

## **Principals Supporting Teachers in Providing Language Instruction to English Learners in Elementary School**

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The purpose of the study was to examine the systems of support that principals establish at their school sites to support teachers with the academic achievement of the English learner population. Two schools from a single district were selected. Specific strategies, structures, and processes that support teachers and principals of English learners were explored. Based on the finding in this qualitative case study, major themes that emerged included (1) the implementation of a culture of high expectations and trust, (2) principals holding teachers and themselves accountable by supporting teachers with lesson development and monitoring daily instruction during a structured English Language Development (ELD) time as well as in other content areas, (3) principals providing various collaboration structures to support data analysis, targeted planning and instruction, and (4) principals supporting teachers with practicing the strategies learned in professional development sessions. In conclusion, the author proposes recommendations a principal must have in place to support teachers of English language learners.

### **Background**

English learners represent 30% of the United States school population (Boyd, 2013). They are the fastest growing student population in both rural and urban schools in the United States (Christianson, 2010). In California alone, nearly 25% or 1.4 million English learner students attend public schools (Hill, 2012). English learners are individuals who speak another language other than English. They differ in various ways, including level of oral English proficiency, academic and literacy ability in both their native language and English, socioeconomic level, different degrees of competence in their mother tongue, and cultural backgrounds (Calderon & Minaya-Rowe, 2010; Gibbons, 1991).

According to Calderon and Minaya-Rowe (2010), the English learner spectrum may include English learners in kindergarten through third grade or newcomers to the United States who were well schooled in their native country. In California, most English learners are of a Hispanic descent and speak Spanish as their primary language (Jepsen & De Alth, 2005). Eighty-two percent of these students in Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade and fifty-five percent in 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade are born in the United States of America (Hill, 2012).

English learners face the dual challenge of mastering all academic content in English while, at the same time, learning a new language (Olsen, 2010). Although the courts have recognized this and have made it clear that school districts are required to address this challenge, English learners in California have not shown the desired academic achievement results (Olsen, 2010). The result has been an achievement gap between native speakers of English and English language learners.

The phenomenon of closing the achievement gap is not new to educators (Garcia, 2012). For decades, researchers have stressed the importance of closing the achievement gap between the English learner and English-only students (Garcia, 2012; Hill, 2012; Olsen, 2010). When addressing the English learner achievement gap, much attention has been given to the development of policies, initiatives, and laws (Hill, 2012). Limited attention has been given to addressing the linguistic needs of English learners (DiCerbo, Anstrom, Baker, & Rivera, 2014). The implementation of the Common Core standards has prompted a new demand on language in all academic areas. Reyes and Garcia (2014) believe that addressing the needs of all English learners will be a challenge because most principals and teachers lack the skills to provide effective instruction for English learners. This lack of knowledge has been evident for decades (Reyes & Garcia, 2014).

### **Research Question**

A recent study conducted by Elfers and Stritikus (2014) revealed that there is a need to find the link between leadership practices and the achievement of English learners. This recent shift in both scholarship and practice focuses on a learning-centered leadership that is imperative for the success of English learners. To unveil the connection between leadership and English learners, the following research question was generated: *What strategies (structures, systems, and processes) do principals use to support the academic achievement of English language learners at a school site?*

Clarity on effective systems and structures that principals establish at their school sites can lead to recommendations a principal can utilize to support teachers of English learner and contribute to changes in classroom practices and instruction.

### **Literature Review**

A school leader or principal is key in the academic achievement of English learners. There has been an increasing amount of research that connects school principals to the success of teaching and learning (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014; McGee, Haworth, & MacIntyre, 2015). However, research conversations have given only minimal attention to the role of the principal in relation to English learners (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014). Closing the achievement gap, promoting learning, and minimizing drop-out rates of English learners places a new emphasis on preparing both new and experienced teachers (Oliveira & Athanases, 2007). Given the shortage of teacher capacity to meet the needs of English learners, the role of the principal must shift to a focus on learning, instruction, and the support of inclusive practices that address the needs of English learners (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014).

Researchers who study leadership and its impact on the academic achievement of English learners agree that principals are key to setting direction, developing people, and designing the organization to meet the needs of all students (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014; Firestone & Riehl, 2005; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). Although the teacher remains as the person who most directly impacts students, the principal stands out as the person who can most influence the long-term success of programs for English learners (Reyes, 2006). In "Leading Academic Achievement for English Language Learners," Alford and Nino (2011) explore four key factors that influence the principal's role as they strengthen their school culture and raise English learner

achievement. These factors include (a) building shared values, (b) fostering conditions to promote learning, (c) celebrating academic success, and (d) building positive relationship.

Building shared values entails communicating a vision, values, and beliefs of high expectations and success (Alford & Nino, 2011). In a study conducted by Aleman, Johnson, and Perez (2009), common characteristics the among four high-achieving schools with high percentages of English learners were the creation of a shared vision that resonated with their faculty and communities, constant communication, and structured time for collaboration on data, instructional strategies and interventions (Aleman et al., 2009). Building shared values is not an easy task because values articulate attitudes, behaviors, and commitments within each stakeholder (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). To embed a change in values requires a mind shift in beliefs, assumptions, and habits. The principal's ability to build positive relationships plays another role that can contribute to the academic achievement of English learners. Alford and Nino (2011) state, "principals can build relationships that foster student success" (p. 9). This entails building positive relationships. This entails building positive relationships and seizing moments to communicate and build trust with students, teachers, and parents. Communication and positive relationships across the homeschool divide are crucial due to the cultural, linguistic, and social differences among English learners (Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011; Suttmiller & Gonzalez, 2006).

Celebrating academic success is the third role. Effective principals create a family-oriented climate where educators acknowledge families, students' excellent work, academic strengths, and character on frequent basis (Aleman et al., 2009). They lay the foundation for a positive culture by working and ensuring that educators feel respected, valued and appreciated. When educators model a positive culture, they also acknowledge students' excellent work and academic strengths frequently by celebrating and communicating their success. Teachers respect students and students perceive that their teachers like them and want them to succeed. The final role involves fostering conditions to promote ongoing learning. This entails that the principal hire the right teachers who are able to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of English learners, facilitate ongoing professional development opportunities, and provide resources (Alford & Nino, 2011; Calderon & Minaya-Rowe, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2000; De Jong & Harper, 2005; Grant & Wong, 2003).

### **Methodology**

The focus of this case study was to acquire multiple perspectives and to identify alternatives and shared patterns among participants at the schools. This study reports on data from two schools in Harvest Unified School District (pseudonym). Harvest Unified was selected due to its successful reclassification rate of English language learners under the new common core standards. Students who are eligible to reclassify must (a) score at a proficient language level on the California English Language Development Test, (b) demonstrate proficiency in grade level reading and math, and (c) receive C or better given by classroom teachers. The schools were selected based on the following criteria: (a) the school had a high number of English language learners compared to other similar schools in the district; (b) the school had a principal who had been an instructional leader in schools that have served the English learner population for at least five years; and (c) for the past three years, the school had demonstrated that their English learner population has been reclassifying at a rate that matches or exceeds the

state average. Cornfield Elementary (pseudonym) is located in a low socioeconomic Hispanic community. The school has an enrollment of 539 students ranging from transitional kindergarten to sixth grade. An estimated 95% of the students receive free and reduced lunch. Spanish is the predominant language. Butternut Elementary (pseudonym) serves an Asian and Hispanic population composed of 629 students enrolled in transitional kindergarten through sixth grade. Its English learner population is composed of 172 students. An estimated 59.5% of the students receive free and reduced lunch.

### **Participant Selection**

Purposeful sampling of individuals was used in the selection of participants. This method allowed for an intentional selection of individuals to better understand the central phenomenon of this study (Creswell, 2002). Participants were selected based on their role as being the most knowledgeable people to provide relevant information. They had been educators for an average of twenty-two years, ranging from ten to forty years. All participants were highly qualified and fully credentialed to teach English learners. Participants consisted of one principal and two teachers from each school site. They were invited to participate in the study via email and were asked to sign a consent form prior to participating in the study. During the semi-structured interview, each individual and site was given a pseudonym for confidentiality. The participating principals and teachers were truthful to the best of their knowledge in the information they provided in the interviews.

### **Data Collection**

This case study used an interview questionnaire and face-to-face interviews. According to Merriam (2014), “interviewing is a good technique to use when conducting studies of a few selected individuals” (p. 88). The semi-structured format was selected due to its flexibility and structure that allows researchers to respond to the situation or topic (Merriam, 2014). Based on Patton’s (2002) recommendations, interview questions were strategically developed to stimulate responses and elicit points of conversations that yielded descriptive data. Interview questions focused on four main components: (a) experience, (b) knowledge, (c) instruction, and (d) challenges.

### **Data Analysis**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant at a designated time and place as indicated by the participant. All responses were audiotaped to ensure an accurate record of the conversation (Creswell, 2002). All responses were transcribed into text data. Data was triangulated to ensure accuracy because the information draws from multiple sources: (a) one-time interview with each participant, (b) quantitative data on school and district reclassification rate obtained from the California Department of Education web page, and (c) personal documents presented by participants. Findings were also validated through member checking to rule out any possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what the participants shared. Each participant was provided a copy of the transcribed interview and were to check the accuracy of the interview data collected. Merriam (2014) suggested that member checking is a good way of identifying the researchers own biases and misunderstanding of what was observed.

Once accuracy or findings were validated, the researcher conducted a preliminary exploration analysis to obtain a general sense of the data and to think about the organization of it (Creswell, 2002). Memos were written on the transcripts' margins to later help with the coding process. Creswell (2002) identified coding as the process of segmenting and labeling text into themes. Excel was used to organize transcribed interviews into themes. These excel sheets were printed out and analyzed to further narrow data into major and minor themes.

## Findings

The following are the findings obtained from the semi-structured interviews conducted at Harvest Unified School District. Data from two principals and four teachers were collected, transcribed, coded, themed, and analyzed to determine the systems, structures and processes principals implemented at their school site to raise English learner achievement and support teachers with instructional strategies focused on developing language. Findings presented addressed the research question.

### Analysis of Findings

*Research Question: What strategies (structures, systems, and processes) do principals use to support the academic achievement of English language learners at a school site?*

Major themes emerged from the participants about the strategies principals use to support the academic achievement of English learners at their school site included (a) the importance of culture, (b) structured English language development time, (c) time for collaboration, data analysis, and targeted planning and instruction, (d) interventions, and (e) professional development.

**Culture.** Both principals agreed on the importance of creating a culture within their school where all stakeholders have high expectations, are engaged, and feel they are trusted. Mr. Smith and Mrs. Gonzalez (pseudonym) believed that this begins with the instructional leader who holds him or herself to high expectations as they create that community of high expectations, a culture of trust, and a shared vision at their schools sites. Both principals expected students to be engaged in what they were doing and learning. They continually visited classrooms and observed what the teachers and students were doing. Mr. Smith reported that when he walks into classrooms, it is important to see students who are engaged and having discussions about what they are learning. He stated:

Engagement should be kids who don't even recognize me when I walk in the room. They couldn't care less that I walked in the room, and they don't look at me because they are so engaged in what they are doing. So they could be loud, could be quiet.

As he walks into classrooms, he expects to clearly understand what students are doing simply by observing for a moment.

Mrs. Gonzalez agreed that it is important for students to be engaged in what they are learning. She, too, holds herself accountable for visiting classrooms to see what teachers and students are doing. Mrs. Gonzalez walks into each of her classrooms expecting to see instructional strategies that support English learners. She expects that her teachers provide rigorous instruction that includes a content and language standard. She explained:

I expect to see scaffolds that teachers create, like sentence frames or like anchor charts that students can refer to throughout the course of the lesson that help make them [students] feel successful and that they can demonstrate using these tools based on previously learned structures that they can demonstrate their learning.

Both principals agreed that it is important to build a culture where there is trust amongst the principal and teachers. Mr. Smith trusts his teachers' professional knowledge and always asks for their feedback on new ideas or strategies. He often asks his teachers, "What do you think about this?" or "This is what I have heard, what are your thoughts?" Mr. Smith added that his teachers are the true experts because they are the ones in the classroom, teaching every day.

Mrs. Gonzalez had to work hard to build that trust at her school. After three years, she has seen the change in attitudes toward her. She felt teachers started trusting her more once she told her story. She shared:

I did something that teachers found remarkable. I told my story. I told them about how I was a second language learner and I told them how I was mistreated. And I told them how I didn't receive what I needed to be successful. And I told them how I felt. And then I had them all tell their story.

As teachers shared their personal stories, she felt that teachers felt a sense of vulnerability toward each other. This made teacher's *affective* filter go down. The teachers later told her that she was courageous for sharing her story.

Mrs. Gonzalez also shared that part of building trust with your teachers is including them in creating a schoolwide vision. Cornfield Elementary has a leadership team who has collaboratively created a shared vision around the structures of the school, expectations for teaching and learning, and the non-negotiables relative to what is needed to be in place for the academic achievement of English language learners. All teachers are further expected to set goals for every child in their classroom. Students are also expected to set their personal goals based on their ZPD and reading scores. Mrs. Gonzalez believes that if you know where you are, it helps determine where you want to go and continually set goals.

Similar to the principals, holding students to high expectations was a common theme among three of the teachers. Mrs. Jennings and Miss Jansen (pseudonyms), agreed that knowing a student's language proficiency level helps them target instruction, challenge their students, and have a clear understanding of what to expect from their students at Cornfield Elementary. At Butternut Elementary, Mrs. Jones (pseudonym) pushes her students to always do their best. She expects them to speak even if the best they can do is echo as she models. She ensures that her students listen attentively to the way she speaks. Mrs. Jones explained that if students listen and speak as much as possible, their vocabulary will improve.

**Structured English Language Development time.** Both principals agreed that language development must occur throughout the instructional day. However, having a specific structured English language development (ELD) time is vital. Mr. Smith and Mrs. Gonzalez structure their school's instructional minutes to include 45 minutes of uninterrupted daily ELD instruction. They monitor daily ELD implementation by asking teachers for daily schedules and visiting classrooms to ensure that ELD instruction occurs. At Cornfield elementary, ELD class occurs first thing in the morning. This was strategically established to send the message that ELD is important.

All four teachers confirmed that there are 45 minutes of structured ELD time as part of their daily schedule. They group students by English proficiency level for that designated ELD block and target their instruction based on the student's level. Miss Jansen and Mrs. Jennings reported that they teach ELD first thing in the morning. Miss Jansen reported that although other schools are required to teach only 30 minutes of ELD, she supports the principal's decision of increasing the time to 45 minutes because it allows English language learners to receive some additional support.

**Collaboration time.** Mrs. Gonzalez and Mr. Smith agreed that collaboration time is important to them. They believe that it provides teachers with time to collaborate so that they can plan, analyze data, monitor student growth, discuss strategies, and set goals. Both principals acknowledged that instruction delivered to English learners must be carefully planned and targeted to meet the needs of students.

Harvest Unified provided early release days so that teachers could collaborate on a weekly basis. Both principals revealed that they structured the early release days to provide guidance on what needs to be discussed and often participated in the discussions alongside their teachers. Mr. Smith shared:

We have many grade level teams that are working incredibly well collaboratively to address those questions. What do we want our kids to learn? How are we going to know they know it? What are we going to do when they don't?

Mrs. Gonzalez shared that at her site collaboration time may consist of having discussions, analyzing data, or learning new skills and strategies. In addition to the early release days, both principals provided collaboration time during the year for analyzing data. Mrs. Gonzalez provided data meetings throughout the school year. The intention of these meetings was to provide a structure for looking at student data more in depth and to have conversations about instructional deficits that may needed to be addressed. Mrs. Gonzalez explained:

So we don't wait all year for the next year or for the California English Development Test (CELDT) score to tell us when to move a child. We use our data to determine when and how and to whom this child will go in order to continue that capacity building process.

At Cornfield Elementary, student language proficiency progress is measured three times a year because it is important to Mrs. Gonzalez and her teachers to know how their English learners are demonstrating progress, which student will be moving to the next instructional language level, and how they can support them with interventions during the school year.

At Butternut Elementary, there was also collaboration time around data. Mr. Smith shares that they carefully looked at data to monitor growth, make changes and reclassify students. Mr. Smith had teachers look at multiple sources of formative and summative data. He met with each grade level and supported them as they look at CELDT data, district reading data, common classroom assessment, and teacher observational tools. Mr. Smith shared that at Butternut Elementary, they monitor *all* students' achievement. He believes that zeroing in on specific needs of individual students is not a choice at his school, but rather it is an expectation that teachers are going to know what their students need.

Both principals agreed that collaboration with students and parents was also important in maintaining the lines of communication, building trust and setting goals. Mrs. Gonzalez and Mr. Smith met with students and parents to discuss data and academic achievement. Mrs. Gonzalez reported that English learners at her school know their proficiency level and understand where they need to be in order for them to reach reclassification status. Mr. Smith personally met with parents of English learners who were struggling to reach reclassification. He shared with them their child's data and explained the reclassification process so that they are aware of how important it is to be reclassified in elementary school.

Both principals shared that collaboration time with all stakeholders at their schools was the arena where discussions about data, planning, instruction, intervention, and goal and vision setting could occur. Both principals further believed that collaboration among all stakeholders impacts student learning.

Teachers confirmed that the collaboration time provided by their principal is important. They agreed that they collaborate to analyze data to track and monitor student achievement and plan instruction based on student need. Additionally, teachers from Cornfield Elementary shared that it has been very helpful that their principal supports them by providing tools to scaffold and track the progress of students when they meet to plan lessons.

**Targeted instruction.** Both principals agreed that it is important to know the student's language proficiency level to be able to plan targeted lessons that address their instructional needs. Mr. Smith expected his teachers to be able to tell him who their English learners were and their proficiency levels. Mrs. Gonzalez expressed that teaching English learners is not a one-size-fits-all instruction. She explained:

Understanding where your children are relative to language acquisition or their language proficiency level is the most critical to know if you have a level three child. You need to know where in level three that child is at because if we don't understand where they are in their *threeness*, we will never move them to four.

She further added that placement of an English learner was crucial because in order for the student to be challenged he/she needs to be placed appropriately. She stressed that blending the content standards with language standards allowed for daily instruction that was differentiated for every student in the classroom. She explained:

Strategic planning helps teachers frontload students [during ELD] using accountable talk structures and academic vocabulary at their language proficiency levels so that when they go back to their homerooms, they are ready to receive ELA instruction.

She further addressed that language domains should also be implemented so that students were not taught in isolation. At Cornfield Elementary, the principal reported that teachers focused on what they were teaching in language arts to plan their ELD lessons. She expressed:

So we have these bridging materials that [are] really content-rich and can be very, very thematic. So what they do is they focus on ELA standards for ELD and then they [align] it with an ELD standard for the appropriate language proficiency level.

She believes that the way an educator becomes proficient at teaching English learners is to understand their capabilities in their particular language proficiency level, go through the process of writing lessons based on that level, and include instructional strategies that will support the student. She explains that understanding English learners, levels of language acquisition, and how to support students has to exist in the mind and heart of a teacher.

All four teachers agreed that it is important to know who their students are and their proficiency level in order to provide targeted instruction. Ms. Jansen believes that knowing her student's strengths and their weaknesses helps her better plan and deliver instruction based on what the student needs. She explained:

I think as a teacher you really know what a true 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 is and knowing, "Okay, if they're Level 1, how I can get them to a Level 2? So, making sure that you are aware of that so you can get them to the next level so they don't get stuck there, and know what's really expected out of them.

Similarly, Mrs. Jennings believes that a teacher needs to be aware of their students' proficiency levels so that they can support students through their comprehension and language and monitor their progress. She also shared that a teacher also needs to know what her students should be able to do based on their instructional level and what strategies she will provide that will support the student.

**Interventions.** Both principals agreed that intervention for English learners are in place at their schools. At Butternut Elementary, Mr. Smith reported that a great deal of interventions occur after the school day. Many of his students attended afterschool programs where they received additional support with language and homework. Some students attended a Saturday school session that was focused on enhancing English skills. He explained that attending school outside the regular school day is part of the culture in the community he serves. He believes that this additional intervention as well as the classroom instruction allows students to reach language proficiency at a quicker rate.

At Cornfield Elementary, Mrs. Gonzalez has a Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA) to support their work and vision. She feels the work that the TOSA is doing is invaluable because she works as a student coach and a teacher coach. Both Mrs. Gonzalez and the TOSA used their knowledge of language acquisition and differentiation to provide coaching with lesson planning, data analysis, and instructional strategies. As they determined where their struggling English learners were, they visited classrooms and provided teachers with feedback on instructional practices. They supported teachers as they provided in-class interventions. Teachers are required to write an intervention plan for all struggling English learners. Mrs. Gonzalez called these intervention plans the “prescriptive practices” that would help support English learner achievement in the classroom.

Like their principal, teachers agreed that intervention supports are important to have in place. Ms. Jansen shared that the role of the TOSA has been vital to supporting students in their classroom and meeting with teachers to provide instructional support. Mrs. Jones and Mrs. King (pseudonym) shared that the intervention at Butternut Elementary occurs outside of school through afterschool or weekend programs that support student with listening and speaking skills in English. Mrs. King explained that parents at her school are involved in “pushing” their children to do well and they pay for additional interventions.

**Instructional strategies.** Both principals agreed that instructional strategies for English learners at their schools are implemented throughout the instructional day. They agreed that scaffolding strategies helped all students whether they were English learners or not. Both coincided with the belief that English learners should not be doing anything different than other students. They should be provided with the same content and it should be differentiated so that English learners are learning. Mr. Smith explained that as he monitored classrooms and supported teachers, he looked for lessons that were specific and purposeful.

Mrs. Gonzalez believes scaffolding instruction throughout the school day helps support all students. She often provided teachers with tools to scaffold instruction as teachers planned and delivered lessons for all content areas. Currently, she purchased a scaffolding tool that included sentence stems and tips on how to move children from the different proficiency levels.

Teacher responses confirmed that instructional strategies were in place at both schools. All four teachers had many instructional scaffolds in place as they provide instruction. They agreed that frontloading students is the most important and effective instructional strategy. They frontload students with the academic vocabulary needed for language arts, math, science, and social science during ELD time. Miss Jansen shared that many teachers at Cornfield Elementary have realized that frontloading students with the use of common academic vocabulary truly supports English learners during other content areas because it supports comprehension and making connections. Mrs. Jones shared that she integrates pictures, technology, realia, modeling, and thinking maps to help students learn vocabulary and make connections. Three out of the four teachers shared that they use sentence frames as a scaffold to support instruction. They implement this strategy to support students with written and oral English language. They believed that through the use of sentence frames, English learners learn how to properly structure words to complete a well-stated or well-written sentence.

**Professional development.** Both principals reported they provide professional development. Mr. Smith's school budget is limited and does not provide funding for consultants or coaches. He relied on any professional development provided by the district coaches. He expected to see that what was learned during a professional development was being implemented in the classroom. He supported his teachers by monitoring classroom instruction, asking questions, and coaching them throughout the school year. He understood that English learners should be developing their language throughout the day. He provided feedback as he walked through classrooms on alternative ways a lesson could be taught to meet the language needs of students.

Although Mrs. Gonzalez had the funds to provide her teachers with learning opportunities throughout the year, she facilitated most of the professional development at her school. She believes that it is important to provide adult learning opportunities so that teachers acquire the knowledge and better their craft. She never assumed that her teachers understood what was asked of them because they were all at different proficiency levels. Furthermore, she always informed her teachers about the purpose for the learning and the importance of its implementation.

She facilitated professional development opportunities on topics which included (a) accountable talk in regards to how it looks like and sounds like at every proficiency level, (b) writing objectives using the content and language standards, (c) charts to support English learners, (d) how to make walls come alive so that English learners can access whatever they need to be successful and they process and produce language, and (e) how to write appropriate language frames that support students in producing language

Similar to Mr. Smith, Mrs. Gonzalez walked into classrooms to monitor instruction and student learning. Her expectation is that teachers apply what they learned during their professional development sessions. As she observes she annotates, listens, learns, and looks for language objectives. She believes it is important to provide feedback in order to build capacity in her teachers so that they can build capacity in their students. At times, she modeled lessons for teachers and advised teachers about instructional practices that they may want to try.

Both principals reported that they have established a culture that learns together, dialogues together, and moves together. They understood that they themselves are learners and are learning alongside their teachers. Mr. Smith expressed that he is not an expert when it comes to educating English learners. Increasing his knowledge is important for him and showing his teachers he is a learner, too, has supported his credibility and respect as an instructional leader.

Mrs. Gonzalez formed an instructional leadership team at her school. They conducted safe ghost walks as a way of learning from each other's craft. This practice enabled teachers to feel comfortable in opening their classrooms doors for their colleagues. Mrs. Gonzalez expressed that her staff has been implementing what they have been learning, opening their doors for their colleagues, and becoming a community of learners.

Teachers expressed common themes dealing with professional development targeted at enhancing teacher knowledge of English learners. These emerged through several structures of facilitation that included district and school trainings, coaching and mentoring, and consultants and experts. The teachers from Cornfield Elementary reported that most of the professional development in teaching English learners throughout their teaching career has occurred at the district and school level. They reported that Mrs. Gonzalez has provided training in accountable talk structures, academic vocabulary, rigor through depth of knowledge, and supporting English

learners academic language development.

The teachers from Butternut Elementary expressed they had a teacher on their staff who was the lead in language development and was providing strategies and materials. She modeled strategies and how they targeted language proficiency level to address students' needs. Mrs. King expressed that there was an administrator at Butternut Elementary that was very helpful and knowledgeable on how to meet the needs of English learner. She served as a coach who supported teachers to become familiar on why and how to teach English learners.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

For decades, policies, initiatives and laws have been implemented to address the phenomenon of closing the achievement gap between English learners and English-only students (Hill, 2012). Although very little research has been given to the role that the principal plays in the academic achievement of English learners, this study revealed that the principal's role as an instructional leader is important. It also revealed that the principal must acknowledge that creating a culture of academic achievement cannot be done in isolation. In *Good to Great*, Collins and Collins (2006) state, "a leader sets up his successor for even greater success" (p. 39). Providing teachers with leadership roles can build organizational and human capacity and promote change in a school. Principals must develop capacity to lead because principals cannot lead alone (Drago-Severson, 2009).

The principals in this study revealed that it is important to have trust in their teachers and work collaboratively to create a community of adult leaders and learners. Principals learn from teachers and teachers learn from principals as they collaborate around instruction, data, planning, interventions and schoolwide decisions. Principals understand that they are learning alongside their teachers and have established a culture that learns, dialogues, and moves together.

When a principal believes in the academic achievement of English learners, all systems and structures are in place. They hold their teachers accountable for ensuring that they are providing rigorous content and language-rich instruction to ensure the academic success of their students. They hold themselves accountable for expanding their base of knowledge so that they can support their teachers. They have built a strong school culture that supports the achievement of English learners and holds each school stakeholder to high expectations.

The role of the principal is to ensure that high-quality instruction is evident in all classrooms and throughout the instructional day. Principals create conditions where there is a culture of collaboration, inquiry, and opportunities for teacher mentoring and coaching (Southworth, 2002). Alford and Nino (2011) stress the importance of facilitating collaboration time during the school day to plan and strengthen the teacher's and principal's instructional skills. It is during that forum that principals can support teachers as they talk about how to address instruction, scaffolds and strategies, data discussion, curriculum, and common assessment development that support identify and address student progress.

According to Drago-Severson (2009), there is a direct link that exists between supporting adult learning and enhanced student achievement that only principals as instructional leaders can provide. Principals can enhance the quality of teaching by providing teachers with the professional development opportunities that they need. Proper professional development trainings must include (a) a focus on understanding the new Common Core State Standards and ELD standards, (b) professional development opportunities focusing on giving teachers the

knowledge, skills, and strategies to meet the needs of English learners, (c) professional development including a process where adult learning includes modeling lessons, coaching, or mentoring, (d) time allotted for teachers to reflect on their practice, and (e) time allotted for teachers to look at data, create lessons, common assessments and have discussion around English learners.

A principal sets direction, develops people, and implements structures that facilitate learning (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Professional development opportunities, however, must be carefully planned and targeted, and the learning reinforced and monitored to nurture a teacher's growth in school (Drago-Severson, 2009). A goal of adult learning is to build capacity through quality professional development that creates positive instructional improvements to meet the needs of language learners (Alford & Nino, 2011). In addition, implementing peer-mentoring opportunities for teachers to promote instructional leadership and professional learning can also support professional development.

Principals who feel they lack the knowledge to support teachers of English learners must research, participate in professional development, and make every effort to gain the skills to support their teachers. Effective instructional leaders learn most by doing the job and understanding curriculum, pedagogy, and adult learning (Southworth, 2002). Principals benefit from learning the practices and skills that teachers are learning because they are the ones who have the opportunity to provide feedback, coaching, and mentoring. It is vital for school districts to provide professional development opportunities for principals as well as time and resources for reflective practice with other principals (Drago-Severson, 2009). The principal is the key person who can implement structures and processes in their school to impact English learner achievement. Strong school leaders are critical because they can impact the success of their schools. Principals can support teachers by fostering conditions that promote learning.

### **Implications**

Findings in this study address the research question which is to identify the strategies principals use to support the academic achievement of English language learners at a school site. In light of the qualitative data presented, the following implications were offered. First, the schools participating in this study have been successfully reclassifying students for a three-year period. The reclassification data used to select the schools include students of teachers who did not participate in this study. Therefore, it is implied that actions reported by teacher participants reflect the actions of the rest of the teachers at their school. Next, it is suggested that the structures and strategies found as effective to raising student achievement of English learners have been implemented effectively and consistently throughout the schools. Although structures are very similar between both schools, the participant's responses suggest that strategies differ in level of implementation based on experience and knowledge. Steps should be taken to study each school in depth.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, data was based on the input from two principals and four teachers who taught third- or fourth-grade students. All other grade levels were excluded due to the district's reclassification criteria which begins in third grade. A second limitation may be that the results of this study may be relevant only to schools with a similar demographic and ethnic backgrounds to the ones included in this study. Another limitation can involve the participant's unique experiences, degree of preparation, and expertise on the topic. Educational backgrounds, ethnicity, and perceptions about English learners may also limit the study because the participant's perception may impact the answers to the interview questions (Creswell, 2002). Furthermore, this study solicited teacher volunteers. Therefore, a limitation may also be that only those teachers who feel more confident and competent in teaching English learners participated in this study. An additional limitation may include the time and location of the interview. The participant could have selected a place where there was constant interruptions or noise that could impact the interview process. Lastly, the time of the day selected would affect the quality of the answers provided by the participant.

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