

## Teachers, Families, and Communities Supporting English Language Learners in Inclusive Pre-Kindergartens: An Evaluation of a Professional Development Model

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of the Teachers, Families, and Communities Supporting English Language Learners (TFC) project was to implement and evaluate a sustainable model of high-quality professional development focused on improving inclusive pre-kindergarten services for English Language Learners (ELL) and their families. The professional development program consisted of three interactive training sessions and on-site classroom coaching visits. The project evaluation consisted of an assessment of the professional development program (i.e., the training sessions and coaching) and teachers' self-assessments of their beliefs and practices. Results indicate that the professional development program supported pre-kindergarten teachers in their efforts to be responsive to ELL children in their classrooms and with their families. Results also indicate that pre-kindergarten teachers are in need of continued support as they work with linguistically and culturally diverse children and their families. Implications for future professional development focused on English Language Learners are discussed.

### **Article:**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The nearly 5.5 million children who are English Language Learners (ELLs) in American schools represent the fastest growing student population, expected to make up one of every four students by the year 2025 (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2006). Of all ELL students, approximately 77% speak Spanish as their home language (Keller-Allen, 2006). These demographic changes reflect a 39% increase in the national rate of children born to immigrant families between 1990 and 2000 with some states (Nevada, North Carolina, Georgia, Nebraska, Arkansas, Arizona, and South Dakota) exceeding 100% growth (Migration Policy Institute, 2005).

Because of the speed at which these changes have taken place, early childhood educators often lack the necessary tools and training to meet the needs of ELL children and their families effectively. The purpose of this study was to implement and evaluate a sustainable model of high-quality professional development focused on improving pre-kindergarten services for culturally and linguistically diverse children and their families. Sustainable professional development goes beyond individuals simply learning new information, though acquiring new knowledge is certainly a critical component. Equally important is an organizational commitment, including school leadership, and a growing sense of professional community among the participants that includes a shared vision (Fullan, 2001). In this project, district administrators, teachers and teacher assistants, community leaders, parents, university faculty, and graduate students joined together to create a series of

professional development experiences to improve the educational outcomes and school readiness of pre-kindergarten children from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, a vision shared by all.

### *Theoretical Perspectives*

Theories concerning the impact of sociocultural context on children's development and learning provide insight about designing professional development programs that will enable teachers to meet the needs of ELL children and their families more effectively. Wertsch, del RíO, and Alvarez (1995) describe a sociocultural approach as discerning the “relationships between human action, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical situations in which this action occurs, on the other” (p. 11). From this viewpoint, quality pre-kindergarten experiences should be packed with opportunities for learning new knowledge that is mediated by the funds of knowledge ELL children bring with them as well as the learning environment itself (Moll, 1992).

Children from culturally and linguistically diverse groups possess culturally developed practices and bodies of knowledge, skills, and information they need to participate in society successfully (Moll, 1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). These funds of knowledge are used as a resource to perform new tasks in society as well as a mediation tool in the classroom for concept and skill development (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004; Riojas-Cortez, 2001). When the curriculum does not acknowledge ELL children's ways of knowing and using language, a type of cognitive dissonance occurs that hinders learning (Gutierrez, 2002). Critical to the teacher's role is the ability to facilitate and guide activities that engage students as thoughtful learners in meaningful tasks, as well as to learn from the students (Moll & Gonzalez). By using children's knowledge as a foundation, teachers can maximize children's cultural and linguistic diversity as a tool for learning in the classroom context (Riojas-Cortez). Thus, the emphasis shifts from remediating children's English language limitations to using available resources, including the language and knowledge of the children and parents, to create new instructional contexts for the academic development of the students (Moll).

It is therefore crucial that teaching staff have the knowledge and skill necessary to recognize ELL children's cultural capital from multiple perspectives—individual, family, and community—and then scaffold or transform these experiences within new learning contexts (Rogoff, 2003). These mediated actions, which shape cognitive development and other skills, are the very essence of the cultural processes that enable children to successfully participate in new settings (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1995).

As social constructors of knowledge, children rely on language to serve as the key to their cognitive development and successful participation in social settings (Vygotsky, 1978). More specifically, the theoretical approach language socialization can be used to understand the interwoven relationship of language and culture. Language socialization means both, “socialization through language and socialization to use language” (Ochs, 1986, p. 2). From this perspective, children must understand the cultural meaning of language-mediated interactions by knowing the rules for using language and in turn using language to be social change agents with others in their environment. Language socialization is especially complex for ELLs who are navigating two or more cultures (Genessee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004). For example, if a school promotes English only for ELL children and marginalizes their home culture, the loss can have long-term effects on their socialization at home and at school. Under these circumstances some ELL children lose their identification with their home culture that may cause rifts among family members and confusion about where they socially fit within the community.

Similarly, language socialization issues may lead to low school performance and social isolation (Tabors, 2008). That is, ELL children entering pre-kindergarten programs may not yet have important language skills in English, causing confusion about their skill levels. For example, teachers sometimes interpret a quiet child who exhibits limited social interactions as autistic or having some other special need rather than a child in the 'silent period' of second language acquisition (Tabors). Even after the initial adjustment period, children may continue to learn at a slower pace due to language differences or unfamiliar teaching styles, sometimes resulting in referrals to special education services (Genessee et al., 2004; Grossman, 1998; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Layton & Lock, 2002).

### *Current Context*

In order for educators in pre-kindergarten programs to meet the challenge of preparing ELL children for kindergarten and their future academic trajectory, they must provide high-quality learning environments. There is a long-standing recognition of the importance of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of children and families participating in inclusive early childhood education (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995, 2005; Division for Early Childhood, 2002). Empirical evidence indicates that in-service training for early childhood teachers focused on linguistic and cultural diversity results in higher quality inclusive practices for children (Espinosa, Gillam, Busch, & Patterson, 1998; Jeffries, 1999). Yet, numerous studies show that well-intentioned teachers are not adequately prepared to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005; Chang et al., 2007; Curran, 2003; Voltz, Brazil, & Scott, 2003).

Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (1995) stipulates that to be a culturally relevant educator, one must continually review practices and challenge current teaching methods for cultural significance. According to Delpit (1995), inviting and celebrating culturally and linguistically diverse attributes into classroom environments lends validity to the multiplicity of backgrounds represented not only in classrooms, but also in the world outside the school setting. This is especially important when teachers do not have shared heritage with the children and families with whom they are working (Foster, Lewis, & Onafowora, 2003).

ELL children are often underrepresented in curriculum development with bias in instruction and classroom management techniques (Artiles, Rueda, Salsazar, & Higaeda, 2005; Keller-Allen, 2006; Salend, Duhany, & Montgomery, 2002). To provide optimal learning experiences for all children, in particular ELLs, educators must be informed on how to best support family cultural and linguistic practices in their classrooms (Division for Early Childhood, 2002). More specifically, early childhood educators need to understand the stages of second language acquisition, teaching strategies that promote success for culturally and linguistically diverse children, procedures for determining language proficiency in English and the home language, dynamic assessment techniques, and methods for partnering with diverse families to prevent mislabeling of ELL children and provide quality early childhood experiences (Chang et al., 2007; Hardin, Roach-Scott, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2007).

In addition, it is critical that teachers understand ways to connect and involve families from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds to maximize children's educational experiences (Bailey et al., 1999; Delpit, 1995; Espinosa, 2005; Tabors, 2008). Delpit (2006) encourages the use of strategies that connect children to their community and respects and honors their home cultures in order to support children's optimal development. Researchers emphasize that knowing family histories and cultural practices on an individual level is as important as knowing broader cultural characteristics when designing effective inclusive early childhood services (Bailey et al.).

Rogoff (1995) suggests that by being active participants (participatory appropriation), individuals can transform their understanding of activities to acquire new knowledge and skills. She further suggests that this process is in itself a sociocultural activity. Thus, effective professional development must actively engage participants in experiences directly related to the children they serve. Espinosa and colleagues (1998) recommend a model that couples formal training with on-site support. That is, teachers attend formal training sessions and receive on-site consultation to facilitate understanding and implementation of presented content.

A school district in Vermont offers an example of this approach (Walsleben, 2008). During a 5-year grant program, in-service training was provided to K-12 teachers on core concepts about culture, language, and family involvement during weeklong institutes for the first 3 years and eight in-service training sessions the last 2 years. Community and family members shared information about their culture, and teachers learned how to change instructional practices so that home languages and cultural information were integrated in the curriculum. English as a second language (ESL) content specialists served as coaches/teacher leaders who worked with approximately 10 participants at three different schools each year. These content specialists coached, advised, listened, and encouraged teachers in their implementation of new strategies in the classroom

environment. The results of this training program included improved teaching strategies in the classroom, greater community involvement, and more meaningful parent participation. Similar to this approach, the professional development model implemented in the current study was intentionally designed to foster the skill development of teaching staff through in-service training in tandem with on-site coaching. This model was utilized to support teaching staff in learning and implementing new information within diverse classroom settings.

### *Teachers, Families, and Communities Project Context*

Between 1990 and 2000 there was a 274% increase in the foreign-born population of North Carolina (Malone, Baluja, Costanzo, & Davis, 2003). By 2005, the number of immigrants in North Carolina increased by another 58.1% (Camarota, 2005). The impact of these changes was evident locally as well. For example, children were speaking more than 100 different languages in the school district where the project took place (Center for New North Carolinians, 2008). In response to the changing demographics of this pre-kindergarten program and a needs assessment conducted by the pre-kindergarten administration and local university faculty, the Teachers, Families, and Communities Supporting English Language Learners in Pre-kindergarten (TFC) project was developed to support teachers and teacher assistants in classrooms with a high percentage (27% or higher) of ELL and immigrant children.

The TFC project consisted of two main components: (1) a professional development program for pre-kindergarten teachers and teacher assistants; and (2) the project evaluation. The professional development program included three interactive training sessions and three on-site classroom coaching visits. The project evaluation consisted of an assessment of the professional development program (i.e., the training sessions and coaching) and participants' self-assessments of their beliefs and practices through pre-/post-classroom environment checklists, focus groups, and surveys. Two research questions formed the basis of the project: (a) Is a professional development model that incorporates both interactive training sessions and on-site coaching effective in supporting teachers to implement culturally and linguistically relevant practices in diverse classrooms? (b) Was the delivery of the professional development program, including the combination of interactive training sessions and on-site coaching, helpful to teachers and effective in supporting culturally and linguistically relevant practices in diverse classrooms?

## METHODS

### *Participating School District*

The participating pre-kindergarten program, which was located in a countywide, metropolitan school district in central North Carolina, had experienced a rapid influx of young immigrant children, many of whom were English Language Learners (ELLs). Approximately 1,000 4-year-old children were enrolled in 59 pre-kindergarten classrooms in the participating public school district during the research period.

### *Schools and Classrooms*

Twenty-four classrooms in 17 elementary schools were chosen by school officials to participate in the project because their enrollment included a significant number of children from multiple language groups (27% or higher). More precisely, of the 396 children enrolled in these 24 classrooms, 161 of the children (41%) were ELLs. The pre-kindergarten program was full-day and funded through Title I, More at Four (a state pre-kindergarten program), and Smart Start (a private-public program that provides comprehensive services to preschool children). It included 4- and 5-year-old children whose eligibility was determined using the Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning-Third Edition (DIAL-3) composite test scores (Mardell-Czudnowski & Goldenberg, 1998) and risk factors such as family income, identified developmental delay, family home language other than English, and chronic health needs. Thus, the greater the risk, the more likely the children were placed in pre-kindergarten. The enrollment of the participating classrooms ranged from 13 to 18 children per classroom. The proportion of children in each classroom who were ELL ranged from 27 to 83 percent ( $M = 44\%$ ). The children spoke a total of 15 different languages. All but seven of the pre-kindergarten classrooms also included children with disabilities.

## *Participants*

A total of 48 teachers and teacher assistants (24 of each) from eligible pre-kindergarten classrooms participated in the professional development program. Forty-six participants reported demographic information. The majority (65%) of these participants had more than 5 years of experience working in early childhood education. However, 46% reported 5 or fewer years of experience working with ELL children. Approximately half of the participants reported having a bachelor's degree (51%), 16% had a master's degree, 18% an associate's degree, and 16% a high school diploma. Twenty-eight participants identified themselves as having teaching licenses, including certification in Birth through Kindergarten (n = 18), K-6 (n = 3), K-12 (n = 3), Special Education (n = 3), and Spanish (n = 1).

## *Measures: Professional Development Program*

### **Training and coaching evaluations**

Two measures were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the professional development program: one for the interactive training sessions and a second measure for the on-site coaching visits. Participants completed written evaluations at the end of each training session. The training evaluation included a total of 10 questions to assess participant satisfaction with the training topic, content, and delivery. Additionally, teachers evaluated the support they received through the on-site coaching visits by completing a nine-question survey of their satisfaction with the coaching content, action planning process, and delivery. These evaluations were completed at the end of each training session and collected by the project codirectors.

## *Measures: Self-Assessment of Beliefs and Practices*

### **Action plans**

An action plan form was developed to assist teachers and teacher assistants in identifying and applying training content to their classroom setting. The action plans included goals, action steps, available and needed resources, a timeline/date completed column, and space for evaluations/reflections. The action plans were initiated following training sessions and revisited at on-site classroom visits. The action plans were living documents that also served as a record-keeping method of teachers' efforts to better support ELL children and families. The action plan forms were printed on NCR paper so that both teaching staff and coaches were able to retain a copy to revisit during follow-up meetings.

### **Self-assessment checklist**

Teachers and teacher assistants completed the Promoting Cultural Diversity and Cultural Competency: Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Behavioral Health Services and Supports to Children, Youth and Their Families (Goode, 2006) scale at the beginning and end of the project. The self-assessment checklist contains 40 items across three subscales: (1) Physical Environment, Materials, and Resources; (2) Communication Styles; and (3) Values and Attitudes. Each item is rated in one of three ways: (a) things I do frequently; (b) things I do occasionally; and (c) things I rarely or never do.

### **Survey on current practices**

Prior to the first training session and after the final coaching visit, participants completed a qualitative survey related to working with ELL children and their families. The survey was comprised of four open-ended questions addressing strategies and skills teachers were currently using with ELL children as well as additional information and knowledge they felt would be important to have in order to be more effective with this population. The questions were: (a) What strategies do you use or have you used to meet the needs of ELL students? (b) What strategies do you use or have you used in communicating with ELL families? (c) What skills or strengths do you bring to working with ELL students? and (d) What other information, knowledge or skills do you think would be important to have in order to better teach ELL students and or work with ELL families?

### **Focus groups**

Focus groups were held with a subsample of six of the participating teachers at the beginning and end of the project. The focus groups included three open-ended questions: (a) What is the purpose of education? (b) How

do you see the role of the teacher in a multiethnic and multilingual classroom? (c) How do you see families or parents of English Language Learners being involved in your classroom or in education as a whole? The project codirectors conducted the pre- and post-focus groups.

### *Procedures*

The project took place during the course of an academic school year. University faculty, doctoral students, and preschool administrative staff from the targeted school district met and collaborated regularly to plan, implement, and evaluate the project activities.

### **Interactive training sessions**

The professional development program included three training sessions that covered: (1) strategies for identifying cultural practices; (2) sheltered instruction techniques and other classroom strategies that support second language acquisition; and (3) effective methods for strengthening teacher, family, and community organization relationships. These topics were based on feedback from pre-kindergarten teachers and administrators during the previous school year. The training sessions were interactive through the use of roundtable discussions, community and parent panels, small group activities, and question/answer sessions. Towards the end of each session, participants met in small groups to reflect on the training content and to begin developing action plans with doctoral student coaches. Each 3-hour training session was carried out during early release days and counted towards required in-service training.

### **Coaching visits**

Doctoral student coaches were assigned four classroom teams comprised of pre-kindergarten teachers and teacher assistants. They met with their cohort of teams at the end of each interactive training session. Additionally, the doctoral student coaches conducted on-site classroom visits following the training sessions. The coaches had extensive experience in early childhood education and/or special education along with experience working with children from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Coaches were trained and received ongoing support through monthly seminars and debriefing sessions conducted by the project codirectors. Coaches supported teachers through an inductive and strengths-based process (Gallacher, 1997; Tabors, 2008) and engaged with the teaching staff (teachers and teacher assistants) through discussion in their classroom settings. They discussed matters unique to teachers' individual concerns and areas of interest (e.g., classroom environment, individual children, family relationships, community resources). During these interactions, coaches assisted teaching staff in further developing and/or implementing strategies they identified within their action plans. For example, coaches helped teachers assess available and needed resources and engaged teachers in reflecting on and evaluating their current practices.

### **Data analysis**

Data were analyzed with a mixed methods approach to assess the effectiveness of the training and coaching. All data were verified against the original protocol by two independent researchers. Quantitative analyses were conducted for Likert scale items and qualitative data were coded and compared to identify common patterns and differences within the data. Teachers' self-assessments of their beliefs and practices were analyzed by triangulating data from the Self-Assessment Checklist, Survey of Current Practices, action plans, and focus groups. Both focus groups were audiotaped, transcribed, and verified against field notes to ensure completeness and accuracy. An interpretive approach was used by two independent researchers to code the data (Creswell, 2005). That is, transcriptions were read and coded identifying similar patterns and themes. Differences in coding categories were discussed and reconciled for each question.

## **RESULTS**

Evaluation results concerning the content and delivery of the professional development program are presented below. These results are followed by a description of the results from teachers' self-assessments of their beliefs and practices throughout the project.

## *Professional Development Program*

### **Training evaluation**

Overall, respondents were positive about the information presented and the format of the training sessions. For example, on a 10-point scale, participants felt all three sessions effectively met their needs related to working with English Language Learners with means ranging from 7.7 (SD = 2.23) to 8.8 (SD = 1.67), and included high interest subject matter with mean ranges of 8.3 (SD = 1.92) to 8.7 (SD = 2.33). In addition, participants expressed interest in learning more about the topics with means ranging from 7.9 (SD = 2.40) to 8.9 (SD = 1.82), and felt their individual questions were adequately answered including mean ranges from 7.5 (SD = 2.15) to 9.3 (SD = 1.21) across the three sessions.

Participants indicated that the interactive format of the training sessions—including panels, discussions, and networking (e.g., making connections with community organizations)—was a strength of the professional development program. For example, one teacher wrote, “I enjoyed the panel discussion of their [each panel member's] culture, education system, and discipline approaches.” Learning about the stages of second language acquisition and cultural practices were also noted as strengths of the training. One teacher assistant reported that she learned “more hands-on activities, [and how] to ask families to come in and talk about their culture.” Participants revealed that they acquired strategies to use in their work with linguistically and culturally diverse children. One teacher noted she learned to, “re-read stories and have activities where 'speech' is not necessary.”

### **Coaching visits**

Coaching evaluations were completed two times during the project. Participants indicated a high rate of satisfaction with the consultation of the doctoral student coaches. On a scale of 1 to 10, participants highly ranked the coaching visits in meeting their needs related to working with ELL children (M = 8.1; SD = 2.21 and 8.3; SD = 1.65, respectively). Participants also rated coaches high in their ability to answer questions (M = 8.4; SD = 1.51 and M = 8.8; SD = 1.62, respectively) and found the action planning process to be helpful (M = 7.1; SD = 2.48 and M = 7.8; SD = 2.64, respectively).

Additionally, they noted that the consultation provided by the coaches was helpful in identifying strategies to support linguistically and culturally diverse children and families. The coaching process supported teachers as they implemented practices to include home languages and cultures within their classrooms. For example, teachers used home languages on labels, incorporated pictures and materials from diverse cultures, and included cultural practices in lesson plans and activities. As reported by one teacher, “She [the coach] had a lot of good input to improve your teaching strategies... [such as] take pride in all the different languages ... know the challenge goes beyond language, use the buddy system.” The coaching process also supported teachers in identifying new ways to involve parents as indicated by this teacher, “She [the coach] responds quickly to my questions/needs. I emailed her [and] she put together a list of [university student interpreters] to assist at my parent meetings.”

## *Self-Assessment of Beliefs and Practices*

### **Action plans**

The action plans were living documents throughout the professional development program. The action plans provided a mechanism for teachers to identify and document goals and strategies that enabled them to better support ELL children in their classroom and to connect with families in more meaningful ways. The action plans were analyzed by identifying goals and strategies with similar content. Goals and strategies related to increasing knowledge about the cultures of the children and families occurred most frequently (n = 25) on participants' action plans. For example, “increase our knowledge of our students' cultures,” was one classroom goal. “Talk with parents about practices” and “attend the Moon festival” were strategies identified to meet this goal. Other frequently cited goals and subsequent strategies were related to promoting language and literacy (n = 14) and community and parent involvement (n = 9). For example, a goal was “to increase the literacy activities for my students and their families” and a subsequent strategy was “to record books on tape [in the home language].” Additionally, goals and strategies related to the translation of materials, second language

acquisition, and the use of teaching tools were represented in action plans. Furthermore, teachers used the action plans to document progress on goals and strategies worked on during the professional development program.

### Self-assessment checklist

The Promoting Cultural Diversity and Cultural Competency: Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Behavioral Health Services and Supports to Children, Youth and Their Families (Goode, 2006) was completed by the participants (one per classroom) at the beginning and the end of the professional development program. Teaching staff used this measure as a self-evaluation of their classroom environments, communication styles, and values and attitudes. Twenty classrooms submitted complete data and are included in the analyses (see Table 1). Overall, the scale had a high level of internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ). Also, each of the three subscales contained acceptable levels of internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ,  $\alpha = 0.78$ , and  $\alpha = 0.80$ , respectively). Therefore, the whole scale and each subscale were analyzed in a comparison of the self-evaluations at the beginning and the end of the project.

<b>Table 1 Pre/Post Comparison of Classroom Self-Assessment (n = 20)</b>					
<b>Pre/Post comparison</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Z</b>
<i>*p &lt; .01. **p = .077.</i>					
Overall Scale	.119	.264	19	2.015	-1.771**
Physical Environment, Materials, and Resources	.476	.504	19	4.22*	-3.208*
Communication Styles	.072	.356	19	.905	-.782
Values and Attitudes	.085	.263	19	1.443	-1.138

Some of the items were not normally distributed; therefore, nonparametric analyses were conducted including a Wilcoxon signed-rank test and signed test<sup>1</sup>. Results indicated a statistical trend, suggesting a change in the overall self-evaluation scores at the beginning and end of the professional development program ( $z = -1.77$ ,  $p = .077$ ). However, this trend was not confirmed in the signed test ( $p = .167$ ).

Because it is recognized that changes in beliefs and practices related to culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy resonate in different phases (Hohensee & Derman-Sparks, 1992), the three subscales were examined independently. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated a significant difference in the first subscale (Physical Environment, Materials, and Resources) at the beginning and end of the professional development program ( $z = -3.21$ ,  $p = .001$ ). This was also confirmed by the signed test where the binomial distribution was used ( $p = .004$ ). The other two subscales (Communication Styles and Values and Attitudes) indicated no significant differences between self-assessments at the beginning and end of the program. During the time frame of the professional development program, these results suggest that teachers may have been more likely to change the physical environment, materials, and resources in their classrooms. Conversely, communication styles and values and attitudes may require additional time. An alternative explanation is that teachers' may have been more critical of their own practices after being exposed to the content of the professional development program.

### Survey of current practices

Participants completed a qualitative survey to report their current classroom practices used with ELL children and their families at the beginning ( $n = 42$ ) and at the end ( $n = 32$ ) of the TFC project. Common themes were identified to understand the classroom practices used by the participants.

At the beginning of the project and prior to participating in the interactive training sessions, participants reported employing various strategies to meet the needs of ELL children and their families. For example, they cited using pictures and visuals such as "picture books," "picture cards," and "visual aids." They also reported using "gestures," "hand signs," or "sign language" to communicate with children who did not speak and/or

understand English. Other strategies included using “some words from their language when possible and modeling or demonstrating behaviors.”

In addition to the practices that were already being implemented, participants most frequently reported modifying the classroom environment by adding materials from children's home cultures at the end of the project. For example, participants described adding “pictures, books, clothing, classroom items, music ...,” “dolls,” and “labels” written in home languages. Also at the end of the TFC project, some teachers noted using more hands-on activities.

In regard to the question concerning strategies used to communicate with families of ELL children, at the beginning of the project participants reported using translators and interpreters to communicate with the families of ELL children and to translate documents when possible. They sought help in translating and interpreting information from a wide range of resources such as ESL teachers or other Spanish-speaking teaching staff from their school, friends, and family members of the parents, as well as bilingual/multilingual parents from their classroom. Teachers also communicated with families by sending translated materials home, engaging in personal one-on-one communication, phone calls, and home visits (e.g., “... call the ESL teacher to go on home visits or call on the phone”). However, these strategies were used inconsistently due to limited access to interpreters and translators. At the end of the project, participants continued to use similar strategies to communicate with families, but with a greater variety of types of activities (e.g., two classrooms went to the library with families and parents were able to obtain a library card, learn about library resources, and were directed to books in their home language). Also, project staff provided teaching staff with resources for accessing additional translators and interpreters, including international students at the local university who volunteer their time.

Participants identified the skills and strengths they possessed for working with ELL children at the beginning of the TFC project. They reported that being able to speak in children's home languages was an asset. However, only a few teachers or teacher assistants were fluent in a language other than English. Most of the coaches informally asked teaching staff if they spoke another language in addition to English. Of the 40 participants who responded, 6 teachers and 8 teacher assistants were bilingual. All of them spoke Spanish as well as English, though their degree of Spanish proficiency varied. However, they felt that having even a limited knowledge of a child's home language was a strength. Participants listed many personal qualities they considered to be helpful, including “patience,” “openness and willingness to try out new ideas,” “understanding,” and “love for children.” Participants also considered their interest in learning about other cultures to be helpful. For example, one teacher wrote, “I desire (genuinely) to learn about their beliefs, culture and language, as well as share in their learning.” At the end of the project participants also noted an increased awareness of a professional responsibility in working with the ELL community. For example, one participant stated, “[I] want to help the ELL community (which is part of my family).”

In response to another question at the beginning of the project, participants reported needing additional information, knowledge, and/or skills on a variety of cultures and languages to help them work with ELL children and their families. One teacher wrote, “... more knowledge about their family and culture; knowing what is important to them.” Additionally, participants expressed a need for more interpreters, translators, bilingual teachers, and resources that could help them connect with ELL children and their families. Specific to working with families of ELL children, participants reported the need to know more communication strategies so they could build relationships with parents and understand parental expectations. At the end of the project, participants also expressed the need for more resources from community organizations, agencies, and personnel to assist them, as well as the ELLs' families themselves. For example, one teacher noted that she needed “better knowledge of additional services and resources to help participants, families and students. Another teacher stated, “more community resources.”

## **Focus groups**

Focus groups were held with a subset of six teachers prior to the beginning of the project and after its completion. The purpose of the focus groups was to gather information about the participants' perceptions concerning their interactions with culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. Identical questions were used for both focus groups.

During the first and second focus groups participants described education as “the biggest piece.” The participants consistently discussed education as an “opportunity,” “the accumulation of information,” and the “key to your [the children's] future.” Literacy and book knowledge were frequently emphasized and equated to education. That is, participants were interchangeably using words associated with reading with education. Additionally, during both focus groups there was an emphasis on pre-kindergarten being the “first” opportunity and the “first” exposure to professionals and teachers being the “first” professionals to provide a foundation for concepts and skills. Unique to the second focus group was discussion of educating the families and parents in addition to the children. For example, one participant stated, “I think education is about preparing children and families [author emphasis] for school.”

Another theme that emerged from the focus group data was the teachers' role as “frustrating” to “we can work with them.” During the first focus group, the participants described the role of the teacher in a multiethnic and multilingual classroom as a facilitator for children and parents, helping to nurture children and parents through the educational process. However, the participants experienced challenges and expressed frustration in being able to perform this role successfully because they perceived the ELL children to be confused, not able to understand the language, and subsequently found it more difficult to teach them. For example, one participant stated, “It takes longer for them to feel confident, to feel safe and secure and I think before learning can progress that they've got to have that.” Participants perceived the effectiveness of their role was compromised when the number of children who did not speak English increased. For example, “... when the majority of your class speaks the same language, they're a community amongst themselves and there is no need for them to develop a new language.” Although the participants understood that the communities created by children functioned as “safe havens,” they also expressed frustration because “they really want[ed] them [children and parents] to learn English.” One participant stated, “It's frustrating on my part because I can't get them to understand what I'm saying.” Another participant stated, “I can get out my Spanish-English dictionary, I can't get out my Montagnard ... [or] Jarai... . It's one thing to try to wing it out of a Spanish-English dictionary, but what do you say ...”

In the second focus group, participants emphasized their role in a multiethnic and multilingual classroom as providing children and parents with resources including exposing children to materials, ways of learning, and opportunities. For example, one participant noted, “It's providing opportunities and resources.” Another participant stated, “I am a resource to parents and the children ... it's providing information to the parents, information to the children ... find[ing] a way to reach everybody regardless whether you are talking about an educational need, language need, find[ing] a way to reach out.” Contrary to the first focus group, participants seemed less frustrated and more optimistic about helping parents and children feel comfortable in their classrooms. For example, one participant talked about English-speaking children learning some Spanish words. She said, “It was really a two way street.”

A third theme concerned parent involvement from “coming in” to “send[ing] things home.” During the first focus group participants held a positive attitude about parents of ELL children describing them as respectful, attentive, interested, and wanting their children to succeed. However, participants limited their descriptions of parental/family involvement as “coming in” to the classroom. One teacher described inviting parents to “just come in and play.” Participants had an expectation of how much parents should be involved and expressed dissatisfaction in the amount of involvement shown by the parents of ELL children. For example, one participant said, “[Parents are] not as involved as [they] would like.” The participants described language as a barrier to parent/family involvement. However, participants with greater access to translators and translated materials were more positive about parent involvement than participants who reported not having resources to reach out to parents that did not speak English.

Unlike the responses in the pre-focus group, in the post-focus group participants recognized parents' feelings of being scared, intimidated, and embarrassed while trying to be involved in the classroom. A participant described one of her parents who expressed to the school interpreter that “she was scared that we were going to laugh at her ... I'm like no, no ...” As in these examples, the participants were more empathetic to how parents of ELL children might be feeling while attempting to be involved in the child's classroom and learning. Language was still considered to be a barrier while communicating with the parents in the second focus group discussions. However, participants identified alternative ways in which parents were involved that included participating in activities with their children at home. For example, one participant described sending a project home for children to work on with their parents and in appreciation stated, “... they came back beautiful.” Participants also recognized that doing things to help parents feel comfortable elicited more involvement. For example, one participant noted, “At first I think they are hesitant because they are unfamiliar with what's expected and then when they get familiar then they, those are the one's that usually come in and get involved.”

## DISCUSSION

Overall, evaluation and research results indicate teachers and teacher assistants who participated in the TFC project were supported through the training and coaching activities provided. Participants continued to use and expand existing classroom practices for ELLs and their families and applied the new strategies they learned during the TFC project. Results show the primary objective of the project was successfully addressed—providing professional development to improve pre-kindergarten services for English Language Learners and their families. Accordingly, the training topics, methods for training and coaching, and connections between participants indicate a shift toward more frequent, meaningful interactions between the teaching staff, ELL children, and their families.

### *Impact on Teacher Practices*

At the completion of the project, teachers and teacher assistants appeared to be better prepared to meet the needs of ELL children and their families. Additionally, where positive practices were occurring, teachers and teacher assistants in classrooms felt supported to continue those culturally relevant methods and practices. The pre-/post-classroom environment self-assessment indicated that there was a statistically significant improvement in the physical environment, materials, and resources in the classroom at the end of the project with teachers creating more culturally relevant environments, including an increase in the use of objects and materials from children's home cultures as well as their home languages in the classroom. Thus, the message of representing children's cultures in the classroom appeared to impact classroom practices. This obvious change may be easier to discern because of the time span of the project. Since no statistically significant changes in how teachers reported their communication style or values and attitudes on this scale occurred, additional training over longer periods of time is likely needed to get at deeply rooted beliefs that challenge preconceptions and personal bias. Unfortunately, funding for this project was only available for one year.

There was evidence at the end of the project that teaching staff were making a greater effort to reach out to and connect with parents. For example, in the postsurvey participants indicated teachers were sending home more documents translated into children's home languages than at the beginning of the project. Also, the empathetic tone in the post-focus group when describing perceptions of family members' feelings was a change from the frustration expressed in the pre-focus group. Teachers appeared to anchor their new understanding in what it might be like for parents with limited English proficiency to navigate the classroom. Subsequently, the teachers exercised their leadership role by creating opportunities for family members to engage in classroom activities such as sending projects home, translating and recording books from English to a child's home language, and incorporating family traditions.

### *Evaluation of Delivery Model*

The current study built on successful models of professional development in which formal training was combined with on-site support, a delivery model that may be useful in a variety of settings. Interactive training

sessions and on-site coaching visits were given high ratings by participants, suggesting they felt supported and affirmed by the project activities to continue to use existing strategies as well as encouraged to make improvements and try new strategies to better serve ELL children and their families. The development and implementation of action plans were an integral part of this process, giving teaching staff and coaches a working document that focused their attention on the implementation of new ideas, practices, and the utilization of resources. These changes occurred despite frustrations (expressed in the first focus group) as participants' experienced positive outcomes for ELL children and their families, in large part due not only to the quality of the training itself, but also to the personal, trusting relationships that developed between the coaches and teaching staff.

According to the results, the shift in perceptions and changes in classroom environments from the beginning to the end of the TFC project was influenced by the professional development model, including a combination of the workshops and on-site coaching. However, the shift may have partially been due to the participants' experiences with the children and parents throughout the year also. Most likely, it was a combination of the two.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the current project seems to have been positive for the participants and resulted in better practices for ELL children and their families, continuing the coaching through on-site support over a longer time period could increase teachers' competence in implementing changes with a new group of children and their families. This would allow for better assessment of the impact of the in-service training longitudinally. Also, extending the project over a longer period would clarify maturation effects that might be attributed to greater comfort with the current group of children teachers are working with or the children's comfort in the classroom. Additionally, expanding the on-site coaching would provide additional opportunity to test new methods of increasing cultural competence by seeking out resources for new families and expanding opportunity for participation within and outside the classroom.

Another recommendation would be to solicit input from families to determine how well they feel their cultures are being represented in classrooms and to determine their goals for teaching staff in pre-kindergarten classrooms. For the current study, this was cost prohibitive because of the need for more project staff and the need for interpreters. Connecting the trainings for teachers directly to outcomes for families, however, would provide new insight into the potential effectiveness of in-service training focused on working with culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. Though much work remains to be done in the area of professional development for pre-kindergarten teaching staff who work with ELL children and their families, this model provides a foundation and points to the potential success for future endeavors. It emphasizes the importance of complementing opportunities for learning new information with on-site support for implementation, connecting knowledge of best practice that meets the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children to the daily environments they experience within their classroom.

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## NOTES

1. Signed test is not as powerful as Wilcoxon signed-rank test on small samples. However, the scope of signed test is not limited by distributions, which are symmetric relative to the median. Therefore, both

signed test and Wilcoxon signed-rank test were utilized to understand the differences in pre/post measures on the Self Assessment Checklist.