DIVERSITY IN THE TEACHER PIPELINE

EMPOWER BILINGUAL PARAEDUCATORS TO BECOME TEACHERS
Given that over 5 million K-12 students in the U.S. public school system are classified as English learners (NCES, 2017), many policymakers and school leaders recognize that public schools need ethnically and linguistically diverse educators. But about 80% of teaching staff are white (Williams, Garcia, Connally, Cook, & Dancy, 2016), and only 13% speak another language in addition to English.

To bridge this gap, some school districts have turned to bilingual paraeducators (sometimes called paraprofessionals or teacher aides) to support students’ learning — and to cultivate the next wave of licensed teachers.

In 2012, the Northern Nevada English Learning Initiative, a consortium of education entities in and around Washoe County, Nevada, received a grant from the federal Office of English Language Acquisition to develop and implement professional learning for paraeducators to work effectively with English learners.

Through this initiative, local school district staff and university faculty collaborated to develop a program to boost paraeducators’ teaching skills. Specifically, paraeducators participating in the initiative learned about second language acquisition, inquiry-based science, and other district programs and priorities, including the Common Core State Standards, specific assessment tools, Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports, and social and emotional learning.

Participating paraeducators have learned to better support students, and some have also built on their experience to become certified teachers, suggesting that supporting paraeducators can have benefits for students, adults, and school systems.

UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

As defined by the U.S. Department of Education, a paraeducator is someone other than a credentialed teacher who provides instructional support for students (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Sometimes called “education support professionals,” paraeducators are generally unlicensed. As hourly wage earners, paraeducators often work more than one job to make ends meet and support their families both during the school year and seasonal school breaks.

A report from New America finds that one-fifth of paraeducators speak a language other than English at home. That is strikingly similar to the number of students who do (Williams et al., 2016). Since paraeducators tend to mirror student demographics, they are well-positioned to help bridge cultural and linguistic gaps between staff members, students, and families. Importantly, they can use their knowledge of students’ home languages to help English learners access the curriculum.

Paraeducators are not only poised to meet the needs of diverse students, but also meet the needs of schools as
Paraeducators are a relatively stable part of the workforce. While 17% of teachers do not return after the first year of teaching, citing issues of low wages and lack of mentorship (Gray, Taie, & O’Rear, 2015), the attrition rate for teachers recruited from paraeducator career lattice programs is only 8% (Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, & Darling-Hammond, 2016).

These trends make paraeducators valuable resources to be tapped, and, in our experience, paraeducators are often interested in opportunities to learn and grow as teachers. As one paraeducator in Washoe County School District in Nevada said: “There are more [paraeducators] every year coming [to work in the schools]. They just need to receive an introduction about [the] education [system].

“I was educated in Mexico and worked as a teacher there,” she explained. “But when I came here, I didn’t know anything about the schools or education. … [Professional learning] is a good tool to help us to be better professionals [and] an excellent opportunity to motivate us to keep moving forward in our careers.”

SKILLS FOR PARAEDUCATORS

Typically, paraeducators are offered little in the way of specialized, on-the-job professional learning. Although many hold bachelor’s and even master’s degrees, they may lack the knowledge and skills specific to working with students, including English learners.

Speaking the same home language as a student or having worked with students in that home language does not automatically translate into teaching skills that scaffold students’ integrated content and language learning.

Because all academic content areas require well-developed language skills, English learners, particularly those who are younger or newer to the country, benefit from having instructors who are trained in topics specific to language learning (Saunders, Goldenberg, & Marcelletti, 2013). As they work with students acquiring a second language, all educators should know, at minimum, the stages of second language acquisition and the challenges that individuals experience as they acquire language.

Many general education teachers have not had the opportunity to develop this knowledge, making professional learning essential. The need for that support is particularly great among paraeducators, given their limited past professional learning.

Professional learning content for paraeducators should include:

- Knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of the job;
- Behavioral and instructional strategies (Keller, Bucholz, & Brady, 2007);
- Skills and experience in helping students become independent learners and guiding students through their struggles to construct knowledge (Ginagreco, 2003); and
- Appropriate theories and philosophies for working with specialized populations (e.g. special education and gifted students) (Deardorff, Glasenapp, Schalock & Udell, 2007).

THE NORTHERN NEVADA ENGLISH LEARNING INITIATIVE

The Northern Nevada English Learning Initiative, a partnership between the University of Nevada, Reno and the Washoe County School District, included 57 paraeducators in prekindergarten through 12th grade. Of those 57, 47% (27 people) were Spanish-English bilingual. They were recruited through pamphlets, email announcements, and word-of-mouth.

Based on research indicating that professional learning offered over time creates sustained changes in classroom practices (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017; Learning Forward, 2011), the course was created as a nine-month, nine-module course intended to impact paraeducator practice and ultimately serve as a career lattice bringing more bilingual paraeducators into full-time teaching positions.

Throughout the course, participants engaged in group structures, such as jigsaws and multimodal group presentations, and used various media types, including audiovisual and text.

The first module focused on second language acquisition theory. Paraeducators explored theories such as the silent period, the affective filter, and progression through the stages of language acquisition.

According to Stephen Krashen (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), second language acquisition includes time in which the learner is unable or unwilling to communicate orally in the second language. The silent period, or preproduction stage, is the first of the five stages of language acquisition.

Once the learner is ready to produce oral language, she enters the second stage, early production, and becomes proficient in producing one- or two-word phrases. In the next stage, speech emergence, the learner can communicate with simple sentences and ask simple questions.

During the intermediate fluency stage, learners use more complex sentences and ask questions to clarify what they are learning in the core academic areas. Learners at the advanced fluency stage are at or near the same level as a native speaker.

As a student progresses in learning a new language, he may experience stress or anxiety that inhibits his ability to acquire the target language. Educators use the term high affective filter to describe this phenomenon. They may
use strategies designed to lower the affective filter in order to facilitate the language acquisition process.

The second module focused on the Individual Differences Among Students Learning a Language model, which describes individual differences that affect the language acquisition process, such as personality and learning style, sociocultural issues, and motivation (Ellis, 2015). To introduce these concepts, participants identified how their own backgrounds, traits, and learning styles affect their learning and teaching. They then applied this insight as they explored strategies to reach students with different traits and styles.

To introduce inquiry-based learning, course designers created a module with hands-on inquiry-based science lessons designed to deepen the paraeducators’ understanding of the 5E learning cycle (engagement, exploration, explanation, elaboration, and evaluation) and instructional strategies, which helps learners construct their understanding of concepts being taught (Bybee, 2015).

As learners, the paraeducators experienced the value of the struggle to construct their own learning to gain insight into students’ experiences of this process. The participants wrote and revised 5E lesson plans based on the Next Generation Science Standards, the Common Core State Standards, and technology standards.

RESULTS FOR PARAEDUCATORS

To examine the implementation and outcomes of this project, the project team gathered data from sources including the Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale, pre- and post-tests from the content covered in the course modules, participants’ reflective journal entries, and researcher observation notes.

Results show that paraeducators both enjoyed and learned from the professional learning. The largest gains were in areas prioritized by the grant, such as language acquisition and inquiry-based science.

For example, over all four years, gains in content knowledge for second language acquisition, the Individual Differences Among Students Learning a Language model, and inquiry-based learning modules increased significantly from before the course to after. (Results were significant at the p<.01 and p<.05 from the pre-test to post-test.)

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Reflecting on the project, one participant wrote, “The course has not only changed how I interact with English learners, but it’s changed how I interact with all my students. I have a much better idea of how the brain works when learning new concepts, how those concepts are practically applied, and how they are put into practice.”

Another participant reported gaining overall confidence in her teaching skills: “I walk away from this course knowing a lot more about the educational system than I did before. … I knew, based from experience, what these students needed to learn, but the course has taught me how to teach them professionally. The different learning activities have built up my confidence and professionalism when it comes to teaching our EL students.”

As a result of the project, five paraeducators are working to become teachers. Three other paraeducators moved to positions within the district where they would be able to better use the knowledge and skills they gained. The remaining participants have remained in their positions, a positive indicator of workforce stability, with increased knowledge and competence.

“(The initiative) was a nice motivation to continue [with college],” said one participant. “I saw how I learned English myself and said, ‘Oh, that’s how I learn English. That’s how I can continue studying.’ I’m going to graduate [from college] after I finish (the initiative).”

BUILDING THE TEACHER PIPELINE

During the course of the project, university and school district leaders identified several paraeducators interested in transitioning into certified teaching positions.

To obtain teaching licenses, some paraeducators needed to return to school to complete a bachelor’s degree in education, which would require an investment of time and money.

Others already held bachelor’s degrees, which they could parlay into a provisional license. In both cases, paraeducators needed support to access and succeed in the local alternative
route to licensure program.

Initiative leaders attempted to identify the needs of paraeducators and best processes for encouraging and supporting them in working toward their teaching licenses. They also needed English classes to prepare them for the rigors of the 120-hour alternative route to licensure program.

Next, they needed help to prepare for the basic skills test they would have to take to receive a provisional teaching license. They also needed coaching to prepare for multiple essays and interviews. Finally, they needed guidance in procuring their transcripts and paying for a transcript evaluation.

A partnership program between the university, local community college, and Washoe County School District helped the paraeducators with these hurdles. The community college leveraged existing workforce development federal grant funding dollars to create an adult English as a second language course that was offered to bilingual community members interested in pursuing a teaching degree.

Nine people completed the course, including four paraeducators from the initiative, and two members of the group went on to apply for and complete the alternative route to licensure program.

One participant who was ultimately promoted into a certified teaching position attributed much of her success as a new teacher to the Northern Nevada English Learning Initiative. “Without the NNELI program, I wouldn’t have had the confidence to move forward into teaching. … I even still refer to my NNELI [resources] when I am struggling with a student.”

**GROWING OUR OWN TEACHERS**

Pipelines and career ladders that include paraeducators, especially bilinguals, are an effective way to respond to the demand for bilingual teachers. Because veteran teachers are retiring and student demographics are changing, the strategy to “grow your own” teachers by tapping into the existing paraeducator pool has robust potential.

We have found that it fills much-needed positions, increases educator diversity, provides models for diverse students, brings linguistic equity into the classroom, and develops paraeducators into their full potential.

**REFERENCES**


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