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“My Language Learners Seemed Like Ghosts”: A Rural Teacher’s Transformational Journey Implementing the Seal of Biliteracy

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This paper describes the personal and professional journey taken by one secondary Spanish teacher to implement the Seal of Biliteracy (SoBL) for English Learners (ELs) in a rural Florida school district. The teacher’s goal was to promote bilingual pride among her ELs and to validate and build their bilingual abilities, which had been frequently unrecognized in the community. This promising practice in a rural Florida district demonstrates two important transformations: first was the teacher’s personal views about bilingualism as an asset rather than a deficit, and second was the instructional practices she employed and fiercely advocated for on behalf of the ELs. Ultimately, the work of the teacher disrupted inequities that her bilingual students faced and positively affected their views of bilingualism and their lives in the rural school community.

Place matters in the context of education, and as Gruenewald (2003) observed, “places themselves have something to say” (p. 624). Place is more than a backdrop or description; rather, place defines and shapes how people come to know and participate in the world and relate to others. For rural schools and communities, this includes an understanding of how community, geography, topography, diverse demography, way of life, and limited resources shape teaching and learning, including for EL students. Place also affects how teachers build relationships with their students. For instance, as Marichal (2020) found, rural secondary teachers who built authentic relationships with their EL students and who paid attention to place improved EL education in a rural secondary school.

In this promising practice article, we tell the story of one teacher who promoted the Seal of Biliteracy (SoBL) in a rural Florida high school. The teacher undertook this practice in order to build relationships with her EL students, support their learning through the SoBL, and move toward more equitable educational practices.

Adela’s SoBL Initiative in a Rural Secondary School

Adela (pseudonym) is a secondary Spanish teacher in a fringe rural school located in an agricultural community in Florida where peanut, hay bale, blueberry, and palm tree industries thrive.

Originally from Puerto Rico, Adela moved to the area as a trailing spouse with her husband and three children. Her English, and that of her children, initially posed difficulties communicating. She explained,

I moved to the mainland US with my children as a trailing spouse and my journey as a teacher became difficult. I completed the [teacher] re-certification process required to work in Florida; however, I could not secure a job as an educator. Even though I am an American citizen at birth, I had a difficult time communicating, as my first language was not English but Spanish. Even though in Puerto Rico students take English as a second language, I still struggled communicating during interviews, composing my résumé and CV and had a difficult time engaging with others in a common environment due to the fact that English is taught in the island but not commonly spoken.

Adela’s experiences in the United States mirror those of other Puerto Ricans’. Although most Puerto Ricans born in the territory receive K-12 English instruction, the instruction emphasizes learning English as a foreign language (EFL) rather than English as a second language (ESL), meaning that English instruction is limited in both amount of time and use in the content areas. Speaking and writing skills are not prioritized in most Puerto Rican schools, and instruction varies across the island.

Upon arriving on the U.S. mainland, Adela's children were identified for English language services. Two of her three children received English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services as students. She describes her unfamiliarity with this process and the difficult period her children experienced:

They were fighting their own battles with the process. Nevertheless, at the end of their second year in Florida, my children were no longer receiving ESOL services and they were put in regular curriculum. I do not recall being invited into their English language learning journey at school, nor was I invited to meetings to determine the needs or accommodations given.

Although learning English was an educational priority for Adela and her children, she never intended for them to neglect their home language and struggled to maintain Spanish use in the home. Adela also felt that the emphasis given to English both at home and in school reinforced a subtractive approach to bilingualism. Subtractive bilingualism occurs when individuals learn a second language at the expense of the first language. Adela felt that this practice resulted in having English-only speaking children in her family.

The linguistic encounters Adela and her children experienced when moving to the United States also made Adela feel like an outsider where her bilingualism was more of a deficit rather than a resource to celebrate. As she undertook a three-year PD program in her rural district (*Project STELLAR*, Supporting Teachers and Educators of English Language Learners Across Rural Settings), she gradually began to understand how place and background played a crucial role in her relationship to her students, and the importance of bilingualism and biliteracy for herself and her students. She also needed to understand who her EL students were as people and as children of migrant workers in Florida. She remarked, “[t]o understand the needs of ELs at school and their dilemmas at home [...] I needed to connect with my students. All of us had something in common, which was language, but I was not familiar with their needs.” In fact, Adela observed that her “[English] language learners seemed like ghosts” in her rural secondary school. She added, “They were purposely separated from the rest of the class... and not considered as the rest of the population.”

The Role of Place in Adela's Journey

Place impacted Adela's work with her EL students in this farmworking community. Reflecting on her personal and professional experiences, she described how place shaped the lives of her EL students and how it impacted their academic lives. In Ivy County, just under 200 ELs or 4% of the students across grades K-12 were identified as receiving ESOL services. The percentage of persons living at or below the poverty line in the district was 20.8% (US Census, 2017). In addition, the town of Hibiscus, where Adela worked, was 30 minutes in either direction away from the next town. There was no public transportation, social services, or emergency health care services. The terrain limited access to amenities and resources. Dirt roads and uneven ground that was hard to walk on with no safe sidewalks for children to go to school made transportation difficult for low-income families who did not own cars. Her high school students had no transportation available to them and had to be picked up by the elementary school bus. This resulted in students riding for two to three hours or missing a school day altogether. As Adela observed, these challenges seemed to be overlooked by teachers that did not know these students and were not aware of the impacts imposed by rurality.

Many of Adela's EL students felt the need to help their immigrant parents in the agricultural fields, especially during blueberry harvest season each spring. Even when ELs attended school after working long hours helping their families, they were tired and lethargic during instruction. These are two of the many examples of how rurality impacted the lives of Adela's EL students. Other challenges such as lack of access to Internet via broadband and the feelings of otherness due to the close-built social networks and the cultural expectations of this community drove ELs' invisibility in Adela's school community.

Adela's strong relational bonds with her ELs and the reflective space provided by the PD program coursework allowed her to reflect on her own personal and professional experiences in addition to extending her knowledge of place. This process transformed Adela's thinking and teaching as she explained, “A fire in me started and I wanted to help my students and their families.”

Adela felt the responsibility for helping her EL students feel more visible and seen at their school by becoming their advocates and by elevating and promoting her own bilingualism and that of her

students. She fought their invisibility by implementing the SoBL. The SoBL is a movement, which began in California in 2011, to recognize and award the language proficiency of students who master English and any other language (including American Sign Language) (Seal, 2021). Although Florida adopted the SoBL in 2016, Adela was not aware of the SoBL in Florida prior to undertaking the PD. She saw the SoBL as an opportunity for her EL students that would demonstrate their language skills and positively affirm their identities as bilinguals. In short, Adela felt compelled to disrupt the inequities constantly experienced by her EL students.

Adela's Path to Implementation of the SoBL

Adela's task of implementing the SoBL required hard work and resilience. Her school did not offer Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish courses, which would be essential to students' obtaining the SoBL. Thus, students who were bilingual, such as the EL students who enrolled in first and second level Spanish, were unable to acquire biliteracy skills and advanced oral language skills in Spanish because the courses were not available to them.

The process to get to the SoBL involved multiple steps. First, Adela needed to convince the school administration of the benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy for her EL students and create a viable path to obtain it. The creation of a new curriculum required teacher training and the purchasing of new books and curriculum content material. She also needed to convince her own EL students of the advantages of obtaining SoBL and improving their own literacy in Spanish. She had to instruct and train the school staff to attach "the seal" itself to the students' diploma and transcripts. This was an arduous process to undertake when Adela was also a full-time teacher with five different curriculum preparations.

After meeting with the district ESOL coordinator and school administrators, Adela advocated for the creation of new curriculum in the school. Prior to applying for the SoBL, Adela was allowed to add the AP Spanish course to the curriculum to improve on the reading, writing, and vocabulary skills of her EL students. The rigorous and strict format of the course required her to be prepared for instruction. The school paid for her to attend the AP Spanish Language and Culture Summer Institute Training the summer before adding the course to the school

curriculum. Fourteen EL students enrolled in her class that school year. As she explained,

To teach the course, I completed training from the College Board, which focused on cultivating students' understanding of the Spanish language and its culture by applying interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational modes in communication in real-life situations with different concepts as reference (College Board, 2020). The training request was submitted via email to our curriculum coordinator at the district level, and my district did not hesitate on granting me the opportunity. The training was completed, I submitted my syllabi via AP Central, and the course was made available to the students interested. The district ordered the materials and textbooks needed for the course.

After completing all the necessary steps, Adela researched the Florida SoBL guidelines, as they vary from state to state. In Ivy County, EL students needed to pass their English Florida Standards Assessment (FSA), the state standardized assessment, with a score of 3 or higher and pass the AP Spanish Language and Culture exam with a 3 or higher. A score of 3 or 4 earned a silver seal, and a gold seal was awarded to students who earned a 5.

Making ELs Feel Less Invisible: The Voices of Rural Secondary Bilingual Students

As a final task embedded in her graduate school project, Adela administered a 13-item questionnaire to four EL students to understand the significance of obtaining the SoBL. All students voiced that being bilingual and biliterate instilled in them a sense of pride about their culture and language. One of the students remarked,

The AP Spanish Language course brought me closer to my roots and helped me discover so many new and fascinating things about where I come from. [...] I would absolutely encourage others to work for this seal because it makes you stand out and it will be something great to have and look back on as an emblem to your high school career.

Another student elaborated on the significance of receiving the SoBL stating, "I feel like it is such a privilege, you should feel honored because it's not easy to know more than one language. Being able to speak your family's language should mean a lot to us." Similarly, another EL student commented, "Cuando recibí mi puntuación me sentí súper

orgullosa, y muy contenta. [...] La reacción de mi familia fue decirme que se sentían súper orgullosos de mi logro.” [Translated: “When I received my score I felt very proud and happy. [...] My family’s reaction was to say that they felt very proud of my accomplishment.”].

All students concurred that being bilingual and biliterate was a way to fight the feeling of otherness and invisibility. In addition, they all agreed that bilingualism was a desirable skill in today’s competitive job market and would highly recommend other students to enroll in the AP Spanish course as a way to obtain the SoBL. Today, ELs at her rural secondary school can either choose to enroll in the AP Spanish Language and Culture course or choose to take the exam instead (if proficiency is demonstrated) and then allowed to fill out an application of intent that explains the requirements and benefits of the SoBL.

Conclusion

Adela’s personal and professional journey experiences and her attention to place, that is, learning how rurality shaped the lives of her EL students, transformed her as a person and her teaching practice. Green and Reid (2014) underscore that place is “a necessary condition in understanding and appreciating the circumstances and specificity of rural education” (p. 27). Rural EL scholars (Ankeny et al., 2019; Bustamante et al., 2010; Marichal, 2020) have demonstrated that as educators become reflective about environments that sustain inequities, place-based knowledge can transform education for rural ELs while educators become ELs’ advocates in their schools. As Cloke (2006) observed, although the strength and resourcefulness of a rural community is

its close-knit networks of support, these networks can oftentimes include or exclude certain populations.

Adela’s own personal experiences with bilingualism, her professional education, and her attention to place allowed her to create awareness and transform her own deficit views about bilingualism and those of other educators in her rural school, establish strong bonds with her EL students to learn about their struggles, and experience the invisibility and isolation EL students sustained in this secondary rural community. Marichal (2020) illuminated the need to understand the rural school community while prioritizing building authentic relationships with their ELs. For instance, the bilingual teachers in her study leveraged their bilingualism and ethnicity by building authentic and emotional bidirectional relationships with their ELs to better understand the challenges they faced in that particular rural community.

The implementation of SoBL encourages all students to pursue biliteracy, honors the skills they attain, and provides evidence of skills that are attractive to future employers and college admission officers. Furthermore, the SoBL can support ELs in rural schools by challenging English monolingualism and advocating for the development of students’ bilingualism and biliteracy by high school graduation. However, this requires that rural educators’ own bilingualism and biliteracy be valued and perceived as a resource to the community. This promising practice is one suggestion for how educators and administrators can disrupt existing stereotypes and to transform their practice. The implementation of SoBL has the potential to advance understandings of the diversity in and complexity of rural communities by elevating the status of minoritized students and creating equitable educational opportunities for all students.

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