

Professional Development for Latino Success: Responding to the New South's Changing Needs

Paul H. Matthews, Ph.D. & Bernadette Musetti, Ph.D.

University of Georgia Center for Latino Achievement and Success in Education

AERA Annual Meeting, April 2006.

Introduction

As a destination point for the “new Latino diaspora” (e.g., Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2002), the Southeast U.S. is representative of many parts of the country as it and its educational systems adjust to the new and rapidly-growing Latino population. In Georgia, for instance, over 120,000 students (PreK-12) identified as Hispanic were served statewide in 2004-05, compared with fewer than 24,000 in 1994-95. Such drastic increases in the Latino student population mean that schools, administrators and teachers must adapt to a changing work environment in order to continue to meet their students’ educational and social needs (e.g., Stodolsky & Grossman, 2000).

Substantial research (e.g., Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Garcia, 2001; González, Huerta-Macías, & Tinajero, 2001; Padrón, Waxman, & Rivera, 2002; Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999; Slavin & Calderón, 2001) has focused on Latino educational challenges and on programs addressing them, primarily in parts of the country with long-established Latino communities. Ensuring support to reduce the achievement gap in test scores, graduation, and educational attainment for Latinos is a public policy (and civil rights)

issue of the highest order. Yet, many newly Latino areas are struggling to provide necessary modifications and programs to support this population. Recent investigations of such locales have suggested a “lack of initiative by policymakers and educators” for addressing Latino educational issues (Wainer, 2004, p. 35); for instance, according to the recent study by Bohon, Macpherson, and Atilas (2005), “the Georgia school system is ill prepared to accommodate the language and cultural needs of Latinos... the immediate future looks dim for Georgia’s Latinos” (p. 56).

Obviously, *teacher preparation* for working with diverse learners is of crucial importance in addressing these needs (e.g., Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Stodolsky & Grossman, 2000). As Romo and Falbo (1996) discuss, schools bear the primary responsibility for ensuring the opportunity for educational success for all students. Teacher training is identified by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute’s recent report on “The New Latino South and the Challenge to Public Education” (Wainer, 2004) as one of the “four major immigrant education issues in new immigrant communities that have been problematic for educators and immigrant families” in Georgia and other newly Latino states (p. 1). Bohon, Macpherson, and Atilas (2005), focusing on Georgia specifically, likewise identified “little school support for the needs of Latino students” as one of six “primary barriers to Latino educational attainment” (p. 43). Thus, both the knowledge of how to work effectively with Latino students and families, as well as the attitudes of school personnel towards this group, are critical elements in considering the role of professional development activities.

Recently, intensive cooperative efforts between schools in Georgia and a university professional development and outreach center for Latino education have led to more

systematic and focused initiatives for raising awareness of issues, highlighting and replicating best-practices, and working to improve educational attainment for Latinos across the state. The objective of this paper is to document and describe the process and results of these efforts for preparing in-service educators in K-12 schools in Georgia, for improving Latino education through targeted professional development with university and peer support. In so doing, our goal is both to highlight “best-practice” work that is being done in this area, counteracting the predominantly negative outlooks of recent characterizations of the state; and to encourage replication of such professional development initiatives in other newly Latino states.

Methods and Data

Data were gathered during 2003-04 and 2004-05 from participants involved in year-long professional development activities as a part of a school- or district-based team working with a university outreach center focused on Latino education. Participants were from a total of 24 teams across 12 school districts in north Georgia; each team (6-12 people) included both teachers and administrators, and applied to work with the university center for a year. These teams represented elementary schools (n=9), middle schools (n=5), high schools (n=4), and district-wide or multi-school groups (n=6). Teams attended a five-day professional development retreat during the summer, which provided extensive training on Latino educational issues, information on successful programs and resources from other schools and states, and intensive individualized support in creating and refining a school- or district-based plan of ideas to implement during the coming school year. Throughout the year university facilitators (faculty and graduate assistants) worked with the teams on implementing the plans; teams also attended one-day fall and

spring follow-up seminars with additional professional development and sharing of successes and obstacles across teams.

Data were collected as part of a larger evaluation and assessment of the program. For the purposes of this paper, which focuses on the effects and extent of professional development for working with Latino students and families, the primary data sources were forced-choice and open-ended written feedback on the effectiveness of the professional development from summer, fall and spring sessions; the teams' action plans; and semi-structured year-end group interviews (taped and transcribed) of teams' accomplishments and barriers in implementing action plans. These data were from the first two years of the project (2003-04 and 2004-05). Open-ended written feedback, group interviews, and team action plans were analyzed thematically for topics related to educator professional development and its outcomes. Descriptive statistics from relevant questionnaires and evaluation items also provide support for the findings.

Findings

Our findings suggest that teachers of Latinos and English learners are highly aware of the overall need statewide, in their districts and schools, and themselves, for additional professional learning to improve the educational success of such students. As one participant in a district-wide team (2003-04) noted, "groups that have worked with Latinos for maybe 20-25 years, the Texas and the Florida, and the California where diversity's been a piece of the fabric for a long time, you're a little wowed by how sophisticated that is and then you have to sit there and say, well they didn't get there overnight either. This took, and they all will say, we're still a work in progress." Participants responded very favorably and enthusiastically to the opportunity to

participate in the long-term, team-based professional development offered by this program. Furthermore, they worked actively to carry their new understandings and knowledge back to their schools and districts and to structure additional opportunities for learning among their peers locally.

Outcome 1: Impact of Professional Development and Program Participation

One important outcome of the study was the demonstrated impact on participants of their year-long participation in this university-sponsored professional development focused on Latino education. Thematically, three principal strands of commentary emerged from analysis of program feedback, and were supported by quantitative as well as open-ended feedback. First was the importance of state-wide opportunities for targeted professional learning from national and state experts during the course of the program activities (summer institute and follow-up workshops). The second finding was how useful participants found peer interaction and learning from other teams. Third was the value of undertaking these initiatives in the context of a formalized, university-sponsored relationship, which provided legitimacy and leverage for participants to implement ideas gleaned from the program activities.

High-Quality Professional Learning Opportunities

With Georgia's previously small numbers of English learners and Latinos, teachers in the state have historically had few opportunities for professional development focused on improving education for these groups. The extended opportunities provided by program participation to hear from multiple national and state experts providing strategies, practices, models, and insights, created a rare opportunity for many participants to gain in-depth understanding and knowledge of these issues.

For instance, on the summer institute 2004 feedback participants (n=67) rated “content and coverage” 4.48 and “overall quality of the institute” 4.49 on a scale of 1-5. For 2003 (n=56), ratings were 4.66 and 4.77. Participant comments from 2003 included “Probably the best ever I’ve attended. Great job!” and “The presentations [were] most informative in every case. The energy and dedication of all the participants was impressive and reassuring.” 2004 summer institute comments included “The general sessions were fabulous-- excellent speakers” “This was very well organized and planned!!” “Great institute—such energy and enthusiasm!” In fact, multiple teams found particular speakers and information so helpful that they replicated these sessions with their schools or districts, bringing local and national speakers in to work directly with others who were not part of the team.

Across these two program years, participants rated highly the impact that the professional development had on their teaching and work. Fall and Spring program-year surveys indicated that participation in the year-long program had a substantial impact—reported as “large influence” for 62% of responses (n=233) and “medium influence” for another 30%. Likewise, participants’ attitudes were influenced by program participation (large influence, 66% of 230 responses; medium influence, 27%. Their “preparedness for working with Latino populations” also was impacted by participation (large influence, 61% of 230 responses; medium influence, 32%). Thus, at least from the participants’ perspective, the professional learning program was indeed effective and worthwhile in helping them develop as educators able to serve this growing segment of the student body.

Peer Interaction

Both the summer component and the follow-up one-day sessions with teams included opportunities for teams and schools to tell each other about programs, initiatives, and implementation logistics for their ideas. In some cases, this entailed sharing what worked, or did not work, in local contexts; in others, the main benefit was motivational, in terms of showing teams that change and growth were possible to implement in “real” school settings. In their written feedback, many participants commented on the perceived value of such interaction with each other. For instance, 30 out of 110 total responses to the prompt “What was of most overall value to you this week?” specifically referenced the importance of interacting with other school-based personnel. 2003 comments included that the most overall value was “meeting/networking (hearing from) people with similar challenges”; “the networking among districts”; “collaboration with teachers outside of my school and system”; and “expansion of my vision by hearing of the marvelous things being accomplished throughout... our state.” 2004 feedback specified the value of “building relationships with other professionals”; “talking with and brainstorming with other schools/districts”; “hearing what is going on in other schools. This helped me realize we are doing good things in our district and are headed in the right direction”; “the energy of being around like-minded people who want to learn and transform to meet others’ needs”; and “hearing how it’s being done-- great, concrete ideas.” One elementary participant from 2003-04 noted during the year-end interviews, “the exchange of the ideas when we were in smaller groups I found as a counselor was really helpful because everybody was so honest, it didn’t work or did work.” Another commented, “it was a big affirmation for a lot of us who wondered if what we were doing and were starting to do here at our school was on the right track, and that reaffirmation is very important to us.”

Participation as Leverage

The third emergent theme related to the program as a whole was the importance of the formalized, university-sponsored relationship in providing credibility and stimulus for teams' efforts to implement new ideas at their schools. Participants found that the regular meetings with university liaisons sparked activity in carrying out professional development plans, and—perhaps more importantly—that taking part in the program provided leverage for implementing professional development (and other action plan items) in the face of unenthusiastic or sluggish district bureaucracy. For instance, participants noted at the end of their year, that participation with this initiative has had a “huge impact”; that it “has been a springboard for the district to move ahead in planning and implementation of our goals”; that it “provided focus” for their school; that the school is “finally talking about the real issues with Latino students”; and one participant concluded, “I think the program acted as the catalyst for us; I think we did a lot faster than we would have done.”

Participants also found the personal growth they experienced to be empowering. One noted, “we are inspired and validated.” A 2003-04 teacher commented, “I think one of the reasons why we have been successful in everything that we have done is I think through CLASE and through some of the other ESOL classes that I have taken, I think all of us have gained an extra confidence in dealing with our Latino families that maybe we did not have before.” Likewise, a 2004-05 teacher remarked that participation in the university-sponsored initiatives “has empowered us simple teachers to take risks and to encourage our school to take risks” to increase Latino achievement and involvement.

Such self-confidence and leverage is obviously a key factor in allowing teachers and teams to influence local policies and practices.

Outcome 2: Extending Professional Development Activities Locally

A second and related outcome of the program was that participant teams consistently identified the need for additional professional learning opportunities targeted towards staff in their own schools and districts. Almost every team included some element of professional development on Latino and English-learner issues for school or district faculty and staff as one of the components of their action plan. Typically, these training initiatives included three categories: improving the knowledge base of mainstream teachers; improving the knowledge base of non-instructional school staff; and improving attitudes of school personnel towards Latino students and families. Likewise, teams identified the importance of communicating their proposed action plans to other stakeholders in their school and district, to ensure sufficient buy-in and participation for successful implementation.

Improving Teachers' Instructional Knowledge Base

In creating the plans of action and implementation that they desired to undertake for the following year in their local setting, schools and districts focused especially on helping ensure that their mainstream fellow teachers understood strategies for working effectively with Latinos and English learning students. Many teams specifically identified as a goal, increasing the number of teachers with the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) endorsement (typically a series of 3 50-hour courses). One district-wide team, for instance, even included in their plan (and achieved!) the creation and state approval of an “in-house” ESOL endorsement program for its teachers. Other teams

opted for providing shorter, in-service training courses, such as one district's two-hour-long "best practices short course in effective instructional strategies for Latino learners" offered to mainstream teachers at multiple locations around the district. In fact, every high-school level team was concerned with ensuring that content-area teachers received such support. One such team specified "regular ed. teacher development" on "modification strategies [and] understanding test scores of ESOL students." Another high school provided targeted professional development at the beginning of the school year, with follow-up during departmental faculty meetings and with sessions especially for new teachers. A third high-school team brought in university and national-level presenters to help ensure that the entire school staff received the same training and presentations that the team members had during the summer institutes. Other high-school teams focused on providing teachers with the knowledge and structure to offer or expand "sheltered" content-area instruction, including professional development, common planning time, and/or team-teaching opportunities.

Improving Non-Instructional School Staff Knowledge Base

Several teams also recognized the importance of ensuring that non-instructional school staff be prepared to work well with Latino families and students. For instance, one district created and offered a "short course for office personnel and administrative staff in cultural awareness, problem solving, and providing a welcoming environment for Latino families," while others specifically focused on increasing the school's support of Latino students and families through hiring additional bilingual personnel such as parent liaisons and support staff. Another high-school team identified a focus on the school's leadership,

with the goal that “administrators [would] learn the name and correct pronunciation of two Latino kids/week.”

Modifying Attitudes

In addition to supporting awareness of instructional strategies and modifications for English-learning students, much of the professional development focus by the teams was on school personnel’s cultural awareness and attitudes. For instance, one district team mandated “cultural sensitivity/awareness training for teachers and administrators during pre-planning”, while others provided structures to promote or require that school staff took part in home visits of Latino students’ families. Other teams conducted community and/or parent “asset mapping” to determine the “funds of knowledge” available in their students’ families and communities, and to involve parents and community members in more than just “meet and eat” activities at the school. Several elementary schools, in particular, focused on school-wide professional development regarding Latino and other cultures to help ensure that school personnel were aware of such basics as customs, holidays, and traditions of the students and their families.

Lessons Learned

In translating these results into practice for future application or replication both in our state and in other regions, several structural aspects of the program have emerged from the data sources which merit particular mention.

First, the data point to the importance of team-based, rather than individually-oriented, professional development. Such a model has several benefits. Specifically, team-based professional learning helps provide a “critical mass” of educators working to effect change. Participants are able to motivate and support each other and to follow up

with ensuring that the implementation remains on target. Likewise, such a model allows for division of labor to implement initiatives at the classroom, school and district level. Taken together, all of these factors help ensure that the professional development is not just a “flash in the pan” but rather has the opportunity to lead to long-term and meaningful change.

Second, administrator participation and support is critical to the success of the implementation aspect of such professional development. The team-based structure can help achieve the necessary buy-in from school and district decision-makers, especially if (as was the case for this program) administrator participation is mandated as a selection criterion for every team. Still, in looking at which teams have been more and less successful in implementing their goals, in every case the support of building- and district-level leadership and buy-in has been a key factor. A perceptive 2003-04 participant offered this analysis after the year-end sharing by all the teams: “the schools that had the administrative backing were able to really put some things into place and that those who didn’t kind of, they struggled... they did things, but it wasn’t a, nobody bought into it, you know on the administrative level and that was much harder for them.”

Third, conducting the professional development at a location that removed participants from their school, district, and other distractions was cited as very helpful in allowing them to focus on the issues at hand. As a 2003-04 participant noted, “We attached more importance to [the learning] than if you had come and done something at the end of the day at school. By taking us away from our normal environment, putting us in a professional environment, we had expectations of what you wanted us to do and we did it.”

Finally, our findings suggest that a university-based model supporting and structuring these professional development activities is especially effective. While some districts or state agencies certainly provide adequate (or even exemplary) professional development in-house, many teachers are skeptical of the “help” that centralized administrators may mandate or offer, especially when it comes from groups that have the authority to evaluate their schools and classrooms. One 2003-04 administrator commented, “what I liked about [the program] is that I felt like it was an avenue to network... it was never threatening, it was truly a resource.” Another teacher from the same elementary team agreed, “I feel like we’re not being judged” at how well the proposed action plan is followed to the letter. Likewise, team members found that the cachet associated with the university and its perceived “clout” created leverage for more effective implementation of planned activities and participation in professional learning opportunities.

Contribution to the Field

As this year’s AERA conference theme suggests, educational research has the capacity both to inform the public sphere of educational and social needs, and to clarify effective responses to these needs. The present study focuses on the second of these tasks; though it does not explicitly link the outcomes of these professional development activities to student achievement changes, this research outlines one state-wide response to a recognized area of importance in improving Latino student achievement, one which will not diminish in significance with the continued growth of the Latino population through Georgia, the region, and the U.S. Especially in the context of predominantly negative reports about how schools and educators are responding to the changing

demographics of schools in newly Latino parts of the country (e.g., Wainer, 2004; Bohon, Macpherson, & Atilas, 2005), it is helpful to observe and report on substantive and proactive efforts of educators to learn to work more effectively with Latino students and families, and to disseminate these findings to a broad audience to both inform and inspire their continuation.

References

- Bohon, Stephanie A., Macpherson, Heather, & Atilas, Jorge H. (2005). Educational barriers for new Latinos in Georgia. *Journal of Latinos in Education, 4*(1), 43-58.
- Flores-Gonzalez, Nilda. (2002). *School kids/street kids: Identity development in Latino students*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Garcia, Eugene E. (2001). *Hispanic education in the United States: Raíces y alas*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- González, Maria Luisa, Huerta-Macías, Ana, & Tinajero, Josefina Villamil (Eds.). (2001). *Educating Latino students: A guide to successful practice*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Education.
- Padrón, Yolanda N., Waxman, Hersh C., & Rivera, Hector H. (2002). *Educating Hispanic students: Obstacles and avenues to improved academic achievement*. Washington, DC: CREDE.
- Reyes, Pedro, Scribner, Jay D., & Scribner, Alicia Paredes (Eds.). (1999). *Lessons from high-performing Hispanic schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Romo, Harriett D., & Falbo, Toni (1996). *Latino high school graduation: Defying the odds*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Slavin, Robert E., & Calderón, Margarita (Eds.). (2001). *Effective programs for Latino students*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Stodolsky, Susan S., & Grossman, Pamela L. (2000). Changing students, changing teaching. *Teachers College Record*, 102(1), 125-172.

Wainer, Andrew. (2004). *The new Latino south and the challenge to public education*. Los Angeles, CA: The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute.

Wortham, Stanton, Murillo Jr., Enrique G., & Hamann, Edward T. (Eds.). (2002). *Education in the new Latino diaspora: Policy and the politics of identity*. Westport, Conn.: Ablex.