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## Involving the Parents of English Language Learners in a Rural Area: Focus on the Dynamics of Teacher-Parent Interactions

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*In this study, the author suggests that the current ELL parental involvement model often overlooks the structural aspects and power asymmetry of parent-teacher relationships that can hinder productive collaboration. In doing so, the author uses postcolonial theory as a conceptual lens to investigate the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions from rural ELL parent perspectives by looking at those interactions as intercultural relations. The study uses a general qualitative methodology to explore the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions. Three broad themes that emerged as obstacles that inhibit productive ELL parent-teacher interactions were (1) teachers' judgments toward ELL students and their parents, (2) ELL parents' frustration about their inability to influence a teacher's decision making, and (3) ELL parents' fear of repercussions for speaking up. The paper concludes with important implications for teachers working with ELL students in rural areas.*

**Key words:** ELL parent involvement, ELL learning, ELLs in a rural area, ELL parent-teacher interactions

English language learners (ELLs) is the fastest growing population among the school-age group in the nation (Kanno & Cromley, 2013). Over the past 15 years, the number of English language learners has nearly doubled to about 5.5 million, and by 2025, it is predicted nearly one in every four public school students will be an ELL (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, NCELA, 2007; Winke, 2011). This growing wave of linguistic diversity is not limited to large metropolitan areas. In fact, growth has been much more rapid in less populated rural states. In this regard, O'Neal, Ringler, and Rodriguez (2008) reported that "ELL students and their families tend to settle in geographical locations that are rural" (p. 6). Similarly, Reed (2010) stated that rural areas are experiencing a rapid increase in racial and ethnic diversity in their student populations; therefore, schools in rural states are facing unique educational challenges in meeting the needs of diverse student populations, including ELLs, a group with which teachers feel inadequately prepared to work productively. With respect to ELL students' academic achievement levels, many states reported that dropout rates for ELLs are significantly higher than dropout rates for non-ELL students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011). In some rural states, dropout rates have increased and graduation decreased within last five years mainly because of the educational and social challenges that ELLs face in their lives (Walker, 2012).

Research in the field of education is constantly striving to improve student learning, and the

importance of parental involvement in student success at school now seems obvious. Indeed, parental involvement as an effective factor in improving student learning is no longer a subject of debate (Wei & Zhou, 2012), and a positive correlation between the ELL parental involvement and ELL student learning has been firmly established (Panferov, 2010). Meanwhile, just as is the case for non-ELL students, in particular those from low income families, difficulties associated with involving the parents of ELLs in their children's schools continue to be reported (e.g., Henderson, Jacob, Kernan-Schloss, & Raimondo, 2004; Hiatt-Michale, 2001; Panferov, 2010). Barriers that may prevent involvement of parents of ELLs have been identified as "language, cultural differences, work schedules, and lack of transportation" (Padgett, 2006, p. 44). With respect to parental involvement in general, Cox (2005), in her meta-analysis of 18 empirical studies, not only confirmed the correlations between parental involvement and students' academic achievements, but she also concluded that the most effective aspect of parental involvement efforts lies in the interactions between parents and teachers. Indeed, Padgett (2006) stated that parental involvement in school activities alone will not increase student achievement; rather, it is the quality of interactions and communication between teachers and parents that has a significant impact on student achievement.

Parental involvement in their children's education can take many different forms (Heymann & Earle, 2000), such as volunteering at school,

assisting their children with homework, and becoming involved in school governance issues. However, since prior research has established that high quality interactions between parents and teachers are the most effective aspect of parental involvement effort, and, because exploration of ELL parental involvement is limited, the focus of this study is to investigate the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions from the perspectives of the ELL parents. The research question that guided this study was: What are the factors that influence ELL parent-teacher relationship and interactions from ELL parents' perspective?

The importance of this study lies in several areas: rapid growth in linguistically diverse students in rural areas is now a mainstream issue and yet many rural teachers feel unprepared to work productively with ELL students and their families; the investigation of ELL parent-teacher relationships and the tensions within them remain an understudied area in the literature; and the perspectives of ELL parents do matter if we are serious about recognizing the contributions that ELL parents can make to the children's success in school. Lastly, this study, which takes place in a small town in the Western state, is important because the National Center for Educational Statistics showed that the ELL population in the Western states has more than doubled in the decade between 1995-2005 (NCES, 2006). The conceptual framework that follows briefly discusses Edward Said's (2003/1979) postcolonial theory and how it is employed as a guiding lens for this study.

### Conceptual Framework

Despite the great influence and potentially positive impact of parental involvement and parent-teacher collaboration, parent-teacher relationships in general remain an area of tension (e.g., Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003), including ELL parent-teacher relationships (e.g., Henderson et. al, 2004; Hiatt-Michale, 2001; Panferov, 2010). Indeed, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) stated that the borderlands between families and schools are a "most complex and tender geography" (p. xi). In investigating the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions as intercultural relations, Edward Said's (2003/1979) postcolonial theory is instructive because he explored how different cultures are represented especially by people who occupy a more dominant position. Put differently, Said was particularly committed to equal human rights, and given that the broader goal of this study is to increase more equitable educational opportunities for ELLs by exploring the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions in which parents and

teachers occupy different cultural and power positions, Said's postcolonial theory provides a robust conceptual framework upon which to ground this study.

In his most famous work, *Orientalism*, Said (2003/1979) foregrounds the social fact that neither individuals, nor social groups, nor cultures ever develop or exist on a *level playing field* (an equal power level), because individuals, social groups, and cultures are always constituted in and through discursive and material practices that are invisibly constituted by complex sets of asymmetrical power relations. Along these lines, Jandt and Tanno (2001) argue that the framework for postcolonialism can be used to expose not only colonial imperialism but also discursive and material practices that are invisibly constituted by also *perceptual imperialism* in the present age. By perceptual imperialism, Jandt and Tanno mean "the process of observing and interpreting information about cultural Others through an underlying set of ideas based not so much on reality as on myth" (p. 120). Thus, the unequal power relations that constitute representational and differentiating practices in intercultural relations can be understood via the framework of postcolonial theory. In relevance to this study, ELL parent-teacher relationships are considered as intercultural relations because linguistic difference overlaps with cultural difference. Furthermore, ELL parent-teacher relationships are grounded in unequal power relations not only because of the different power positions that teachers and parents (like doctors and patients) occupy historically but also because of the different power positions that teachers, the majority of whom are European Americans and parents as racially and linguistically marginalized groups occupy historically (Luke, 2004).

From a postcolonial theoretical viewpoint, no discourse of knowledge, self, other or cultural relations and interactions is ever neutral (Said, 1994) and how problems of difference are understood depends on the political locations in which individuals stand. What this means for ELL parent-teacher interactions is that how teachers understand the cultural practices of ELL families, for instance, is never objective; rather, teachers' perceptions are influenced by their cultural, social, and political backgrounds. In this regard, intercultural relations are invisibly linked to discourses of unequal power relations between the members of the dominant and subordinated groups because the members of subordinated groups are represented by the members of the dominant group in ways that often serve the dominant group's interests – i.e., most often an unintentional act on the part of the members of the dominant group. Hence, when viewed through the

lens of postcolonial theory, ELL parent-teacher interactions are not just individual-to-individual relationships and relationships in which knowledge and opinion matters in their interactions are linked to the power relations that are historically constituted and thus not always visible. In other words, ELL parent-teacher interactions can be constituted by the usually unconscious enactment of power of the teacher. In this regard, this study, which explores the dynamics in ELL parent-teacher interactions in a rural area from ELL parents' perspectives, postcolonial theory helps us understand the subject position of the ELL parents and why ELL parents feel the way they feel.

To further ground the study, the literature review explores the benefits of parental involvement and the factors inhibiting ELL parental involvement. Although this study investigates the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions in a rural area, because current research on ELL parental involvement has been limited, parental involvement in children's schooling in general is reviewed.

### **Benefits of Parental Involvement**

Parental involvement in its broad term has been defined as "the willingness of parents to participate in the education of their children" (Jeynes, 2003, p. 204), and it has become "one of the centerpieces of educational dialogue among educators, parents, and political leaders" (Jeynes, 2003, p. 203) for quite some time already. In this regard, numerous studies have shown that parental involvement has a significant influence children's success at school (Heymann & Earle, 2000; Panferov, 2010; Walker, 2012; Wei & Zhou, 2012). With respect to rural areas, King (2012) reported that parental involvement serves as one of the factors that most impacts rural students' decisions to attend college. This finding is not surprising given that students become motivated when they observe their parents take an active interest in school because parent involvement communicates to students how important they are to their parents (Gonzales-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005). Other researchers have shown that the parents who emphasize their children's achievement as important and who are actively involved in their learning significantly impact student motivation (Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001). Some studies have shown that parental involvement is also positively related to students' attitudes toward school and to reduced high school dropout rates (Rumberger et al., 1990; Jeynes, 2003). Others have even reported that parental involvement impacts time students spend on home work (e.g.,

Trusty, 1996; Gonzales-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005).

These studies have looked at parental involvement as parent-teacher collaborative tasks and relationships, which make a perfect sense given that parents and teachers, have the mutual goal of children's success in school. With respect to ELL students, researchers have similarly shown that parental involvement has a positive effect on their second language learning, student motivations, and academic achievement (e.g., Kanno & Cromley, 2013; Walker, 2012; Wei & Zhou, 2012).

Many researchers have also argued that encouraging ELL parental involvement can be difficult (Kozol, 1991; Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Queen, 1998; Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). Some studies have identified factors limiting ELL parents' school involvement as a mismatch between the parents' own experiences with, and expectations for school, as well as their English proficiency (Bosher, 1998; Hyslop, 2000; Jeynes, 2003; Muchinsky & Tangren, 1999). Others have identified obstacles as the lack of effective communication venues between parents and the teachers (Padgett, 2006; Scribner, Young & Pedroza, 1999); the low level of support and training provided by the school to encourage greater parent engagement (Gibson, 2002); and the lack of time and resources to take time off from work (Heymann & Early, 2000). Also, Smith, Astern, and Shatrova (2008) have identified the factors inhibiting Hispanic parental involvement in their children's school as "the failure of the school to send correspondence, school calendar, lunch menus or newsletters written in Spanish; and the inability of the parents to speak and advocate for the right of their children" (p. 18).

Through a brief literature review on the different aspects and effects of parental involvement, what is notable is that many studies assume that parent-teacher collaboration occurs on an equal power level. So for instance, if English proficiency issues were solved, if schools provided more training and opportunities to support parental engagement, and if the time constraint from parents' work was taken into an account more seriously, then productive and active parental involvement and successful teacher-parent relationships are attainable. In other words, the current parental involvement model often does not attend to the structural aspects and power asymmetry of parent-teacher relationships that can hinder productive collaboration. That said, the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions in rural areas merit further research because (a) parent-teacher interactions hold great potential to improve student achievement (Cox, 2005), (b) the ELLs overall in the nations are underperforming academically when

compared to their counterparts (Winke, 2011), (c) ELL parent involvement continues to be difficult (Kozol, 1991; Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Queen, 1998; Panferov, 2010), and (d) the rapid growth of ELLs in rural areas brings unique challenges to the schools in meeting their academic needs.

### **Methods**

The study uses a general qualitative methodology to explore the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions.

#### **Setting**

The context of this study is a town located in the south-central portion of a Western state in the U.S. The state is made up of primarily rural ranching communities, and the town has a population of 9300. Due to many employment opportunities linked to the state penitentiary and coal mines in the town, in the last two decades the town's mainly white population has become increasingly diverse, with the greatest increase in the Latino population, but also including individuals from China, Thailand, and Philippines. Consequently, the influx of ELLs has been noticeable in the town, and the public school ELL population in the town has more than doubled since 1990's.

The town houses two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Currently, 26.6 % of the total student population is Hispanic, and Asians and Native Americans account for 4.1%. With regard to English as Second Language (ESL) services, 11.8% of the total student population qualifies and over 15% of the total student population lives in a home where one or both parents speak a language other than English.

#### **Participants**

Participants were recruited from middle school parents. The total student population of the middle school is 385, and according to an administrator of the school district, about 20 % of the middle school population is ELL students. Initially, a district ESL program coordinator assisted the researcher in identifying and contacting the participants in person and by telephone calls. Six ELL parents whose children were enrolled in the middle school responded to the coordinator's invitation and volunteered to participate in this research project. Of the six parents, four parents spoke Spanish as their first language and two parents spoke Chinese as their first language. The number of years that the participating parents and their families lived in the town is between 3 to 10 years. Three of the Spanish

speaking parents did not feel comfortable interacting in English with the researcher; for these three, a high school ESL teacher in the same school district who speaks Spanish as a second language fluently served as a translator. The other three parents spoke English to communicate with the researcher. One Spanish-speaking parent and one Chinese-speaking parent were fathers of their children, and the other parents were mothers of their children.

#### **Procedures**

The researcher and the six volunteer ELL parents met initially at an ELL parent night at the middle school. The middle school holds a parent night for ELL parents twice during a school year, and according to the district ESL coordinator, the attendance rate remains low. During the ELL parent night, the researcher and the ELL parents talked casually in a group but also on a one-to-one basis. Each individual conversation lasted about 15 minutes, and they all agreed to participate in future individual interviews. Following the ELL parent night, the researcher contacted each ELL parent and met with them individually for about an hour. All the interviews were tape-recorded, and as mentioned above, the translations for the three ELL parent interviews were provided by a high school ESL teacher. The main question that guided the interviews was: How do you feel about interacting with your child's teachers?

#### **Data Analysis**

Open coding strategy of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to identify and analyze the patterns and themes within the participants.

#### **Findings and Discussion**

While the details of each ELL parent's interactions with their children's teachers were not identical, there were many similar dynamics that were found to be important. The discussions in this study pertain to the experiences of the participants in this study; thus, they cannot be generalized. In addition, this study does not deny the importance of the perspectives of teachers and their expertise. However, the present study focuses on the perspectives of ELL parents, and the findings from this study illuminate the general, yet important to acknowledge, asymmetrical power relations that shape the nature of ELL parent-teacher interactions. Below are the discussions of the findings, which are organized into different themes. Each theme is

discussed with one or more examples from the statements made by the participating ELL parents.

### Theme One: Teachers' Judgments

One of the most common misconceptions about linguistically diverse populations is that English language proficiency is linked to intelligence (Cummins, 2000). From such a myth, teachers can easily assume that students or parents who do not speak English fluently lack in their capacity to think at the same levels that people who speak English as their first language. In this regard, one Chinese ELL mother expressed her frustration about teachers' judgments toward her and her child.

*They think our limited English and accents mean our IQs are low, and we cannot think for ourselves. One time a teacher generalized our values of education based on a single encounter with one other Chinese parent. Just because how we educate our children did not meet the teacher's expectation does not mean that we don't care about our children. Is there any parent who really doesn't care about her children and their education?*

The parent perceived the teacher prejudged the entire Chinese population based on a single previous encounter with another Chinese parent. She also expressed her surprise at a teacher assuming that Chinese parents do not care about their children's education, which she alluded to as being unfair. A Chinese father commented:

*One time, my wife and I had a parent-teacher conference with our children's teachers. When we were talking about the teaching of math, my wife just wondered how math was taught since my wife felt that the teaching of math is rather slow here in the US. The teacher did not even explain how teachers taught math here and pointed out that research had shown that this was the best way to do it and that other ways to teach math are not as effective. The teacher also told us that we needed to catch up with how math is being taught here. Even though my wife and I wanted to say more, we felt intimidated by this teacher because we don't speak English very well. In our hearts, however, we know that it does not mean that we are not intelligent people.*

This parent further expressed his frustration regarding teachers' unwillingness to be open about different ways of teaching math. This parent also commented that the teacher's insistence on focusing only on how math is taught in the US as opposed to other places in the world is not only unfair but not dehumanizing.

From a postcolonial perspective (e.g., Said, 1994, 2003/1979), the members of the subordinated groups are defined as inferior based on the members of the dominant group's perspectives. In this case, the parent perceives the teacher's judgment to be underpinned by prejudice, which is not based on objective facts but rather on myths that inhabit the unconscious mind of the teacher. From this perspective, the teacher is unconsciously and unknowingly operating within a colonial trajectory in which what is different from the dominant culture to which the teacher belongs, i.e., the different level of English proficiency and the different ways to educate children, are considered inferior. The teacher's perspectives, when viewed through the lens of postcolonial theory, are influenced by the complex history of which the teacher is probably not aware, and yet the teacher's judgment, which obviously influenced the ELL parent-teacher interaction, reflects the social fact that the presence of the past must not be denied or ignored.

### Theme Two: Inability to Influence a Teacher's Decision Making

Another prominent postcolonial scholar, Gayatri Spivak (1988) in her influential work, *Can the subaltern Speak*, discusses the importance of *speaking voice*. More specifically, Spivak argues that white men in colonial time represented brown women as if their representation was objective and neutral. Therefore, brown women did not have speaking voice. Here, what Spivak refers to as a speaking voice in her work is not limited to the actual act of talking but includes the power and influence that the speaking voice has or does not have. One Hispanic ELL parent in this regard stated that, "They tell us that our opinions are welcome and that we are free to voice our opinions but then they do whatever they want to do anyway."

Another Hispanic ELL parent echoed this statement and stated:

*I always feel like I am being talked at but not talked with. They say that they are only interested in students' learning. My feeling is that teachers report how my children do in school, but they never ask me how my children do at home. They have all the answers ready for me but no question.*

Similarly, another Hispanic ELL parent commented:

*I feel like I am wasting my time when I talk to my child's teachers. They already made their decisions about many things, but they are trying to making it seem like it is also my decision. In reality, I know I am not at all a part of any*

*decision making process. I feel pretty degraded when I am treated as if I have no ability whatsoever to see through how they are not really including me.*

All three parents also expressed feelings of intimidation even when the teachers do not directly intimidate them. In his critical essay about a prescriptive model of dialogue, Nicholas Burbulas (2000) asserts that a conception of dialogue is based on a neutral communicative process. However, Burbulas contends that “a dialogue is not an engagement of two (or more) abstract persons” (p. 262), rather it is a “discursive relation situated against the background of previous relations” (p.262) that is imbued with complex asymmetrical power relations. From such a perspective, the imbalance of power that accompanies ELL parent-teacher interactions impacts the dynamics of the interactions. Furthermore, such asymmetry cannot simply be discarded by teachers: the attributes of status, power, and authority have been socially and historically assigned to the teacher’s position and as such may be at least a partial reason why these parents felt intimidated and talked at. While one parent felt that his opinions, even when given the floor, did not really count, the other parent felt that she was not given the floor at all to contribute to her children’s school lives. From a postcolonial theoretical perspective, which attends to power asymmetry in intercultural relations, both are symptoms of unequal power differences that even assertive ELL parents and well-intended teachers cannot entirely escape.

### **Theme Three: Fear of Negative Repercussion against Speaking Up**

Many ELL parents felt that teachers are not genuinely willing to respond to their questions. Said (1994, 2003/1979) contends that how the members of subordinated group are represented and spoken for is largely affected by those who belong to the dominant group. So, for example, in the field of education, the more powerful (teachers who are from dominant groups), knowingly or unknowingly, and often in the name of equality, impose their values on subordinate groups (e.g., ELL students and their parents) without risking any disruption to their own positions. Thus, in the end, it is the ELL parents who are forced through normalizing grids constructed by the teachers. Furthermore, if the members of the subordinated group resist the values of the dominant, the consequences are often negative (Said, 1994).

One Hispanic ELL parent stated:

*I just feel that the only way to make them happy is if you remain quiet and you just agree with everything they say. I feel like they want to have*

*all the control and when you question them about materials or extra support, they give you that face, **how dare you?***

Another Hispanic ELL parent similarly claimed:

*I recognize their expertise, and sometimes I just want to know more about how they are helping my child. But the minute I ask them a question, they become defensive and I realize I’d better not saying anything. Really, their professional knowledge is lost in their demeanor.*

In regards to remaining silent because of the fear of possible negative consequences, one Chinese ELL parent also stated:

*There are many times I want to say something or ask something, but I end up not saying anything because I am afraid that my child will be penalized by a teacher because I made the teacher angry by asking her questions.*

The idea of possible repercussions that might result from ELL parents’ communication with teachers played a big role in these parents’ decisions to remain quiet. Essentially, these parents seem to calculate the risk before asking questions that might make teachers defensive. In other words, these ELL parents may have been asking if the potential benefits from asking questions is worth the risk of possibly angering their children’s teacher, especially when teachers have an inordinate ability to affect their children’s social, emotional and academic well-being. When viewed through the lens of postcolonial theory, the fear of these ELL parents about the repercussions makes sense, given that the members of the subordinate group suffer the consequences in one form or another for not remaining complicit and assimilating into the dominant values, whereas there are virtually no consequences flowing in the opposite direction for the dominant group.

### **Implications**

Among the many factors that limit productive ELL parental involvement in a child’s school, this study explored the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions by looking at ELL parent-teacher interactions as intercultural relations in which ELL parents (who are from historically marginalized groups) and teachers (who are European Americans) occupy different power positions historically. The teacher population in the middle school described in this study is predominantly European Americans. At a broader level and similarly, the teacher population in public schools in the nation continues to remain predominantly European American (e.g., Berg, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010), and this is especially true in rural areas (e.g, O’Neal, Ringler. & Fodriquez, 2008). Moreover, this study

focused on the perspectives of ELL parents not because the perspectives of teachers are unimportant or invalid, but to expose the voices of ELL parents in a rural area, which are often overlooked in the literature.

In this study, the three broad themes that emerged as obstacles that inhibit productive ELL parent-teacher interactions in a rural area are teachers' judgments toward ELL students and their parents; ELL parents' frustration about their inability to influence a teacher's decision making; and ELL parents' fear of repercussions for speaking up. These three themes were analyzed from a standpoint of postcolonial theory which showed that what impacts the ELL parent-teacher interactions includes the histories that are beyond immediate context and yet that constitute positions of ELL parents and teachers that are not on equal power levels. While these socially constructed subject positions are not reversible merely through good intentions, being aware of the unequal power dynamics and the tensions they cause has important implications for teachers working with ELL students and their parents. More specifically, even though unequal power dynamics do and will continue to exist in ELL parent-teacher interactions and even though such inequality are the effects of systemic social conditions, if improvement is going to occur, it will be largely a function of how we as teachers act (or don't act) in relation to ELL parents. From such a commitment, below are a few implications drawn from this study for all teachers working with ELL students and their parents.

Making an effort to learn from differences, how parents know and view their children for instance, as not something that needs to be overcome, not something that need to be merely tolerated, but as something that serves as a generative ground in which teachers can move beyond their taken-for-granted ways of knowing and seeing children. While the campaign to respect differences in the field of education is not new, in practice, however, we do find it very hard to live together amidst difference (Boler, 1999). People are not all the same and the articulating of differences and truly listening to differences offers teachers fertile soil for thinking outside familiar frames of reference. Interacting with ELL parents who possess different values can be uncomfortable and at times even unsettling for teachers. However, if we are not willing to listen and learn from the parents of ELL students, we do stand to lose by not challenging ourselves and engaging constructively with ELL parents, who may not always share our point of view. This requires teachers to consider what it means to really respect and understand the ELL students and parents so that

differences are not merely tolerated but rather may provide the foundations for creativity through which teachers can further assist their ELL students to succeed in school.

As shown in this study, some ELL parents feel intimidated, excluded, and even demeaned by a subtle message that teachers unknowingly communicate that the parents do not care about their children's education and have not adequately prepared their children to succeed in school. In conclusion, it may be helpful for teachers to make a conscious effort to be more self-reflexive in several ways. First, it is important to respond to the questions that ELL parents may ask in genuinely respectful ways to ensure that the parents are encouraged to ask more questions and to learn what parents do not understand. Second, it is also important to make an effort to not only report how an ELL student is doing in school but to be curious about and interested in learning about how the child is doing at home. In this regard, teachers need to learn to value the knowledge of parents and recognize the contributions that they can make to the children's success in school. In fact, it would serve teachers well to see the ELL parents as essential partners in ELL students' optimal learning. This means that teachers have to learn to listen—"patiently, intently, and respectfully—to parental perspectives on their children" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. 230), so that teachers learn the child's life outside of school and convey to parents that they do care about their children.

Moreover, it is critical for teachers in rural areas, who are mostly whites and have little exposure to diversity, to remind themselves that a child's and parent's proficiency level in English and their accents cannot be equated with their intelligence level. While teachers may very well understand this concept theoretically, in practice, such judgments occur more often than not (e.g., Cummins, 2000), and it requires a conscious effort for teachers not to demean the ELL students and parents by making false assumptions. Lastly, this study is not suggesting at all that such reflexive work for teachers working in rural areas is easy. In fact, creating new spaces for ELL parent-teacher interactions in which teachers genuinely welcome parents' questions and their ways of seeing and knowing their child, and seeing them as invaluable resources for working successfully with their children may require a continual effort, struggle, and hard work. Such an effort is one of the critical requirements in facilitating ELL parent-teacher communication that are open and collaborative which in turn will benefit ELL students' educational, social, and emotional growth in rural areas. In this respect, teacher training programs need



to focus more on teaching pre-service teachers about working with parents in general and with ELL

parents more specifically.

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