' learning experience, and serves as a link between the broader school context and student outcomes (e.g., Gutiérrez, 1996). High school departments have been the subject of research focused on understanding this unique setting and the way that it impacts teachers' work (Siskin & Little, 2001; Talbert, 2001), and have been characterized in the research as professional communities (Little, 2002) and teacher learning communities (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Extensive research conducted by the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching provided crucial information about the significance of high school departments not only in the work of teachers, but in the larger context of school reform (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). High school departments have presented a paradox for policy and reform researchers: on one hand, departments are key sites for teacher learning and professional community, but on the other hand, departments have been at times seen as problematic due to their insular nature that is less conducive to schoolwide reform (Little, 2002).

At a fundamental level, the work that all teachers do is influenced by the conditions of their work, including how they are organized (Lee & Smith, 2001). At the high school level, teachers are organized into subject-area departments, presenting a different context than other grade levels. It is also understood that the work and experiences of teachers vary in different subject areas (Stodolsky & Grossman, 1995). Given the significance of the existence of departments, the variation between different subject areas, as well as the highly-specialized work of ELL teachers (Harper & De Jong, 2009), this work contributes to understanding of ELL department and teachers, specifically.

In relation to the amount of literature available on secondary content area teachers who teach ELL students, there is less about ELL teachers themselves and their organization in departments. Some research specifically at the high school level that addresses the work of ELL teachers includes Maria del Carmen Salazar's work (2008, 2010) investigating the relationship between ELL policies and "humanizing practices" and the "pedagogical stances" of ELL teachers, while research in the Canadian context tells us about effective ESL (English as a second language) program design and policy implementation related to the integration of ESL students and their academic success (e.g., Derwing, DeCorby, Ichikawa & Jameson, 2006; Roessingh, 2004). These areas of research touch upon the important issues of ELL policy implementation, the practices of ELL teachers and the success of ELL students, but to contextualize this work, we need to know more about the organization of ELL departments. In addition to knowledge about how ELL teachers' work is shaped by their department, it is important to consider how it is shaped by their agency. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of sociocultural theories of agency, as well as addressing the salience of agency for language teachers, and the interaction between structure and agency.

### **Theories of Agency**

Writing from the perspective of linguistic anthropology, Laura Ahearn (2001) draws our attention to important considerations in the discussion of agency: language and power, language as social action, and agency as a social practice. We can see these considerations reflected in her oft-cited definition of agency: "Agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 112). Adopting the understanding of teaching and learning as sociocultural acts, it follows that such a definition of agency would lend itself to the discussion of teachers' work within their schools and departments, especially in an ELL context where the teachers' work is centered on language teaching and learning in social interactions.

Expanding on Vygotsky's (1987) conceptualization of the way that individuals (their thinking, learning, etc.) are shaped by sociocultural forces, Wertsch, Tulviste and Hagstrom's (1993) understanding of agency is based on two premises: 1) while agency has long been conceived as a property of the individual, it extends "beyond the skin" (p. 339) and does not operate in independence; and 2) that agency is mediated by tools and the individuals around them. An understanding of agency as socioculturally mediated also underscores the importance of collective action and collaboration in agency. An individual view of agency would miss the importance of agency that occurs when individuals work together, such as teachers within a department. The other point of emphasis, that agency is facilitated by mediational tools, is applicable in a school setting where teachers rely often on the tools available to them (i.e., curriculum, technology, materials).

### **Structure and agency.**

Importantly, Giddens' theory of structuration (1979) emphasized the way that human agency is constrained by the structures in which we act. Relevant to the current discussion of teachers' work within schools and departments, he emphasized the "rules and resources" of structures, and how they might constrain agency. In order to further explicate the relationship between agency and structure, I turn to Sewell's (1992) theory of structure, as his reformulation of Giddens' (1979) structuration theory clarifies the definitions of structure and agency, as well as the relationship between the two in a way that acknowledges the possibility of change. Neither the individual agent nor the structure has primacy in this conceptualization, and agency is seen as a "constituent" of structure (p. 20), and not opposed to it (as in previous conceptualizations). This can be seen in the work of ELL teachers who are organized by the structures of a department, but who also use their agency (and expertise) to work within and apart from these structures, often in ways that bring about positive change. As described later in

this article, an ELL teacher in each high school followed district policy requiring a certain curriculum be used for specific classes, but both adapted it in specific ways to meet the needs of their students, and were then encouraged by district administrators to share these ideas at a district ELL training meeting.

Sewell makes a number of salient points in defining and describing agency in its relationship with structure: first, that agency enables the ability to act and even exert control in social settings, depending on the resources and schema available. In his view, agents necessarily have the ability to transform structures. Second, all humans have the capacity for agency, but it varies greatly from person to person and depending on the context. Finally, agency exists both at the individual and collective level. This conceptualization of agency, embedded in its relationship with structure, provides a useful lens for viewing the work of ELL teachers whose teaching context is so different from teachers of other subjects. Later in this article I describe in more detail the varied roles of ELL teachers, the work they do both individually and collaboratively, across various settings, and with various resources and schema at their disposal, all in relation to various structures.

Turning now to the more specific context of agency in educational settings, I present some of the existing research on teacher agency to provide an overview of the ways that sociocultural conceptions of agency have been used in previous research. Over recent decades (the 1990s and 2000s), teacher agency has been prominent in various literatures, and more recently, has been taken up in research of language teacher agency.

### **Teacher agency and language teacher agency.**

Employing a sociocultural lens which relies on the role of mediational tools in shaping learning (Vygotsky, 1987), and including Wertsch et al.'s (1993) conception of socioculturally

mediated agency, Lasky (2005) considers the interplay between teachers' agency, identity and the school context. She describes her framing as follows:

The concept of mediated agency is especially useful in analyzing whether government mandated school policy mandates create a mediational system with new tools and expectations for teaching; to possibly discern the ways teachers' sense of professional identity affects how teachers understand and interact with new mandates; and to explore how this dynamic might affect teachers' experiences of professional vulnerability (p. 900).

Her study of teachers negotiating school reform policy at the secondary level is focused on two mediational systems that influence teacher agency: the early influences on teacher identity and the current reform context. She also attends to the unique nature of the secondary setting, an important aspect of the context, noting that secondary school departments "are both an expression of agency and shared identity while also being elements that shape agency and professional identity" (p. 902). This study found that the reform context of the school constrained teachers' agency in a way that impacted their work with students. This is relevant to the study at hand as I seek to understand not only what mediates ELL teacher agency, but what might constrain it as well.

### **Conceptualizing high school ELL teacher agency.**

Synthesizing the theories and literature in the above sections, I provide the following conceptualization of high school ELL teachers' agency:

- *It is mediated by the school and department context, including policies, available resources, support, and curriculum (Ahearn, 2001; Siskin & Little, 2001; Talbert, 2001; Wertsch et al., 1993). In schools large enough to have more than one ELL teacher, they*

are organized in departments as other teachers are, though high school ELL teachers work under a different set of conditions than other subject area teachers, and this difference in context affects their agency in specific ways. One example of this is the way that ELL teachers are positioned within a school (for example, the work of ELL teachers and departments is often seen as a “service” rather than a “subject area”). Due to funding sources (federal versus local), ELL departments and teachers often have access to different funding and resource supports than other subject areas. Additionally, there are different policies in place (at the federal, state, district, and building level) regarding ELL programs and services that are specific to ELL departments (such as policies regarding assessment, program placement, and courses offered).

- *It shapes and is shaped by school and department structures (Giddens, 1979; Sewell, 1992).* High school ELL teachers work in a unique context and interact with different structures than their non-ELL peers; at the same time, the uniqueness of their role often affords them agency which can influence and change structures. An example of this is the way that ELL teachers are often called upon to assist other departments in issues related to ELL instruction, or provide “in-house” professional development to other teachers.
- *It is collective in nature, relying on collaboration with other ELL teachers, content area teachers, and school leaders (Lasky, 2005; Vygotsky, 1987).* In addition to their interactions within departments, due to the integrated nature of English acquisition and content area learning, ELL teachers interact often with content area teachers and school leaders. This is especially the case in districts and buildings where ELL students are

being mainstreamed into content area classes (rather than placed in sheltered courses), or classes that are co-taught by an ELL teacher and content-area teacher.

### **Methods**

Data for this article were gathered as part of a larger, qualitative study that was designed to understand the complexity of high school ELL teachers' work. In this article, I employ some strategies of comparative case study research (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2013). Using purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002), I selected a single school district and two comprehensive high schools within that school district as the sites for my study. Each high school's ELL department and teachers was a unit of analysis, with an emphasis on the ELL department head in each school. This choice of what I was studying allowed for in-depth study over time of each school and department. The presentation and comparison of the two ELL departments and the roles of the two department heads provides focused and detailed information that can help the reader make sense of ELL departments and the work of high school ELL teachers.

### **Sampling and Timeframe**

The study was conducted in three phases over a year and a half. During the first period of fieldwork, I collected information about district size and student demographics over the past several years, with particular attention to the percentage of students within the district that is identified as ELL (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2016). Districts with a very small percentage of ELL students (<5%) were not considered given that schools in these districts did not have as many ELL teachers as schools with larger numbers of ELL students.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The amount of FTE (full time equivalent) positions allotted for the hiring of ELL teachers is based on a formula from the state department of education that is determined by the number of ELL students-and their level of English proficiency as measured by the state-adopted assessment (at the time of this study, the Washington English Language Proficiency Assessment, or WELPA).

Other important information about districts that I collected included: number, type (e.g., comprehensive versus “small” or alternative schools), and size of high schools, as well as the structure and organization of ELL services available at the high school level. In order to compare district program policy and the implementation of the service models, I needed at least two schools within the same district. This eliminated districts with only one comprehensive high school. In addition to this information, I also had informal conversations (as part of pre-data collection fieldwork) with an ELL administrator in each district to better understand the district ELL service model at the high school level and also to identify potential school sites within the district for data collection. After gathering background information about each of these districts (five in total), I assessed the benefits and limitations of conducting the study in each, with special consideration to the potential for comparison and contrast within the district. This fieldwork allowed me to use purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002) and intentionally select the sites that would facilitate understanding and analysis of the research problem under investigation. Ultimately, Lake Valley School District (LVSD) was chosen based on their fit with the above considerations, as well as access.

This large, urban, ethnically and linguistically diverse district was chosen for its demographics that are increasingly common in areas of the United States’ that are immigrant and refugee centers. The schools that were sites for this study were the most linguistically diverse of all of the district’s high schools, and were also home to the district’s largest percentage of English learner students. The ELL populations in these schools were known for the diversity of home languages represented, proficiency/literacy in both their home language and in English, mobility and transience, and previous education experiences (as is often the case with secondary ELLs). This variety presented the district and the school sites with challenges in how to design

and implement ELL programs that were appropriate for the skills and needs of its diverse student populations.

After selecting the district, I identified two high schools within the district; while not an example of extreme case sampling, the criterion described for the selection of sites and participants was aimed at obtaining “illuminative cases,” from which the most could be learned (Patton, 2002, p. 233). The criteria was as follows:

- Schools with the largest percentage of ELL populations among the high schools in the district (acknowledging that there are contrasting characteristics with regard to their ELL population, such as different numbers of ELL students, differences in home languages and countries of origin).
- Schools with different ELL program service models and structure (such as the number of ELL teachers and paraprofessionals, and the classes offered to ELL students). Examining schools with different ELL service models and program structures allowed me observe the variation between schools within the same district. These differences provided points of comparison when examining ELL teachers’ navigation and implementation of district policy, and can potentially highlight their roles and agency in different settings.
- Schools within each district where there has been a service model in place for ELLs (including a dedicated ELL teacher) for three or more years.
- Schools with at least one dedicated and endorsed ELL teacher whose primary role is as ELL teacher (i.e., teaching ELD or ESL classes), in addition to content area teachers who hold an ELL endorsement, and/or ELL teachers who co-teach content area classes.

## **Participants**

Participants in this study represented three subject groups within the selected district and schools. The primary and central participants were high school ELL teachers, specifically the ELL department heads at each school. At Metro High School, there were four full-time ELL Teachers, and at Fields High School, there was one full-time ELL teacher, and one part-time ELL teacher. The number of ELL teachers (and the corresponding FTE) at each school was determined by the number of ELL students enrolled. At Metro High School, I was only able to interview the department head (though I was able to observe the other ELL teachers in their classes and meetings). In addition to the teachers, the other participant groups are high school building administrators (principals and/or vice principals), and other school and district personnel who worked with ELL teachers (i.e., content area teachers, district administrators, and ELL program coordinators). These three groups of participants, in their different roles, represented important actors responsible for ELL instruction and services.

Table 1

*District and School ELL Personnel*

Role	Lake Valley School District	Metro High School	Fields High School
ELL Director	Ms. Theodore		
Secondary ELL Specialist	Ms. Sapora		
Administrator		Principal, Mr. Aaron (Principal)	Ms. Harper (Assistant Principal)
ELL Department head		Mr. Bloomquist	Ms. Bryant
ELL Teacher(s)		Ms. Gregor Mr. Vola Ms. Wong	Ms. Russell
# of ELL Teachers (FTE)		4.0	1.5
# of Paraprofessionals		5	4

**Data Sources**

Primary data sources for this study were semi-structured interviews with district administrators, building administrators, and ELL teachers that lasted between 40 and 80 minutes, and took place between the fall and winter of the 2015-2016 school year. I conducted an initial interview with district ELL administrators, the building administrator who supervised the ELL program, and with ELL teachers in both high schools. In the spring of the same school year, I conducted follow up interviews with all participants. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in entirety. In the first round of interviews, I was collecting descriptive information

about the roles and experiences of the participants in the ELL program, and the nature of the ELL program. When interviewing district ELL personnel, I asked about district level ELL program policies and gathered information about each high school's ELL program from the district's perspective. When interviewing building ELL personnel, I asked about the ELL program at the school level, and about participants' understanding and perception of the district policies. In interviews with ELL teachers, I asked specifically about their opportunities for agency, and examples of instances where they thought they had more agency, as well as instances when it was constrained.

In addition to interview data, I conducted classroom and meeting observation, and collected artifacts, such as district policies, handouts from meetings, and pictures of classroom and school sites. To supplement and triangulate (Merriam, 2009) the interview and artifact data, I conducted observations of classes taught by ELL teachers, and I also observed ELL meetings at the department, building, and district level. During these observations, I took detailed fieldnotes and meeting observations were also audio recorded (I could not audio record classroom observations due to the limits of my Human Subjects agreement). Fieldnotes were a crucial part of my data collection as I sought to not only learn about participants' roles and experiences as ELL teachers and administrators, but the context in which this work took place.

The final phase of data collection was from August through October of 2016. During this time, I conducted follow-up interviews with administrators and one teacher participant. I also communicated with participants for clarification of questions and verification of data, and to conduct member checks. Since this final phase took place in the new school year following my study, I asked participants to reflect on the previous school year and comment on any major

changes that were made to the ELL program, and also what they considered to have been successes or challenges related to their work.

### **Data Analysis**

Throughout data collection, I engaged in what Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to as “early analysis” (p. 50) which allowed me to examine the existing data as I collected it in order to inform my decisions about future data collection. Along with audio recordings, field notes, and artifact collection, the process of creating memos and carefully documenting my interactions with participants and my experiences during data collection provided a record of the data collection as it is occurring. I engaged in both open and thematic coding, deriving my coding scheme from the important concepts framing this study: high school departments, teacher roles, and teacher agency (specifically: socioculturally mediated agency, collaboration, and the interaction between structure and agency). To help identify themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), I created thematic documents based on interview question responses from teacher participants and administrator participants to help me compare participants’ various perspectives on the school and department structures and organization, and teachers’ roles.

### **District Context: Lake Valley School District’s ELL Program**

In accordance with federal guidelines, the Washington state department of education (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction) provided a list of approved ELL program models, and each district within the state has the purview to adopt a program model that best suits their ELL population and available staffing and resources. In the case of LVSD, the district chose a Transitional Bilingual Program (TBP) model to “serve language minority students,” which stated that, “The language of instruction in the TBP is English. It is teacher-led through

academic content.”<sup>3</sup> However, it was not clear what aspects of the program model involved instruction in another language. While at other schools in the district it is possible that a transitional bilingual model was being implemented, at either high school in the study, there was no such program; at both Metro and Fields high schools, English was the only language of instruction. It is important to recognize that even within a district there is variation in how the program model is implemented; in fact, a premise of this study is variation between different schools within the district. This kind of variation is not unique to an ELL context; for policy scholars (e.g. Elmore, 1980) flexibility in the implementation of policy is often desirable at the level closest to where the policy is being implemented. In this way, resources can be directed to the unit likely to have the greatest effect.

Given the many differences between elementary and secondary instruction, as well as the demographic variation between school sites, it is logical that there would be variation in the district ELL program model at different schools. Table 2 provides an overview of the district and building demographics.

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<sup>3</sup> District policy information was gathered from online policy documents, and in order to protect the confidentiality of the district, I chose not to disclose the website.

Table 2

*Lake Valley School District and School Demographics*

	<b>Lake Valley School District</b>	<b>Metro High School</b>	<b>Fields High School</b>
<b>Total Enrollment</b>	28,0000	2,000	2,000
<b>% ELL</b>	20	17	7
<b>% Free and Reduced Lunch</b>	50	66	40
<b>% Latino</b>	20	27	18
<b>% Black</b>	12	20	9
<b>% White</b>	36	22	40
<b>% Asian</b>	18	20	22
<b>% Two or more races</b>	10	7	9

At the high school level, the ELL program model in LSVD more closely resembled other types of state-approved program models, namely the Content Based Instruction and Supportive Mainstream models (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2016), where students took content area (or mainstream) coursework for credit in order to graduate. As mentioned in the introduction, there is a greater tension at the high school level (as opposed to elementary or middle school levels) regarding the emphasis of instruction for ELLs and whether it should be more focused on language acquisition or content area instruction, and this tension is reflected in programs and policies (Callahan, 2005). I now turn to the findings, beginning with a description of the structure and organization of each high school's ELL department in more detail.

## **Findings**

The findings of this study are organized into three sections, each section addressing a research question. First, I describe the similarities and differences of the ELL departments. Second, I present data on the differences in roles of the ELL teachers at each high school, with a focus on the ELL department head. Finally, I discuss the role of agency for high school ELL teachers, with an emphasis on the opportunities for agency, as well as the constraints.

The two high schools chosen for this study had the largest percentage of ELL students of the five high schools in the district, which was a diverse setting with over 130 home language represented in its schools. Both schools also had ELL departments with more than one ELL teacher, and a growing and linguistically diverse ELL population. At the district level, the ELL director Ms. Theodore was responsible for policy, staffing and budget issues, the flow of information to buildings, supporting administrators, and designing and providing professional development (Fieldnotes, 12/8/15). Working more directly with the high schools was a Secondary ELL Specialist, Ms. Sabora. She worked often with administration around program structure and organization, as well as the needs of individual secondary schools, curriculum and materials, testing and professional development. She considered herself the liaison between the district and the schools, and worked closely with the ELL teachers at both buildings in this study.

### **Similarities and Differences in the ELL Departments at Metro and Fields High Schools**

To understand the external forces shaping the work of ELL teachers, I focused in part on the structure and organization of the ELL department in each school. While I anticipated differences between the two schools, what I found were major contrasts rooted in the history of the school and department, the experience and tenure of the teachers and administrators, and the way that the department and teachers were positioned within the broader school context.

Ultimately, the differences in the department resulted in different courses being available to the ELL students.

### **Metro High School's ELL department.**

Located centrally within the district and city was Metro High, a comprehensive high school with an enrollment of 2000 students, two thirds of whom qualified for free and reduced lunch, nearly 20% were identified as ELL, and 80% were students of color.<sup>4</sup> Because of the central location of this high school in a part of the district that was home to large populations of immigrant and refugee families, the linguistic and ethnic diversity at Metro was greater than other areas of the district. Both the principal and ELL department head shared that in their estimation, 70% of the Metro student body either currently or formerly received ELL services at the time of the study. The graduation rate the year previous to the study was around 75%.<sup>5</sup> Slightly over 100 teachers worked at the school, four of whom comprised the ELL department.

The presence of large numbers of ELL students was not new for Metro High; the school had been home to a large ELL population for over a decade, and the department was well-established and many of the current teachers had been there for close to a decade. The long-standing ELL program had undergone many changes over the years, and was also characterized by a fluctuating and transient population of ELL students:

The ELL teachers at Metro have all lived through multiple incarnations of ELL assessment and shifting initiatives: SIOP,<sup>6</sup> PLCs, a strike, three superintendents, and the

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<sup>4</sup> In conversations with both Mr. Aaron and Mr. Bloomquist, both estimated that one third of the students at Metro High were either current ELL students, former ELL students or bilingual/multilingual students. (Fieldnotes, 11/18/15)

<sup>5</sup> The graduation rate for Washington state the year prior to data collection was 78% for all students, and 56% for ELL students (retrieved from <http://www.k12.wa.us/DataAdmin/pubdocs/GradDropout/14-15/2014-15GraduationDropoutStatisticsAnnualReport.pdf>)

<sup>6</sup> The acronym "SIOP" stands for "Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol" (Echevarria, Short & Powers, 2008), a specific set of strategies used to shelter instruction for ELLs, especially at the secondary level. While this protocol is widely used, LVSD has not formally adopted or recommended that teachers use SIOP strategies for several years.

waves of immigrant and refugee students...most ELLs were white in 2003, then came Turkish and Russian, then from Burma, Nepal...There's a lot of student turnover, more so than most places. Turnover in the school is colossal and endemic. The ELL numbers change every day, sometimes by as many as four or five students (Fieldnotes, 11/18/15)

The four ELL teachers divided teaching duties between them, each teacher responsible for multiple courses that targeted different English proficiency levels and language skills. Both content English Language Development (ELD) courses dedicated to English language acquisition, and literacy courses geared towards both language development and alignment with core English language arts (ELA) courses. This decision to align ELD and ELA courses was a new policy directive aimed at ensuring that ELL students received ELA credits and required the ELL teachers to align their instruction with the work of the ELA courses. With the exception of Mr. Bloomquist, the department head, the majority of their responsibilities were teaching and assisting with the annual administration of the English proficiency assessment. Later in the article, I analyze these roles in relation to the department and school structure and organization.

A key component of the ELL department at Metro High was their PLC. The four teachers gathered every week to discuss instructional strategies and look at student data and work samples. They were lauded by administrators for their productivity and as Mr. Bloomquist described, "because the [ELL teachers] in there are such vigorous thinkers, we were from time to time able to take our PLC work to a very high level" (Interview 1, 10/7/16). This well-established collaborative space would prove to be one salient difference between Fields and Metro high schools, and was perhaps a function of having a department of veteran teachers supervised by a veteran administrator.

### **Fields High School's ELL department.**

The other school site of the study, Fields High, was also a large comprehensive high school serving many English learners. However, the first of many contrasts was in the location of the school. While Metro High was centrally located in a part of the city that was both commercial and residential, Fields High was located on an edge of the district in a different, smaller town that bordered Lake Valley. Fields High served the second highest number of ELL students of the district's five high schools (four comprehensive and one alternative). Like Metro High, Fields High also had an enrollment of close to 2000 students, but the student demographics were different for the building: only 40% of students qualified for free and reduced lunch, less than 10% were identified as ELL, and 60% were students of color. While there were similarities in terms of the home languages and ethnicities represented, the ELL population at Metro was much more transient and there was higher rate of moving schools among their ELL students than those at Fields. That said, both schools frequently received new and newly-arrived ELL students throughout the school year (Fieldnotes, 11/18/15).

In contrast to Metro's long-standing ELL population, well-established ELL department, and veteran teachers and administrators, Fields High School was in the midst of changes in student demographics, a newly-established ELL department, and new ELL teachers and administrator. Ms. Harper, Ms. Bryant and Ms. Russell were all in their first year working at Fields, and were also all in their first year in their respective roles. Ms. Bryant, the ELL department head had previously taught for one year in a middle school in the same district before coming to Fields. Prior to the school year when data was collected, the ELL department at Fields had been largely non-existent, poorly organized, and not integrated into the school. Ms. Harper described the state of affairs when she had arrived to her position:

The person supervising ELL had no idea what they were doing...the teacher they put into ELL was mostly selected for the job because they were certificated in the area and they were isolated so they wouldn't have to interact with any others teachers because they were not doing well in their current department. That is what we walked into. (Interview 1, 11/30/15)

At the time of the study, the ELL department at Fields High was comprised of one full time ELL teacher, and one part-time ELL teacher, Ms. Russell, who was a content area social studies teacher for the other portion of her teaching day. There were four paraprofessionals who worked with the ELL teachers in their classes, but who also worked different content area classes based on a matrix that identified where ELL students were clustered and which students needed the most assistance in which classes. In this way, the paraprofessionals were strategically placed in classrooms with high numbers of ELL students, as well as in classes where the ELL students typically needed more assistance, either because of their English proficiency level or their grade in the class or both.

Similar to Metro, the ELL department at Fields offered an ELD course for beginner and intermediate level ELL students, as well as support classes that are designed to align with ELA classes. The department head taught blocks of two classes at both the beginning and intermediate level where one half of the block was an ELD class for which students received elective credit, and the other half was an ELA support class for which students received an ELA credit, something imperative for their transcripts. In addition to these two blocks, she also taught an elective advanced support class for ELL students. This class was focused on reading and writing strategies, and served a range of intermediate and advanced ELL students across the grade levels.

Another big difference between the two schools was the decision to implement a co-teaching model during the year of the study, which impacted which courses were available to ELL students at Fields, and also which courses the part-time ELL teacher, Ms. Russell, would teach. Two content areas were identified where ELL students were struggling: freshman science and freshman social studies. The assistant principal determined that co-teaching presented a viable option for supporting ELL students in content area courses. The part-time ELL teacher, Ms. Russell, co-taught two classes with content area teachers, in addition to her responsibilities as an ELL teacher. The decision about where she should co-teach was made by looking at the distribution of ELL students in content area classes as well as where ELL students were credit-deficient and needed support. In this role, Ms. Russell was able to not only provide support for ELL students in the content area classrooms, but also to support content area teachers. This was the first year that the school had implemented a co-teaching model, and it was admittedly a learning experience for everyone, especially Ms. Russell. Ms. Harper described Ms. Russell's co-teaching:

She's a social studies teacher, so she's been working in social studies classrooms and one science classroom. So, it's been a growing experience for her to see how her ELL skills and strategies have been implemented in the science classroom if she is not a science teacher. (Interview 1, 11/30/15)

The decision to pursue the co-teaching model at Fields High was a departure from how things had been done previously in the building, and how things had been done in the district, although the district supported this decision and was even hoping to implement co-teaching in other high schools. (Fieldnotes, 8/31/16)

Other differences between the two schools' ELL departments were related to the size of the school and ELL population, the tenure of ELL teachers and the administrators they worked with, as well as the history of the ELL department within each school. The structural and organizational differences depended on the context/environment of each school, and consequently the different structures of the ELL department in each building created different roles for ELL teachers. Key components of the ELL department's structure and organization were the administrators in each building who worked with ELL (and the nature of this collaboration), and the work of the ELL department head. Another salient factor in the structure and organization of departments was the tenure of the administrators and teachers. During the year of this study, the district had adopted a new curriculum to be used by the ELL departments, and had also designed new policy wherein ELL teachers would not only teach ELD, but would also teach ELA support classes to mirror the ELA curriculum that non-ELLs were learning in their content area classes. One explanation of these differences lay in the differences in tenure of administrators and teachers. At Metro, both the administrator and ELL teachers had been working in the building for a decade and had been doing things a certain way for many years; whereas at Fields, the new administrators and ELL teachers were in the process of re-designing the ELL department and implementing changes to the ELL program. There are affordances and constraints for both established programs and new programs, and it is beyond the scope of this study to comment extensively on this. However, it was clear that at Metro, the department organization, relationships between ELL teachers and administrators, and the positioning of the department within the school was stable and hadn't changed recently. In contrast, at Fields, the new department and personnel were building the department and developing relationships with

other staff, and importantly, working pro-actively to improve the positioning of the ELL department within the building.

Understanding the differences in the departments at two schools within the same district allowed me to understand the context and conditions (Lee & Smith, 2001; Little, 2002) of ELL teachers' work, as well as the reasons that there was variation between the departments. In the following section, I present findings about the ways that the roles and responsibilities of the ELL teachers at each school varied, not surprisingly, these differences were partially related to the organization of the department.

### **Differences in Roles and Responsibilities of ELL Teachers at Fields and Metro**

The most significant differences in the roles of the ELL teachers were revealed by the nature of the ELL department's and teachers' positioning within the school and their relationship with other departments and teachers; the relative independence or integration of the department influenced how the ELL teachers interacted with other teachers. The table below displays the roles and responsibilities of the two ELL department heads, both within the ELL department and within the larger school setting.

Table 3

*Roles and Responsibilities of ELL Department Heads in Two High Schools.*

	<b>Mr. Bloomquist Metro High School</b>	<b>Ms. Bryant Fields High School</b>
<b>Courses Taught</b>	Beginning ELL Skills (1 period)	Beginning ELL Skills & Beginning ELA Support (2 period block)
	Intermediate ELA Support (3 periods)	Intermediate ELL Skills & Intermediate ELA Support (2 period block)
	Instructional Coach (1 period)	Advanced ELL Support (1 period)
<b>Other Roles and Responsibilities within ELL Department</b>	Coordinated ELL assessment	Coordinated ELL assessment
	Curricular decision-making	Curricular decision-making
	Organized and led ELL PLC	Supervised and scheduled paraprofessionals
<b>Roles and Responsibilities within School Building</b>	Collaborated with administrator	Collaborated with administrator
	Supported ELL students with content area work	Supported ELL students with content area work
	Provided professional development for staff	Provided professional development for staff
	Organized family night for the parents of ELL	Assisted with content-area assessment
		Participated in after-school homework sessions (open to all students)

One of the most readily observable differences in the roles of ELL teachers in each school could be seen in the courses taught by ELL teachers. At Metro, all the ELL teachers taught ELD classes and ELA support classes. At Fields, one ELL teacher taught ELD and ELA support classes, and the part-time ELL teacher co-taught in two content area courses. While the courses offered in each school could in part be attributed to the size and resources available in each school, the difference in courses taught at Fields and at Metro signals a difference in the

way that ELL teachers were positioned and utilized within the building (Arkoudis, 2006; Dabach, 2014). At Fields, two content area courses (freshman biology and social studies) were co-taught with an ELL teacher, which meant that the ELL teacher was working with non-ELL teachers in other departments, as opposed to schools like Metro, where the teaching assignments of ELL teachers were solely located within the ELL department. This kind of structure related to course offerings demonstrated the interaction of the Fields ELL department with other departments.

### **The Opportunities and Constraints of High School ELL Teacher Agency**

Shifting now to another factor shaping the work of high school ELL teachers, I discuss the opportunities and constraints of ELL teacher agency at Fields and Metro. I highlight the collaborative nature of their agency, and the way that agency was employed related to curricular decision-making. These opportunities for agency in teachers' work are consistent with the existing literature, but these findings highlight teacher agency in the specific context of the work of high school ELL teachers, and also describe the flipside of the coin: the constraints of agency. During data analysis, I noticed that the agency of the ELL teachers (specifically, the ELL department heads) was challenging in some instances because of the related increase in roles and responsibilities, and this appeared to be linked to the substantial capacity that these teachers had to act.

#### **Agency and collaboration.**

Across both schools, I observed frequent collaboration among the ELL teachers within a department, and also with the building administrator who was assigned to the ELL department. Absent clear support and guidelines in terms of district policy (in an interview, Mr. Aaron shared that there had been substantial turnover of district ELL administrators in recent years), the ELL

department heads were in a position within their buildings to exert teacher agency and leadership and use their knowledge to make decisions that were appropriate for their students and the needs of the program. This agency was also promoted by the school administrators that they worked with. In the case of Metro high school, Mr. Aaron said this of the ELL teachers:

I really trust my specialists, my teachers that are ELL teachers...I really trust them that they know better than I, and so when they say, this is what they need, or this is that's going on, then you know, I sit down and I really go to bat for them. (Interview 2, 8/31/16)

While he was knowledgeable about the ELL students in his building and the issues related to ELL instruction, Mr. Aaron looked to his ELL teachers for their input and recommendations related to the ELL program and services, from student placement to curricular decisions. At Fields High, the department head Ms. Bryant, described the latitude that she was given in her position, where she was called upon to make decisions regarding scheduling, courses offered, and assessment practices, because she "had the background" knowledge about the students (Interview 1, 12/15/15).

I also observed ELL teachers seeking support and advice from fellow ELL teachers and building administrators when needed. Part of this was an opportunity for agency built into the existing structure of PLC meetings that met once weekly. These groups were an incredibly important resource for ELL teachers' work, and Mr. Bloomquist (Metro High School) articulated the role of collaboration and agency:

Agency seems to be a product of the groups that you associate with yourselves with. The stronger your support system, then the more agency you seem to have. The amount of agency that the teachers can personify seems to increase as the function of the networks

that you populate. The networks and groups that you are a part of have everything to do with how much change you can make. (Mr. Bloomquist, Interview 2)

At Metro, the teachers in the ELL department had been working together for many years both as a department and within the high school. Mr. Bloomquist's comment regarding his perception of his agency, reflects the importance that he and the other ELL teachers at Metro placed on their relationships as a department and their support for one another. At building and district level meetings, the Metro ELL teachers were always seated together, whereas teachers from other departments and buildings were mixed throughout the room.

At Fields High School, the ELL department head, Ms. Bryant, spoke about her frequent collaboration with an assistant principal, absent a large ELL department to work with:

[She] definitely is the one that I work with the most. We try to meet every week or two, and I feel like, and she knows this, I say it to her every time, every time we meet, we take care of business, but then we have a whole new list of stuff that we have to go through. She and I are both learning together. She's amazing. It's ridiculous how much she helps, because I didn't get that support before. It's nice. (Interview 1, 1/25/16)

In this quote, Ms. Bryant talks about her collaboration with a building administrator, and how by working together they were able to accomplish important tasks of running the ELL program and services. This collaboration provides support and opportunity for Ms. Bryant's agency; in other words, working closely with the administrator mediates her capacity to act (Ahearn, 2001).

With the support and resources provided to her by an administrator, Ms. Bryant was able to exercise more agency through her collaboration. An example of this was seen in Ms. Bryant's decisions regarding the placement of ELL paraprofessionals in mainstream classrooms, her creation of a homework clubs for ELL students, and her input in the scheduling of newly-arrived

ELL students. These were all issues that Ms. Bryant was knowledgeable about, and by working closely with Ms. Harper, she was able to use her expertise and act in the best interests of the students. As both Ms. Bryant and the administrator were new to the district, and were both working together to create a functioning ELL department where previously there hadn't been one, their collaboration and agency were necessary, and allowed them to do work that individually would have been more difficult to accomplish. For Ms. Harper and Ms. Bryant, their collaboration extended beyond their weekly PLC meetings, and both participants described that they would meet frequently, often informally, throughout the week to address issues and problem-solve.

#### **ELL teacher agency and curricular decision-making.**

During the year prior to this study, the district had adopted a curriculum to be used in the ELL courses, the ELL teachers described having a lot of freedom and choice in the way that they used the curriculum. In LVSD, there had been a history of ELL curriculum being a source of tension. However, with their agency around curriculum use, the ELL teachers were not only making a decision about which curriculum they preferred to use, but also which curriculum was best for the students. When asked to tell about a moment when he felt that he had exercised agency as a teacher, Mr. Bloomquist told a story about how he had in the past advocated against a particular curriculum that the district had chosen.

I can think of an example when we had been given a new curriculum to use, this is about five years ago. It was a curriculum that we had never seen before and we were trying to use it, it was an intervention curriculum, and we were trained to use it that summer.... It still ranks as the worst thing I've ever seen done to English-language learners in Lake Valley. It was a reading intervention program that was designed for struggling

readers...It was all centered on teaching kids to read on the sounds of words and categorizing vocabulary according to rhyme and sounds instead of what the words mean. It was in practice here for about 10 ½ weeks, and we fought it and our principal supported us, and we won. Instead of using materials that were designed for kids with learning disabilities and English proficient kids who just had severe reading deficits, we went back to a language acquisition approach. (Interview 1, 12/12/15)

The other aspect of curricular decision-making that was connected to the agency of the ELL teachers at both high schools was visible in how teachers implemented the district-adopted curriculum. While ELL teachers at both schools taught the same classes (nominally), their use of the curriculum was vastly different, but with the same end goal of meeting the needs of their students. Mr. Bloomquist had this to say about his use of the curriculum:

I'm still learning how to use it, but it means that I have to do things from a different angle, which I don't necessarily think is the wrong thing. One thing I have noticed about it, one thing that comes to mind is that the vocabulary and the grammar instruction, the background vocabulary and the grammar instruction is completely incongruent from the complexity of the text selections. The text selection complexity is way up here, and the type of vocabulary and the grammar skills that are taught at the same time are multiple orders lower. It's a conundrum, a puzzle. I developed some different practices of how I would get the kids to read and experience that literature. (Interview 1, 12/12/15)

Ms. Bryant's adaptation of the curriculum took a different approach where she selected different parts to use, using her judgment about what student would connect with and what they needed to learn for assessment:

Just looking at it, we all were a little like, "Ehh, this one seems kind of weird" [but] it's been great. I skipped a couple random things here and there that, they weren't on the test, and I was like, this is stupid, I wouldn't want to learn this, so why would I teach it? The students responded really well to it.... They wrote essays on different stories. (Interview 1, 1/25/16)

Both teachers were open about how their decisions regarding the way they used the curriculum was influenced by what they thought that the students needed the most, not only in terms of assessment, but also in terms of her students' background knowledge and prior educational and life experiences. Ms. Bryant said,

Not once since I've been here has anybody been worried about it, to where they're asking. I would say it's a pretty open decision. I think as long as I'm using the curriculum, I think it's probably solid. You can look at [the curriculum] and see the pros and cons either way. You can say, on the one hand, if this is an intervention program that's designed for core intervention, let's give it to kids because they're going to core English and there's a lot to be said for that and it's a very convincing argument. There's also a tremendous amount of, or a very strong case to be made, from materials for kids who are older and who may have limited literacy in their first language that is really designed to be comprehensible for a beginning and intermediate English learners. The vocabulary needs, the background needs, the strategy development that refugee English learners need, grades nine through 12, is a world apart from the intervention strategies that English-speaking kids need. They've been in the K-12 system since kindergarten, they've grown up in American culture, they've got to know all the patterns, all of the cultural capital that they need to be successful. (Interview 2, 6/9/16)

Ms. Bryant expressed nuanced understanding of the strengths and needs of her students and the way that the curriculum could meet those needs. While she had reservations about an intervention approach to ELL education, she saw the ways that it could be modified for her teaching. Ms. Bryant used her expertise regarding her students' needs, as well her agency, to advocate and implement a curriculum in a way that she thought would be the most appropriate for her students. This was unique from teachers of other subject areas in that the adopted curriculum was used for high school ELL students across grade levels and English proficiency levels, and therefore necessitated greater understanding of the students' skills and greater agency in modifying and implementing the curriculum.

**The constraints of high school ELL teacher agency.**

Returning to the previously mentioned constraints of agency for the ELL teachers, I describe here how the same conditions and context that provided opportunities for agency, may also have provided constraints that shaped the roles and responsibilities of ELL teachers. It is important to recognize the potential constraints related to teacher agency so that our understanding of their work does not assume and account for only the positive aspects (similar to the way that possibilities need to be considered along with limitations). This acknowledgement of the proverbial "double-edged sword" allows us to see the different ways that ELL teachers' work is shaped.

One such constraint was the lack of clear district policy regarding the ELL services to be provided at the school level. As previously mentioned, LVSD's ELL program policy stated that instruction would be in English and "teacher-led through academic content." Beyond this, there were no specific guidelines present for how each school building should organize their ELL services, and as such, decisions were made at the building level, by the administrators (in

collaboration with the department head). While this provided room for each school to make decisions that are most appropriate given their student population and available resources, it also placed a burden on the ELL teachers to design and implement ELL program services. This is a potential constraint in that ELL teachers may be the ones responsible for many aspects of ELL services beyond teaching, which may shortchange the amount of time teachers spend on instruction. There was evidence of this in the way that the roles and responsibilities of the ELL department heads at both Metro and Fields ranged far beyond instruction, and both Mr. Bloomquist and Ms. Bryant discussed their myriad responsibilities outside of teaching.

Another potential constraint could be found in the curricular decision-making and implementation by ELL teachers. At the time of data collection, the district had recently adopted a new curriculum to be used by the ELL departments at the secondary level, and ELL teachers at both Fields and Metro were using the curriculum, although Mr. Bloomquist and Ms. Bryant reported different experiences with the curriculum. While Ms. Bryant was very positive about the curriculum and used it as her primary source of instruction, Mr. Bloomquist had a different experience. He found some aspects of the curriculum useful, but reported spending a lot of time modifying the curriculum so that it was accessible for his students, although he was using the curriculum when I observed his teaching on multiple dates (Fieldnotes, 1/21/16, 2/11/16, 3/18/16). In classroom observations of two of the other ELL teachers at Metro (Ms. Wong and Mr. Vola), I did not see them using the curriculum, but rather using resources that they had developed themselves (Fieldnotes, 2/12/16, 4/26/16). At Metro, it was clear that while the ELL teachers had agency in their curricular implementation, there was a constraint related to the amount of time spent either modifying the curriculum or developing other materials.

## Discussion

In the data presented here, I make a case for the opportunities for high school ELL teacher agency that exist in their collaboration with other ELL teachers and administrators, and in their curricular decision-making and implementation, as well as the potential constraints. I return now to the conceptualization of high school ELL teacher agency that I put forth previously in the article, connecting the findings to relevant literature.

Bringing together the two main bodies of literature that frame this study, the work of high school teachers and department organization, and teacher agency, I found that the agency of high school ELL teachers was shaped by, and shaped, the organization of the ELL department and program. This is consistent with the recursive loop of structure and agency wherein structure and agency influence one another (Giddens, 1979; Sewell, 1992). The ELL teachers in both high schools were organized into departments, and taught specific courses that were decided at the building level; in this way, their work and agency was shaped by the structure of the ELL program and building-level policies. However, within the classroom and department, the ELL teachers (especially the ELL department heads) were able to influence the structures, using their capacity to act in order to provide additional services beyond the courses and to advocate for the ELL program in ways that would serve the ELL students (an example of this was the initiative in both schools of the ELL department to offer after-school ELL support).

Second, the findings support the understanding of teacher agency as socioculturally mediated by the school context and department organization (as described above), as well as available resources, support, and curriculum (Ahearn, 2001; Siskin & Little, 2001; Talbert, 2001; Wertsch et al., 1993). It was evident that the agency of the high school ELL teachers at both schools was shaped by the people they worked with, the materials available, and the policies that

guided the ELL program at the building level. This type of socioculturally mediated agency is significant because it illustrates the way that while agency resides within an individual, it can be effective when informed and influenced by the human and material resources around them. One specific instance of this was seen in the ELL teachers' interactions with others, which I turn to know in a discussion of the collaborative nature of teacher agency.

The agency of the high school ELL teachers in this study was collective in nature, and relied on collaboration and support from school leaders and other ELL teachers (seen in the collaboration between school leaders and department heads at both schools in efforts to improve the experiences and opportunities of high school ELL students, especially during PLC meetings) (Lasky, 2005; Vygotsky, 1987). The ELL teachers at both school worked closely with other ELL teachers and the supervising administrator. At Metro High School, this was observed in the close-knit nature of the ELL department and their interaction in formal weekly meetings, and informally throughout the school day; at Fields High School, the ELL teachers also interacted frequently with other content area teachers; seen in the way that Ms. Bryant frequently interacted with other departments, and both she and Ms. Russell attended other PLC meetings. In settings such as Fields and Metro High Schools where the ELL teachers work in departments, and in the context of increased integration of ELL students into mainstream classes, the collaborative nature of ELL teacher agency is an integral part of their work, and also the experiences of the students they serve.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

I undertook this study to better understand this complexity and the forces that shape high school ELL teachers' work, specifically agency and the organization of ELL departments. I compared two ELL departments at two high schools within the same district, and gathered data

that explained the context as well as the above-mentioned forces. I discovered that the ELL department at each high school had a unique structure that informed the roles and work of the ELL teachers. This type of variation is typical and was expected; it was not surprising that there was variation between the two departments, but the surprise was rather in the *ways* that the department organization varied and how this shaped the work of the ELL teachers (as well as the implications of this variation for the experiences and opportunities for ELL students).

At Metro, the school with the larger, more-established ELL department with veteran ELL teachers, ELD courses were offered and other services were provided in a way that positioned ELL teachers as expert within the building, but also somewhat separate from the other departments. This type of separation can create (or perpetuate) the existence of “two-schools-in-one” (Valdés, 2004) where the ELL students and teachers exist in one environment and set of courses, and non-ELL students and teachers in another. Viewed as an affordance, this separation provides the opportunity for ELL teachers to act independently and with agency, using their expertise to serve ELL students in the ways they see best. However, viewed as a constraint, this type of isolation can affect the teachers and further marginalize the students.

At the school with a smaller, and newly-revamped ELL department with novice teachers (and supervised by a novice, yet knowledgeable, administrator), ELD courses and co-taught ELL content area courses were available, which provided different opportunities for ELL students, and also shaped the work of the ELL teachers in that building. In some ways, the opportunity for this ELL department to re-design their program provided affordances for the teachers who were able to teach and provide services in ways that were responsive to the students, without feeling beholden to a status quo or previous way of doing things. This type of freedom and latitude was

ideal for a teacher like Ms. Bryant who was told when she was hired that the program was a “clean slate” (Interview 1, 1/25/16).

The organization of ELL departments and the ELL teachers’ work have important implications for the students they serve: the availability and type of courses that students have access to are salient factors in ELL students’ course-taking, academic achievement and outcomes, graduation rates, and post-secondary opportunities (e.g. Callahan, 2005). At both the district and school building level, it is necessary to be intentional about the organization of ELL departments and the work of ELL teachers in order to provide appropriate opportunities to ELL students.

In addition to understanding the intersection of high school ELL teachers’ work and issues of equity for ELL students, it is also worthwhile to consider the different roles and types of work that high school ELL teachers are engaged in, above and beyond their contract hours and explicitly stated duties. In both schools, I observed ELL teachers using their agency in ways that were responsive to the changing circumstances and needs of ELL students through their curricular decision-making and implementation, their expansive roles and responsibilities, and their collaboration with one another as well as school administrators. This responsiveness is necessary when the population of students they serve is constantly changing. The ELL teacher participants acknowledged that their work looked different from one day to the next and one hour to the next, and the variety of roles that they filled within the building and department speaks to the different work they were doing in service of their students. As the field of secondary ELL education grows and changes, we can learn from the responsiveness of their teachers as we conduct research, develop policies, and train teachers for working with this important population of students.

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## Article 2

### **Inside the “Black Box” of English Language Learner Professional Learning Communities: Possibilities and Limitations from Two Urban High Schools**

With growing policy and scholarly attention being paid to the educational outcomes and opportunities of high school English language learners (ELLs), it is important to also examine the work of the ELL teachers who are often a significant part of a high school ELL students’ educational experience and are also responsible for the implementation of district- and building-level ELL program policy. Scholars have previously pointed towards the salience of high school education as a context of reception for immigrant youth (Dabach, 2015), as well as the role of the teacher as an agent of reception (Dabach, 2011). Other research has focused on the teacher placement, course-taking, and academic achievement of ELLs (Callahan, 2005; Dabach & Callahan, 2011). As scholars and policy makers alike continue to puzzle through the affordances and constraints of different approaches to the education of high school ELLs, research is needed that helps make sense of teacher learning in professional learning communities (PLCs).

As the work of ELL teachers changes in response to various policies at federal, state, and district levels, what are the conditions and structures in place to support their work and inform their practice? Professional learning communities present one such structure and setting where teacher learning can occur, and this study examines ELL teachers’ participation in ELL PLCs to better understand what transpires in these meetings and the implications for their work. Understanding the work of ELL teachers is a key component in scholarship that addresses ways

to improve the educational experience, opportunities, and outcomes of ELLs, and a key component of this is understanding the work of ELL teachers.

The goals of this article are three-fold: to better understand how ELL teachers are engaged in department PLCs, the content and foci of these meetings, and the possibilities and problems of their work in these groups. The research questions guiding the study are:

1. What topics emerged during ELL PLC meetings and how were they taken up by meeting participants?
2. How did participants engage and participate in ELL PLC meetings?
3. What possibilities and limitations for meeting districts' aims regarding professional development emerged through the structure and interaction of participants in ELL high school PLC meetings?

These questions are designed to “open the black box” of ELL PLC meetings in order to better understand something that is complex and about which not much is known. This article contributes to a growing body of research about the work of high school teachers of ELL students (e.g. Dabach, 2011, 2015), studies of professional learning communities (DuFour, 2004), teacher learning, and ELL teacher expertise (Harper & deJong, 2009; Harper, deJong & Platt, 2008).

### **Literature and Framing**

This study of high school ELL department PLCs is broadly framed by the context of district policy regarding professional development, a component of which is the presence of PLCs at all schools in the district, as well as established meeting time. The presence of PLCs in the district where this study was conducted provided a window into the teacher learning of the ELL teachers at two high schools. For this reason, I spend some time describing the district

policy regarding PLCs, as well as the role of professional development and its implications for ELL teaching and learning. From there, I provide a brief overview of teacher learning as it relates to PLCs, and the role and often-overlooked importance of ELL teacher expertise in these PLCs (Harper & deJong, 2009).

District-level professional development policy and initiatives can be approached from the perspective that such policies are aimed at reform (Little, 2002), improving student outcomes, capacity building (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995), and teacher learning (Horn & Little, 2010). This perspective provides a vantage point from which we can consider the connection between professional development initiatives, such as the policy at hand providing for PLCs, and the important work of attending to the need for improving educational outcomes for ELL students. Professional development policies and practices are often aimed at improving achievement and outcomes of students, and this focus directly implicates ELL students, who continue to receive inequitable access to educational opportunity. What is unique about the study at hand is that while there is literature addressing professional development for content area and mainstream teachers of ELL students, this study examines one facet of professional development and teacher learning for a different population: high school ELL teachers.

### **Teacher Learning in Communities**

One way that PLCs have been studied and conceptualized is as communities of practice (COPs). This framework provides one lens for understanding their work and the interactions they engage in with other teachers and administrators as they navigate and implement district policy. Lave and Wenger's (1991, 1998) theory of social learning of has been applied to a variety of fields, disciplines, and communities, including education. This theory represents a turn towards understanding teachers' work from a sociocultural perspective, whereas previously teachers'

work was conceptualized by individual practice and autonomy (Lortie, 1977). This turn, however, is not without tension. Darling-Hammond and Richardson write:

In ongoing opportunities for collegial work, teachers learn about, try out, and reflect on new practices in their specific context, sharing their individual knowledge and expertise. In the United States, efforts to develop professional learning communities bump up against individualistic norms and school structures that sharply limit time for collaborative planning. (2009, p. 46)

The work of Gallucci (2003) provides a definition of communities of practice including the following criteria: “teachers working together”, “sustained mutual relationships”, “shared ways of doing things”, and importantly, “shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world” (p. 5). Gallucci looked at a specific aspect of teacher learning: the role of communities of practice in forming the link between policy and teacher practice, a theme that I return to later in this section when addressing the specialized work of high school ELL teachers as implementers of district policy.

Teachers’ participation in professional communities is one way to understand how teachers develop knowledge and instructional practice (Little, 2002), but this participation varies widely between different sites, grade levels, and importantly, subject areas. Part of the motivation to identify the participants and content of meetings is to ultimately understand the ways these communities have an impact on teacher learning. However, Little (2002) points out that the development and structure of professional learning communities depends on the context.

The study of PLCs provides a window into the social learning that teachers engage in and offers insight into the ways that this learning leads to changes in their practice, which ideally leads to changes in student achievement outcomes. However, researchers continue to pursue

better understanding of the conditions of teacher learning in PLCs and the specific ways that teachers engage in them (Little, 2002). There is also room for more investigation into the ways that these communities are structured, who participates in them and in what capacity, as well as their ability to effect change, both in the experiences of teachers and students.

For the purposes of this article, PLCs refer to the building-level groups of ELL teachers and administrators (for more description, see Table 1). To provide some definition for these groups, I draw on Lave and Wenger's (1991) three essential criteria of communities of practice. First, there must be a shared domain of interest (in this case, educating ELLs). Second, there needs to be community, either formally or informally established, and not necessarily intentionally. For this study, the community was comprised of the ELL teachers in two high schools and the administrators that supervised and worked closely with the ELL program. Finally, there must be a practice that the community is engaged in, such as department PLC meetings. The presence of these three criteria provides a starting place from which to examine the participation of high school ELL teachers in their PLCs and the content of these meetings.

### **Professional learning communities at the high school level.**

Professional learning communities have been given increasing attention in recent decades for their implementation in response to the need for teacher development considering various district and school-based reform initiatives (Little, 2002). Findings from a review of PLC research found that "well-developed PLCs have positive impact on both teaching practice and student achievement" (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008, p. 80). Other work focuses on the ways that PLCs serve as a space for teachers to understand and navigate the relationship between policy and practice as well as being "sites for teacher learning and... mediators of teachers' responses to standards-based reform" (Gallucci, 2003, p. 3). Additionally, PLCs exemplify the context-

embedded nature of teaching in various environments: classroom, school, district, and policy (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

It is important to separate the study of PLCs at the high school level from other educational PLCs, given the unique setting and structure of subject-area departmentalization that occurs at the high school level (Little, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). High school PLCs are typically organized around existing subject-area departments, and thus the communities of practice are groups of teachers engaged in teaching similar content. In Lake Valley School District, there was a district-wide PLC model that provided for paid PLC meeting time once a week at the end of the school day. The PLC structure existed as part of a larger district professional development plan, and at the high school level, the PLC time was used for department meetings. As stated on the district website, the goal was the development of “high-performing PLCs that focus on student learning, growth, and academic achievement.”

#### **Professional learning communities and ELL departments.**

With the understanding that communities of practice (including PLCs) at the high school level are professional communities important to the work of teachers, as well as the role of professional community in “institutional improvement and school reform” (Little, 2001, p. 917), I turn now to the context of ELL-specific PLCs. The role of ELL PLCs should not be overlooked given the prominence of school-based reform efforts that address the achievement of ELL students. Professional learning communities have gained popularity in recent decades as vehicles for both school and district-level reform related to student achievement. For schools with significant numbers of ELL students, like those in this study, issues of student achievement inevitably include discussion of ELL student achievement; for these students, the opportunity gap is pervasive (Fry, 2007, 2008; Menken, 2008). It follows then that PLCs devoted to ELL

students present an important possibility for pursuing reform, especially as related to the educational outcomes of ELL students. There is a body of research into the possibilities for teacher learning in PLCs (Horn & Little, 2010; Little, 2002), and it follows that ELL PLCs could achieve similar potential, especially given the widespread call for improved professional development opportunities related to ELL teaching (Ballantyne, Gebbie, Sanderman & Levy, 2008; Lopez, Scanlan & Gundrun, 2013; Penner-Williams, Diaz & Worthen, 2017).

The work of high school ELL PLCs is necessarily distinguished from other department PLCs given the differences in staffing, curriculum, assessment, standards, and the demographics of their students (i.e., home language, educational experiences, and English proficiency levels). Recent studies of ELL PLCs include the work of Penner-Williams et al. (2017), who examined teachers' perceptions of their roles in PLCs and the impact on their learning and practice, and Serrano (2012), who examined which features of ELL PLCs were most effective in supporting the academic performance of ELLs. He identified teacher collaboration and planning as critical features of these PLCs. The work of these authors points to the importance of studying ELL PLCs separately from other content-area PLCs, given the differential needs and goals of their teachers.

### **The role of teacher expertise in ELL PLCs.**

Teacher expertise has been a renewed focus of research in the post-NCLB era that emphasizes educational outcomes of students and the accountability of their teachers (Palmer, Stough, Burdenski, Jr., & Gonzales, 2005). Of especial interest is what defines teacher expertise as a construct, and studies spanning from the 1980s (e.g., Shulman, 1987) to current day (e.g., Bransford, 2007) attend to the attributes of expert teachers. In their review, Palmer et al. (2005) identify the following “indicators” that researchers have used to describe expertise: years of

experience, deliberate practice, desire for mastery, and expertise as a social attribute. However, they concluded that despite the presence of these indicators and factors that contribute to them, definitions and criteria of expertise have varied significantly by investigators over time. In this study, I was not as concerned with what makes a teacher an expert as I was with the significance of their expertise within the PLCs and how it was demonstrated in the PLC meetings.

Speaking directly about the expertise of ELL teachers, Harper and deJong (2009) point to the conditions that have led to a systematic devaluing of the expertise of ELL teachers: “The mainstreaming of ELLs, along with developments in the field of English as a second language...such as the integration of language and content teaching, have contributed to the diffusion and devaluation of ESL teacher expertise in the United States” (p. 137). This in turn has led the specific skills and expertise of ELL teachers being replaced with more general teaching practices, which has negative implications for ELL students (Harper, deJong & Platt, 2008). With this backdrop, we can see more clearly the importance of ELL teacher expertise, and PLC meetings are one place where this expertise is evident as ELL teachers gather together to address problems of practice and issue related to the education of ELL students, whether they be administrative or instructional in nature.

### **Methods**

Data for this study was gathered as part of a larger study that was designed to capture the complexity of ELL teachers’ roles, as well as the variable and changing district context in which they experience and implement language education policy. This study included aspects of qualitative design (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2005), case study (Yin, 2009), and policy analysis (Goertz, 2006; McNeil & Coppola, 2006). I collected data in two comprehensive high schools in an urban, linguistically diverse district over the course of the 2015/2016 school year. In addition

to observing ELL PLCs, I also observed ELL classroom instruction, and I interviewed ELL teachers as well as building and district administrators who worked directly with the ELL programs in each school. I examined district ELL program policy and collected artifacts such as handouts and materials that were distributed during observations and photos of each school site. I employed a variety of interpretive practices that allowed entry into these interconnected facets of the research problem and a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002).

### **Setting**

Prior to beginning data collection, I spent several months identifying potential school districts in the Pacific Northwest. During this period of fieldwork, I collected information about district size and student demographics over the past several years, with particular attention to the percentage of students within the district that was identified as ELL. Districts with a very small percentage of ELL students (<5%) were not considered, given that schools in these districts did not have as many ELL teachers and/or were less likely to have established ELL departments as schools with larger numbers of ELL students.<sup>7</sup> Other important information about districts that I collected included number, type (e.g., comprehensive versus “small school” or alternative), and size of high schools, as well as the structure and description of ELL services available at the high school level. To compare district program policy and varying service models, I needed at least two schools within the same district. This eliminated districts with one comprehensive high school. In addition to this information, I also had informal conversations with an ELL administrator in each district to better understand the district ELL service model at the high

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<sup>7</sup> The amount of FTE (full time equivalent) positions allotted for the hiring of ELL teachers is based on a formula from the state department of education that is determined by the number of ELL students-and their level of English proficiency as measured by the state-adopted assessment (at the time of this study, the Washington English Language Proficiency Assessment, or WELPA).

school level and to identify potential school sites within the district for data collection. After gathering background information about each of these districts (five in total), I assessed the benefits and limitations of conducting the study in each, with special consideration to the potential for comparison and contrast within the district. This fieldwork allowed me to use purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2005) and intentionally select the sites that would facilitate understanding and analysis of the research problem under investigation. Ultimately, Lake Valley School District was chosen based on their fit with the above considerations, as well as access. (All site and participant names in this article are pseudonyms.)

### **Participants**

Potential teacher participants were initially identified from conversations with district level ELL personnel and building administrators. After identifying these teachers, I conducted a preliminary interview with the teachers to learn more about their roles in the building and their work as an ELL teacher. During this interview, I asked them questions about topics such as the length of time they have been teaching ELLs (including amount of time in the school and district), their teaching roles (including what classes they teach), and a description of the courses that they taught. The goal of this screening interview was to be certain to involve teachers who are directly involved with the ELL program and implementing the district ELL program service model and who also teach ELL students (as opposed to ELL teachers who work primarily as instructional coaches, for example). The ELL department heads were the focal participants in each school; in their role, they were at the center of the ELL program in each building and involved in all aspects of the ELL program, from administrative to instructional practices.

The other participants in the study (district and school administrators, ELL specialists, and content area teachers) were identified from conversations and interviews with the teacher

participants. This purposeful sampling allowed me to identify participants that worked directly with the ELL teachers and whose work was part of the district or school ELL service model.

*Table 1: Participants in ELL PLCs*

<b>Location</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Title</b>
Metro High School	Mr. Bloomquist	ELL Department Head
	Ms. Wong	ELL Teacher
	Ms. Gregor	ELL Teacher
	Mr. Vola	ELL Teacher
Fields High School	Ms. Harper	Assistant Principal
	Ms. Bryant	ELL Department Head
	Ms. Russell	ELL Teacher

### **Data Sources**

I attended four ELL PLC meetings, two at Fields High School and two at Metro High School. All four PLC meetings took place during the spring of the 2016 school year. While I attended other meetings in the district and schools during data collection, these four PLCs were meetings that I was explicitly invited to by the ELL department heads in each building. It was important to me that I was welcomed into the space so that my presence would not feel intrusive. In the case of Metro High School, the department head asked the other teachers if they were comfortable with my attendance. Meetings of departmental PLCs took place throughout the school year, and during participant interviews, these meetings were described as important space for teachers' collaboration and information sharing. Observing these meetings allowed me to see ELL teachers' discussions and interactions regarding ELL students and their teaching. Table 2 displays an overview of each meeting, participants, and summary of topics addressed, and in the

findings section I go into more detail about the participants, their participation, and the topics that were addressed.

Table 2

*ELL PLC Meetings*

<b>Event</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Date and Amount of Time</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Main Topics and Themes</b>
ELL PLC Meeting 1: Fields High School	Ms. Bryant’s classroom	3/9/16	Ms. Harper	Discipline issues
		25 minutes	Ms. Bryant	New students’ placement and services  Scheduling and duties of paraprofessionals  Roles and responsibilities of Ms. Bryant
ELL PLC Meeting 2: Fields High School	Ms. Bryant’s classroom	5/17/16	Ms. Harper	Placement of new students
		130 minutes	Ms. Bryant Ms. Russell	Roles and training of paraprofessionals  Teaching assignments  Issue of misplacing ELLs in special education  Communicating with content area teachers  Failure rates of ELL students

ELL PLC Meeting 2: Metro High School	Mr. Bloomquist's classroom	4/19/16  80 minutes	Mr. Bloomquist  Ms. Wong  Mr. Vola  Ms. Gregor	Review of student assessment data  Modifying curriculum  Instructional strategies  Building background knowledge of student
ELL PLC Meeting 3: Metro High School	Mr. Bloomquist's classroom	5/3/16  60 minutes	Mr. Bloomquist  Ms. Wong  Mr. Vola  Ms. Gregor	Parent conferences  Debrief of recent conference  Translanguaging and students' home languages

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis for this study focused on the participation of high school ELL teachers in their departments' PLCs, the topics and content that arose during these meetings, and the nature of discussions that took place during four PLC meetings in the spring of the 2015-2016 school year. To do this analysis, I analyzed audio and field notes, as well as transcripts of each meeting. Using content analysis (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2005), I identified the topics or themes of each meeting to determine the content of these PLCs. I then sorted these topics into two broad categories: instructional or administrative practices and tasks. I added a category for student learning, achievement, and experience, based on PLC research demonstrating that productive PLCs are those that are centered around student learning (DuFour & Eaker, 2009; Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1994). I created definitions for these categories to clearly delineate the topics that were most relevant to ELL instruction from those that were un-related to ELL instruction. For example, Ms. Russell, one of the ELL teachers at Fields High School, also taught in the social studies department, but her exchanges with Ms. Harper related to the social studies department were not relevant to the ELL department PLC meeting. I then organized each transcript into five-minute segments so that I could code for the different topics as they occurred over the course of the meeting and identify which topics surfaced when and with what frequency. To analyze participation, I created a code to identify the enactment of participants' roles (leader/facilitator or contributor), and the nature of the participation (i.e., leading, questioning, decision-making). Using meeting transcripts, I counted the number of utterances and the number of lines of text for each utterance to get a sense of how much each participant spoke during the meeting. I also

coded for questions, to see who was asking questions and what types of questions were being asked (i.e., clarifying, probing).

Transcripts and field notes were coded using both open coding, to identify themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) and patterns as they arose, and focused coding (Lofland & Lofland, 2006), where I used relevant concepts from the literature and framing to build on the themes and patterns that emerged in open coding. Along with audio recordings, field notes, and artifact collection, the process of creating memos and carefully documenting my interactions with participants and my experiences during data collection provided a record of the data collection as it was occurring.

### **Analytic codes.**

I created and used a coding scheme (see Table 3) to categorize, differentiate, and describe the content of the discussions and work that took place during four ELL PLC meetings at two high schools within the same district, Metro High School and Fields High School. These codes do not capture or describe every topic of conversation during these meetings, but rather were selected through the dual process of open coding and thematic coding based on existent literature on PLCs at the high school department level. Below, I describe how each code is defined (for the whole code book, including sub-codes, see Appendix). There are main/single codes as well as “double codes” that capture two or more of the main/single codes. After reviewing the audio and transcripts and while creating the codebook, it became clear that double codes were necessary given the nature of the conversations and the prevalent overlap of codes. It was important to code for both the topics and the participation in order to have a fuller understanding of what transpired during these meetings.

### **Code: Administrative and instructional tasks and practices.**

The code “administrative practices” refers to instances in the meetings where aspects of the ELL program, department, and teachers’ work was focused on an administrative, rather than instructional, practice. Administrative practices were those practices engaged in by teachers that pertain to the logistics of how the ELL program is run, service delivery, and how department-level decisions are made. Administrative practices engaged in by the ELL PLCs included decisions about courses offered, scheduling of courses and training, teaching assignments, paraprofessional assignments and tasks, registration, etc.

“Instructional practices” refers to instances when participants discussed instructional practices, strategies, assessment, curricula use/adaptation, and research related to instruction. This code does not refer to the instructional practices of content-area teachers or paraprofessionals, as I wanted to stay focused on the learning and practices of the teachers, and I didn’t collect additional data (such as interviews) with paraprofessionals.

The code “ELL student learning, achievement, and experiences” describes instances when the learning, achievement, and experiences are discussed. This code is designed to capture moments when meeting participants reference ELL students’ academic achievement, language use and skills (including home languages), and experiences in ELL and non-ELL classes. This is different from administrative and instructional codes that capture the decisions and practices related to ELL students’ education.

**Double codes.**

Instances when the conversation addressed a topic that includes both administrative practices and student learning received a double code designed to capture the overlap between administrative practice and its effect on/potential outcomes for student learning. This is significant because some of the administrative practices and conversations were very

consequential and touched upon student learning, whereas some conversations were solely about one or the other. For example, discussing the placement of ELL students in special education courses, or ELL students who receive special education services.

Double coding was also applied in instances where discussion of instructional practices overlapped with discussion of student learning, achievement, and experiences, including their home language use. This was important because it indicates when participants were not only discussing instructional strategies but also discussing the students who receive the instruction. In this way, conversation about student learning was connected to and embedded in the conversation about instructional practices.

A double code was also used in instances when there was overlap in the conversation about administrative practices and instructional practices. Similar to the double code for instances of both administrative practices and student learning, this code was used when the discussion addressed the work of teachers that was both instructional and administrative in nature, such as a conversation about Ms. Russell's co-teaching assignment where both administrative aspects, such as training, and instructional aspects, such as how to combine her strategies with the other teachers' teaching strategies, were discussed.

#### **Code: Participants and participation.**

A participation code was employed to identify not only the participants and their different roles (i.e., leader or contributor), but also the nature of their participation in the PLC meetings. Drawing from aspects of conversation analysis (Schegloff, 2007) and discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2008), I attended to the way that participation and interactions in these PLC meetings demonstrated different roles as well as expertise (see below). Their participation was coded for

speaking (both duration and frequency) and questioning (who asked what type of questions).

### **Code: Teacher learning and expertise.**

The code for teacher learning is specific to teacher learning that occurs in the PLC meetings, and learning that is specific to instructional practices (versus learning related to administrative practices). This is not to say that this is the only place that teacher learning takes place in the school setting, but the focus of this study is on what transpires during PLC meetings. The definition of this code is instances when discussion relates to teachers' instructional practices (i.e., pedagogy, strategies, and skills) specific to teaching ELL students.

As noted in the literature review, the construct of teacher expertise has been described in different ways. For my analytic purposes, I focus on the years of experience of the teacher, their deliberate practice (as evidenced in their participation in the ELL PLC), desire for mastery, as well as expertise as a social attribute; in other words, if they are identified as an expert by others (Palmer et al., 2005). I also include in this code the expertise that is specific to ELL teachers, as this has been widely overlooked and marginalized in both practice and research (Harper & deJong, 2009). The expertise of ELL teachers can be observed in their knowledge specific to ELL instruction, language acquisition, and the experiences, strengths, and needs of ELL students.

### **Limitations and Positionality**

Like any study, this study has limitations. First, I present data here from four PLC meetings, a small sample of all the PLC meetings that took place during the school year. Observation of more meetings would have provided for more context and breadth of the data. The four meetings also took place during the spring, and it is possible that meeting during other times in the school year would have had different focal topics or participation. Attending

meetings in the spring after I had already been collecting data for several months allowed me to better understand and contextualize these meetings. Additionally, focusing on these meetings allowed me to look deeply at a clearly bounded set of data.

It is important that I acknowledge my own subjectivity and positionality. I bring my previous experience as an ELL teacher (both at the high school and K-8 setting), and my current work as a teacher educator, to my research design and analysis. In addition to the theoretical and ideological assumptions that inform and influence my work, my background as an ELL teacher brings an additional lens to my view of the research setting. During the design, data collection, and analysis processes, I repeatedly reflected on the ways that my own experiences were influencing my work, especially at the interpretive level. To address this, I engaged in member checks where I shared observations and findings with participants, and asked them for their input and clarification.

I also come to this research as a native English speaker and non-immigrant, and my own experiences as a student and teacher in the public education system afforded me privileges and opportunities that are too often inaccessible or withheld from ELL students, immigrant, and immigrant-origin youth. This is important as it affects my understanding and interpretation of the events that I observed in the during data collection.

### **Findings and Discussion**

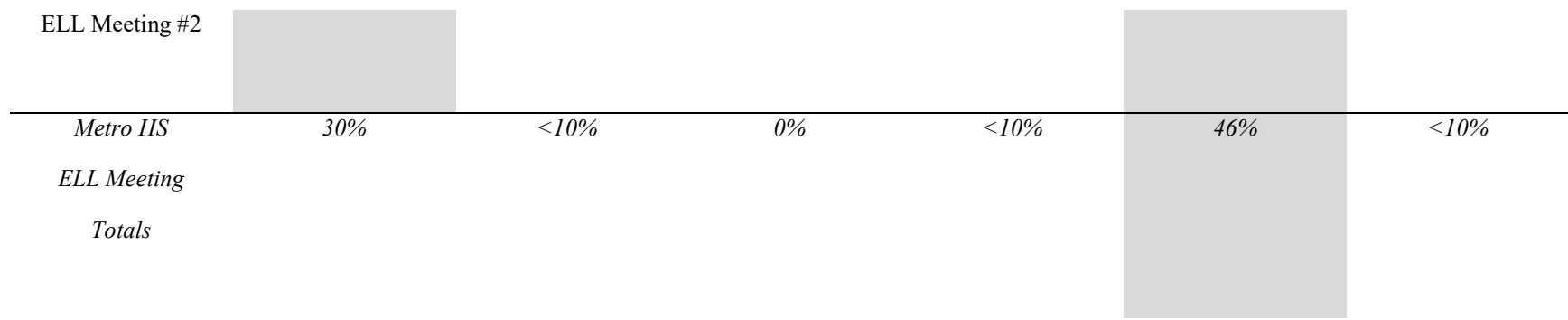
The existence of district-wide PLC time that was mandated and included in teachers' contract hours was not something I was aware of prior to data collection; I had anticipated observing meetings of some sort, but did not expect that there would be structured time dedicated to weekly department meetings. I was invited to attend two PLC meetings at each school, and in this section I describe the meetings at Metro and Fields, the topics that emerged and how they

were taken up, and an analysis of the participation in each PLC. This is followed by a discussion of the possibilities and limitations that emerged across the two sites. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the percentage of time in each meeting devoted to the following main categories: ELL teacher instructional practices; student learning, achievement, and experiences; and administrative practices, as well as the overlap or “doubling up” of these categories during certain discussions. The areas shaded in grey are the categories where most time was focused.

Table 3

Percentage of ELL Meeting Time Per Focal Topic

	ELL Teacher Instructional Practices	Student Learning, Achievement, and School Experiences	Administrative Practices of ELL Department	Instructional Practices/Administrative Practices of ELL Department	Instructional Practices/Student Learning, Achievement, and School Experiences	Administrative Practices/Student Learning, Achievement, and School Experiences
Fields HS ELL Meeting #1	0%	0%	60%	0%	0%	40%
Fields HS ELL Meeting #2	0%	15%	12%	12%	<10%	53%
<i>Fields HS ELL Meeting Totals</i>	<i>0%</i>	<i>13%</i>	<i>20%</i>	<i>&lt;10%</i>	<i>&lt;10%</i>	<i>51%</i>
Metro HS ELL Meeting #1	31%	13%	0%	0%	50%	0%
Metro HS	42%	0%	0%	<10%	42%	<10%



## **Fields High School's ELL PLC: Changing School Demographics and New ELL Teachers**

The focus of the ELL PLC meetings at Robison high school was largely administrative, but this administrative focus was necessary given the needs of a newly-revamped ELL department, new ELL teachers (Ms. Bryant and Ms. Russell), and a new ELL administrator (Ms. Harper), who also attended these PLC meetings. Fields High School had experienced a reversal in school economic, ethnic, and ELL population demographics over the last decade. Previously this school had been majority white, middle-class, and with a small ELL population and an ELL department consisting of one teacher and a few paraprofessionals. The ELL department had operated in isolation, and there was a history in the building of tense relationship between the ELL department and the rest of the building. In the summer prior to the 2015-2016 school year, the new teachers and administrator undertook the task of overhauling the ELL department and program services, and this work continued into the school year and shaped the course of the PLC meetings.

### **Topics and tasks of PLC meetings.**

The first observed ELL PLC meeting was brief, and attended only by Ms. Bryant (the ELL department head) and Ms. Harper (the assistant principal responsible for the ELL department). The other ELL teacher, Ms. Russell, was not always in attendance at these meetings as she often participated in the social studies PLC, where she also taught. During this meeting, Ms. Bryant and Ms. Harper focused on the task of supervising and directing the ELL paraprofessionals. Sixty percent of this meeting focused on administrative tasks related to the roles of the paraprofessionals and what was expected of them. Ms. Bryant and Ms. Harper collaborated and problem-solved issues related to the work being done by paraprofessionals. It was clear that even at this point in the year, there were issues regarding what was expected of the

paraprofessionals, and what tasks they should be engaged in throughout the day. In the following excerpt, they discussed the specific work of three of the paraprofessionals, Cheryl, Stacey, and Elaine:

**Ms. Harper (Administrator):** I feel like we're moving in the right direction. These are all good choices we are making...at what point am I having the conversation with Elaine versus you?

**Ms. Bryant (ELL Department Head):** Well, I devised a small plan and I thought I'd run it by you.

**Ms. Harper:** Yes.

**Ms. Bryant:** I think Cheryl should be in charge of the testing...I think Stacy should get trained from Cheryl about the emails...and give that responsibility in the afternoons at least to Stacy. (Fields HS ELL PLC, 3/9/16)

This is an example of an administrative practice that Ms. Harper is collaborating on with Ms. Bryant; Ms. Harper's knowledge and work as an administrator is complimented by Ms. Bryant's knowledge as the ELL department head.

Later in the meeting, the discussion turns from the work of paraprofessionals to the placement testing and classes for a newly arrived student. This is an example of an administrative task that is related to student learning and the conversation revealed aspects of both. Ms. Harper asks Ms. Bryant about when he should be tested and by whom (an administrative practice), and they also discuss his English skills as related to the placement testing process:

**Ms. Harper:** Just see how much he gets through and have him take a break.

**Ms. Bryant:** Yeah...he's pretty low.

**Ms. Harper:** That's why it might be a couple of days.

**Ms. Bryant:** I don't know. He seems like he has a very high work ethic so he might attempt it. (Fields HS ELL PLC, 3/9/16)

This type of exchange demonstrates the overlap of administrative tasks and student learning, achievement and experiences. In the case of placement testing, it is valuable that the conversation included both, with Ms. Harper and Ms. Bryant bringing their knowledge of the assessment process and the student into the conversation.

Two months later, I observed another PLC meeting at Fields High School, this time with both ELL teachers and Ms. Harper. This meeting was much longer (over two hours), and a wider range of topics were covered with more of the categories represented. Over 50% of the time was devoted to conversation that addressed both administrative practices and student learning, achievement, and experiences. Major topics of this meeting included more conversation about the work of paraprofessionals, students who were dually identified ELL and special education, Ms. Russell's co-teaching responsibilities, and content area courses. Like the previous meeting, there was a very collaborative tone and it appeared that the three ELL personnel relied on one another to problem-solve and for support. In the following excerpt, the three of them talk together about the coming school year and what courses will be offered:

**Ms. Harper (Administrator):** We're going to just go with the two sections of co-teaching for now.

**Ms. Bryant (ELL Department Head):** Okay.

**Ms. Harper:** Then, just also knowing in the back of our head-

**Ms. Russell (ELL Teacher):** Whatever happens, happens.

**Ms. Harper:** Right. What if we get 15 extra ELL students? I mean, we're expecting-

**Ms. Russell:** It will all come out in the wash.

**Ms. Bryant:** It's still going to be better than the beginning of this year.

**Ms. Russell:** Okay, what would the co-teaching training be, just the same thing I had earlier this year?

**Ms. Harper:** It would probably be the same thing...then you could also add our input.

(Fields HS ELL PLC, 5/17/16)

Here we see the three participants shared their knowledge and experiences from the current school year and planning for the coming school year, thinking especially about the numbers of students and the courses that should be offered.

Across these two PLC meetings there was an overt emphasis on administrative practices over instructional practices, but these administrative conversations were necessary in order to facilitate the functioning of the ELL department and provide services to students. Additionally, in both meetings, there was a connection between administrative conversations and student learning. The administrator and teachers worked together, each contributing their knowledge and sharing the responsibility for the ELL students.

### **Patterns of participation in PLC meetings.**

Analyzing the participation of the ELL PLC meetings at Fields High School clarified the atypical nature of this group; in many ways, these meetings presented as administrative or department meetings as opposed to PLCs that are more explicitly focused on teacher and student learning. Part of this was evident in the participants themselves: there were only two ELL teachers at Fields, only one of whom is full-time ELL. As such, a learning community of teachers would be, at most, comprised of two teachers. Additionally, the presence of the assistant principal, Ms. Harper, changed the dynamic of the meetings and helped to account for the more

administrative orientation of the group. An important note here is that while she was the vice principal, her prior experience as a teacher in a school with a high percentage of ELL students informed her participation. She was experienced with and aware of the issues related to high school ELL education.

Possibly due to her role as an administrator or her experience as a veteran teacher, she assumed a role as a leader and facilitator of the PLC meetings at Fields, and the other teachers had roles as contributors and collaborators. A breakdown of the amount of participation at these meetings revealed that she spoke for over half (56%) of the meetings, and her speech accounted for nearly half of all utterances (44%). It is possible that her presence and participation affected the amount and nature of participation of the ELL teachers, as she was their direct supervisor. Despite this power differential, the tone of these meetings was collegial and friendly, punctuated by jokes and laughter, and it was apparent that Ms. Harper was invested in the success of the ELL department, the teachers, and the students.

### **Metro High School's ELL PLC: An Established Department and Veteran Teachers**

In contrast to Fields High School's new ELL teachers and re-configured ELL department, the ELL department at Metro High School was well-established, and staffed by four veteran ELL teachers. The school had a larger population of ELL students, and there had not been recent changes in either the ELL demographics or the structure and services of the ELL program. In addition to the four ELL teachers, the administrator who supervised the ELL department had also worked at Metro High School for over a decade, and was very supportive of the ELL department, although his participation was different than that of Ms. Harper at Fields, and he was not in attendance at the two PLC meetings I observed (although in interviews with him and with Mr. Bloomquist, it was evident that there was a lot of conversation between the two of them about

ELL students and instruction). The content of the two ELL PLC meetings I observed was overwhelmingly related to instructional practices, with substantial overlap with student learning. Present at each of the two meetings was Mr. Bloomquist, the department head who lead the PLC meetings, and the three other full-time ELL teachers: Mr. Vola, Ms. Gregor, and Ms. Wong.

### **Topics and tasks of PLC meetings.**

The first meeting was dedicated to reviewing and analyzing student data from a formative assessment that Mr. Bloomquist had used with his students. He created a spreadsheet with students' written responses from an activity, and he asked the other teachers to review the data and suggest strategies for his next steps.

**Mr. Bloomquist:** The question is are the predictions appropriate and then are the questions derived from the text features? ...Will they be helpful for the students? Don't feel like you have to do very much, but if you have any ideas maybe you could just write down "ready to read" or...something else that give some kind of sense whether or not the student understood the task. (Metro HS ELL PLC, 4/19/16)

Here he was providing examples of student work, sharing his problem, and soliciting feedback from his colleagues, all in the service of improving his instructional practices. The other teachers then asked questions and provided insight. Ms. Gregor asked, "Before they started writing their predictions and questions, did you go over the meaning of the words? Or did anyone ask?" and Ms. Wong shared her perception: "I was surprised at his predictions and his questions because usually when he writes something it's meaningful, more or less, compared to other kids" (Metro HS, ELL PLC #1). The conversation is focused on student work, and teachers shared their knowledge about instructional practices, and about the students. Not surprising given this focus,

the discussions at this meeting were entirely devoted to instructional practices, student learning, or a combination of both.

In the second ELL PLC meeting at Metro High School, there was again a clear focus and shared task for most of the meeting: the teachers debriefed a conference they had recently attended, sharing handouts and materials, and discussed what they had learned and its connection to their teaching at Metro. The conference was a regional conference for ELL and bilingual education practitioners. All the teachers except for Mr. Bloomquist had attended the conference (I also attended this conference in order to have some context and understanding of their experience there). The district paid for these teachers to attend, and while Mr. Bloomquist did not attend this year, he had attended in the past and was familiar with the conference and the presenters. Mr. Vola, Ms. Wong, and Ms. Gregor took turns sharing their impressions and what they had learned at different presentations. A unifying theme across their sharing was what they had learned about bilingual instruction, translanguaging, and strategies for incorporating students' home languages into the classroom.

**Ms. Wong:** The first one [presentation] on Friday about translanguaging I think was more for my own knowledge just to know what's going on in the field, what people are doing what they're working on, you know?... So, they were talking about translanguaging which is different from code-switching. Internally bilingual people use both languages and they draw from both languages... It was just interesting, just knowing what's going on in the field.

**Mr. Vola:** Like a mixture of languages? Like you start in English and all of a sudden your next word is in your native language if you speak another or any other language,

whatever, so it's sort of, to me, it sounds like...stream of consciousness. Whatever comes to mind you say it in whatever language you know.

**Mr. Bloomquist:** What's the difference?

**Ms. Wong:** When they're talking about translanguaging, it's internal, like you live with two languages and the knowledge of both language when you speak, it's kind of more of an internal thing, right? But that's what's going on out there.

Later in the conversation, Ms. Gregor returns to translanguaging, and how to bring students' home languages into the classroom:

I noticed there was a common theme, many speakers talked about bringing students' languages into the classroom, adding posters, having words in different languages in your classroom...Then another teacher talked about how from time to time he poses an essential question in two languages. (Metro HS ELL PLC, 5/3/16)

All four teachers were engaged in a conversation related to instructional practices and student learning that was focused around a common or shared experience: the recent language instruction conference they had attended. The ELL PLC at Metro spoke to the importance of a focus on student learning, as well as the value of shared artifacts or experiences to anchor the conversation and promote their learning as teachers.

### **Patterns of participation in PLC meetings.**

The two ELL PLC meetings I observed at Metro High School had the following participant structure: the department head, Mr. Bloomquist, was the leader and facilitator of the meetings; the meetings took place in his classroom, he set an agenda for the meetings, and he also spoke more during the meetings than the other teachers (his speech accounted for 51% of the conversation, and 46% of the utterances). However, this quantity of participation was in

service of the participation of the other teachers. He provided information and data to the teachers, asked many questions, and in general facilitated the conversation in such a way to promote interaction between the other teachers. In the first meeting, where Mr. Bloomquist shared student data, he actively solicited feedback and suggestions from the other teachers, who then shared their strategies and knowledge. In the second meeting, where teachers debriefed the conference they had attended, Mr. Bloomquist asked the other teachers for their impression of the conference and to share what they had learned.

### **Topics and participation across sites.**

As I contemplated the similarities and differences across the two sites, the following questions guided my thinking: What accounted for the differences in the content discussed in the ELL PLC meetings? What factors contributed to the productivity of each PLC, and what factors hindered it? As described in the discussion of each school's ELL PLC, there were stark differences in the content of each meeting, and in part, these differences could be attributed to the organizational needs of each department. But in addition to the needs, it is possible that the levels of teaching experience and expertise at Fields did not lend themselves to the kind of in-depth instructional and theoretical conversations that happened at Metro. There is a case to be made for the role that teacher expertise played in Metro's PLC, where teachers could draw on more experience and resources, as opposed to the teachers at Fields who were in their first and second year of teaching.

The nature of the interactions and participation in the ELL PLC meetings was noticeably collaborative at both Metro and Fields and focused on both issues of instruction and ELL program administration (such as placement, assessment, and paraprofessional support). These interactions were centered around issues of specific students, their academic experiences, and

how to support these students in the ELL and content-area classrooms. This finding is consistent with PLC research that indicates that successful PLCs are grounded around student learning and collaboration (Little & McLaughlin, 1993). In these PLCs, I observed teachers sharing student work, brainstorming formative assessments, discussing research, and collectively problem-solving issues of placement and student achievement, among other topics addressed.

There were interesting similarities and differences in the PLC meetings across the two sites. The meetings at both schools had a leader who facilitated the conversation and set the agenda. At Fields, this was the assistant principal, Ms. Harper; at Metro, it was the department head, Mr. Bloomquist. In both schools, the leader encouraged the participation of the teachers. However, the structure and participation of the PLC meetings I attended at Metro High School were in some ways more typical of a PLC meeting: there was a clear agenda related to student and teacher learning and more inquiry-based activity and conversation (Feimer-Nemser, 2012). At Fields High School, the participation of an administrator who was knowledgeable and involved in the ELL department affected the structure of the meetings, but in a way that was supportive and encouraging of the teachers' participation. At both sites, there was a connection between the topics, participants, and participation that I take up in the next section.

**Possibilities and limitations of ELL PLCs related to teacher learning and district professional development policy.**

Professional learning communities present a promising site for teacher learning, and in the case of high school ELL teachers, this opportunity extends beyond traditional notions of teacher learning to include the role of ELL teachers in administrative aspects of ELL departments, which, as previously discussed, also have important implications for student learning. These PLC meetings also demonstrated the possibility for deepening teacher expertise,

especially in the case of Metro High School, where the teachers engaged in inquiry-based activity, problem-solving, and reflection. Finally, given the highly-specialized nature of ELL teachers' work, PLCs exist also as a discourse community (Johnstone, 2008) where participants have a dedicated space for discussing their work as ELL teachers, work that is often marginalized within the broader school community (Harper & deJong, 2009).

Through my observations and analysis, I identified two important limitations related to the structure, topics, and participation of the PLC meetings I observed. First, the focus on administrative tasks at Fields High School limited the amount of conversation that took place related to instructional practices and teacher learning. More time dedicated solely to teacher learning could lead to greater expertise. Second, related to district policy regarding PLCs: if the stated goal of PLCs was to foster teacher learning and improve student outcomes, does this structure locate ELL student learning and outcomes solely under the purview of ELL teachers? This is problematic, given that ELL student outcomes are the responsibility of content area teachers as much as, if not more so, than ELL teachers.

Connecting back to the previous discussion, both PLC groups made a case for the importance of teacher expertise, albeit in different ways. At Metro High School, the expertise of Mr. Bloomquist was evident in the way that he led the meetings, provided information, and facilitated conversation based on student work, data, and research. His expertise allowed him to promote an inquiry-based environment in these meetings in a way that promoted not only the participation but also the learning of the other teachers. Additionally, the other ELL teachers were veteran teachers, and contributed their expertise in the meetings. At Fields High School, the most expertise in terms of experience and knowledge about ELLs) was located not with the department head (a novice teacher in her second year) and other ELL teacher (in her first year of

teaching), but rather with the assistant principal, a novice administrator but experienced teacher. In either form, teacher expertise was integral to the productivity of the PLC meetings.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

There are implications of this work for high school ELL departments, teachers, and administrators related to the structure and participation of professional learning communities. What began as an inquiry into the work of ELL teachers resulted in an investigation of teacher learning and teacher expertise and ultimately provided insight into the “black box” of high school ELL teacher PLCs. To summarize the findings: first, in a district where policy provided for designated PLC time, high school ELL PLCs at two school sites addressed a range of topics from administrative to instructional, depending on the structure of the department and tenure of the teachers. Second, patterns of participation in both PLC groups revealed the importance of a leader (in one case, the department head, in the other, the assistant principal), and also the importance of teacher expertise relative to accomplishing the district’s stated goals regarding PLCs. Third, these meetings presented both possibilities and limitations for the work of ELL teachers in PLC settings.

There is a real need for greater acknowledgement of ELL teacher expertise (Harper & deJong, 2009) as well as the work they do in both an instructional and administrative capacity. This may be different than the work of other departments’ PLCs, and it might be the case that the structure of an ELL PLC needs to account for the need to address both. There must be space for ELL teachers to engage in inquiry and to deepen their learning and expertise apart from addressing administrative and logistical tasks. Similarly, the occasional and timely involvement of administrators in ELL PLC meetings is important; their presence indicates interest and investment in the work of ELL teachers, and they can help address administrative tasks as they

arise. Finally, I see great potential in a structure that allows for members of ELL PLCs to meet with PLCs of other content areas in order to share knowledge and learn together. In this way, discussion of ELL student learning and outcomes is shared across content areas, and there is opportunity for ELL teacher expertise to be shared.

“Opening the black box” of the ELL PLCs that I observed presented an alternative image of PLCs that can inform our understanding of ELL teacher learning and the role of ELL-specific communities of practice. Across the research sites, different configurations of teachers and administrators came together in different contexts, and each had its use and benefits. The flexibility of topics, content and participation of professional learning communities may be an un-tapped resource when it comes to teacher learning around topics of ELL students and instruction. As it is the case that high school ELL students experience inequitable educational opportunities and outcomes, and that teacher learning is the “sine qua non of every school change effort” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 249), more knowledge about how and where ELL teacher learning takes place can only serve to improve these opportunities.

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## Appendix: Code Book

Single Codes	Double Codes
Administrative Practices (AP)	Administrative practices and student learning, achievement, and experiences (AP-SL)
Instructional Practices (IP)	Administrative practices and instructional practices (AP-IP)
Student Learning, Achievement, and Experiences (SL)	Instructional practices and student learning (IP-SL)

### Single Codes

#### *Administrative Practices (AP)*

*DEFINITION:* The code “administrative practices” refers to instances in the meetings where aspects of the ELL program, department, and teachers’ work was focused on an administrative, rather than instructional, practice. Administrative practices are those practices engaged in by teachers that pertain to the logistics of how the ELL program is run, service delivery, and how department-level decisions are made. Administrative practices engaged in by the ELL PLCs include decisions about courses offered, scheduling of courses and training, teaching assignments, paraprofessional assignments and tasks, registration, etc.

*EXAMPLE:* Discussion between Ms. Harper and Ms. Bryant about the tasks and responsibilities of paraprofessionals assigned to the ELL department:

Ms. Harper (assistant principal): I think Char should be in charge of the testing, which I’d appreciate your follow up email to Jan specifying that as well. I think Tracy should get trained from Char...and give that responsibility in the afternoons to Tracy. (RHS, ELL PLC #1)

*NON-EXAMPLE:* Discussion between Ms. Harper and student resource officer (SRO):

SRO: When you have a moment, if you could come by to assist with another opportunity.

Ms. Harper: I will be there in a moment, I’m hoping you can give me 15 minutes.

SRO: Thank you, ma’am. (RHS, ELL PLC #1)

#### *ELL Teachers’ Instructional Practices (IP)*

*DEFINITION:* The code “instructional practices” refers to instances when participants discussed instructional practices, strategies, assessment, curricula use/adaptation, language acquisition theories, or other research related to instruction. This code does not refer to the instructional practices of content-area teachers or paraprofessionals.

*EXAMPLE:* Mr. Bloomquist is presenting to the other ELL teachers:

“For an assessment, I gave today to my students on how well they could preview and make a solid prediction, and then use text-features to formulate questions for reading.”  
(CHS, ELL PLC #1)

*NON-EXAMPLE:* A discussion between Ms. Harper, Ms. Bryant, and Ms. Russell about paraprofessionals in content-area classrooms:

Ms. Harper: “For instance, when you were telling me earlier this year that Char was sitting in the classroom and just taking notes, well, the kids were also supposed to be taking notes, and then she was not even interacting with the kids.” (RHS, ELL PLC #2)

### ***ELL Student Learning, Achievement, and Experiences (SL)***

*DEFINITION:* The code “ELL student learning, achievement, and experiences” describes instances when the learning, achievement, and experiences are discussed. This code is designed to capture moments when meeting participants reference ELL students’ academic achievement, language use and skills (including home languages), and experiences in ELL and non-ELL classes. This is different from administrative and instructional codes that capture the decisions and practices related to ELL students’ education.

*EXAMPLE:* Conversation between Ms. Harper, Ms. Bryant and Ms. Russell about a new student, Stas.

Ms. Harper: What’s our new student’s name?

Ms. Bryant: Stas.

Ms. Harper: Was he in class today?

Ms. Bryant: He was in my advisory briefly, then he went to lunch. He ended up in Mr. G’s room.

Ms. Russell: This is the worst week to start him.

Ms. Harper: I know, and he doesn’t speak any English. (RHS, ELL PLC #2)

*NON-EXAMPLE:* Ms. Russell describing placement of ELL students and her co-teaching responsibilities for the coming year.

Ms. Russell: We looked through data of like, how many kids are going to be in each class, like core classes, and like, where there are problems at semester. We figure out like, Algebra 3, 4, wait, no, no Geometry 1, 2, and then Integrated 3, 4, science is where there’s the most need, so that’s where I’ll be co-teaching. (RHS, ELL PLC #2)

### **Double Codes (Indicate overlaps of more than one code)**

*\*NB: There is no non-example given for these codes; a non-example would be an instance of a single code.*

### ***Administrative Practices and Student Learning***

**DEFINITION:** Instances when the conversation addresses a topic that includes both administrative practices and student learning; this code is designed to capture the overlap between administrative practice and its effect on/potential outcomes for student learning. This is significant because some of the administrative practices and conversations are very consequential and touch upon student learning, whereas some conversations are solely about one or the other.

**EXAMPLE:** Discussing the placement of ELL students in special education courses, or ELL students who receive special education services.

Ms. Harper: There was also a comment made during the master schedule meeting today where I had to revisit the fact that just because a student is an L1 does not mean they are academically deficient...remember ... just because a kid's L1, we're not putting them in basic or remedial courses. (RHS, ELL PLC #2)

### ***Administrative Practices and ELL Teacher Instructional Practices (AP-IP)***

**DEFINITION:** Instances when an administrative practice/conversation has bearing on ELL teacher instructional practices.

**EXAMPLE:** Discussion about co-teaching.

Ms. Harper: Other issues with co-teaching or concerns or questions?

Ms. Russell: Concerns with like my current co-teachers, or-

Ms. Harper: Yeah. How's that going? What's happening?

Ms. Russell: It's going well. They're just two very different styles. (RHS, ELL PLC #2)

### ***Teachers' Instructional Practices and Student Learning (IP-SL)***

**DEFINITION:** This code refers to instances where discussion of instructional practices overlap with discussion of student learning, achievement, and experiences, including their home language use. This important because it indicates when participants are not only discussing instructional strategies, they're discussing the students who receive the instruction. In this way, conversation about student learning is connected to and embedded in the conversation about instructional practices.

### Article 3

#### **A Framework for School Leaders' Support of High School ELL Departments and Teachers**

The role of school leadership, specifically administrators, is critical in the effective education of English language learners (ELLs) (Reyes, 2006). Specifically, a building principal can have impact on issues of equity and social justice and the success of an ELL program over time (August & Hakuta, 1998; Reyes, 2006; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). Two such issues impacting the education of ELLs are: first, how to address the changing policies regarding ELL education in order to meet the needs of a growing and ever-changing student population; and second, how to do this in a way that promotes the integration, rather than isolation, of ELL students, teachers, and departments. In what follows, I provide a brief description of each of these issues to frame the discussion of the work of school leaders in supporting ELL teachers.

#### **ELL Education: Changing Policies and Changing Populations**

As noted often (e.g., Migration Policy Institute, 2016; National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2010; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2009), this population of students in the United States is rapidly increasing and diversifying. At the same time, federal accountability policy has also changed, and the recent instantiation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), have presented both greater inclusion of ELLs in the policy, and greater challenges vis-à-vis academic standards and measures of accountability (Hopkins, Thompson, Linqianti, Hakuta & August, 2013). A statement from the Working Group on ELL Policy points out that “the law... misses an opportunity to set expectations for states to establish systems of school and

district support that promote improved achievement of ELLs,” including “effective school leadership that fosters accountability while supporting and encouraging teachers’ and students’ working toward learning goals” (Statement from the Working Group on ELL Policy, January 8, 2016, p. 4).<sup>8</sup> It remains to be seen how ESSA implementation will unfold; nevertheless, we know from past experience that local decision-making will continue to have important implications for ELL program models and the outcomes of students (Callahan, 2005; Dabach & Callahan, 2011; Hopkins, 2016).

In addition to federal policies regarding the education of ELLs, there are important legal precedents that ELL administrators are responsible for upholding. The first is *Lau v Nichols*, the U.S. Supreme Court case of 1974 requiring that schools provide bilingual or ESL (English as a Second Language) programs to address the learning needs of ELLs.<sup>9</sup> This ruling established that equal treatment under the law was not sufficient and that specialized instruction and services were required for ELLs to have meaningful access to education (Thompson, 2013). However, *Lau* did not provide specifics about what “meaningful access” would look like, and was thus followed by *Castaneda v. Pickard* in 1978, which provided a three-pronged description of the requirements for ELL services. The ruling specified that such specialized instruction must be based on educational theory and research, “implemented effectively with resources for personnel, instructional materials, and space,” and finally, the program of instruction must demonstrate effectiveness. However, what these federal ruling and legal precedents mean at the district and building level for ELL students is an area open to many different interpretations and subject to local capacity and available resources. This is where building administrators come in:

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<sup>8</sup> Retrieved from <http://ellpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/ESSAComments.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> In this article, I use the term “English language learner” or “ELL”; while other authors (cited in this paper) use “EL” for “English learner” or “English as a Second Language” (“ESL”). There are important differences and meanings associated with these terms; for more description and discussion, please see the introduction.

principals and assistant principals who work with ELL departments are important agents and advocates for their ELL teachers and students. One of the ways that they can do this is through their awareness and responsiveness to the way that ELL departments, teachers, and students are positioned within the school building. This study will explore the work of school leaders in supporting ELL departments and teachers and also provide a practical framework to inform this work. This framework highlights five salient features of administrators: collaboration, responsiveness, awareness, framing, and trust.

### **The Struggle Between Integration and Isolation of ELL Departments**

The integration of ELL students into the mainstream school environment (including their placement in courses) is visible in the way that ELL departments and teachers are positioned and integrated into the building. English language learner programs and teachers tend to be marginalized within schools (Harklau, 1994; Olsen, 1997; Valdés, 2004). Some ways that secondary schools segregate ELLs are through enrollment practices, curricular tracks, and social and physical segregation via separate physical classrooms and spaces in the school. This isolation of ELLs from native-English speaking peers increases the potential that the segregation from non-ELLs will lead to labeling and its associated harms (Dabach, 2014). It is important to mention, however, that there is evidence that there are potential benefits of serving recently arrived, or newcomer, ELLs separately within school setting (such as increased participation in classes where they feel more comfortable, cultural sensitivity on the part of teachers who are experienced teaching immigrant and ELL youth, collective sense of belonging with other immigrant and ELL students, and ability to access information about other school-related activities and structures). But this is not a wholesale endorsement of separate ELL programs, as described by Faltis and Arias (2007):

At the secondary level, the most typical policy for teaching immigrant students who do not have enough English abilities to participate in and benefit from instruction in English is to hyper-segregate these students into classes where the curriculum consist primarily of ESL and sheltered content classes for most of their day. (p. 19)

One proposed alternative framing of ELL programs and students within schools is the idea of a “new mainstream” (Enright, 2011; Thompson, 2013) that more adequately describes the presence of non-native English speaking and multilingual students in today’s schools. This vision of new mainstream classrooms is accurate, given the realities of the ethnic and linguistic composition of today’s schools, and the students that comprise the new mainstream bring with them a “wealth of unexpected talents, perspectives, and unique experiences” (p. 113). However, simply acknowledging the presence of different demographics in schools is not sufficient; Thompson (2013) notes that once we have acknowledged this new mainstream, it is incumbent upon educators to be responsive with their instructional practices.

### **Methods and Context of Study**

Data for this article came from a qualitative study during the 2015-2016 school year that examined the roles and experiences of high school ELL teachers and the implementation of district ELL program policy at two large, urban, and linguistically diverse high schools within the same district. One aspect of this study was to interview district and building administrators who worked closely with the ELL department in each building. I interviewed these administrators twice over the course of the 2015-2016 school year, once in the fall and once in the spring. I also observed district, building, and department-level meetings related to the ELL program.

This study took place in Lake Valley School District (LVSD) (all participant and location names are pseudonyms), a district of nearly 30,000 students (20% of whom were identified as ELL), with 130 languages spoken by students. The two high schools selected for this study were the high schools with the largest percentages of ELL students, and both had enrollment of about 2,000 students. Metro High School was located more centrally within the district, and had an ELL enrollment of 17%, and Fields High School was located five miles away at the edge of the district, with an ELL enrollment of 7%. Following this is a brief description of each high school and the administrator who worked most closely with the ELL department, including a short anecdote that highlights their support of the ELL department.

Table 1

*District and School Demographics*

	<b>Lake Valley School District</b>	<b>Metro High School</b>	<b>Fields High School</b>
<b>Total Enrollment</b>	28,0000	2,000	2,000
<b>% ELL</b>	20	17	7
<b>% Free and Reduced Lunch</b>	50	66	40
<b>% Latino</b>	20	27	18
<b>% Black</b>	12	20	9
<b>% White</b>	36	22	40
<b>% Asian</b>	18	20	22
<b>% Two or more races</b>	10	7	9

In addition to these schools having the largest percentage of ELL students of the district's high schools, it was also important that these were schools where there had been a population of ELL students and an existent ELL program. I focused on schools with ELL programs that had been in place for a number of years, rather than schools with more recently developed ELL populations and programs. This would allow me perspective of how the ELL department, teachers, and students operated within the building.

## **Principal Aaron at Metro High School**

I've been on several different district committees working with language acquisition as well as the ELL program itself at the secondary level for the last nine years. . . and a big part of that is . . . the passion of the kids and the families for wanting to get an English education, to get a high school diploma, working so hard . . . I've never seen a harder working group of kids, and then my teachers are just rock stars. They truly are all about the kids, so I feel good about what we're doing, just walking in their classroom to sit down and watch the kids' eyes light up when they're doing work and being successful at things. (Interview, 12/15/15)

At Metro High School, the administrator responsible for supervision of the ELL department was the principal, Mr. Aaron, a veteran administrator who had been at Metro for over a decade and had worked closely with the ELL department for that entire time. His responsibilities ranged from the formal observation and evaluation of the ELL teachers to frequent attendance at the ELL departments' professional learning community (PLC) meetings to advocacy at the district level on behalf of ELL students and teachers. He regularly collaborated with the ELL department head and was knowledgeable about the issues related to ELL education and the experiences of the students. When asked about the frequency and nature of his interactions with the ELL teachers and ELL department, he said that he spoke with ELL teachers several times a week, most often with the department head, Mr. Bloomquist. While he held decision-making power as the principal, he relied on the teachers' knowledge and experience and always sought their input, saying, "I really trust them, that they know better than I" (Interview, 8/31/16).

Mr. Aaron's involvement with the ELL program at both the building and district level demonstrates his commitment to the ELL teachers and students in his building. He praised the ELL teachers who also "work so hard at the various levels to get our kids to accelerate through multiple years of language acquisition in any given year, so they can acclimate themselves to core classes with their peers" (interview, 12/15/15). In my interviews with Mr. Aaron, I noticed that he was attuned to the specialized nature of ELL teachers as well as the experiences of the ELL students in his building. Further, he used this knowledge to advocate for the ELL department at the district level.

An example of this was his participation and facilitation of conversation around the curriculum adoption process for the ELL curriculum, which happened in the fall of 2015, prior to data collection. While Metro had piloted one ELL curriculum that they wanted to adopt, the district chose to adopt a different curriculum, which had not been piloted at Metro, and which the ELL teachers did not feel was the best choice for their school. Mr. Aaron participated in meetings and conversations throughout the adoption process, supporting his teachers and trusting their concerns and input:

[S]o when they say, this is what they need, or this is what's going on, then you know, I sit down and I really go to bat for them . . . there's so many different factors that it's important that I advocate for my teachers and my kids and my community and push back on various things, just because they don't have especially the context or the deep understanding of the challenges of the sheer number of kids that we serve here at Metro in ELL. (Interview, 8/31/16)

In his role as principal and interactions with the ELL teachers, Mr. Aaron demonstrated awareness, trust, and responsiveness to the specific needs of the ELL department and its students.

### **Assistant Principal Harper at Fields High School**

I said that I could either quit teaching, become the very bitter teacher that locks themselves inside their classroom and gets really angry . . . Or I could get my administrative credential and maybe do something different . . . so then I got my administrative credential and I applied for a job over the summer and I was hired . . . and I just talked to my supervisor and he said it was because of my science background . . . and my ELL experience. (Interview, 11/30/15)

At Fields High, the ELL department was supervised by Ms. Harper, an assistant principal and a former high school science teacher. During the study, Ms. Harper was in her first year as an assistant principal and her first year in LVSD. As a vice principal, Ms. Harper interacted frequently with the ELL department, especially the department head, whom she frequently consulted with regarding the ELL program, classes, and students. Her work included supervising and observing the ELL teachers in addition to the placement and scheduling of the ELL students, a task that involved an overhaul of the classes that were offered to ELL students, which classes ELL students were placed in, and who taught these classes. Ms. Harper and the ELL department head worked during the months prior to the school year to reevaluate the identification and placement of every single ELL student and to create courses that would better meet their needs. Previously, the ELL department in the building had been disorganized and poorly managed, and Ms. Harper was tasked with re-organizing the department and making sure that ELL students

were placed in the appropriate courses, which was challenging as a new administrator in the building. She described the process thusly:

I'm supervising the ELL department, which at the beginning of the year meant reviewing the master schedule, the students that were placed in the courses, cleaning up data that had to do with who was tested and not tested...which then re-assigned many kids within that. ...As we cleaned up our data at the beginning of the year and also the district was going through cleaning up their data looking for any students that may have been missed by the system...we had to test an additional about 30 students. Maybe a little bit more than that, depending on the incoming new numbers as well as a clean-up list that we were given where there seemed to be questionable data missing and then working with teachers...trying to move class periods. (Interview, 11/30/15)

Given her familiarity with student data, Ms. Harper was able to work closely with the ELL teachers regarding their placement and what courses should be offered, and she collaborated frequently with the ELL department head to discuss curriculum, scheduling, and the work of the ELL paraeducators. In addition to supervision and organizational collaboration, Ms. Harper also sought resources for the ELL department and facilitated their interaction with other departments, providing support in a way that an administrator less familiar with the needs of an ELL program would potentially be less able to do.

### **Considerations and Recommendations for ELL Leadership**

Throughout data collection and during analysis, I paid close attention to the ways that building administrators interacted with the ELL department and teachers and what their roles were in supporting the ELL program and teachers. As noted in the previous section, there were

significant differences between the high schools, departments, staff, and administrators. These distinct cases offered two approaches to the implementation of district ELL program policy vis-à-vis their ELL program model and services, which demonstrated the importance of local decision-making to best work with existing resources to meet the needs of specific student populations. Across both cases, five themes emerged that I develop and expand upon in the following section to create a framework for school leadership's support of ELL departments and teachers.

### **Collaboration, Responsiveness, Awareness, Framing, and Trust (CRAFT)**

This framework identifies five aspects of school leaders' interaction with ELL teachers to promote the meaningful and equitable education of high school ELL students. Each aspect has its own merit, but there is potential for positive change when all aspects are integrated. Certainly, these are not the only components of effective leadership for ELL programs, but these stood out and were even more salient given the vast differences between the two schools where this research took place.

#### **Collaboration**

“[My] interaction with [the] ELL department has been constant . . . as needed, whenever needed. Earlier this year, it was many times a week.” (Interview with Ms. Harper, 11/30/15)

“I would say that I talk to at least one or more of the ELL teachers probably three times a week, and I attend about every other PLC meeting, so every other week I'm at their PLC meeting. Mr. Bloomquist and I interact quite often...no less than two or three times a

week that I'm talking to them or meeting with them.” (Interview with Mr. Aaron, 12-15-15)

School leaders who work well with ELL departments need to collaborate with ELL teachers in a meaningful, consistent, and timely manner. Collaboration is facilitated by a clear set of topics and issues to discuss, and clear designation of roles (i.e., who will facilitate the meeting, take notes, follow-up with action items). While unconventional, at both Fields and Metro High Schools, the school leader frequently attended the department's PLC meeting, and also met frequently with the ELL department heads. In some instances, the presence of an administrator could have a chilling or inhibiting effect, but in conversation and interviews with ELL teachers, as well as my observation at PLC meetings, the administrator's presence was viewed as supportive and collaborative. This kind of involvement in PLC meetings by an administrator is not common, and speaks to the difference between ELL departments and other building departments. The presence and participation of a school leader in these meetings demonstrated the importance of ELL instruction and the work of ELL teachers, and helped to promote the integration of the ELL department and teachers.

### **Responsiveness**

One big point has been our older ELL students who are aging out, for instance, we sat down with one of the counselors and the ELL teachers and myself and we went through our list of any students that was 17 and older and looked at their credits, their state assessments, whether they are really on track for graduation, asking counselors to go back and review transcripts to make sure that content classes were placed giving content credit not elective credit. How close were these students to actually being able to

graduate or whether they might time out; and so we organized a trip to [local community college] to look at the program. (Interview with Ms. Harper, 8/12/16)

Closely connected to collaboration is the importance of school leaders' responsiveness to the needs of the ELL department. Given the frequent changes in policies and initiatives surrounding ELL instruction, as well as the frequent changes in ELL student populations, responsiveness was imperative to the functioning of an ELL program. In the example above, Ms. Harper recognized a need for resources for older ELL students, and she responded by coordinating with a local community college. Other ways that school leaders demonstrated responsiveness include working with the counselor to change course offerings based on needs and strengths of ELL students, implementing a co-teaching model to assist beginner students in content area courses, and providing professional development opportunities tailored to the needs of teachers.

### **Awareness**

You've got kids that are coming in from all over the world with a lot or little to none formal education and trying not only teach them the English language, but just survival and life skills, that and our program has grown immensely. I mean, my first year here we were probably 150 ELL kids, and now we're at 350, and so that's changed a lot.

(Interview with Mr. Aaron, 12/15/15)

Foundational to all aspects of this framework is the awareness of school leaders about the issues germane to ELL instruction. This awareness ranges from knowledge about students' backgrounds and skills to systems-level understanding of the experiences of high school ELL students related to academic achievement. The educational experiences of high school ELL students are vastly different from their younger ELL peers: many are recent arrival students with

varying levels of English proficiency and educational experience; and given their age, there is less time for them to develop English proficiency, demonstrate competence in content areas, and obtain sufficient credits to graduate.

### **Framing**

So, the ELL teachers are constantly after school with their kids, not only working with kids, but also trying to communicate with parents. Erik delivers professional development every other staff meeting for us, around . . . ELL best practices and he is highly regarded amongst our entire staff, so when he talks, everyone listens. (Interview with Mr. Aaron, 12/15/15)

The framing and messaging of the ELL department, teachers, and students by the administrator is important for the integration of ELL in the building, as well as how ELL teachers and students are positioned. In both schools, the administrators positioned the ELL teachers as experts. One way they did this was to provide structured time where ELL teachers could present information to staff at meetings and other professional development workshops. In terms of how ELL students were positioned, both administrators were inclusive in the way they referred to ELL students, referring to ELL students as “our” students, and referencing individual students by name, demonstrating familiarity despite both schools being quite large. They also used the collective pronouns of “we” when talking about the work that they did in collaboration with ELL departments, communicating an alignment and shared responsibility with the work of the ELL teachers.

## **Trust**

I really trust my specialists, my teachers that are ELL teachers or special ed [sic] teachers . . . and so when they say, this is what they need, or this is what's going on, then you know, I sit down and really go to bat for them. (Interview with Mr. Aaron, 8/31/16)

Finally, a theme that emerged during this research was the trust that school leaders placed in the ELL teachers, both at Metro where the ELL teachers were very experienced, and Fields where the ELL teachers were novices. These administrators trusted their ELL teachers with important decision-making and sought their input for decisions ranging from curriculum adoption to the responsibilities of the ELL paraprofessionals. English language learner teachers are ultimately responsible for so many aspects of ELL students' education that the trust of their administrator is necessary for them to not only feel supported, but also empowered to make decisions in the interest of their students.

## **Conclusion**

This article contributes to a growing body of research that closely examines the district and building-level actors implicated in the education of ELL students, specifically school leaders. As noted by Elfers and Stritikus (2014), "The role that leaders do or could play in the learning of ELL students has been relatively absent from research conversations about ELLs" (2013, p. 3). To return to the research questions: how can administrators support high school ELL departments and teachers and how can administrators support the integration of ELL departments, teachers, and students into the school? Administrators can (and should) intentionally structure their interactions with ELL teachers, paying attention to the aspects of the above framework and the way that these interactions facilitate or reflect them. These components of school leaders' practice move beyond simply considerations, and need to be implemented via

deliberate action. Finally, school leaders are in a position to frame ELL departments, teachers, and students in a way that promotes their inclusion in the mainstream school setting via their messaging and opportunities for ELL teachers' participation in the school community.

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## **Conclusion**

The goal of this dissertation was to better understand the complex work of high school ELL teachers, and the district- and building-level contexts surrounding their work. Imagine if you will, a circle with an ELL teacher in it. Now, picture many overlapping and interconnected circles surrounding that first circle. These other circles represent the colleagues, administrators, policies, curricula, laws, and more, that touch and influence the work of the ELL teacher.

I began this study with a sincere (and personally relevant) question about the work that high school ELL teachers do, work that we hear so little about in the bigger conversation of standards, graduation rates, and accountability. Through the three articles in this dissertation, I presented analyses of high school ELL department organization, the roles and agency of ELL teachers, ELL teacher learning, collaboration, and expertise, and the work of school leaders in supporting all of this. While there are no simple solutions to complex problems, a better understanding of the context and work of high school ELL teachers can inform the directions that schools and districts move in.

How we educate our young people and prepare them as members of our society reflects values and ideologies that extend far beyond the classes that they take in school, and increasingly, these young people are multilingual and multicultural, and our education system and policies need to acknowledge and change to recognize the strengths of these students and not only their educational needs.

I will now briefly re-cap the major findings of each article, and then suggest ways that the findings of each are connected, followed by a proposal for future research in this area. The first article, titled “What Shapes the Work of High School English Language Learner Teachers?:

A Qualitative Study of Teacher Agency and Department Organization at Two Comprehensive High Schools” compared the organization of two high school ELL departments and the roles of the department head in each, and also examined ELL department heads’ experiences of agency. The organization of the department varied at each school, as did the program structure and services offered to students, which in turn had implications for the roles and responsibilities of the ELL teachers. Another factor shaping ELL teachers’ work was their agency, which I found had both opportunities and constraints for their practice. There are implications for these findings in the way that ELL services are organized and provided at different schools within a district, for both ELL teachers and their students.

In the second article, “Inside the ‘Black Box’ of English Language Learner Professional Learning Communities: Possibilities and Limitations from Two Urban High Schools,” I analyze the participation and topics addressed during ELL department PLC meetings at each high school. Findings indicate that the foci of the PLC in each building varied widely from a focus on administrative tasks to a focus on instructional tasks, with overlap in the area of student learning. Additionally, I found that the expertise of ELL teachers was an important aspect of PLC meetings. This article contributes timely understanding of ELL teacher learning, and the potential for ELL PLCs to support both teacher and student learning. This has important implications for the way that ELL PLCs are structured, both in terms of who is participating and the subjects that are taken up. Additionally, increased opportunities for teacher learning and opportunity have the potential to increase ELL teacher expertise, which is vital to improving the educational experience and opportunities of high school ELLs.

In the third and final article, “A Framework for School Leaders’ Support of High School ELL Departments and Teachers,” I take a different approach and propose five components of

effective school leader support of ELL departments and teachers. These five components emerged during interviews and meeting observations. They are: collaboration, responsiveness, awareness, framing, and trust. These components complement one another and in some cases, the presence of one will promote the others (i.e., with increased awareness of issues surrounding ELL education, administrators are likely to be more responsive). Implementing practices that include these components is relevant to the conversation about high school ELL students' educational experiences, achievement, and outcomes, as well as their supported integration in the larger high school environment.

Considered in concert with one another, the findings of these articles hold promise for improving structure, organization, and support of ELL programs, departments, and teachers at the high school level. The three articles in this dissertation contribute to growing work on the experiences of high school ELL teachers in the current context of increased standardization and accountability. How this context is experienced in different districts is varied, and does not always account for the variety of skills, knowledge, and experience of the high school ELL population; often, the work of navigating these competing interests falls to high school ELL teachers, who as previously discussed, already have many roles and responsibilities within their building and department. The ELL teachers that participated in this study demonstrated commitment to their students and worked tirelessly, in their different ways, to ensure that students had access to the educational support and opportunities that were their right.

Each of these three articles was designed and written as an individual work and each one tells a different part of the story of the work of high school ELL teachers. When read separately, each piece speaks back to an important body of research that has informed my understanding and research of this complex topic. When read together (time permitting), these articles complement

one another to provide a multi-faceted and interwoven description and analysis of the work of high school ELL teachers. While it may go without saying, understanding the forces that shape and inform ELL teachers' work (including policies, structures, interactions, and learning) has bearing on the students that they serve. In future work, I hope to explore these topics from the perspective of the students in order to learn more about their experiences, achievement, and outcomes, as well as doing more investigation into the work that ELL teachers and content teachers engage in together.

In closing, I leave the reader with the following questions: when we envision and research the work of high school teachers, are we including ELL teachers? When we draft policies regarding the service model for ELL students, are we considering those who implement it and the contexts that they work in? When we support high school ELL teachers, are we doing so with full understanding of their roles, needs, and expertise? Keeping these questions in mind as we continue to seek understanding and improvements to our education system will help ensure that we hear the voices of the teachers and students that are not heard as clearly or often as those of others.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview Protocols

#### Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Initial Interview with Focal Teachers

##### Background questions

1. Can you tell me about how you came to be an ELL teacher?
2. How long have you been teaching in this building and district? What other teaching have you done outside of this district (including outside of the public school system)? What other experiences with ELLs do you have?
3. Do you have any experiences learning and/or speaking a language other than English? Can you tell me about those?

##### Questions about teachers' roles, practice, instruction and planning

4. Describe your role as an ELL teacher at your school.
  - a. What classes do you teach?
  - b. What responsibilities do you have beyond teaching?
5. Who do you work with most closely in your role as an ELL teacher?  
Probe: People from other departments? People from other schools? Others?
6. What curriculum and materials do you use in your instruction of ELs?
  - a. In what way do you use standards in your planning and instruction?
7. How, if at all, do you use ELP standards?

##### Questions about district policies and ELL program

8. Describe your school's ELL program and services.
9. To the best of your knowledge, who makes the decisions regarding the ELL program and services at the district level?
  - a. Who makes the decisions regarding the ELL program at the building level?
10. What are the most important considerations for your planning and instruction?
  - a. Do you receive guidance from administrators? Department heads? Coaches? If so, please describe the guidance that you receive.
11. What is your capacity to make decisions about your teaching (including curriculum and assessment)? If so, how do you exercise this freedom? If not, why not?
12. Can you describe a time while you've been teaching in this building where you were able to take action about an important issue in the ELL program or your instruction of ELLs?

Probe: Are there other people (colleagues or staff) that were part of this moment/event?

13. Is there anything else about your work as an ELL teacher or the ELL program in your district/school? Do you have any questions for me?

## **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Follow-Up Interview with Focal Teachers**

1. Let's talk about my recent classroom observations. Can you tell me more about [activity/event]?
2. Let's talk about the [meeting/professional development] that I recently attended. What were the goals and outcomes of this meeting?
  - a. In your experience, how was this meeting similar or different from other meetings/professional development regarding the ELL program?
3. What work have you done recently with colleagues or other personnel regarding the ELL program?

Probe: Can you give me an example of this?
4. Can you tell me about professional development or other time outside of teaching that has been devoted to planning and instruction for working with ELLs?
5. What challenges have you faced this school year regarding your work as an ELL teacher?
6. What have been the joys of your work as an ELL teacher this year?
7. Thinking ahead to next year, how do you anticipate your work and role(s) changing? How will they stay the same?
8. Thinking about this school year in context of other school years you have taught in this building, what stands out about the ELL program? What about your work as an ELL teacher?
9. What other thoughts or ideas regarding the ELL program in your school and your work as an ELL teacher would you like to share with me?

## **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Initial Interview with Administrator**

### Questions about teachers' roles, practice, instruction and planning

1. Describe for me your role as principal/vice principal. What are your main responsibilities?
2. In what ways do you work with the ELL program and ELL teachers?
  - a. How often do you work with the ELL program and teachers?
3. How do you see ELL teachers' work in the ELL program? What support and services do they provide for ELL students?
4. How, if at all, have ELL teachers' roles changed in recent years?

### Questions about district policies and ELL program

5. Describe your school's/district's ELL program and services.
6. What is your school's/district's approach to the education of ELs?
  - a. What are your school's/district's goals for ELs?
7. Who makes the decisions regarding the ELL program and services in this school?
8. Who do you work with at the district level regarding the instruction and services of ELLs?

## **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Follow-Up Interview with Administrator**

1. It has been a little while since we last spoke. How is the new school year going?
2. Thinking specifically about the ELL program, what, if anything, is different this year than the previous school year in terms of the program structure and services offered?
  - a. Have there been any changes to courses, teaching, curriculum, or assessment? If so, can you describe these for me?
3. How, if at all, do you see these changes impacting the ELL teachers and their work?

Probe: Can you give an example?
4. How, if at all, do you see these changes impacting the ELL students?

Probe: Can you give an example?
5. Have the school's/district's goals or mission with regard to ELLs changed at all? If so, in what ways?
  - a. How do you see the ELL program changing over time?
  - b. What, if any, are the challenges that your school/district face with regard to the instruction of ELLs?
  - c. What are the strengths of your school's/district's ELL program

### **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Initial Interview with Other ELL Personnel**

1. Can you tell me about your position and the work you do in the ELL program?
2. Can you tell me about how you came to this position?
3. How long have you had this position and have you done other work in this building/district?
4. Tell me about your work with [Focal Teacher].

Probe: What kind of work do you do with [Focal Teacher]? How often do you work with this person?

5. In your experience, what are the challenges of the ELL program in this building/district?
6. What are the strengths of the ELL program in this building/district?

### **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Follow-Up Interview with Other ELL Personnel**

1. It has been a little while since we last spoke, how is the new school year going?
2. Thinking specifically about the ELL program, what, if anything, is different this year than the previous school year in terms of the program structure and services offered?
  - a. Have there been any changes to courses, teaching, curriculum, or assessment? If so, can you describe these for me?
3. How have these changes impacted your work with the ELL program? Can you provide examples?
4. In your opinion, how have these changes impacted the ELL teachers? Can you provide examples?
5. In your opinion, how have these changes impacted the ELL students? Can you provide examples?

## Appendix B: Observations Guides

### Classroom Observations Guide

Data sources will include narrative field notes and digitally audio-recorded conversation in the classroom using the following guide:

#### 1. Classroom Context:

Prior to and during the observation, be sure to record the following information:

**Setting:** Describe the physical space and layout of the classroom. How are desks and other equipment organized, what is hanging on the walls, what is the classroom environment like, etc. When possible, make diagram of classroom layout.

**Actors/Participants:** Who is in the space and how are they organized and what are their roles (i.e., teacher, paraprofessional, student).

**Artifacts:** With teachers' permission collect handouts or other materials that do not identify students; with teacher's permission, take photos of board, posters, or other materials that do not identify students.

#### 2. Field Notes:

Using the following template, note the time of major episodes during the observation, and what is happening with special attention to the talk, tasks, and tools.

**Talk:** What talk is happening in the class? Who is talking and what is the nature of talk? What languages are being used by the teacher? What languages are being used by the students?

**Tasks:** What are the major tasks and activities that participants are engaged in? Pay special attention to curricular decisions that the teacher is making as evident in their instruction.

**Tools:** What tools (both material and conceptual) are being used by the participants?

Time/Episode Chunk	Observation Details	Notes

#### 3. Post-Observation Notes:

After the observation, record the following information.

**Summary-**Briefly, what were the major events or themes of this observation.

**Impressions-** What major impressions are you left with?

**Lingering Questions, Thoughts, Speculations-** What are I still curious about? What did I see, hear, or sense about my visit that might be important to pursue in the future? What hunches do I

have about what is transpiring? What questions do I have for the teacher about this observation?  
What will I pay attention to next observation?

## Meeting Observation Guide

Data sources will include narrative field notes and digitally audio-recorded conversation in the classroom using the following guide:

### 1. Meeting Context

Prior to and during the observation, be sure to record the following information:

**Setting:** Describe the physical space and layout of the meeting space. How are desks and other equipment organized, what is hanging on the walls, what is the room's environment like, etc. When possible, make diagram of layout.

**Actors/Participants:** Who is in the space and how are they organized and what are their roles (i.e., teacher, paraprofessional, administrator).

**Artifacts:** With meeting leader's permission collect handouts or other materials that do not identify students; with meeting leader's permission, take photos of board, posters, or other materials that do not identify students.

### 2. Field Notes:

Using the following template, note the time of major episodes during the observation, and what is happening with special attention to the talk, tasks, and tools.

**Talk:** What talk is happening in the meeting? Who is talking and what is the nature of talk?

**Tasks:** What are the major tasks and activities that participants are engaged in?

**Tools:** What tools (both material and conceptual) are being used by the participants?

Time/Episode Chunk	Observation Details	Notes

### 3. Post-Observation Notes:

After the observation, record the following information.

**Summary-**Briefly, what were the major events or themes of this observation.

**Impressions-** What major impressions am I left with?

**Lingering Questions, Thoughts, Speculations-** What am I still curious about? What did I see, hear, or sense about this meeting that might be important to pursue in the future? What hunches do I have about what is transpiring? What questions do I have for the focal teacher, other ELL personnel and/or administrator about this observation? What will I pay attention to next observation?