ESL Programs in Rural High Schools: Challenges and Opportunities

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Rural and small-town communities in the United States have been rapidly diversifying over the last few decades and rural schools have faced challenges in supporting changing populations. This article builds on a limited body of education research that has focused on diversity in rural areas, driven largely in the U.S. by Latinx immigrant populations. This research draws on several data sources from multi-week visits in a mixture of new and established immigrant destinations to profile the challenges educational leaders faced in developing ESL programs in five rural high schools and explores challenges such as how schools struggle to recruit and retain administrators and teachers, how they often have limited knowledge and resources to support curriculum development, and how program size limits schools' ability to place students appropriately. The article concludes with suggestions for what education programs, rural administrators, and state policy makers can do to better support English learners in rural schools.

Many rural and small-town communities across the United States have been rapidly diversifying over the last few decades, driven largely by growth in Latinx populations (e.g., Kinkey & Yun, 2019). The percentage of students of color in rural schools rose from 16.4% in 2000 to 26.7% in 2013 (Johnson et al., 2013). As of 2016, 250,000 rural students were labeled English learners (ELs) but a much higher number, 821,000, spoke a language other than English at home (Showalter et al., 2017).

Despite this growth, research focused on language support and diversity in schools still focuses largely on urban or suburban areas and comparatively little is known is support for language learners in rural schools. Work that focuses on minoritized students in rural areas often does so incidentally (e.g., Valadez, 2008), a fact not surprising given that a review of research by Arnold et al. (2005) found that a third of education studies based in rural areas did not engage with rural-based issues in analyzing and presenting their data. Nonetheless, the evidence is building that English learners (ELs) in rural schools may face a variety of challenges that are not always shared by their counterparts in urban schools. In order to learn more about how rural schools are serving ELs, I conducted institutional case studies at five high schools in the Southwestern US. The primary question guiding the analysis and presentation of data for this article is the following: What are common characteristics of ESL programs in rural schools and what challenges do schools face in supporting their ELs?

A Note on Terms

As well-documented elsewhere, there are a number of terms that schools and scholars have used to reference language learners—accepted terms change over time as old terms are problematized, especially for upholding deficit attitudes (Webster & Lu, 2012). The most commonly used institutional terms used in U.S. K-12 schools for students have been Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and English Language Learner (ELL). The former has generally lost favor due to its emphasis on *limited*. More recent terms include English Learner (EL), learner of English as an Additional Language (EAL) and emergent bilingual—I will use EL in this article to reference students because of its prevalent use and its clarity for *Rural Education's* diverse readership while recognizing that is limiting because of how it defines a student primarily in relation to learning English—EL will also stand for ELL except when it is used in a quote from an outside source or participant. I will also reference immigrant and/or refugee students since the EL identity often overlaps with these identities. Other institutional terms commonly used to reference classes and curriculum are English as a Second Language (ESL—used throughout this article as it was typically used in the profiled schools to refer to classes supporting ELs language development), bilingual (in the context of bilingual education or a teacher having a bilingual teaching certification) and TESOL certification, which is commonly used to reference a certification available to teachers working with ELs.

Supporting English Learners in Rural Schools: What We Know

Emerging research on language support for ELs in rural schools has reported various challenges that schools face in providing language support for increasingly diverse student populations, while also exploring some of the unique innovations in different districts.

Rural school leaders have also long reported challenges recruiting and retaining teachers. Monk (2007) noted that teacher labor markets "tend to be highly localized" (p. 163)—if teachers do not have a connection to a specific town, like many ESL teachers do, they may suffer from professional and cultural isolation (Edstam et al., 2007). Nationwide shortages of TESOL and bilingual-certified teachers adds an additional challenge (e.g., Batt, 2008; Lara-Alecio et al., 2004; Showalter et al., 2017; Walker, 2012) as well as salary disparities (Showalter et al., 2017). Teachers often have to take on multiple teaching roles at one school or are spread thin among several schools, as described by this respondent in Batt's (2008) study: "I am the ESL provider for 6 different schools. All grades and travel between the schools. Supposedly getting the job done in 5 1/2 hours per day" (p. 41).

Both large scale (Beck and Allexsaht-Snider, 2002; Zehler et al., 2008) and more local studies (Bruening, 2015; Martinez, 2002; Wortham, 2002) have documented how language instruction in rural schools is often ad hoc as schools work to build up capacity. Zehler et al. (2008) found that "districts lack the infrastructure to support services for English language learner students and often have very limited resources for building that infrastructure" (p. 4). Beck and Allexsaht-Snider (2002) noted that students in many rural districts were left to "sink-or-swim immersion," "ignored in their regular classrooms, placed in the corner of the room with a busy-work handout or coloring sheet" (p. 57). Bruening (2015) detailed a school's dependence on a "well meaning, but largely untrained, paraeducator who had little formal knowledge of how to help [the focal student] improve her language proficiency and content-area knowledge" (p. 44).

Despite these challenges, there is an emerging body of work showing how rural schools and partners have worked to address some of these concerns through curricular innovations. For instance, the ESL and migrant education teacher at one school invited Latinx students to develop a lowrider art magazine, which enabled students "to bring significant cultural iconography into the school site" while also boosting their status among students and encouraging a positive identity—the art teacher joined this initiative, helping bolster the program's status within the school (Grady, 2002, p. 179). More recently, Wille et al. (2019) discussed different ways that rural schools served refugee students, such as obtaining funding from local employers and grants to develop programming that recognized the cultural diversity of the schools' refugee students and their families.

Other initiatives have recognized the importance of building up local knowledge and expertise in areas that have not traditionally seen much language diversity among students (Bruna, 2015; Coady, 2019a; Coady et al., 2019; Gallo et al., 2015; Morita-Mullaney et al., 2019; Sawyer, 2015). Sawyer (2015) described a binational teacher exchange where rural teachers went to Mexico for a cultural exchange and learned about educational practices there. She reported that the experience helped teachers better understand the diversifying backgrounds of their students and be more sensitive to cultural differences. Coady (2019a) and Coady et al. (2019) have been engaged in professional development initiatives to help rural educators and school leaders better serve English learners. Teacher participants "began to make educational decisions that met the needs of students in their specific schools, situated within their rural school district and without outside help" (Coady, 2019a, loc. 3064). Teachers learned about the importance of building connections between families and the school, "integrating ELs' cultures into the schooling system," and developing professional learning communities with peers (Coady et al., 2019, p. 51). Administrators in the district Coady (2019a) worked with began to make important changes like placing their best teacher with the lowest-performing multilingual students, which led to immediate shifts in student engagement and success.

The present study builds on existing work by providing an in-depth comparison of ESL programs across several rural high schools, examining challenges that well-intentioned schools face in providing support for their EL populations while concluding with recommendations for teacher and administrator educators and policy makers. Previous work has been limited by its focus on quantitative measures (e.g.,Dondero and Mueller, 2012), a lack of observational data (e.g., Zehler et al., 2008), or a focus on a single school site (e.g., Bruening, 2015).

Table 1
ESL Infrastructure Categories and Components (Zehleret al., 2008)

Category	Component
Personnel	Leadership structures
	Staffing
	Professional development
Instruction	Instructional services
	Curriculum
	Materials
Administration	Registration
	Funding mechanisms
	Data/data management
Assessment	Identification
	Language proficiency/academic achievement
Outreach	Students
	Parents
	Community
	Social services

Analytical Framework

In the report *Preparing to Serve English Language Learner Students: School Districts with Emerging English Language Learner Communities*, Zehler et al. (2008) focused on how schools with growing EL populations developed infrastructures to support the learners' needs. The authors described five different infrastructure categories: personnel, instruction, administration, assessment, and outreach. Each of these areas and their components are depicted in Table 1. Under Personnel for instance, Zehler et al. (2008) made recommendations such as designating a teacher with qualifications or interests in supporting ELs and building experience and support from within the district's teaching staff through encouraging certifications and additional professional development. In this article, I am unable to address the outreach component due to space limitations, although Coady (2019a; 2019b) has published important work on EL family engagement in rural schools.

After discussing findings from the literature and their own study in these different categories, Zehler et al. (2008) discussed four stages that districts tend to go through when developing support for growing EL populations:

- ad hoc response: schools make the most of the resources they have, using student buddies and the foreign language teacher's expertise
- consistent services: a recognition that the population is a long-term part of the district and that ad hoc methods that might work with smaller populations no longer work
- program development: increased hiring of staff with expertise along with regular staff development and acquisition of materials to support students
- expanded perspectives: a shift from the idea that English as a Second language (ESL) teachers are the only ones responsible for ELs "to a recognition that the district needed to focus on the role of all teachers and all staff who work and interact with English language learner students" (p. 30).

Schools in the program development and expanded perspectives stages are more likely to be hiring teachers with TESOL expertise while those at earlier stages of development are more likely to depend on what existing expertise they have, such as a foreign language teacher. Under curriculum, the authors described how schools in the ad hoc stages are unsure what to do, scrambling to establish buddy systems and finding teachers interested in helping ELs while a stronger focus on establishing a more formal curriculum for these students coming at the program development and expanded perspectives stages. Under administration, more systematic placement procedures begin to develop at the consistent services stage. Assessment was a related component, as it was a key component in identifying students who needed services and tracking their progress and continued need for EL supports. While this model implies schools progress through a linear process of

Table 2
Town and School Characteristics

	Town Size	Town Demographics	Poverty/ Median Income	Economy	School Size	District EL %
Leon High School	~10000	90% Latinx, 7.3% foreign born in 2000, 11.8% in 2015	~30%; $30,000	Service jobs; Federal lab/base	~900	23%
Rio High School	<2000	90% Latinx, 38.4% foreign born in 2000, 36.8% in 2015	~30%; $30,000	Agriculture	~350	43%
Flatlands High School	<2000	75% Latinx, 18.1% foreign born in 2000, 21.7% in 2015	15%, $45000	Agriculture	~300	18%
Mineral High School	<2000	80% Latinx, 9.6% foreign born in 2000, 12.8% in 2015	20%; $35,000	Mining	~200	16%
Plains High School	<10000	40% Latinx, 6% foreign born in 2000, 12.9% in 2015	15%; $45,000	Agriculture	~500	10%

development, the reality I discovered through the present research can be quite different. Nonetheless, I found the framework useful in identifying areas of needed infrastructure and understanding different levels of progress towards supporting ELs.

Methodology

Contexts

School sites were selected based on several different factors: their presence in a rural area or small town, the prevalence of students classified as ELs, and geographic diversity within the region. For this study, I used the National Center for Education Statistics school locale system as guidance to determine rurality of school sites, focusing on schools from Town, Distant to Rural, Remote in towns of less than 10,000 people. I also consulted with a faculty member in the education leadership program with extensive experience working with rural school principals—he was able to help me better understand the meaning of rural in the New Mexican context.

For EL populations, I drew on information from the state education department along with word of mouth to identify schools. The first five schools are in New Mexico and the last is in a neighboring state, the name omitted due to more stringent IRB restrictions. It is important to note that New Mexico has a longer history of diversity and is unique compared to other states seeing more recent influxes of immigrant students. According to Showalter et al. (2017), 85% of rural New Mexico students are students of color, which is the highest rate in the U.S., and the state has one of the highest percentages of rural EL students at 25%.

The characteristics of each town and school, drawn from school and U.S. Census data, are depicted in Table 2. As evident from the table, Leon and Plains were the largest towns and schools while the other three sites (Rio, Flatlands, and Mineral) were similarly sized. Rio and Flatlands had the most substantial immigrant populations, having depended on immigrants for agricultural work for decades. Leon, Mineral, and Plains had seen more recent growth, with their foreign-born populations increasing approximately 60%, 33%, and 115% between 2000 and 2015. The growth of immigrant populations in Leon is unclear but may have been due to family unification because there weren't large local agricultural or mineral extraction industries, which drove growth in other towns. It is important to note that the high Latinx percentages in New Mexico towns do not mean that immigrants were warmly welcomed; as Guzman's (2005) article in a local paper noted, there are ongoing tensions between those who identify as Hispanic and Spanish and those who identify for instance more closely with Mexican or other Latin American cultures. Another important contextual piece for the New Mexico schools that I

will reference later was the implementation of a stringent teacher evaluation system during this study in which student test scores accounted for 50% of teacher evaluations. I have discussed the negative impact this teacher evaluation system and the associated test has on diverse students and rural schools elsewhere (Ruecker, 2020).

Data Collection and Analysis

I adopted an institutional case study approach for this project, aiming to understand the interactions between administrators, teachers, and immigrant students by spending time with them in their schools. While I began this study with interview protocols and plans on which classes to observe, these plans evolved over the three years I visited schools, with later case studies incorporating visits to Spanish classrooms and interview protocols being revised after the first few visits to incorporate more questions on the role of Spanish in classroom and school contexts. I typically spent 3-4 weeks on site at each school, living in the town when possible or, in the case of Flatlands and Mineral, in a nearby town because no lodging was available. While present, I tried to be as active as possible in the school and community, eating lunch with teachers every day, regularly attending extracurricular activities, and exploring the towns and surrounding areas in the evening.

In order to develop a rich and accurate portrait of the schools and the experiences of students within them, I triangulated data from multiple sources: observations, interviews, materials, and an analytic journal. First, I attended classes every day of any English Language Arts (ELA), ESL, or Spanish teacher in each school who consented to participate in the study. During ELA and Spanish classes, I was typically a passive observer; with the exception of Flatlands HS, my role in ESL classes was more participatory after a few days of traditional observation (see Ruecker, 2017 for more on why I value a participant observer approach). The second data source was interviews with administrators, observed teachers, and up to 10 students at each school. Note that the number of participants varied by school size, my ability to build rapport with participants, and the number of administrators open to being interviewed. I also collected teaching materials, other school materials, and samples of interviewed students' writing. Finally, during my visits, I kept a journal, taking typically an hour at the end of each day to capture an ongoing portrait of the school as I spent time there. My observation notes and journaling were shaped by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's (2011) understanding of writing as "a way of seeing, of increasing understanding, and, ultimately, of *creating scenes*" (p. 120). While making connections and some preliminary conclusions as I wrote, I strived to "write a more loosely structured fieldnote tale…that describes seemingly extraneous actions that happen during the incident recounted" (p. 121). Across these five schools, I conducted a total of 78 interviews and wrote approximately 176,000 words of observation notes and journal entries.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English or Spanish and were transcribed by an assistant and verified by the researcher. As is typical with qualitative work, data have been analyzed recursively throughout the research process and initial findings emerged during the aforementioned journaling process. Before coding the data associated with a particular school, I crafted memos while listening to the recordings, focusing on key elements that stood out to me in individual interviews while also drawing connections to other findings. Similarly, I reviewed the observation notes and journal before going back and annotating them. After these initial reviews, I returned to code teacher and student interviews using an open-source qualitative analysis software (TAMS) based on a coding list inductively developed through initial readings and expanded as needed throughout the coding process.

While coding, I developed analytical matrices (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014) that highlighted participant responses in some of the most salient coding areas and helped systematize my ability to compare across participants and contexts. The administrator interviews were not coded as their differing roles and the small sample of interviewees made it more meaningful to understand and track the different perspectives of that group via analytic memoing and recursive reading. As I drafted this article, I worked within the categories provided by the Zehler et al. (2008) framework as I moved between original data sources, the various analytical documents, and the developing manuscript in order to verify the trends I identified. Interview quotations have been edited slightly for readability by removing filler words such as "um" and "you know" and by adding punctuation.

Findings

Personnel

Hiring and retaining teachers qualified to work with ELs was the most prominent and consistent challenge that the schools faced. One of the primary challenges related to staffing was funding: the ability of schools to fund a dedicated ESL position and their ability to be competitive in salaries with competing districts. While schools often served large numbers of ELs, they offered ESL classes to anywhere from 3-20 students schoolwide, which necessitated that ESL teachers either teach at different schools in the district or teach non-ESL classes. For instance, one of the teachers at Flatlands taught business and university success classes alongside an English Language Development (ELD) class, their equivalent to an ESL class. At Plains HS, the ESL teacher taught two ESL sections along with three sections of senior English. She described the impact this disparate teaching had on her (along with her duties as the head cheerleading coach—the teachers in this study often had substantial responsibilities beyond the classroom):

> I'm busy, I'm very busy. The first 6 weeks my ESL population made me very busy, I had to get folders together. I was here every day till very late trying to get every folder like it needed to be and then on top of that having to write lesson plans for English, and so I have been very busy. I think I am very torn.

The challenge of having to prep for multiple courses and multiple levels was often the norm for rural teachers in general, especially at the smaller schools. In the case of the Plains HS teacher, it was evident that the cheerleading work took a large amount of time throughout the day and after school, especially when I visited during football season.

The bilingual and ESL program director for the Mineral district (who doubled as the middle school principal) discussed staffing from a budgetary perspective, noting "anything we end up spending on our bilingual kids, it comes out of our regular budget because we've spent all the money we've gotten on that one bilingual teacher." In short, the funding small districts receive to support ELs may only cover one position for the district—the high school did not have a bilingual program like the lower grades did and was dependent on its Spanish teacher to teach ESL. One way that administrators work around this is by "designating a portion of a foreign language teacher's time to working with English language

learner students" (Zehler et al., 2008, p. 29). The Spanish teacher was either the primary ESL teacher or provided additional support in 3 of the 5 schools whereas the other two schools had monolingual but TESOL-certified English teachers doubling as ESL teachers. (Unless the teacher is in a state-funded bilingual multicultural education program, New Mexico teachers were not required to have a TESOL certification to teach an ESL/ELD class at the time of this study. The state in which Plains HS is located did have a requirement for a TESOL endorsement.)

From conversations with teachers and administrators, it appeared that elementary and middle schools generally seemed to have more language support, with dedicated ESL teachers and even a two-way bilingual program in the Flatlands district. Their federal programs director referenced this: "I think one of our biggest strengths is that we have the dual language programs in the elementary school. I would like to see more opportunities for dual language at the middle school and high school." This bias in developing language support in earlier grades is not a uniquely rural issue and has been mentioned in previous literature (Carhill et al., 2008).

Multiple principals cited challenges being competitive with salaries at neighboring schools, something discussed by an assistant principal at Leon HS:

> Sometimes [we would be competitive in hiring] regular teachers, but not for bilingual or TESOL [certified] teachers because right next door at [district name omitted] they would pay them 3,000 dollars, 4,000 dollars, and we're paying 1,000 dollars for having an endorsement. So I'm going to go next door and get a, and then they have signing bonuses, and we [don't], so no.

While the New Mexico funding formula allows for differentiation based on school rurality and other aspects, local property taxes generally make up the bulk of school revenues as it does across the U.S. This means that schools have different amounts to pay their teachers, pitting schools against one another in teacher recruitment.

As noted earlier, there is an acute shortage of bilingual and TESOL-certified teachers nationwide, so these are areas that become even harder for schools to fill. This problem does not seem to easing. A 2017 study by New Mexico State University revealed the depth of the teacher shortage in New Mexico, pointing to hundreds of vacancies statewide and declining enrollment in teacher education programs (Trujillo et al., 2017). They also reported

that 50% of teacher respondents wouldn't recommend a career in education to others. Externally imposed pressures placed on teachers under increasingly punitive evaluation systems have played an important role in these shortages (Smith & Kovacs, 2011), shortages that will ultimately limit rural schools' ability to transform to better serve ELs. The Flatlands HS principal stated this connection clearly: "since the advent of the new evaluation system in the last two or three years, the number of qualified teachers out there to recruit from has gone down significantly."

Unless they have a special connection to a town, the available teachers tend to gravitate towards larger cities. The principal at Mineral HS explained, "They're not being produced, and if they are, they're student teaching in [larger cities], and they're swept up right away, and they're not coming to Mineral." Soon after my visit to Mineral HS, the Spanish/ESL teacher retired. A local news article had the principal noting that the school had filled all their vacancies except for a bilingual high school teacher, quoting the principal saying there are not enough candidates graduating in the state with certifications in bilingual education (citation omitted for anonymity). When asked if he had trouble finding bilingual or TESOL-certified teachers, the Plains HS principal quickly said "we can hardly find them" and how he tried to recruit a potential applicant with his "best sales pitch" who never called back and ended up taking a job in a larger city closer to family.

One strategy commonly used by districts to overcome the recruitment challenge was to build up local expertise through incentives such as offering to pay for teachers to take the TESOL certification exam (Plains HS) or for coursework towards a TESOL certification (Mineral HS), but districts generally were not able to offer a pay boost with the certification. Related to the point made in the previous paragraph about districts competing for teachers, Mineral HS often saw mid-career teachers jump to a nearby district where they were paid $10,000 more. As the principal explained, "we get them trained up, and then they move on, so the transition is huge here. You know a lot of turnover." The Plains HS principal explained that zero teachers had taken him up on the offer, in part because teachers were concerned that a TESOL certification would require them to do more work without additional compensation. Similarly, while rural teachers are used to wearing a variety of hats, not all teachers want to be pushed into another role—

although the Spanish teacher at Flatlands was helping with a new immigrant who spoke little English, he wanted to protect his role as a Spanish teacher: "I don't mind helping, but I don't wanna go back and get English-certified. Cause that's not what I wanted to do." These various factors—the ability for qualified teachers to easily move to another district as well as the ability of teachers to resist administration pressures on them to complete TESOL certifications—helped hinder the transformation of schools to better serve their ELs.

Instruction

With the possible exceptions of Plains HS and Flatlands HS, I did not see evidence that less-experienced teachers were deliberately placed into ESL classes as noted by other researchers (Dabach, 2015). However, due to a lack of local expertise, most ESL teachers had limited training or experience in teaching ELs with much of their background focused on either Spanish language teaching or teaching mainstream ELA classes. As DeJong & Harper (2005) illustrated, effective teachers of ELs have to harness a complex set of skills and knowledge—simply being a "good teacher" isn't sufficient. Moreover, teacher abilities were hampered by the fact that instructional materials were often dated at the schools I visited as part of this study, with ESL specific materials being extremely dated (as in the 2002 books at Leon HS) or largely absent (as was the case at Flatlands HS, Mineral HS, and Plains HS). While other studies have pointed to the negative impact of overly restrictive packaged curricula on students and their teachers (e.g., Gilliland, 2017), the profiled ESL teachers had the opposite problem: a lack of curriculum and little knowledge about how to procure something useful for their context and students.

As evident from this story from an ESL teacher at Flatlands HS, teachers were often placed into ESL positions without sufficient support:

About in 2008 the principal said, "well, because you're TESOL endorsed, you get these 13 ELD [English Language Development] class kids and freshmen." And that's when I was moved out of the English department and given the alternative side. And I said, what do I do with these ELD kids? "Well, you took the TESOL program, you figure it out."

The art teacher who recently also became an English teacher at Flatlands HS with ESL students in her

classes reported that her transition to teaching English was "Harder than I thought it would be. You know because I did pick up an endorsement, an alternate endorsement, so I haven't had all the classes to teach English." The challenge and frustration this transition can bring was touched on by the Spanish/ESL teacher at Mineral HS: "to be honest, I really wasn't prepared, didn't know how, how to approach these kids because there's no curriculum and there's, I had no idea, I had no idea." Absent established curricular materials, teachers improvised.

The Spanish/ESL teacher at Leon HS depended largely on rote vocabulary instruction, with students filling their notebooks with pages of vocabulary lists and regular word search worksheets. The Spanish/ESL teacher at Mineral HS described his teaching as ongoing trial and error, having tried a few different approaches before I had arrived: "last year I used Achieve 3000 and I tried to do some study guides with them to work on their English, but also it wasn't the only thing. They also needed assistance in trying to get homework done from other classes." Because the school delayed in purchasing Rosetta Stone licenses for the ESL class, he was improvising from the Rosetta Stone teacher's guide when I arrived. ESL classes at Plains HS had traditionally been a study hall where students could complete work due in other classes—the new ESL teacher expressed challenges in changing this culture: "I'll have several teachers that bring me their work…or bring me a test for them to finish in here or bring me several things to do in here…I understand they can learn from that but that should not be all that I'm doing, but I think that's all [the old ESL teacher has] done." Nonetheless, while facing the additional challenge of working against students who felt that "me hace bien un periodo para hacer. para catch up on my work," the new teacher struggled to identify a curriculum that worked for her classes. During my visit, she was trying a phonics-based ESL program that she learned about at a district training, which had a number of lessons focused on getting students to pronounce words like a "native speaker." The students would often complain about the lessons during my observations, saying they were for children. This presence of reductive curricula that reduces ELs' opportunities to learn by restricting them to specific words or phrases for instance has been well documented by other researchers (e.g., Valdés, 2001).

Rio HS, which had most developed ESL program, had some textbooks from the National Geographic *Edge* series and a subscription to Rosetta Stone, but because students of different levels were grouped into the same class, the first-year students were almost exclusively working on computers. In the words of a student who had just been there a month when I met her:

I: que haces en la clase ESL?
S: Um, Rosetta Stone.
I: Siempre? Todo, todo los días?
S: Si, casi siempre. Cuando no hacemos Rosetta Stone, nos pone la Ms. hacer un examen de NoRedInk o de otra pagina.
Translation:
I: What do you do in ESL class?
S: Um, Rosetta Stone.
I: Always? Every, every day?
S: Yes, almost always. When we don't do Rosetta Stone the teacher has us do a test on NoRedInk or another web page.
(NoRedInk was a grammar learning website widely used in the school.)

As seen with the phonics-based program being used at Plains HS, some of the programs or curricula used were picked up because teachers or students had heard about them or used them previously. As a result, Rosetta Stone benefits from familiarity through its heavy advertising, even though it has limitations such as its lack of emphasis on building students' academic language competency or its failure to provide metalinguistic knowledge that research has shown supports language learning (de Oliveira & Schleppegrell, 2015). Too often students were put on computers in part because of the challenges that teachers faced in having students of varying levels in the same class or just being completely uncertain in how to teach new language learners. However, computer-supported language learning seemed to be a vital part of students' language learning experience; when not on computers, ESL classes often lacked direction. Students at Mineral HS expressed frustration with the delay on purchasing a computer-based program they had requested:

I: ¿Tú preguntaste por este programa, por este sistema?
S: Siempre todos, pues nosotros casi no sabemos inglés, y les decimos y pero nada más nos dicen que sí...puras mentiras
Translation:
I: You asked for this program, this system?

S: Almost all of us [have] because we barely know English and we told them but they only say yes [we'll get it] . . . pure lies.

In general, administrators and teachers needed more resources to find and evaluate appropriate curricular materials for their ESL classes. Even when there was funding available for purchases, local professional learning communities had not reached a point of development where they had knowledge of the English teaching options available nor the expertise in deciding which was best for their students. When I suggested to the principal at Mineral HS that they invest in textbooks for the ESL classes, he told me that he had no idea they had books like they have in Spanish class but for learning English. It is perhaps unsurprising that a study on schools in rural Canada found that 57% of administrators listed curriculum materials development as a professional development priority for ESL teachers, topping the list among the surveyed options (Abbott & Rossiter, 2011). Without expertise in selecting a curriculum appropriate for students in a particular context, schools sought out a program that was familiar and that had been given legitimacy through various advertising initiatives: Rosetta Stone.

Administration and Assessment

Regular turnover among both teachers and administrators meant schools faced challenges in building and maintaining systems to support the assessment and placement of their ELs. Leon HS was especially well known for having a school board that hired and fired principals and superintendents with regularity: for instance, the high school saw a new superintendent and high school principal every year or two for the decade leading into my visit. The principal at Rio HS was the longest serving among the schools I visited (six years) when I arrived and was also bilingual certified. She described how building an effective ESL program took years:

it used to be where the Spanish teacher had them all, and it would be like, oh my God, well who are they, and what are they. Let me tell you, this year was our breakthrough year, you know, that plumbing, I always feel like a plumber and you have to just, you know, keep poking and get that thing to flow, and I, I just couldn't get the, the bilingual and the [WIDA] ACCESS and all that together.

Rio HS has already had at least two new principals since my visit. This subsequent turnover,

along with the potential for principals with less training and/or interest in developing language support, has the potential to undo the work that had been previously accomplished.

Along with regular administrative turnover, one of the largest challenges across the schools was the placement of students and leveling of classes. Whereas classes in larger schools with higher numbers of students needing ESL support might be leveled, the ESL classes at all schools I visited had students from a variety of levels, which made teachers' jobs challenging because they could not tailor their instruction to a particular level. Even when the ESL teacher was in charge of maintaining folders, managing testing, and placing students, schools generally had access to placement scores to place students in different levels due to state testing mandates. However, differentiated placement did not happen for a few different reasons. Program scale was perhaps the largest issue. If students were divided up into multiple levels, then the resulting classes would be too small and consequently expensive to teach. However, as the ESL teacher at Plains HS explained, teaching different levels of language learners made her job infinitely more challenging:

I do not think that you should have your most lowest and your most highest all in one class. It's too hard because working with the lowest one, you're gonna have that higher student very bored and then you're working with your higher student, you're gonna have that lowest student lost.

As mentioned previously, students at Rio HS, the only school with a teacher primarily dedicated to ESL teaching, were lumped into one class and consequently one group largely were put on the computers while the teacher focused on the other half of the class. An ESL teacher at Flatlands HS described the challenge she faced when working with students with so many levels and needs in a language support program she deemed inadequate:

then I have in here, some of them are mixed in here, they're special ed and ELD and so they're not getting serviced in both of those areas well because they're in one place or the other. And then the ones that don't speak English [are] not getting serviced in an English class teaching them how to speak English, so that's an issue. If they're in a Spanish class trying to learn English and…I don't see it working. Not with my kids anyway. They're not any better than they were

nine weeks ago when I first got them in that area. So in vocabulary, you know, they're just very low. That's what I see this year. And that's why I'm struggling. And then I have all levels, so they're all over the board, so I just keep working as much as I can.

The administration at Plains HS did hire an aide to help ELs in the ESL classes and other classes but he seemed to be hired because of his Spanish knowledge rather than his expertise in language teaching; he worked night shifts as a nurse at a nearby hospital and would often fall asleep during classes I observed.

Larger districts often have specialized staff in the main office who can provide the support that may be limited in particular schools, ranging from selecting curriculum to testing and placing students. However, in rural schools, this work often falls on overworked teachers who feel unsupported and are already coping with a variety of stresses (Markham, 1999). The ESL teacher at Leon HS expressed her frustration multiple times throughout our interview, such as how she was repeatedly asked to translate letters for parents: "I'm not [a] professional to translate, but I always do that because the parents I want that they know about it. But finally I tell them the other day, if you tell me this is not my job, don't send me any letter [to translate] because it's not my job either." Similarly, she had to fight with the counselors, who refused to provide the testing support needed for the ELs: "They don't want to deal with that. And sometimes, I understand that we have a lot of a lot of like [state] tests, many tests through the whole year and I understand that they get tired. But if we decide to get a job it's for some reason. And if you need to handle it is part of your job."

Like teachers, the rural administrators in these schools and districts were often overwhelmed by the number of roles they had to take on. The bilingual director for the Mineral district doubled as the middle school principal, was monolingual, and did not mention any ESL teaching experience. At Rio HS, the assistant principal doubled as the district athletic director and described a decline in support positions throughout the years: "when I started as an assistant, there was a transportation director, there was a curriculum instructor, there was the associate superintendent and then all of that disappeared." In a place like Plains HS, where the district was seeing recent and dramatic demographic shifts, the curriculum specialist in the main office was learning along with the teacher, which meant the ESL teacher

was largely responsible for coordinating testing for the ELs while figuring out to assembling the folders documenting their services. As the Plains HS principal noted, "we're trying to grasp at straws to try to help out the best we can."

Discussion and Recommendations

Despite some experience over the years with ELs, especially at Rio HS and Flatlands HS, the schools in this study were home to a good deal of uncertainty on how to support these students within individual classrooms and in the school as a whole— in this sense, they appeared more like the schools seeing recent demographic shifts with their ad hoc approaches (Dondero & Muller, 2012; Zehler et al., 2008) than might be expected for schools in a state that has a long history of linguistic and cultural diversity. When funding was available, well-intentioned administrators had trouble recruiting ESL teachers with the requisite training and experience. Consequently, it was common practice for schools to repurpose Spanish teachers as ESL teachers with limited training or put a teacher with a TESOL certification in charge of the whole ESL program. With both teachers and administrators having limited knowledge on ESL program design and implementation, classes remained unfocused while teachers tried out different curricular options, sometimes based on name recognition as we saw with Rosetta Stone or based on the promotion of an individual selling their curriculum around the state/region, as we saw with the dated phonics-based curriculum at Plains. Based on these findings and the findings of other studies, I have suggestions how rural administrators, colleges of education, and state policy makers can work to better support the teaching of ELs in rural schools.

Curriculum in education leadership programs

Principals and other administrators would have clearly benefited from more training and resources in supporting ELs. Administrators play an important role in ensuring support for ELs by embracing this population and ensuring students are receiving the resources and support they need, encouraging the teachers to adapt their teaching to serve their ELs. If they only have a perfunctory understanding of laws and take a technical implementation approach, they can obstruct "social justice for [their] students" (Mavrogordato, & White, 2019, p. 24). If they focus too narrowly on academic outcomes and test scores, a

practice often encouraged by state mandates, "This can have ripple effects that cause teachers and staffs to view ELL students as a burden on the school system and foster mistrust of the school system among ELL students and their families" (Showalter et al., 2017, p. 45). Hill and Flynn (2004) offered several areas that school leaders need to consider in supporting ELs, ranging from understanding legal requirements to identifying and promoting effective professional development to creating an environment that values diversity to monitoring and evaluating any language support program. Bérubé's (2000) similarly dated *Managing ESL Programs in Rural and Small Urban Schools* is another useful resource. While these resources are useful, it is evident that we need more published resources as well as more opportunities for rural school leaders to develop expertise in ESL program development.

Curriculum in Teacher Education Programs

It was evident throughout this study that teachers would have benefited from more robust training in supporting ELs. As noted by the Education Commission of the States (2014), more than 30 states have no special requirements for teacher preparation for working with ELs beyond the minimal federal mandates. Because the quality of teacher education courses depends on the quality of faculty teaching them, programs should also be conscious of diversifying their faculty in terms of expertise, teaching experience and language backgrounds (De Jong et al., 2018). For instance, while de Jong et al. (2018) found that faculty might feel competent in talking about the sociocultural aspects of teaching ELs, they may lack knowledge about how to adequately provide language support and effectively assess the progress of ELs. Education courses and programs should draw on nationally-recognized standards such as TESOL's (2019) "Standards for Initial TESOL Pre-K–12 Teacher Preparation Programs," which provide guidance about what educators need to know in several different areas to better serve ELs: knowledge about language, ELLs in the sociocultural context, planning and implementing instruction, assessment and evaluation, and professionalism and leadership. As de Jong and Harper (2005) have noted, simply being a "good teacher" is not enough.

Building up Local Expertise

It is evident that rural schools need to be empowered in building up the expertise of their existing faculty rather than rely primarily on hiring and retaining teachers from other places. States need to respond to rural school leaders' requests for for funding to pay for coursework and offer additional stipends for teachers who obtain certifications to support their ELs. Rural administrators can seek out additional training for school themselves via educational leadership programs or organizations like the Rural School and Community Trust. They can form partnerships with local and/or regional teacher education programs to provide training for their teachers—they should be prepared for this work in their educational leadership training. Alongside this partnership building, teacher educators need to develop more high-quality distance-learning options that can support school leaders in building up their local communities of practice without facing the challenge of out-of-town travel. Coady et al.'s (2019) successful program was based around six 8-week-long online courses and supported by locally hired specialists. Federally funded centers like the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota might also be good resources—CARLA offers summer workshops with an online delivery option on topics such as "Using Technology in Second Language Teaching" and "Exploring Project-Based Language Learning." School leaders can also build resource libraries for their teachers. For instance, Coady's (2019a) *Connecting School and the Multilingual Home: Theory and Practice for Rural Educators* is also an important resource for teachers in training and practicing teachers.

More supportive state policies

Policymakers need to balance the desire to improve the quality of teaching with market realities such as teacher shortages and understand how shortages impact rural schools that have traditionally had a harder time recruiting teachers, especially those with bilingual and TESOL certifications. Legal challenges may provide hope in ensuring that states provide rural districts with the financial resources and teachers they need to better support their linguistically diverse students. The New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund filed

lawsuits in recent years claiming that schools were not providing sufficient support for ELs and minoritized student groups (Yazzie v. state of New Mexico and Martinez v. state of New Mexico, 2018). In a harsh judgement against the state, Judge Sarah Singleton found evidence that "school districts do not have the funds to pay for all the teachers they need" (p. 32), that "there are inadequate funds to adequately train teachers" (p. 36), and that "it is difficult to recruit teachers in rural areas and to obtain teachers in special education, STEM, and bilingual education" (p. 36). She attributed this partially to salary disparities: "Some districts have difficulty maintaining a sufficient number of TESOL-endorsed teachers because of an inability to compete with neighboring districts" (p. 36). She also blamed the teacher evaluation system: "Teacher evaluations in New Mexico may be contributing to the lower quality of teachers in high-need schools. In general, punitive teacher evaluation systems that penalize teachers for working in high-need schools contribute to problem in this category of schools" (p. 34). It is evident from this judgement that state funding formulas and policies like punitive evaluation systems impact the ability of rural schools to sufficiently serve their ELs, a point I have made elsewhere (Ruecker, 2020). It is important for rural school leaders to collaborate via organizations such as the Rural School and Community Trust and the National Rural Education Association to advocate for policies that help rural schools hire and retain strong teachers as they work to serve diversifying student populations.

Concluding Thoughts

It is clear that ELs will continue to play an important role in rural communities and schools throughout the U.S. Based on my visits to the five schools discussed in this article, four of them in a state and in towns with a longer history of diversity, additional work needs to be done to provide EL students with a truly equitable education that helps them succeed. By more effectively training new generations of administrators and teachers, by empowering rural school leaders to build collaborations to grow local expertise, and by advocating for the needs of rural schools at the state and national level, we can move beyond some of the ad hoc methods described here to a time where support for ELs is embraced and integrated throughout all rural school cultures.

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