

# Transformations To Serve English Learners: A Call for Innovative Partnerships in Educator Preparation

*Dr. Joan Lachance*

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Education reform for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and the current era of standards-based instruction are profound catalysts for increased momentum and realignment of what is considered *the norm* with regard to diversity, multicultural education, and English learners (ELs). Now, more than ever, institutions of higher education (IHEs) are faced with understanding the profound and multifaceted relationships between education programs accreditation criteria and the critical concepts of culturally responsive pedagogy with language learning (Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Education Programs [CACREP], 2014; Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2013). This strategic balance between theory and application within preservice educator coursework includes the fundamental understanding of how to address local, state, and national needs for hard-to-staff schools and shortage fields, including English language learning. Likewise, IHEs as providers, must address educator candidates' development of critical concepts and pedagogy resulting in the elimination of academic barriers, as well as meeting the ever-changing demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century P-12 classrooms (CAEP, 2013; CACREP, 2014; Crethar, 2010; Gay, 2010; Schellenberg & Grothaus, 2011). The swift and ever-changing demands of the P-12 demographic ultimately require innovative thinking to continuously reflect upon programs and the demonstrative specifics related to authentic preparation for the tasks at hand. Once educators are in the field, they must meet the needs of the diversity within the United States P-12 population, designing and delivering educational services in diverse schools (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2004, 2010, 2014).

Ultimately, the demands of educator candidates have swiftly transformed themselves to encompass strategic considerations concerning the impacts of collaborative cross-cultural literacies, multilingualism, and the emphasis on academic language development (Lee & Dallman, 2008). Candidates' competencies of globally productive student learning and academic success, cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as systemic change are the framing guiding principles for teachers' and school counselors' roles within professional school communities (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012; Arredondo, Tovar-Blank, & Parham, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

With this in mind, a perpetual pattern of "missing the mark" still exists. Most educators still feel ill-prepared to work with English learners, in spite of the changing demographics and well-intended standards for educator preparation (de Jong, E. J., & Harper, C.A., 2005; Goodwin, 2002). Teachers, once working in school systems that were rather uniform, are now working with culturally and linguistically diverse students in a multitude of P-12 settings (NCES, 2014). Research also confirms that most teachers are white, female, of European descent, and with monolingual backgrounds in schooling (Lewis, 2006; Nieto, 2012; Kolano, Dávila, Lachance, & Coffey, 2014). Consequently, educator preparation programs must continue to think innovatively, searching for comprehensive answers to meet the demands of the profession.

## Context of the Project

This study's findings are from an urban, qualitative investigation that carefully examined high school counselor practices with English learners, including specific elements for comprehensive partnerships with teachers. The contextual details for the study include its location in an urban district in the Piedmont (south-central) region of North Carolina. English as a second language program services for linguistically and culturally diverse students are provided in all schools for the district (NCDPI, 2014). Additionally, in accordance with public school licensure mandates in North Carolina, school counselors serving all students, including immigrant ELs, must have completed a masters-level counselor preparation program in order to work as a K-12 school counselor in a public school. Of the district's approximate 140, 000 students K-12, nearly 10 % are classified as limited English proficient (LEP) (Charlotte-Mecklenburg School [CMS], 2011, 2013).

Representative of the national trend, school counseling programs are clearly called to respond to the needs of diverse student populations, removing barriers to academic achievement through standards-based, comprehensive, and culturally responsive program services (Chen-Hayes, Miller, Baily, Getch, & Erford, 2011; Crethar, 2010; Martin & Robinson, 2011; No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2001). Likewise, school counseling program policies follow those of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model for school counseling programs, decisively shaping program design and delivery (ASCA, 2008, 2010, 2012). The ASCA framework's quadrants of Foundation, Delivery, Management, and Accountability insist school counselors possess knowledge and skills for diversification within the student services. School counseling practices include an emphasis on rigor, diversity within experiential learning, and the facilitation of appropriate academic pathways for *all* students. (ASCA, 2012; Chen-Hayes, Miller, Baily, Getch, & Erford, 2011; NCDPI, 2014).

This multi-case study focused intensely on the experiences of four professional school counselors who revealed aspects of school counselor preparation, required daily practices in the field, and how they were equipped to work with ELs. Within the process, substantial particulars emerged regarding the urgency of understanding how to design and deliver culturally responsive, standards-based services to linguistically and culturally diverse students, including partnerships with teachers for critical input within the process.

## Theoretical Frame

The fundamental principles of the study's framework are grounded in social constructivism, the idea that knowledge comes from real-world experiences (Glesne, 2006). Expanding this one step further explains this paradigm to mean that human beings do construct meaning as real-world perceptions through interaction with others across a variety of social contexts, including school, with undoubtedly deep-rooted cultural aspects (Crotty, 1998). Correspondingly, Lev Vygotsky proclaimed the fundamental concept that cognitive development and learning requires student interaction and [academic] language dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). A child's achievement is fully dependent on and determined by interdependent problem solving in collaboration with capable peers under the guidance of an adult for eventual learned independence in completing academic tasks (Gibbons, 2002). Additionally, this study and its connections to language and culture are also framed by the theoretical understanding of linguistic

and sociocultural fundamentals of second language acquisition (Chomsky, 1986; Cummins, 1981; Krashan, 1985).

Theorist Jim Cummins' fundamental research in second language acquisition has resulted in the further conceptualization of language proficiency (Cummins, 1981, 2000; Gregory & Chapman, 2007). Cummins' distinction between two levels of language proficiency has had deep implications in the field of education, extending the shaping of pedagogy and language development (Gibbons, 2002). Cummins (1981) formalized the terms *Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)* and *Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)* in order to characterize the difference between the context-embedded social language used in everyday contexts from the context-reduced academic language necessary to do well on high-stakes testing in school. In order for English learners to be academically successful, they must master academic English as well as content area concepts through exposure to rigorous curricula (Calderón, Slavin, and Sánchez, 2011).

Therefore, school counselors and teachers are in strategic loci to be vigilant, to consider these crucial details along with the sociocultural context of diversity within education. These positions of teaching and school counseling facilitate partnerships when serving as true student advocates by facilitating the design of student-specific academic plans (Nieto, 2012). While the need for school counselors and teachers to have this understanding is clear, this study reveals the need to fully understand collaborative partnerships between school counselors and teachers to transform educational approaches with ELs in new, innovative ways.

## Methods

This qualitative, multi-case study explored the intricate practice of how four high school counselors facilitated the course selection process for recently-arrived English learners via individual student planning (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Each participant was a recent graduate (within five years or less) of an accredited counselor preparation program, held North Carolina licensure in school counseling, and was monolingual. Attention was given to school counselors' practical display of preparedness for the task of addressing linguistic and social complexities while facilitating English learners' success through appropriate exposure to language, rigor, and content curriculum through observations and open-ended interviews. Considering these elements, qualitative analysis was employed, resulting in the thick description of school counselors' observed practices as well as their beliefs regarding beneficial knowledge and skills related to addressing the linguistic and social complexities of English learners. Table 1 shows the makeup of the participant group.

Data collection and analysis occurred in multiple stages (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Since the purpose of this study was to examine emerging thick descriptions, the data collection for the study allowed for systematic procedures for collecting qualitative data through counselor consultative discussions, observations, audio recordings, and in-depth, ethnographic-like interviews, all of which generated knowledge (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001; Piantanida, Tananis, & Grubs, 2004; Seidman, 2006). The researcher's interview protocol for two 90-minute interviews per participant included questions that resulted in participants' expressions regarding what information they found to be helpful while working with English learners. This protocol, ethnographically framed field notes from four individual student planning session observations, each lasting a minimum of one hour, as

well as the verbatim transcriptions from counselor interviews, were used for open and axial coding. Constant comparative analysis was done to inductively identify and thematically categorize the emergent data. Selective coding served to refine the identified common themes and subsequent themes and patterns in the emerged data from the interview transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The qualitative process for reduction, analysis, and interpretation of the findings ultimately resulted in the researcher’s findings and conclusions of overarching themes and subsequent themes.

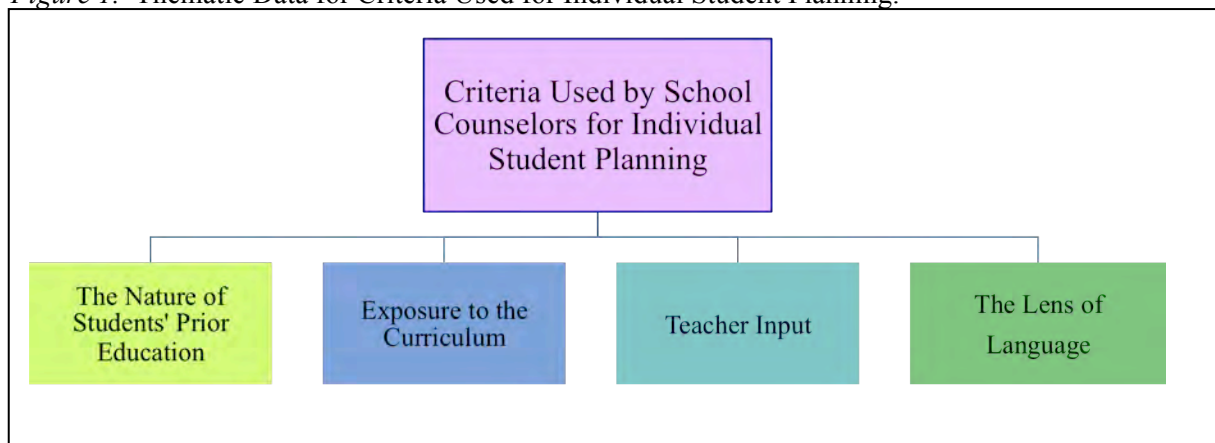
**Table 1.**  
**Participant Group**

	Female	Male	Total
Recent Graduate	4	0	4
NC Licensure	4	0	4
Monolingual	4	0	4

### Results

Conclusively, like teachers, participant school counselors who work with English learners described little or no strong feelings of competency to work with such students. This is relevant in the historical pattern (Collison, et al., 1998), and yet school counselors are uniquely positioned to play a crucial role for advocacy and education reform (Ravich, 2006; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010). School counselors must no longer be viewed as part of “ancillary hallways” where students receive intensive therapeutic services, but rather as team members to form comprehensive partnerships with teachers. School counselors as authorities on child development, academic achievement, mental health, and catalysts for systemic change (ASCA, 2012; NCDPI, 2014) bring innovative skills and knowledge that, when combined with pedagogical strategies, form a new layer in best practices for working with ELs (Albers, Hoffman, & Lundahl, 2009). Similarly, while all graduate coursework taken by the participants was found to be highly valuable and pertinent, there was little advantageous emphasis given to *how* to deliver comprehensive systems of service with English learners. The emergent, detailed thick descriptive data indicated nuances about the criteria used by school counselors to facilitate individual planning sessions with high school ELs. Four major areas for consideration were revealed. As a result, the organically formed subsequent themes of (a) the shape of students’ prior education; (b) exposure to the curriculum; (c) teacher input; and (d) the lens of language had collective positions within the study’s findings (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1.* Thematic Data for Criteria Used for Individual Student Planning.



## Criteria Used by School Counselors for Individual Student Planning

All four participants relied on myriad data sources for student related information to make specific educational recommendations. Examples of data sources noted were intake documents, enrollment forms, prior report cards and or school transcripts, and English language proficiency testing results. For the purposes of this presentation, there is focus on one specific area of findings, teacher input.

### *Teacher Input*

As the interview protocol was used with all study participants, there was definitive evidence that the participating school counselors consider teacher input as important for individual student planning sessions and course selection with English learners. This is quite positive in approach as it indicates leadership, advocacy, and collaboration for the shared venture and common goal of student success (Militello, Rallis, & Goldrin, 2009; NCDPI, 2014; Skrla, Bell, & Scheurich, 2009). The remaining dilemma remains that teachers feel ill-prepared to work with second language learners (Delpit, 2006; Lee & Dallman, 2008). Interviews and observations within the study indicated that both teachers and school counselors understand they must address EL students' needs but are unclear about how to do this. The following is an example of observed nuances in this segment of the study, expressing the notion that teachers and counselors alike are in positions to collaborate regarding English learners yet often don't feel prepared to know how to collaborate. Participants shared their thoughts applicable to the questions regarding teachers' and counselors' reactions to English learner enrollment via individual student planning sessions:

Participant: Well, I work with the ESL teacher and I get content teacher recommendations forms for all the core teachers so they recommend things. They know their students better than I know their students. They're in the classroom with them every day so they recommend things. The ESL teacher will also recommend when a student needs to come out of ESL. They will tell me where they think the students need to be.

Participant: ...some teachers are a little more accepting of an ESL student in their class. They might come to me and [say] "I've got this new student, what can you tell me about him—I know he doesn't speak any English." And some are great because you can just explain they should do what they can with them. And then you get the teachers that come up and say "I've got this kid in my class and he doesn't speak any English. What am I supposed to do with him?" And, you're saying "well, he's got to be somewhere." You're not the only teacher who has those students who don't speak a whole lot of English. Here [at this school] you get the extremes, even from the newer teachers.

Another participant expressed:

Participant: The most common response from teachers is "what am I supposed to do with this kid?" That's the most common response about schedules because we've [our school] got kids who don't speak a word of English in courses like astronomy. Well, I mean we [counselors] needed to give them a class so basically what am I supposed to do with this kid? I get a lot of that. A lot. Just like, what am I supposed to do, what am I supposed to do, what am I supposed to do? I mean it's a little uneasy for us all.

By and large, these teacher-generated conversations indicate teachers are willing to communicate with school counselors. These interviews, observations, and field notes confirmed the participating counselors were open to teachers' input, both content and ESL teachers, regarding students' placement in courses after their initial individual student planning sessions and course selections. In fact, this teacher input was considered vital. The polarization within the interview results and observation data was reflected in *how* the input was interpreted by the school counselors to then carry out services. More importantly, if both parties are unclear about what to do with English learners, the question remains whether or not the counselor/teacher partnership resulted in successful EL student exposure to curriculum and pedagogy required for academic language development (Genesee, Gava, Dressler, & Kamil, 2006). Meaning, the well-intended conversations between the counselors and the teachers may or may not result in ELs gaining access to teachers who feel confident with pedagogical practices to make the content subjects comprehensible, teaching language and content simultaneously (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Walqui, 2000a, 2000b; Genesee, 2000; World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment [WIDA], 2014). Even with a desired attempt to serve ELs, the crucial need remains for teachers and school counselors to have *in-depth* understandings on how to effectively frame comprehensive pedagogical methodologies and additional student support services for language development processes and academic achievement.

### **Significance and Transformative Recommendations**

In conclusion, the findings of this study solidified and extended the current literature regarding the role of the school counselor for the 21<sup>st</sup> century as advocates for collaborative educational transformation. (Albers, Hoffman, & Lundahl, 2009; Arredondo, Tovar-Blank, & Parham, 2008; ASCA, 2005; Bemark, 2000; NCDPI, 2014). This research is an urgent benchmark to generate new perspectives on the challenges educators face while working with ELs and ways in which comprehensive partnerships between school counselors and teachers can equip them for the charge. However, within these partnerships, it is evident that teachers and school counselors need specific criteria to discuss. A framework for collaborative discourse with specific attention to facets of EL students' academic backgrounds, language proficiencies, socio-cultural contexts for learning, as well as other pertinent details could serve to build a more foundationally-sound platform for pedagogical change (Parsons, 2009; WIDA, 2014). The needs for teachers and counselors to be well-informed is two-fold. First, they must understand that variations for language support in the classroom is vital for academic language development. Second, they must understand *how* to collaborate about this. (Camot, & O'Malley, 1994; O'Malley, & Chamot, 1989; WIDA, 2014).

Ultimately, the study reveals that school counselor education programs, while highly grounded in foundational theory, must look to find innovative ways to shape the parameters of experiences of teachers. These must support practitioners' comprehensive demonstration of a true sense of preparedness to work with English learners. A resounding recommendation links to strategic connections during clinical experiences to specifically involve English learners and the identified beneficial skills related to best professional practices while comprehensively collaborating with skilled teachers in this area. Another significant recommendation is to examine the option of infusing elements of second language acquisition and true comparative education into current course syllabi for teachers and school counselors. The notion of interdisciplinary approaches between education faculty and Teaching English as a Second Language

(TESL) faculty may be further explored to combine the theoretical notions from myriad fields into the discipline-specific coursework.

Finally, with current national and state standards focused on a new vision for teachers and school counselors, it also becomes more crucial to also look for ways to support current practicing professionals through high-quality, on-going, and sustainable professional development, comprehensively coordinating communication and services. With these changes, the focus on English learners' student outcomes and academic achievement is more comprehensively addressed.

#### *About the Author*

*Dr. Joan Lachance is an Assistant Professor in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her research agenda encompasses TESL and Dual Language teacher/educator preparation, P-12 academic literacy and language development, as well as critical pedagogy and access to multicultural curricula.*



*Within her faculty position, Dr. Lachance serves as a leader in North Carolina and the surrounding region, specializing in professional development for teachers, school counselors, and school administrators on best practices for English learner education, social justice and multicultural pedagogy, authentic assessments for English learners, and international comparative education.*

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