

Policy, Context and Schooling: The Education of English Learners in Rural New Destinations

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Abstract

The number of immigrant English learners attending schools in new destinations across the US is rapidly increasing. We draw on the sociological scholarship on “contexts of reception” and scholarship on sociocultural approaches to policy to examine the educational contexts faced by immigrant English learners in new destination communities and how these contexts shape their educational experiences. Using data from qualitative case studies of rural school districts in Wisconsin, we examined local discourses surrounding new immigrant populations, and how they shaped the ways in which local educators interpreted and enacted educational policies on the ground. We argue that policy implementation is influenced by local understandings of immigrant English learners and their educational needs, such that potentially inclusive educational policies become assimilative in practice.

Keywords

Education, English learners, educational policy, anthropology and education, rural education

Introduction

The growth of immigrant populations is extending beyond traditional gateway cities as immigrants move to suburbs, small cities, towns and rural areas, especially in the Midwestern and Southeastern U.S. (Marrow, 2011; Martinez, 2011; McConnell, 2006; Wortham, 2001; Wortham, Mortimer & Allard, 2009; Zuniga & Hernandez-Leon, 2006). As immigrant populations have settled in new destinations, a growing body of research has focused on how immigrant groups are being incorporated into

communities that have relatively little experience with foreign-born populations. With a few important exceptions, the research on immigrants in new destinations has focused on the contexts faced by adults and not on the unique contexts encountered by school-aged children and youth (Hamann, Wortham & Murillo, 2001; Wortham, 2001). For school-aged

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immigrant children and youth, schools play a primary role in the incorporation process. What immigrant students learn in classrooms shapes their future opportunities, and how they are treated by their teachers and peers influences their understandings as to where they fit in their new country.

Our focus in this paper is on the educational contexts, particularly the academic ones, facing immigrant students who are English learners (ELs) in rural new destinations. We are particularly concerned with how national, state and local educational policies and school district and school-level staffing shape the ways in which schools are responding to immigrant ELs. Because schools and school districts exist within community contexts, we will also consider the impact of community context on the decisions that local educators make regarding the education of immigrant ELs. Thus, we are asking: How are schools in rural communities that are new destinations for immigrants responding to the recent influx of immigrant students who are English learners (ELs)? How are educational contexts for immigrant ELs influenced by policy contexts, school district contexts, educators' professional judgments, and local community contexts?

Importance of Contexts of Reception

Sociologists have highlighted the influence of the contexts of reception – government policies, economic opportunities, societal attitudes, and the presence or absence of existing co-ethnic networks – on immigrant adjustment and incorporation into US society (Portes & Borocz, 1989; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Discussions regarding the contexts of reception have been central to theory of segmented assimilation, which portends that many members of the second generation face serious barriers to upward mobility. Writing in the late twentieth

and the early part of the 21st century, sociologists of immigration have identified the barriers associated with the hour glass economy, which limits the abilities of poor and uneducated immigrants to find jobs that pay a living wage (Zhou, 1997; Waldinger, 1996). Research shows that many of the lowest skilled and poorest immigrants settled in declining urban environments, which further threatens their path of incorporation (Zhou, 1997). Sociologists have underlined the importance of co-ethnic social networks in immigrants' ability to successfully negotiate life in their new communities. Despite the obstacles facing low-income immigrants, co-ethnic social networks have been shown to play a central role in immigrants' ability to secure employment and have even been found to have a protective effect on immigrant youth in urban environments (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Dominant group attitudes towards immigrants and immigration further shape experiences and opportunities for immigrants and their children. As many scholars have observed, Americans are notoriously ambivalent about immigrants, simultaneously celebrating the immigrant roots of the US and calling for the closing of borders (Schrag, 2010; Suarez-Orozco, 2006). Of course, not all immigrants are viewed equally, and research suggests that racial differences account for some of the variation in how immigrants from various ethnic groups have adjusted (Stepnick & Stepnick, 2009). Furthermore, some scholars have found that attitudes regarding a particular immigrant group may change over time in response to economic and other social conditions (Portes & Fernandez-Kelly, 2008; Ong, 2003).

The growing body of research on immigrants in “new destinations” and the research on the “new Latino diaspora” has highlighted the importance of regional contexts on immigrant experiences. In her research on Latinos in the rural South, Marrow (2011) found

that regional context matters in relation to “assimilation, race relations and political and institutional responsiveness to immigrants” (p. 233). Unlike those who settle in established immigrant communities, immigrants in new destinations generally do not find a well-established co-ethnic network or ethnic organizations. Despite the possible challenges of being isolated from co-ethnic communities, research on the experiences of Latinos who have settled outside traditional Latino settlements suggests that these new spaces may offer immigrants greater flexibility to negotiate their experiences with the dominant group. Wortham and colleagues (2009) asserted, “Such locations allow more flexible and sometimes more hopeful immigrant identities. Immigrants in the New Latino Diaspora face both more ignorance and more opportunity than in areas of traditional settlement.” (p. 395). Wortham’s ethnographic research in one town with a new and growing Latino population suggests that Latinos have emerged as a “model minority” in contrast to the more established population of African Americans. Similarly, Marrow (2011) discovered that Latinos in the rural South were generally preferred over African Americans by employers. As the literature on new destinations suggests, ideas regarding immigrants are influenced by the presence or absence of other racialized minority groups as immigrant newcomers are compared to both whites and groups of color.

The literature mentioned above focuses primarily on Latino populations, and that is, indeed, the most visible immigrant group to venture to new destination communities. It is, however, not the only immigrant group to do so. In our study, for example, a particular community had a new influx of Somali immigrants/refugees. In contrast with Latino immigrants, the Somali population is black, Muslim, and as refugees have limited or interrupted prior education. Thus the dynamics around racism, religious tolerance, and

perceptions of educational potential are encountered differently (Bigelow, 2010; Kusow & Bjork, 2007). While new destination communities may offer more room for negotiations of identities and positions within the community, it is variable not only by aspects of the particular context, but by the specifics of the particular group. Martha Bigelow (2010), in her study of a Somali diasporic community, noted “... when powerful institutions discriminate against youth based on entrenched xenophobia, racism and Islamophobia, a democratic, plural society in the making has much to lose.” (p.148)

Importantly, the literature on context of reception highlights the centrality of policy in framing the incorporation process for immigrants. Focusing on national and state-level policies regarding immigration and other policies regarding access to social services for immigrants, sociologists discuss policies in terms of their relative exclusivity or inclusiveness regarding immigrants (Portes & Borocz, 1989; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). While inclusive policies define immigrants as “deserving” of particular services and/or rights, exclusive policies implicitly characterize immigrants as “undeserving” of public services and/or rights (Filindra, Garcia & Blanding, 2011; Marrow, 2011). Significantly, exclusive policies were associated with barriers to incorporation and more inclusive policies were associated with increased opportunities (Filindra et al., 2011). Marrow (2011), for example, argued that K-12 education is a relatively welcoming space for immigrants in North Carolina because of the “inclusive government policy” regarding the education of all youths regardless of legal status. In contrast to the K-12 policy context, researchers have identified the higher education context as being relatively exclusive because undocumented youth are denied access to federal financial aid (Filindra et al., 2011).

Sociocultural Approaches to Policy

Although distinguishing between “exclusive” and “inclusive” policies provides a helpful framework for understanding the basic goals of particular policies, it assumes that the goals of a policy will or should determine actions and outcomes in the same way across different contexts.

Furthermore, although this perspective on policy allows for the possibility that policies may influence attitudes, it does not account for the fact that attitudes may also shape the implementation of policy. This framework reflects the rather deterministic understanding of policies associated with the “technical-rational” approach to the field of policy (Hamann & Rosen, 2011). In short, the “technical-rational” approach to policy, which dominates policy discussions, assumes a direct relationship between policy and practice, is focused on predicting outcomes, and assumes that policies are rational, objective and scientific (Hamann & Rosen, 2011; Levinson & Sutton, 2001).

In contrast to those writing from a technical-rational perspective, scholars who apply various sociocultural approaches to policy assume that policies will take shape differently across contexts in response to differences in local cultures, resources and perspectives (Ball, 1997; Hamann & Rosen, 2011; Koyama & Varenne, 2012; Shore & Wright, 1997, 2011; Sutton & Levinson, 2001). Ball (1997), for example, asserted that policies define problems, pose solutions and create categories of people, but they do not determine specific actions. Similarly, Shore and Wright (2011) explained “we see policies as windows onto political processes in which actors, agents, concepts and technologies interact in different sites, creating or consolidating new rationalities of governance and regimes of knowledge and power” (2). Highlighting the role of human agency, Koyama and Varenne (2012) described policy as a “productive play” whereby “responses to the

policy require deliberate human activity” (158). From the perspective of various sociocultural policy researchers, the line between policy and practice are blurred in such a way that teachers and aides are educational policy actors. According to this logic, policies can be transformed, resisted or embraced on the ground.

We will draw on both the sociological scholarship on “contexts of reception” and the scholarship on sociocultural approaches to policy in order to focus on the educational contexts faced by immigrant ELs in new destination communities. Following the lead of sociologists of immigration, we will pay attention to how immigrants are received by locals in five rural communities in Wisconsin. We are particularly interested in how long-term residents of these communities make sense of their new immigrant neighbors and how the local response to immigrants frames the work of educators. By engaging the scholarship on sociocultural approaches to policy, we seek to extend understandings of how local educators interpret and enact educational policies on the ground.

The Study

Data for this paper was collected as part of a larger mixed method study on the way rural and suburban communities in Wisconsin are responding to the recent influx of immigrant students who are English learners. The proliferation of immigrant populations in the state of Wisconsin is typical of the proliferation of immigrant populations in new destinations in the Midwest, where the majority of recent adult newcomer immigrants tend to have low levels of proficiency in English and limited educational backgrounds (Levinson, Everitt & Jones, 2007). Job opportunities in the meatpacking industry, farm work, and construction, along with the affordability of the Midwest compared to the west and east coasts, have drawn immigrants to

the region during the last 20 years (Grey & Woodrick, 2005; McConnell, 2004). The growth in immigrant communities in Wisconsin can be seen in statewide school district demographics. In 1999, 149 school districts in Wisconsin reported having limited English-speaking students, while in 2004 there were 240 districts with LEP students, which represents 54% of the total districts in Wisconsin (WINSS)¹. The majority of immigrants are Latino (predominantly from Mexico, but also from Central and South America) but the immigrant EL population in Wisconsin also includes students from Africa, Southeast Asia, Asia and Eastern Europe.

In the first phase of our study, we surveyed the roughly 300 districts in Wisconsin with EL populations to find out the types of programs in place for English learners. Based on the 136 survey responses, we identified nine school districts for qualitative case studies. We were not attempting to identify “typical” or “representative” cases, but instead were looking for a range of districts. Thus we chose case study districts that reflected a range of differences across: geographic region of the state, ethnicities and languages of newcomers, size and rate of growth of newcomer populations, program models and staffing structures. All districts chosen had experienced a significant increase in their EL population within the last 10 years. Our case studies included four suburban districts and five rural districts, thereby allowing us to focus attention on how location and local context influenced district responses to ELs. We conducted 1-2 day observations in these districts during which time we paid particular attention to the discourses surrounding immigrant ELs, teacher beliefs, the structure of the programming and support services offered, the nature of the classroom instruction, the content of the curriculum, and interactions between students and school staff. In each district, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the

designated ESL coordinator, principals, ESL teachers, bilingual support staff, and when possible other members of the staff. The interviews focused on how educators were making sense of the new immigrant EL populations, how they were making sense of educational policies for ELs and how they were making decisions about how to educate ELs. We also conducted interviews with individuals at a CESA (Cooperative Educational Service Agency; a local arm of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction) that worked with one of the focal districts, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, and WIDA (World Class Instructional Design and Assessment; a national standards and assessment organization that serves Wisconsin and other states, in order to understand policy and assessment from an official perspective. Finally, we examined local newspapers, policy documents and a number of community programs and initiatives (Wedel, Shore, Feldman & Lathrop, 2005).

Our approach to data analysis involved both inductive and deductive approaches to the data. We worked together to code and analyze the data using both grounded codes that emerged from the data and codes from relevant literature. We developed theoretical propositions through the writing of analytic memos and we sought out evidence that confirmed and disconfirmed our emerging findings (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). In this paper we focused on the way the five rural schools districts in our study responded to the growth in immigrant English learner populations. While we appreciate that there are debates surrounding the definitions of “rural”, our working definition of “rural” includes geographic isolation from major urban centers, and population and/or district’s self-identification as rural (Coladarci, 2007). Our purpose here is to examine the similarities and differences across the five rural districts in order to explore the kinds of educational contexts

facing immigrant English learners in rural Wisconsin.

Five Rural Wisconsin Communities

A largely working class rural community located in the central part of the state, Clover² has experienced a dramatic increase in its immigrant population over the last decade. According to the 2000 Census, Clover's population was just under 2000 with 98.6% of the population identified as white/non-Hispanic. According to the 2010 census there were 2310 residents in Clover, with 73.7% of the population identified as white/non-Hispanic and 25% identified as Hispanic or Latino. Mexican immigrants have been drawn to Clover because of job opportunities on dairy farms and in the meatpacking industry. The growth in the Mexican immigrant population can be seen in Clover School District's population of English learners (22 ELs in 1999; 45 ELs in 2003 and 103 ELs in 2008). When we conducted our case study in 2009 there were 160 ELs in the district, accounting for approximately 20% of the total student population in Clover.

Located in south central Wisconsin, Allentown has experienced a modest growth in its immigrant population in the last decade. According to the 2000 Census, 97% of the 7800 residents were white/non-Hispanic. The total student population for the district in 2009-2010 when we collected our data was 2559 and there were 48 students classified as English learners, compared to 4 English learners in 1999. Allentown educators reported that the first Mexican immigrants moved to town when a factory moved from Chicago to Allentown bringing many of the workers to town at the same time. In addition to the Mexican immigrants, there were a few Asian immigrant families in the community. Since we collected our data the Latino population in Allentown has continued to grow and, according the 2010

Census, the Hispanic/ Latino population is at 4.3%.

Denton is located at the end of a migrant trail and as such the district has served significant numbers of Mexican students from migrant families through a Title 1 Migrant Education program³ for several decades. Mexican immigrant families began to settle in Denton during the last fifteen years, and in the 2010 Census Hispanic/Latinos made up 29% of the town's population of 8448, up from 21% of the total population in 2000. The growth in the immigrant population can be seen in the number of ELs in the Denton school district (280 ELs in 1999; 398 ELs in 2003; 560 ELs in 2008). During our research in 2009-2010, native Spanish speaking ELs made up 24% of the total student population.

Cedar Ridge is located in the south central part of the state and it is the largest of the five rural communities in our study. With a total population of just over 15,100 residents in the 2000 Census and 16,200 residents in 2010 Census, it has many aspects associated with a smaller city (e.g., population density), but district officials consistently referred to their district as "rural." Cedar Ridge has experienced a steady growth in its Latino population over the last fifteen years. According to the 2010 Census, the Hispanic/Latino population made up 7.5% of the total population up from 4% of the total population in the 2000 Census. During the 2009-2010 academic year, there were 215 English learners and nearly all were Spanish speakers. By contrast, there were just 28 ELs in 1999.

Steward is a small farming community in the northern part of the state. Since 2001 Steward has been home to a growing Somali refugee community when members of the Minnesota Somali community began moving across the state border in search of work, more affordable housing and educational opportunities. Interestingly, teachers,

administrators and individuals at the local Muslim community center reported that the first Somalis to arrive in Steward were high school students who left Minnesota because of concerns regarding their ability to pass the newly instituted high school exit exam. According to the 2000 Census, Steward's total population was around 3200 and was 97.7% white. By 2003 there were 400 Somali residents living in Steward, and in the 2010 Census 8.8% of the population identified as African American. According to the Wisconsin Department of Instruction, Steward did not report having a single English learner in the district in 1999. By 2003 they reported having 65 ELs and in 2009-2010, when we were conducting our research, there were 86 ELs in the district, which made up approximately 5% of the total student population.

Isolated, Understaffed and Overwhelmed: Staffing Issues Across the Five Districts

Prior to 2000 the majority of ELs in Wisconsin were enrolled in school districts in urban areas, but more recently immigrant groups have begun moving to suburban and rural communities throughout the state. Immigrants who settle in urban and suburban communities in Wisconsin enter school districts and communities with established programs for English learners and with some experience dealing with racial and cultural diversity. In contrast, immigrants who settle in rural communities enter communities and schools with little experience dealing with racial, cultural or linguistic differences. Like other rural districts, the five districts in our study were under-resourced, isolated, and struggled to recruit and retain qualified ESL and/or bilingual staff (Berube, 2000). With the exception of Denton, where they had a history of working with migrant students, the rural districts in our study were still struggling to

establish programs for their ELs when we conducted our research, which in every case was over five years since ELs first enrolled. Administrators spoke about their difficulty attracting teachers certified in English as a Second Language (ESL)⁴ and/or bilingual education to live in small rural communities. In several of the districts teachers certified to teach foreign languages were recruited to work with ELs, and in two of the districts these teachers were in the process of pursuing ESL certification. In interviews, teachers reflected on their early improvisational efforts to address newcomer ELs through after-school homework programs, volunteer tutors from the communities, and peer tutors.

In all five of the rural districts the responsibility for ELs was left to a small number of educators, often as few as two or three individuals for the entire district. These educators were responsible for managing the required assessments of ELs, teaching classes, working individually with students, communicating with and interpreting for parents, and advocating for ELs in their schools. The most striking case of this was in Clover where one certified ESL teacher, one reading specialist and one bilingual aide were responsible for the 160 ELs in the district. Furthermore, the ESL teacher Mrs. Kohl, was the only person in the district with specific training to work with ELs. According to Mrs. Kohl, the district has faced significant financial constraints that have hampered the development of ESL services, and it also has had difficulty recruiting qualified ESL teachers. She expressed significant frustration about being pulled in multiple directions, and feared that some students were simply being overlooked. She explained that as one of the few bilingual adults in the district, she does a lot of interpreting for Spanish speaking parents and that her classes were often interrupted because she had to take most phone calls from Spanish-

speaking parents. In the 2009-10 academic year, administrators brought in a consultant from the regional CESA who advised the Clover ESL staff to prioritize providing services for ELs in state-mandated tested grades (grades 3 & 10). The consultant also recommended that no services be provided in the lowest grades, as students at young ages would adjust more easily without support. The consultant's recommendation acknowledged that the ESL staff did not have the capacity to address the educational needs of all of the ELs in the district. As we ended our conversation, Mrs. Kohl remarked, "As you may notice I am very frustrated with this situation but I keep my hopes up for better days to come."

Even in districts where the ratio of certified ESL/bilingual staff to students appeared to be reasonable, the staff reported being overwhelmed by their responsibilities. Cedar Ridge, for example, employed three ESL certified teachers for 215 ELs in the 2009-2010 academic year, but the single elementary ESL teacher for the district had to split her time among six elementary schools, which meant that much of her time was spent driving from school to school. In Steward there were two certified ESL teachers for 86 students, but the ESL teachers were entirely responsible for all of the services for the ELs.

While research on successful models for working with ELs suggests that schools need to have a collective and school-wide investment in working with ELs, the educators responsible for ELs in these five districts were isolated in their buildings (Bartlett & Garcia, 2011). Teachers and aides spoke repeatedly about how mainstream teachers assumed that the ESL teachers or aides were the school staff responsible for working with ELs. Even in districts that had moved to a push-in model (having language support services delivered in students' mainstream classrooms), there was an assumption that ELs were not the responsibility of the mainstream teachers, and ESL and

mainstream staff did not plan or implement instruction in collaboration. In Allentown, for example, one of the ESL teachers expressed frustration about the "indifference of the school administrators regarding ELLs"⁵ and noted that this attitude made it difficult to get mainstream teachers to attend in-service trainings that focused on ELs. In four of the districts, we heard that there was no professional development offered that focused on ELs. Similarly, the ESL coordinator in Cedar Ridge noted that the greatest challenges she faced in her work were with "regular education teachers not providing accommodations for ELL students." Thus, the limited staff members available with expertise in educating ELs did not integrate with the rest of the teachers and administrators in their buildings and districts, they worked with the EL students in isolation.

Further, none of the rural districts in our study were located in close proximity to a college or university that offered pre- or in-service teacher preparation in the area of ESL. Although we encountered a few teachers with specific ESL preparation, for the most part districts utilized foreign language teachers to support ELs. The districts often used instructional aides; while these staff members may have shared the language and/or cultural background of the students, they did not have academic preparation in the field of education. Even the certified ESL teachers we found had foreign language as their initial certification, and were not prepared to teach grade level-appropriate academic content.

Current discourses around effective education for English learners center on notions of integrating language and content development, providing access to and support for learning academic language (defined as the language features, functions, structures and registers that are necessary for academic achievement), and designing curriculum and instruction that is culturally and linguistically

responsive to learners (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Ovando & Combs, 2012; Valdes, Kibler & Walqui, 2014). ESL instruction consisted of vocabulary instruction and drill, often delivered through commercial packaged programs. As one elementary ESL teacher said, “we work on worksheets from the internet. We focus on letters of the sounds, and building up.” Thus isolation describes much of what took place in the local educational context: students were isolated from meaningful academic content in their learning, and teachers were isolated from current discourses about effective educational program models and practices for ELs.

Local Reception: Making Sense of Immigrant Newcomers

Mexican immigrants and/or the children of Mexican immigrants accounted for the growth in the immigrant English learner populations in four of the five districts in our study. As in other communities that have been part of the new Latino diaspora, the attitudes towards the Latino immigrants in Allentown, Clover, Cedar Ridge and Denton can best be described as watchful ambivalence (Grey & Woodrick, 2005; Martinez, 2011; Millard & Chapa, 2004). As in many rural communities across the US, the local populations in Clover and Allentown have been aging and in decline (Grey & Woodrick, 2005; Millard & Chapa, 2004).

As younger residents graduate from high school they often leave smaller towns in search of opportunities in larger cities, leaving local industries with a shortage of labor. For rural communities experiencing a decline, immigrants can be an important source of revitalization. In Clover, for example, as in many rural communities in the Midwest, the new Latino population has filled the demand for labor on dairy farms and in the meatpacking industry. Latino immigrant children have kept enrollments in Clover schools robust even as

similar towns struggle to keep schools open. Indeed, we heard more than one Clover teacher joke about the fact that the “large” immigrant families keep them employed.

Alongside the recognition of how Latino immigrants are helping local economies, however, there is also evidence of some anti-immigrant sentiment in some towns. Educators in all of our case districts referred to the fact that some long-term residents feared the cultural and linguistic changes that immigrants brought to their community. In particular, educators in Denton, Clover, Cedar Ridge and Allentown spoke about long-term residents who were worried about the “problems” associated with “illegal” immigrants. The part-time ESL teacher in Allentown reported that many of her colleagues made racist comments about “illegal” immigrants and complained vociferously about Governor Doyle’s proposal to allow undocumented students to attend Wisconsin public colleges at in-state tuition rates. In Clover, one local politician was particularly vocal in his rhetoric about “illegal” immigrants in the town and across the state, suggesting that “illegal” immigrants were costing taxpayers money and were dangerous.

As the ELs in Denton have shifted from being a migrant population to a year-round immigrant population, some members of the local community have expressed concerns about what this might mean for the town and the schools. Ms. Matthews, the principal of one of the three elementary schools explained that she has had to respond to complaints from some locals about “spending taxpayer money on them.” Underneath this complaint is the implicit suggestion that many of the new Latino families may be undocumented immigrants, and some locals assume that they don’t pay taxes and are therefore *undeserving* of a public education. She explained that “family nights” for Latino parents had drawn particular attention because locals assumed that taxpayer money was being

used for special programming for “them.” She noted that once she explained that Title 1 money was used for these events and not local money some parents were satisfied. She expressed frustration with what she described as the narrow-minded response of a small but vocal number of locals, suggesting that public schools should serve all students regardless of background. Here, we have an example of how the inclusive K-12 policies surrounding immigrants may be influencing the way educators think about their jobs (Marrow, 2011). Mirroring the discourse of Dream Act advocates, Ms. Matthews asserted that undocumented students are blameless children who deserve to be included in the schools. Children are thus positioned as sympathetic victims of their parents’ actions and government policies.

While Latino immigrants were subjected to the discourses of illegality, Somali refugees in Steward were subjected to the intense racism and Islamophobia directed at the Muslim community since the attack on the World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001 (Bigelow, 2010; Sirin & Fine, 2008). Journalistic accounts of the Somali population in Steward have highlighted the cultural differences between the Somali newcomers and the long-time Steward residents. One public health researcher identified racism as the single most significant health issue confronting the Somali refugees in Steward (Sanders, 2006). According to Steward educators, fighting and property destruction were regular problems when the Muslim immigrants first arrived in Steward. One particularly virulent act of Islamophobia involved the desecration of a Somali flag after 9/11. Joe Morgan, a district-level administrator, reported that some white parents took advantage of the state’s open enrollment policy and transferred their children to schools in other districts in the county in order to avoid sending their children to school with Muslim students.

Jennifer Johnston, the high school ESL teacher, described racial tensions during the early years like this:

You had this, you know, Somali population and this white population as well as the community issues, and there was hatred, and racism, and religious issues and it was just a nightmare... Well what happened was, is that the community started to resent them, they’re like I’m going to move out because there are Somalis, or I’m going to open enroll my children because I don’t want them to go to school with Somali, you know, with Somalis, and it was, you know... But, you know, what I saw at this time was that there were three strikes against them. They were Muslim. This was 2001. They don’t know the language and they’re black. Prior to all of those things, maybe being black you would have been targeted, but you have all of three of things going against you, not good.

In Ms. Johnston’s account, we hear the ways that race, language and religion came together to mark Somali refugees in Steward as problematic outsiders. In response to this hostility, Ms. Johnston and Mr. Morgan worked to encourage a culture of tolerance by painting Somali immigrants as sympathetic victims of a civil war, who possessed strong family values, not unlike members of the larger Steward community.

Although all of the ESL/bilingual staff we interviewed across the five districts were dedicated to working with ELs and expressed concerns about how to support ELs, there was little recognition of the strengths within immigrant communities and/or the importance of building on immigrant languages or cultures. There was, for example, a fairly unquestioned belief across the staff in all five districts that immigrant parents weren’t involved in their

children's schooling, yet most acknowledged not knowing many parents. There was also a uniform discourse around ELs as *lacking language skills* and an assumption that educators needed to help them assimilate. In the following quote Mrs. Anne Smithson, the elementary ESL teacher for the Steward district, talked about her concerns for the Somali children.

We are dealing with poverty, we are dealing with malnutrition, we are dealing with bottom, bottom, we're dealing with refugees from war-torn situations. Very little schema, they have schema, but it's very, very...it's in a little box compared to the other people, you know, even simple things as we talk about light and one of the first things I had to explain some of the pictures and visuals I was using was a birthday party. And they raised their hands, Mrs. Smithson, what birthday party? Well, they don't celebrate birthday in the Muslim faith. They never celebrate birthdays, so then to see all these visuals and everything related anything to a birthday party, they have no schema for that whatsoever.

While poverty was an issue for the local Somali community, Mrs. Smithson conflated economic disadvantages with cultural deficiencies. She interpreted her students' cultural and religious differences as deficiencies that needed to be overcome. In short, she slid from a discourse of sympathy to a discourse of deficiency. Significantly, Mrs. Smithson positioned herself as an advocate for the Somali community in Steward and she talked about her efforts to convince her fellow teachers to "help" Somali children.

As our data demonstrated, the ESL/bilingual staff in our case districts saw themselves as advocates for the immigrant ELs. Significantly, their advocacy was not limited to academic issues but included efforts to shape attitudes towards cultural, racial and linguistic

outsiders. While ESL/bilingual staff expressed inclusive attitudes towards immigrant ELs, they also held deficit perspectives about immigrant ELs' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, which led them to support assimilative practices. Thus, our research confirms the scholarship that demonstrates that inclusive attitudes and the desire to welcome immigrants do not necessarily lead to cultural and linguistic recognition (Turner, 2015)

Making Sense of Educational Policies: Local Educators as Policymakers

The five rural districts in our study experienced an unprecedented influx of ELs at the same historical moment that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) began requiring the annual assessment of and accountability for ELs. Under NCLB, ELs must be included in state assessment of students' knowledge of academic content. School districts must also assess ELs' progress in achieving English proficiency on an annual basis. Wisconsin is part of the WIDA Consortium; as a WIDA state, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction adopted WIDA assessments (e.g., ACCESS) for the mandated annual assessment of English proficiency in 2006. ACCESS is an assessment tool designed to measure ELs' social and academic proficiency in English as well as the knowledge of the specific language associated with language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

In addition to NCLB requirements for ELs, Wisconsin's Bilingual-Bicultural Statute [Wis. Stats. 115.95] outlines requirements for serving ELs, but these policies were established in the late 1970's, when there were far fewer ELs in the state and most were located in urban districts in the southeastern part of the state. According to Wis. Stats. Ch. 115 95 and PI 13, schools are obligated to support ELs by establishing a "bilingual-bicultural" program once they meet

certain enrollment figures. Although Wisconsin does not mandate a particular type of program, there has recently been an increased emphasis on integrating English learners into mainstream classes with language support offered in the mainstream classroom, which teachers commonly referred to as “push-in.” The increasing support for “push-in” practices comes from both the movement for inclusive education in the field of special education and the critiques of segregated ESL classes that have come from the research literature (McClure & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010). Recent research on new destination districts suggests that push-in models are being implemented for complex reasons, including accountability pressures, concerns regarding segregation and cost-savings since push-in eliminates the need for additional classroom spaces and reduces the need for additional ESL/bilingual staff (Castagno, 2009).

Policy researchers have described Wisconsin as a state that emphasizes local control over education (Brown, 2008; Lowenhaupt, 2015), which makes it a particularly interesting state in which to examine the way educators enact policy on the ground. For example, while Wisconsin policy requires that students who score between 1 and 5 on ACCESS receive assistance, the policy does not specify the type of services required. Rural and suburban districts rely heavily on the network of 12 CESAs for information on how to comply with current state policies. CESAs serve as a link between school districts and between school districts and the state department of education, and CESAs provide services and resources for schools districts, including professional development.

One of the first things that we noticed during our data collection was that testing policies were shaping how educators were talking about ELs and how they thought about their work as teachers. Across all five districts, administrators and teachers spoke the language

of policy, regularly referring to EL students by their ACCESS scores. Not insignificantly, the emphasis on scores contributed to a deficit perspective on the students, one where the focus was on what students could not do. Staff talked described “level 1’s and 2’s” (beginners) as “being high needs,” reflecting a deficit perspective. Another example of focusing on what students can’t do was reflected by the ESL coordinator in (Cedar Ridge), who, when talking about ‘low level’ high school ELs, said, “You know, you, at that level, they’re often not independent enough to break those chunks down while all this information is coming at them,” thus conflating a lack of language proficiency with a lack of independence. And a number of districts discussed modified grades for “lower level” students.

While teachers were able to report on the ACCESS scores of all of the students in their classes, they did not understand the breakdown of scores the test provided regarding students’ proficiency in specific skill areas (reading, writing, speaking and listening; the overall score being a composite), and often had no other information about the students. For example, teachers had little knowledge about older students’ previous educational backgrounds or literacy skills in their first language. Furthermore, across the districts ESL staff appeared confused about how to use the scores to make decisions regarding practice. While WIDA offered professional development opportunities for teachers, ESL staff in four of the five districts explained that their districts either didn’t have the money to pay for the WIDA training and/or they didn’t think district administrators prioritized ELs enough to spend the money.

Interestingly, we heard educators in all five districts using testing data to support the move to push-in models for ELs. In Denton, for example, Barb Mitchell and Lynette Edwards (elementary school principal and district level

administrator responsible for ESL services respectively), both explained that the Denton District had moved away from the bilingual, pull-out model in favor of a push-in model for ELs in response to testing data that indicated that the previous pull-out and bilingual models were “not working.” Mrs. Mitchell explained the goals of push-in as being similar to inclusion models for special education students:

Because, really the idea was you wanted, you wanted our English language learners to look more like our model for special education, which was inclusion.

Because if you know how you learn English or any other language, you learn it by immersing yourself in that.

Reflecting an understanding that pull-out services lead ELs to feelings of marginalization, the district coordinator explained:

We can't teach the kids in isolation and expect them to succeed in a regular classroom because they don't have that comfort level if we're constantly pulling them out, they're... they're missing instruction from a teacher and they're not able to interact with peers. And so when they go back into that room, they don't feel comfortable.

As these quotations suggest, the support for push-in reflects the current rhetoric in the academic literature and in the policy world regarding the academic and social benefits of integration for ELs.

The Clover School District has also embraced push-in as the official policy for bringing ELs - cultural and linguistic outsiders- into the mainstream. Indeed, some policy researchers have lauded the Clover School District for its commitment to push-in practices for ELs (Odden, Picus, Archibald, Goetz, Mangan & Aportela, 2007). In a 2007 Wisconsin policy report, for example, the Clover

elementary school principal was praised for his decision to spread the ELs across the kindergarten classes despite the fact that there were enough native Spanish-speaking students for separate ESL or bilingual kindergarten classes (Odden et al., 2007).

In theory, push-in or inclusive models position ELs and native English speakers as equal participants in the classroom and promotes general education teachers and ESL/bilingual teachers as engaging in co-teaching (Ovando & Combs, 2012). In our observations across the districts we found that ESL staff continued to be almost entirely responsible for working with ELs. Underneath all the talk of inclusion, we found little evidence that any of the districts had prepared the staff for the inclusion of English learners in mainstream classes. Ms. Arroyo, the ESL coordinator in Cedar Ridge, expressed frustration about the fact that that mainstream staff don't view the ESL teachers as equals who could provide assistance with instruction and assessment.

In our interview with Jean Short, the high school ESL teacher in Denton, she described the way push-in worked at the high school level:

Sometimes I sit just with groups of students in the classroom and um, just talk quietly within that group to try to check understanding with what's going on in the room, um, sometimes I'm helping them take notes and understand what it is they're putting down. Sometimes, I may take a group of students, you know, I had an English teacher who had a whole group of students who didn't understand subject-verb agreement. So I did some additional activities with them in the back of the room while she continued on with... So it varies.

As Ms. Short's description reveals, her current role in push-in classes is largely that of

an aide who provides assistance to ELs while the general education teacher focuses on the native English speakers. This not only denies her the status of a co-teacher in the class, but also actually serves to transform push-in to very visible pull-out, as she separates ELs to work with them in the back of the room. Our observation of a 12th grade social studies course confirmed Jean's description of how push-in services were handled in the district.

After interviewing Jean we followed her to the 12th grade American Political Systems Class where she works with 5 ELs (all native Spanish speakers). She noted that the Access scores for the students ranged from 2 to 5 (including 3 and 4). All the students were sitting in rows (17 students total), and all the ELs sat in the back. The teacher was giving a power point lecture on the Electoral College. During the class he called on two white girls sitting in the front row several times and directed conversation to them as well. Jean worked mostly with the level 2 boy and also interacted briefly with the other boy. She focused on vocabulary words and told students when to write things down. "You need to write that down- 10" (i.e., number of electoral votes WI has). It seems that students were probably missing stuff as she was talking to them. The teacher did not interact with the EL students or Jean at all. (Field notes, Nov. 6, 2009)

As this field note suggests, both ELs and the ESL teacher were marginalized in this example of push-in. Although ELs and native speakers were in the same room, ELs were not fully integrated into the life of the classroom. Rather, they were academically marginalized by instruction that was directed solely at native English speakers and they were physically

segregated at the back of the class. Ms. Short acknowledged the shortfalls of this model, and reported that "some teachers" were resistant to seeing ESL teachers as equal partners and that she was often not informed in advance about the lesson plan for the day. She explained that without prior knowledge of the day's lesson plan she couldn't "pre-teach" to her ELs and was left whispering vocabulary words in their ears to try to just keep up.

According to Mrs. Kohl, the ESL teacher in Clover, many mainstream teachers at the middle and high school levels were resistant to integrating ELs into their classes and did little to adapt their teaching to meet the needs of ELs. Mainstream teachers in Clover have never been required to engage in professional development around ELs. As we listened to Mrs. Kohl describe her role in the push-in settings, we were struck by the fact that she and the ESL aide were the ones who had to entirely adjust their roles to fit into each mainstream classroom. While the mainstream teachers continued to offer undifferentiated instruction aimed solely at the native English speakers in the class, Mrs. Kohl and the bilingual aide rushed to assist and translate for English learners during class. While the Clover administration appeared to view push-in as a success in and of itself, Mrs. Kohl and the bilingual aide expressed serious concerns about whether the district was providing adequate support for the 160 ELs in the district. Although push-in is the official policy of the Clover district, students who are most at risk for struggling on standardized tests were given support in the form of pull-out services.

In recent years the number of elementary school students in the Clover district scoring proficient or advanced has gone up, a fact that policy researchers have attributed to the district's commitment to inclusive practices and to their reliance on the assistance of the local CESA (Odden et al., 2007). Scholars writing

from a technical-rational approach to policy might conclude that push-in practices in Clover are a success because test scores among elementary aged students have improved. Our research, however, highlights a more complicated picture. In contrast to the rosy picture painted by the testing data, Mrs. Kohl drew our attention to the fact that

so many of our ELL students are on the D and F list at this time... I was looking at the report the other day and saw that there are two pages of students on the D and F list in the middle school alone, and if I took out the ELL students it came down to 17 students.

Because testing was driving the decisions regarding which students got services, the result was that many ELs were not getting served. What happens in grades where kids aren't tested? Mrs. Kohl suggested that these students were simply victims of the policies.

In Denton, there was an awareness that many high school teachers had not embraced push-in. In response to our questions about how the transition to push-in was going, Mrs. Edwards responded

And I know some of the...when we had some feedback from high school students last year, you know, like they've said when I raise my hand at the end of a lecture and ask, you, can you repeat that one part, I didn't quite understand it, they get the, well you should have been listening... The kids are like, you know, when I get that kind of response, I will never raise my hand again, you know.

As evidence that the district was invested in helping all teachers work with ELs, she explained, "for two years so far, every staff meeting, they've been presenting strategies for classroom teachers to use. And the mantra was, if it's good for ELLs, it's good for everybody."

The fact that administrators in Denton recognized that mainstream teachers need ongoing support and training during the transition to push-in is a positive sign. The support for push-in, however, appears to come primarily from assumptions about the importance of cultural and linguistic assimilation for ELs. And, as implied in the quote, there was little recognition of the need for language-specific support, nor culturally and linguistically responsive instructional approaches and strategies.

In contrast to the other four districts, Steward was interesting in its focus on creating policy to respond to local issues. This is not to say that the Steward staff did not spend time on mandatory testing, and they certainly did talk about efforts to implement push-in. However, they were more focused on responding to local concerns and preparing ELs to live in the community. For example, the ESL staff developed courses specifically directed at the Somali high school students, including a "survival skills" class that covered topics such as banking. Here, there seemed to be an understanding that the Somali youth were likely to stay in Steward and continue to work in the "turkey store" (poultry processing plant) after graduation.

As we noted earlier, the Somali high school students left Minnesota because of concerns regarding Minnesota's high school exit exam. As in other states with high school exit exams, the Minnesota high school exit exam was designed for native English speakers and is therefore first and foremost a test of English proficiency, which puts ELs at a distinct disadvantage. Somali youth and families migrated to Wisconsin because Wisconsin did not have a high school exit exam, and they were specifically drawn to Steward by jobs in the local meat processing plant. The move to Steward reflects the understandings of this population regarding how the Minnesota educational policy

disadvantaged them, and also reflects their determination to be active agents in their schooling (Dorner, 2012).

Significantly, local community members and Steward educators expressed concerns about Somali students coming to Steward to get a high school diploma after failing the high school exit exam in Minnesota. Ms. Johnston stated that she shared the concern about students showing up in January and trying to graduate after just one semester. She and Mr. Morgan were also involved in negotiating new high school graduation policies directed at Somali students. The first policy requires all students to be enrolled in Steward schools for two semesters in order to earn a Steward diploma. Using the discourse of accountability, Ms. Johnston explained that she supported the two-semester policy because Steward educators had to be able to assess whether students “can write or read” before getting a Steward diploma. The second policy requires students to demonstrate minimum English proficiency in order to graduate from high school. Drawing once again on an inclusive discourse, Ms. Johnston was quick to point out that this new requirement was for “All seniors, all seniors. Not just English language learners.” The students demonstrated their English skills using a portfolio process, which involved being interviewed by community members, administrators and teachers. The involvement of community members in this process is particularly interesting and might be interpreted as a way to give long-time community members a sense of power and control in a changing social environment. As these policies suggest, Ms. Johnson and Mr. Johnson’s advocacy did not extend to explicit questioning of the dominant educational discourses that called for assimilation.

Making Sense of the Stories

The educational contexts facing immigrant ELs in these five rural districts were shaped by the complex interactions among state-level educational policies and discourses, local community attitudes towards immigrants, staffing and budgets, and educators’ professional judgments. English learners and their educators in our five rural districts faced serious and complicated challenges. Although there were differences across the five cases, which make it impossible to talk about a single way that rural schools respond to new populations of ELs, there were important themes across the cases.

Across all five districts ESL/bilingual staff were isolated and marginalized in their schools, and administrators reported difficulties recruiting certified ESL/bilingual teachers. In addition to problems with isolation and understaffing, there was little depth of experience with EL issues in any of the districts. In most districts, the responsibility for ELs was left to a teacher whose preparation and experience had been in teaching a foreign language. While virtually all of them recognized a challenging environment for English learners, and took on an advocacy role for these students, there were few teachers certified in ESL, and virtually none with a background that included subject-area academic instruction. We found that the ESL/bilingual staff was largely unaware of the current research on integrating language and content, or on additive approaches to working with immigrant ELs. Many of the teachers we interviewed recognized their limitations and confided that they were often overwhelmed by their responsibilities, worried about their students, and frustrated by their general education colleagues.

There is a robust body of scholarship that highlights the problems of teacher isolation, including the absence of opportunities for professional growth, emotional stress and attrition (Lieberman & Miller, 1990; Lortie,

1975; Schlitte et. al., 2005). And it has long been acknowledged that ESL and bilingual professionals in schools usually work in isolation, often being the only educator in a given building specifically designated to work with ELs. Significantly, we found that professional isolation from current research allowed a deficit perspective about immigrant families and a culture of low expectations for ELs to go largely unchecked. There was, for example, an unquestioned assumption, despite research to the contrary, that ELs could not engage in rigorous academic learning until they acquired English, which for most educators meant building vocabulary. To be clear, we are not arguing that isolation causes deficit perspectives to emerge, but our data suggests that distance from information and lack of opportunities to engage in meaningful professional collaboration may allow deficit perspectives to go unchallenged. Finally, our point here is not to criticize dedicated educators who are overworked and isolated, but to point out that professional isolation has a negative impact on educators and students. Although problems associated with the isolation of ESL/bilingual educators are not unique to rural new destinations, we are arguing that the situation in rural new destinations is more pronounced.

Without exception the ESL/bilingual staff lived either in the districts where they worked, or in neighboring towns, and thus were part of the local conversations regarding changing demographics. While Denton was the only community where there was widespread anti-immigrant sentiment, the ESL/bilingual staff in all five communities mentioned that some locals were concerned about the growing number of immigrants moving to their respective towns, and particularly worried about the impact of immigrant ELs on school resources. The ESL/bilingual staff in all five districts reported that many mainstream educators in their

districts often held overtly problematic views about ELs. As our case studies demonstrate, the ESL/bilingual educators had to contend with these attitudes when making decisions about how to serve the growing number of immigrant ELs in their schools. Finally, as we have already argued, even dedicated members of the ESL/bilingual staff expressed some deficit perspectives about immigrant ELs. Previous research on the educational contexts in new destinations has similarly found that educators may express inclusive intentions towards new student populations and simultaneously hold deficit perspectives towards these groups (Cooper, 2009; Lowenhaupt, 2010; Wortham, Mortimer, & Allard, 2009; Turner, 2015).

Across all five districts, the language of policy infused the ways the ESL/bilingual staff talked about the immigrant ELs. The performance of ELs on standardized tests was a particular anxiety for teachers and administrators. As various sociocultural approaches to policy remind us, all policies reflect particular assumptions regarding both the nature of the social “problem” and assumptions about how to solve the problem (Ball, 1997; Shore & Wright, 1997). According to the logic of both testing and push-in policies, the *problem* is the slow rate of English acquisition among ELs and the impact of their limited English proficiency on ELs’ academic achievement. The fact that ELs speak languages other than English is therefore implicitly viewed as a deficit in need of remediation. Not insignificantly, the ESL/bilingual educators across the five districts appeared to accept the assumptions regarding the *problems* defined by current policies. Thus, while they expressed concerns about how test scores were used to evaluate schools and criticisms about the amount of time that testing took, none of the teachers questioned the assumption that ELs were *behind* and needed to acquire English more quickly.

As Thea Abu El-Haj (2006) has astutely asserted, current educational solutions reflect three justice claims around integration, equal standards, and recognition of difference. The policies around testing and the current emphasis on push-in policies grow out of educational justice claims around the importance of equal standards and integration respectively. Both testing policies and push-in policies can be categorized as *inclusive* policies, which aim to include ELs among all other students. As research on testing clearly demonstrates, however, there are often significant unintended consequences of inclusive policies, including the creation of greater barriers for ELs (Menken, 2008). Push-in policies, for example, are meant to address the problems associated with segregation, but when integration trumps bilingualism in this definition of inclusiveness the result is practice that is assimilative in nature. Because assimilative practices inherently focus on what ELs “lack” there are no attempts to build on students’ native languages or cultural backgrounds (Garcia and Bartlett, 2011). Testing policies, for example, have encouraged educators in Denton to move away from bilingual education in favor of English-only practices (Menken, 2008), despite provision for bilingual education in Wisconsin policy. As many scholars have observed, assimilationist practices can lead to marginalization and difficulty in school, thereby perpetuating inequalities.

Our research confirms the importance of understanding educational policies as being nested within and playing out in particular communities. We see the influence of local context in how educators make sense of policies, and we see how policies and community context shape how educators make sense of the educational needs of immigrant ELs. Our research also illustrates that inclusive educational policies do not guarantee that immigrant ELs will receive meaningful and equal educations. The assumption that inclusive

policies will provide educational opportunities for immigrant ELs fails to recognize that policies are negotiated by policy actors on the ground. Inclusivity does not guarantee that students’ linguistic or cultural identities will be reflected in educational spaces. Indeed, they were not in any of the focal districts in our study.

Of course, deficit thinking and the problems associated with assimilative policies and practices are not unique to these five rural districts or to rural new destinations more generally. A vast body of scholarship has pointed to the challenging educational contexts facing immigrant ELs in urban districts as well. That said, we believe that the issues surrounding professional isolation, both the isolation that ESL/bilingual staff experience inside their schools and the isolation from current research, are more pronounced in rural new destinations. Furthermore, the lack of established co-ethnic/immigrant communities in new destinations means that there is an absence of organized community voices to advocate for immigrant ELs and to challenge deficit discourses. Despite the challenges facing these rural new destination districts, there are pockets of possibility in each district in the form of dedicated individuals who deserve more support and professional development for their work.

Notes

1. Limited English proficient, or LEP, has long been the favored label for English learners in the US policy world.
2. All names of towns and people used in this article are pseudonyms, in order to protect the privacy of study subjects.
3. Title I is the portion of the United States federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families.

4. EL (English learner) refers to students/people learning English, while ESL (English as a Second Language) refers to a field, a program model, and programmatic and/or course content.
5. English language learner, or ELL, is an alternative to English learner (EL). While they are synonymous, we have chosen to use EL. We use ELL only when quoting its usage by participants.

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