Exploring the professional experiences of english language learner high school teachers in a rural state: A qualitative investigation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions and experiences of high school teachers in North Dakota who teach English Language Learners (ELL). Using the transcendental phenomenological method, we interviewed seven teachers with between 10 and 23 years of experience working with ELL students. Ecological systems theory (EST) was employed to capture specific elements and processes present in the school environment that assist or hinder ELL teachers as they fulfill their work responsibilities and support the resettlement of New Americans. The findings revealed the complex and multifaceted role of ELL teachers, which is affected by multiple ecological factors and duties that extend well beyond teaching in a classroom. Participants felt supported in their work life by ELL teachers, paraeducators, interpreters, and ELL programs. However, the participants expressed aspects of their work lives that inhibit their ability to assist ELL students, including the exclusive responsibility of ELL, a lack of professional development opportunities, time-consuming language testing responsibilities, and conflicts with mainstream teachers who do not fully understand how to best engage with ELL students. In light of these findings, we offer practical implications for schools to better support ELL teachers and foster inclusive school environments for English learners and New Americans.

Keywords: *Diversity, English language learners, ELL teachers, high schools, new Americans, transcendental phenomenology, inclusion, ecological systems theory.*

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Highlights of this paper

- The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of high school teachers in North Dakota who teach English Language Learners (ELL) using a transcendental phenomenological research design.
- The four broad themes that emerged from the interviews included: (a) spread too thin, (b) mainstream teachers' misconceptions about ELL, (c) sources of support, and (d) inconsistent school and district administrator commitment to ELL and diversity.
- It is essential for policymakers and administrators to create systems and processes that support ELL teachers, mainstream teachers, and students at a school-wide level.

1. INTRODUCTION

The racial and ethnic attributes of school districts across the United States are changing as immigrant and refugee-background individuals, or New Americans, resettle in cities nationwide. Over the past few decades, immigration has shifted from traditional immigrant and refugee-receiving gateway states like California and New York to new destinations in the Southeast and Midwest (Massey, 2008), including North Dakota, which has welcomed over 4,000 refugees in the past decade. These resettlements, along with North Dakota's lower overall population, have resulted in the state having the highest per capita refugee resettlement in the nation (Kaleem, 2020). These refugees, along with North Dakota's nearly 5% immigrant population, approximately 36,000 individuals, American Immigration Council, 2020, are often resettled in urban areas, including Fargo, Grand Forks, and Bismarck. These cities have the largest school districts in the state, and while they remain predominantly white, they are becoming more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (Gilblom, Crary, & Sang, 2020). Of these cities, Fargo has experienced nearly twice the growth of any of the others, with more than 11,300 new Americans settling there since 2010 (North Dakota Census Office, 2017).

As a result of the influx of new Americans, North Dakota now faces the challenge of addressing the needs of its growing population of English-language learners (ELL). ELLs are defined as individuals from non-English-speaking families who experience challenges with the English language (US Department of Education, 1994). These individuals are also referred to as English learners (Thompson, 2017), limited English proficiency students (Callahan, Wilkinson, & Muller, 2010), language minority students (Callahan et al., 2010), and culturally and linguistically diverse students (Cramer, 2015). For clarity, the term "ELL" will be used in this article.

Although researchers have assembled a detailed picture of the diverse English learners population and teaching practices that support their learning, the working experiences of ELL teachers in the school context, especially in rural states with changing student demographics, are incomplete (Liggett, 2010; Ruecker, 2021). Teacher preparation programs often provide minimal coursework focused on working with diverse populations, leaving many mainstream teachers feeling unprepared to work with these students. In addition, rural districts and smaller states may lack the funding or ability to adopt policies and practices that promote inclusive educational experiences for New Americans (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2019; Nwosu & Barnes, 2014; Ruecker, 2021; Wille et al., 2019). Given this, investigating the working experiences of ELL teachers in new resettlement destinations will offer insights into how schools in rural states are adjusting to their changing student bodies.

This transcendental phenomenological study focuses on the observations and experiences of ELL high school teachers in North Dakota. We investigated their working environment and their everyday ability to educate ELL students. We employed Bronfenbrenner (1976) to capture specific elements and processes present in the school environment that assist or hinder ELL teachers as they fulfill their work responsibilities and support the resettlement of new Americans. The guiding research questions for the study were: a) What are the lived experiences of ELL teachers in North Dakota's high schools? and b) What contexts or situations affected their experiences?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Multifaceted Role of ELL Teachers

A significant component of a school's ELL infrastructure is its teaching staff, especially their level of preparedness to support ELLs. Recent scholarship underscores the necessity for all teachers to be prepared to work effectively with ELLs (e.g., De Jong & Harper, 2005; Lucas & Villegas, 2013). However, multiple studies suggest that, although both mainstream and ELL teachers are responsible for supporting ELL students, mainstream colleagues tend to deny this responsibility, assuming that ELL teachers are solely responsible for them (Bacon, 2020; Brooks, Adams, & Morita-Mullaney, 2010). Therefore, ELL teachers often assume multiple roles and responsibilities outside of their teaching roles. According to Bascia and Jacka (2001), administrators often ask ELL teachers to "go above and beyond the job description" (p. 340). Bascia and Jacka (2001) characterized the ELL teacher role as one of "filling in" to bridge gaps between student needs and school resources (p. 339). ELL teachers are asked and expected to take on more work than their mainstream colleagues, including serving as liaisons between not only parents but also mainstream teachers and administrators (Brooks et al., 2010).

ELL teachers at both the elementary and secondary levels have reported an increased sense of responsibility for their students (Markham, 1999). Studies focusing on how ELL teachers perceive their job responsibilities have found that ELL teachers see their primary role as advocates and mediators for their students (Fogle & Moser, 2017; Trickett et al., 2012). They often collaborate with mainstream teachers and school leaders, "providing protective advocacy" (Trickett et al., 2012) to address cultural misunderstandings and advocate for fair, empathetic treatment for ELLs (Pawan & Craig, 2011; Trickett et al., 2012).

As advocates and mediators, their responsibilities include many activities outside of the classroom setting, including intervening on behalf of students with mainstream teachers, working with school administrators to pair students with supportive teachers, helping students navigate unfamiliar bureaucratic processes, developing relationships with key school personnel to influence the class placement of English learners, providing food and supplies, developing programs, helping ELLs access financial aid and social services, and visiting ELL families to get to know them better (Bascia & Jacka, 2001; Trickett et al., 2012). However, despite these demands, many ELL teachers are committed to working with diverse student bodies and their parents (Craig, 2019; Trickett et al., 2012).

2.2. ELL Teachers in the School Context

Research suggests that there is a lack of prestige and an outsider status associated with being ELL teachers (Brooks et al., 2010; DelliCarpini, 2009; Trickett et al., 2012). Many ELL teachers report that other school staff treat them as "different" in some way, including feeling that other staff consider them to be less important or of lower status than mainstream teachers (Trickett et al., 2012). Some report feeling marginalized due to insufficient time for co-planning, inappropriate deployment of their academic expertise, limited shared decision-making, and a lack of feedback and support from colleagues (DelliCarpini, 2009; Olsen, 1997; Trickett et al., 2012). Others have described how administrators and colleagues do not hold them or their subject matter in high regard (Fradd & Lee, 1997).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

In his 1976 seminal publication, Urie Bronfenbrenner adapted the social ecological theory to the field of education and developed a framework that describes a hierarchy of settings or systems that surround an individual and contribute directly or indirectly to student learning. Bronfenbrenner (1976) ecological systems theory (EST) is based on the premise that human development cannot be considered independent of context. Bronfenbrenner conceived of

this ecological environment as the following five nested environmental levels that influence, and are influenced by, a developing individual located at the center: (1) the microsystem, (2) the mesosystem, (3) the exosystem, (4) the macrosystem, and (5) the chronosystem. Conceiving of the ecological environment in this way enables the researcher to examine the relationships between the individual and multiple surrounding settings (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The *microsystem* is the first level of an individual's environment. It is a system of complex relationships that a developing individual has within their immediate context (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), the closest one to the person, in which he or she has direct contact with others. Bronfenbrenner described the microsystem as the immediate environment in which a person engages in structured roles, relationships, and activities. This context is shaped by its physical and material characteristics and includes interactions with others who possess distinct temperaments, personalities, and belief systems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The next level of the ecological system, the *mesosystem*, consists of the interrelations among the individual's different microsystems. For example, a child's experiences at home may connect to school experiences, or experiences at school may affect interactions with community members (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The third level of ecological theory, the *exosystem*, refers to factors outside of the individual's environment but can still influence an individual's behavior and development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The *exosystem* is located around the mesosystem and includes the associations and procedures between two or more settings. The developing individual may not typically occupy one of these settings, but the policies, processes, and events that occur in that space may ultimately affect the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The fourth level of ecological theory, the *macrosystem*, encompasses the broader social contexts in which a person lives and all other systems that influence him or her, such as the economy, cultural values, and politics (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The final component of EST is the *chronosystem*, which incorporates the element of time in an individual's development. This level includes all environmental events and transitions that have affected the development of the individual over their life course.

The employment of EST in this study provided a lens to examine the work environment of ELL teachers in North Dakota. The authors used an EST framework in a previously published article that focused on high school students' inclusive and exclusionary experiences (Gilblom, Crary, & Sang, 2022). From an ecological point of view, ELL teachers, as individuals, are influenced by their immediate colleagues and by the physical and social environment of schools. They operate within multiple levels of the school context, ranging from in-class student-related factors to school-level processes and school system policies, which affect their professional demands and the opportunities they have to support students (Trickett et al., 2012). Therefore, EST was selected to guide this study because it allows investigators to uncover the ways in which multiple environmental factors (e.g., mainstream teachers, administrators, job duties, testing) affect them in their work environment.

4. METHODOLOGY

Since the experiences of ELL teachers in North Dakota are unknown, the researchers chose a qualitative approach driven by a transcendental phenomenological research design, as we were investigating the participants' lived experiences and developing an understanding of how they make sense of their experiences (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed that research methods and designs that focus on an individual's interpretation of an experience within an environment, rather than solely on the objective characteristics of the environment, are necessary for researchers to understand a phenomenon (Poch, 2005). By understanding the

perceptions and experiences of an individual, a researcher can begin to understand the influences of the environment on the actions of an individual (Poch, 2005).

The steps in conducting a transcendental phenomenology followed the stages outlined by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2013): the researcher a) brackets out their own experiences with the phenomenon (epoche); b) collects data from several participants who experienced the phenomenon; c) identifies significant statements in the collected data (horizontalization); d) clusters these statements into meaning units and themes; synthesizes the themes into a description of the experiences of the individuals (textual and structural descriptions); and e) constructs a composite description of the overall essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). According to (Moustakas, 1994), this "essence" is described as "what" individuals experience and "how" they experience it. The systemic procedures and detailed data analysis steps as outlined by Moustakas (1994) are rigorous yet accessible to qualitative researchers (Creswell, 2013). The transcendental phenomenological approach and Bronfenbrenner's EST work together to uncover the factors that affect teachers in their daily work lives and how teachers make sense of their experiences.

4.1. Participants

To recruit participants for this study, the researchers emailed high school ELL teachers in a region of North Dakota and asked them to participate in an interview about their experiences as ELL teachers. Participants who expressed interest were sent an information sheet describing the purpose of the study, risks, benefits, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. Table 1 contains the participants' demographic information. All participants taught in either of two high schools located in a region of North Dakota and were formally certified to teach English learners. Most had spent the entirety of their careers teaching ELL in North Dakota. Each participant had worked with English learners between 10 and 23 years (M = 16.3 years). All participants identified as White and native English speakers. This sample size is within the recommended guidelines for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2013).

Table 1. Participant demographics, including content area and the number of years they have taught in schools.

Pseudonym	Content area	Teaching experience
Janet	English language arts	11 years
Ronald	Science	10 years
Kathleen	Math	24 years
Jane	Math	10 years
Brenda	Social studies	11 years
Paige	English language arts	23 years
Terry	Math	23 years

To protect the identities of participants, the researchers are not disclosing the names of the schools, school districts, or cities in North Dakota where the participants are employed. North Dakota is a less populated state, and the number of districts with programs for emergent bilingual students is limited. By providing the school districts in which these teachers currently work and/or additional details about the participants, their identities may be compromised.

4.2. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were scheduled via email and conducted via Zoom to comply with COVID-19 guidelines. Before the interviews, one of the researchers read the information sheet to the participants and then conducted the verbal informed consent process. Each semi-structured interview was recorded and lasted

approximately 60–90 minutes. Questions included both open-ended questions and more structured questions about specific job-related topics derived from existing literature and an ecological perspective on ELL teachers' work lives. North Dakota State University's Institutional Review Board approved all study protocols.

4.3. Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and emailed to the participants for member-checking. Participants were encouraged to contact the researchers via email within two weeks to schedule a follow-up interview to clarify any points they made or to add to their responses. No follow-up interviews or corrections were requested by the participants.

To conduct the data analysis, the researchers followed the stages outlined by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2013). The researchers first read each transcript in its entirety. Each transcript was read several times to gain an understanding of what it was like to be an ELL teacher and how each participant experienced it. Themes that emerged from each transcript were documented, allowing the voices of the participants to be heard from the data. Similarities across participants' stories guided the development of conceptual and analytical categories, and meaningful statements informed the thematic development and textual descriptions. Institutional Review Board Statement: The Ethical Committee of North Dakota State University (NDSU), United States of America, granted approval for this study on 9/23/2020. (Ref. No. IRB0003226).

5. FINDINGS

The four broad themes that emerged from the interviews included: (a) spread too thin, (b) mainstream teachers' misconceptions about English learners, (c) sources of support, and (d) inconsistent school and district administrator commitment to English learners and diversity. We highlighted subthemes and provided participant quotes to illustrate each theme.

5.1. Spread too Thin

When asked about their workday as ELL teachers in high schools, the participants largely focused on the "extra work" outside of their formal teaching roles, responsibilities that "are just on top of my other job, which is, incidentally, the same as every other [mainstream] teacher's job, [just with] extra duties." Within the broad theme of being spread too thin, a theme addressing the overextension of ELL teachers in North Dakota, three subthemes emerged: (a) language testing responsibilities, (b) social worker duties, and (c) taking exclusive responsibility for ELL students.

5.1.1. Language Testing Responsibilities

The most frequently mentioned work duty outside of the ELL classroom was WIDA ACCESS testing. In previous years, one North Dakota school district employed a full-time ELL director responsible for meeting with new ELL students, assessing their English language proficiency, and coordinating with schools. Currently, ELL teachers are "shoulder[ing] that stress" and are responsible for screening new and current ELL students. The ELL teachers coordinate with each other face-to-face or through email throughout the day to determine who will conduct the testing. Some reported that the strain of testing affects their classroom teaching because they lose their prep hour, often unexpectedly. Jane described how testing impacts their workday.

"We screen students during our off periods. It is just a lot to manage running from class to class, testing students, and then trying to figure out their schedules in the middle of it all, while still trying to teach. It's just a lot to ask of anyone."

5.1.2. Social Worker Duties

Several years ago, one school district in the area employed social workers dedicated to ELL students at each school, which, participants said, provided a sense of trust and consistency for the students and their families. Currently, this school district employs several social workers who circulate among the district's schools and assist both English learners and mainstream students as issues arise. Janet reflected on the district's decision not to have a dedicated ELL social worker for each school.

"Having dedicated ELL social workers was probably the best thing that ever happened to the students socially and emotionally, in terms of safety, and everything else. When you take away that face-to-face interaction with those families, and you know she had worked with siblings and other family members, it was just ruining the program, bluntly speaking."

Participants reported attempting to fill the gap created by the absence of a dedicated ELL social worker. Some participants recalled handing out hats, gloves, and granola bars to students because the district social workers are busy at other schools. Janet described the frustration of trying to help students without a dedicated ELL social worker and how it affects their professional lives.

"Like this student says they don't have food at home. What can we do? And the student won't even admit it to someone they don't know. The new social worker is really busy; she goes to five other schools. I try to figure it out myself. I email a counselor and the principal, informing them that this student has this issue. What do we do? It's so frustrating. The situation adds more stress and responsibility to us".

5.1.3. Taking Exclusive Responsibility for ELL Students

All participants provided examples of some mainstream teachers' efforts to accommodate English learners. However, a major concern among all participants was the impression that English learners are their exclusive responsibility. All participants described situations in which some mainstream teachers were reluctant to get involved with and support English learners. Janet stated that mainstream teachers are understandably engrossed with other student populations, leaving ELL teachers to work exclusively with English learners.

"Mainstream teachers are so busy with everyone and dealing with special education, 504 plans, and IEPs, as well as individualized learning plans. They know that our ELL department is a good program, but sometimes they just assume that the ELL teacher will take care of it".

However, most participants felt that many mainstream teachers believe that because English learners are not native English speakers, ELL teachers are solely responsible for them. Kathleen stated that mainstream teachers *"feel that because the kid doesn't speak English or the family doesn't speak English, that… the ELL teacher can deal with them".*

Brenda summed up her feelings about the number of extra duties she has on top of teaching responsibilities: "If it wouldn't directly affect children, it just makes you want to quit doing all the extra work I do and make them see what it looks like when I don't do that."

5.2. Mainstream Teachers' Misconceptions about ELL Students and Courses

Most participants shared that mainstream teachers often have misconceptions about English learners' abilities and the purpose of language accommodations, including experiences they had with mainstream teachers who did not understand that ELL courses cover the same material as mainstream courses. Jane expressed frustration that some colleagues undervalue their math classes because they teach English learners.

"It's the stigma that everyone attaches to it…like I don't teach math, but I teach ELL math… it's just so bizarre… My original degree is in math. I'm like, you know, I know math too! Triangles still add up to 180 degrees in our class."

The participants also discussed situations where mainstream teachers refused to incorporate ELL teaching strategies or even speak more slowly in their courses. Another remarked that some mainstream teachers try to avoid having ELL students in their classes because they do not want to deal with them. Kathleen said she often advises ELL students to enroll in classes with specific mainstream teachers whom they know will accommodate ELL students. She remarked, "We are kind of protective."

Several participants added that some mainstream teachers believe that ELL teaching strategies promote unfairness in the mainstream classroom. Kathleen recalled sharing ELL math strategies at a staff meeting:

"One time I was telling them how I make everyone do a listening activity, and then someone asked, 'Do they get a grade for that?' At first, I thought they were just wondering how I work things or whatever. But later, I realized what they were saying was that it wasn't fair, as if I was padding their grade with vocabulary and it wasn't math-related enough."

Participants attributed some mainstream teachers' misconceptions about English learners to a fear of change. Some mentioned that generational differences influence attitudes, noting that younger teachers are "a little bit more open" to working with ELL students, while older teachers "who have been there for a while [are not] wanting to change, maybe not wanting to try new things." Ronald stated that teachers, like American society, are divided by their beliefs regarding diversity and inclusion. One participant summarized this perspective:

"Much like our society as a whole, there really doesn't seem to be a middle ground… there are some teachers who say that when a new culture comes to this country, they must conform to the dominant culture… and do not want our culture of lefse Saturdays and parades that resemble American parades to change. There is a divide. There are not many people in the middle… It is polarized."

Lastly, some participants voiced concerns about the efficacy of ELL student-related professional development aimed at preparing mainstream teachers to accommodate English learners in their classes, training that ELL teachers are typically responsible for designing and presenting. While they vehemently agree that such training is necessary, some were doubtful of its effectiveness for those who are not wholeheartedly invested in English learners. In the words of Kathleen:

"I'm thinking about someone who gets forced to go through anger management…they don't really want to control their anger, someone else is making them go through [training]…. How do we make sure that PD isn't like having to go through this diversity training… how do you make someone see the value in it and make someone see that they really do need it? "

5.3. Sources of Support

The participants mentioned key resources and in-school supports that provided personal and professional assistance to them in their roles as ELL teachers. Three subthemes emerged: (a) ELL teachers, (b) paraeducators and interpreter services, and (c) English learners.

5.3.1. ELL Teachers

The participants routinely identified their ELL colleagues as a consistent source of professional and emotional support. One participant noted that a group of fellow ELL teachers regularly served as a sounding board for student issues and ELL programmatic concerns. Other participants identified specific ELL teachers who routinely helped them with curricula, teaching strategies, or student issues. For example, Jane described how meaningful it was to have a colleague help her acclimate to her new role as an ELL teacher when she was first hired. She described the experience as "valuable" because she learned about the curriculum and the students she would be teaching. Jane

praised this experienced ELL teacher, acknowledging that "she just did that out of the goodness of her heart; she didn't get paid to mentor me." She also wished she had more time to interact and learn from other ELL teachers in her content area.

All participants acknowledged the sustained effort that the ELL teachers invest in their students. Kathleen praised ELL teachers for their dedication to students, saying, "I know [ELL students] have teachers who care about them. I know that they have teachers who work very hard for them."

5.3.2. English Learners

A predominant theme in sources of support is the English learners themselves. All indicated a closeness to their students, a desire to help them reach their goals, and their own personal transformations from working with them. In the words of Kathleen:

"They're incredibly talented, skilled, passionate... I am humbled every day by what they bring into my classroom and their capacity for both learning and caring about other people. I just think about how much I've learned from them… I feel like my life is richer because of it. I feel like I understand the world a little better."

Ronald described how interactions with English learners "opened [his] eyes" and "motivated" him to become more politically active, to join organizations, or volunteer in his local community. Ronald shared that after working with this student population they "got passionate about helping underserved students… I had no intention of going into ELL, but as of right now, I have no intentions of leaving ELL either."

5.4. Inconsistent School and District Administrator Commitment to English Language Learners and Diversity

The participants' experiences with school and district administrators were mixed. Some identified specific administrators whom they perceive as supportive. Several mentioned relationships they cultivated with key decision-makers that ultimately benefit English learners. However, concerns about administrators dominated the interviews. Two subthemes emerged that exemplify inconsistent commitment to ELL students in schools and districts: (a) lack of consistent ELL-related professional development (PD) and (b) inconsistent support for diversity initiatives and school policies.

5.4.1. Lack of Consistent ELL-Related PD

All participants emphasized the need for yearly professional development for mainstream teachers focused on ELL students. They perceived that most mainstream teachers do not understand what ELL and New American students and their families have experienced and that they lack the skills to teach them effectively in the classroom. Ideas for professional development included accommodations and support that English learners may need from mainstream teachers as they transition to mainstream classes, teaching strategies for instructing English learners, ways to integrate activities across all four language domains, trauma-specific training, strategies for working with refugee families, and community and district resources for refugees. However, participants were often met with resistance and administrator pushback when proposing these professional development topics. All participants believed that "the focus has shifted" away from ELL-related professional development to other topics and student populations. A significant issue with the lack of ELL-related professional development was that mainstream teachers would not be able to properly accommodate English learners in their classrooms, which ultimately hinders the academic success of English learners and shifts the responsibility for assisting them to ELL teachers.

5.4.2. Inconsistent Support of Diversity Initiatives and School Policies

All participants commented on their school's and district's responses to English learners and diversity. Some participants shared stories about particular administrators being involved with English learners and supporting diversity initiatives. However, participants also spoke about how diversity initiatives at the district and building levels are not always fully supported by administrators. Brenda described the administrator and district response as "hit or miss," which she believes "is a sign in itself. The fact that we're not consistent… is a little concerning to me because, in education, we need to be consistent."

Some participants were unclear about why certain diversity initiatives and activities are abandoned when ELL student and teacher support exist. Ronald described how a school administrator rejected a student-led organization from sponsoring an activity that celebrates diversity. However, this same administrator funded a project to hang photographs of diverse students in a hallway, even undertaking construction costs to modify the wall to securely hang the photographs. Ronald ultimately concluded that the photo wall was a "very performative" demonstration of the administrator's commitment to diversity.

Common issues that are not consistently addressed by administrators include dress code enforcement and disciplinary matters. Ronald stated that dress code enforcement varies based on race, saying, "*Like every other part of our society, it seems as though there is a certain group of people who can do certain things that aren't as noticeable or as quickly punished.*

Disciplinary disparities between White, mainstream students and ELL students were also addressed. Ronald stated that when African students speak loudly in the hallways:

They draw more attention from the staff, and if [administrators] hear an F-bomb or hear swear words come out of that group, you'll quickly see a response from the admin team…despite it being pretty benign in nature and no different than any other language you might hear in a commons. In fact, if it were a smaller group of other students, of mainstream students who maybe… aren't from another country, you might look the other way. You might not see the same response from our admin team.

Overall, participants emphasized that schools and districts must learn to embrace diversity. Many acknowledged that North Dakota schools are experiencing unique challenges related to the influx of new Americans, and they recognized that mainstream teachers and administrators may feel uncomfortable reaching out to students from culturally diverse backgrounds because they lack knowledge about other cultures. Janet encouraged teachers to be curious and to understand what is happening, asking students questions to learn and connect with them. She advised teachers and administrators on speaking to new Americans, not to be afraid of embracing the discomfort involved in these interactions.

6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOLS

Similar to other investigations of the work of ELL teachers (Trickett et al., 2012), the role of ELL teachers in North Dakota is complex, multifaceted, and demanding. At the microsystem level, ELL teachers work directly with students and their families, mainstream and ELL teachers, school administrators, school staff, social workers, curriculum, and WIDA ACCESS language testing. These individual systems exert influence on the teachers' professional lives. However, the convergence of these systems (mesosystems) defines the ELL teacher role, setting expectations for the duties they must fulfill at their schools. They collaborate with other ELL teachers to balance classroom teaching responsibilities with language testing duties and serve as advocates for ELL students, interacting with mainstream teachers and administrators to ensure students' needs are met.

Consistent with prior studies, many ELL teachers in this study identify their primary role as being advocates for their students (Fogle & Moser, 2017; Markham, 1999; Trickett et al., 2012). Some of this responsibility stems from the lack of support from some mainstream colleagues, including their hesitance to incorporate ELL instructional

methods, such as providing scaffolding, or trying to avoid having ELL students enroll in their classes. Therefore, ELL teachers in North Dakota provide "protective advocacy" (Trickett et al., 2012) by intervening on behalf of ELL students to advocate for fair, empathetic treatment of ELL students, to help ELL students enroll in classes with supportive teachers, and to prepare PD with an ELL focus, findings supported by other studies (Pawan & Craig, 2011; Trickett et al., 2012). These mesosystem interactions, connections, and exchanges initiated by ELL teachers demonstrate the elevated responsibility ELL teachers undertake for the benefit of ELL students.

School and district processes at the exosystem and macrosystem levels affect the roles of ELL teachers and the classroom ecology, including the decision not to have a dedicated ELL social worker, a full-time ELL director who manages language testing, and yearly professional development focused on English learners and New Americans. These processes also include providing training and resources for mainstream teachers to interact with and support the success of ELL students, as well as a lack of concerted efforts to consistently embrace diversity at the school and district levels. These exosystem factors permeate, shape, and often disrupt the everyday work life of ELL teachers and influence how they perceive their roles within their schools. This is exemplified by the "filling in" Bascia and Jacka (2001) phenomenon many participants engage in, whether acting as a social worker, a language testing manager, a liaison between students, parents, teachers, and administrators, or a diversity coordinator, to bridge gaps between student needs and school offerings.

Lastly, while the ELL teacher role is filled with extraordinary demands, ELL teachers have a positive view of ELL students and their abilities, and they respect the often troublesome circumstances that brought them to North Dakota. They learn about the personal lives of their students and families to ensure that each student succeeds academically and socially as they transition to life in North Dakota. While this investment in the lives of students requires effort and time, many reported that the endeavor is not only worthwhile but also part of their job.

The findings of this study offer some guidance for North Dakota's schools and districts. To help shift the misconception among some mainstream teachers that English learners are solely the responsibility of ELL teachers, it is essential for policymakers and administrators to create systems and processes that support ELL teachers, mainstream teachers, and students at a school-wide level. School leaders are positioned to influence the school climate and culture, whereby all teachers and staff appreciate and value diversity and inclusion. In her extensive literature review on the role of the principal in creating inclusive schools for diverse students, Riehl (2000) underscored three tasks that principals should prioritize: fostering new meanings about diversity, promoting inclusive practices within schools, and building relationships between schools and communities.

First, principals can support new meaning-making about diversity in schools by providing opportunities for democratic discourse, a process that "promotes trust within the community, increasing the capacity for larger problems to be addressed (Riehl, 2000). They can exercise strong leadership and engender transformative changes through democratic discourse by working to bridge gaps between the school and community and within the teaching faculty. Deficit notions held by the school and community should be challenged through conversations or meaningful professional development to shift towards incorporating a funds of knowledge-based orientation that values what diverse student populations bring to the classroom and community (Singleton, 2014).

Second, principals can promote inclusive school practices that enable diverse students to succeed, including culturally relevant or culturally responsive teaching, and by ensuring that all students have access to instruction that promotes achievement (Riehl, 2000). Mainstream and ELL teachers need to be supported with more resources, time, professional development, and support from central administration to assist ELL and New American students. Principals must ensure that all teachers, especially those with minimal experience working with English learners and New American students, receive additional professional development and mentoring to avoid holding deficit

perspectives. Without support and resources, teachers will continue to apply the instructional practices and beliefs already employed in their work with New American students rather than rethinking how to best individualize instruction for New Americans, ELLs, and other students with specialized academic needs (Roxas, 2011).

Lastly, principals can foster an inclusive school environment by forging relationships between schools and communities, specifically by coordinating services with family, children, and youth organizations that meet the needs of the ELL population at the school (Riehl, 2000). The complexity of the problems involved in educating English learners requires a concentrated effort by all stakeholders, as challenges faced by ELL teachers are not solely technical aspects of how to educate this population of students but also include social, economic, political, and cultural issues of a broader scope (Khong & Saito, 2014).

7. CONCLUSION

This study represents an effort to link the ecology of the work lives of ELL teachers to the influx of new Americans in North Dakota high schools. This study highlights the ways in which ELL teachers are members of a larger ecology that interacts with other systems. They are a mediational force that collaborates with other systems, such as paraeducators and social workers, to assist ELL students. Sometimes, friction between systems arises. As evidence from our study suggests, ELL teachers are critical to the support and inclusion of ELL and new American students in North Dakota's high schools. However, these schools lack the resource capacity to adequately meet the multifaceted needs of an increasingly diverse student population. The entire community of teachers and administrators must be involved in understanding and valuing ELL students. Leadership must take steps to address the overwhelming responsibilities of ELL teachers and to allocate duties and resources to ensure their retention and support, as well as the social and academic success of ELL and new American students.

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