Hopefulness for Teachers of ELLs in the Era of NCLB

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In this article the authors explore the role of critical hope as an essential quality in teachers’ preparation to teach English Language Learners (ELLs) in the era of No Child Left Behind. The authors found that high stakes testing with inappropriate measures combined with teachers’ lack of preparation to teach ELLs resulted in a downward spiral in hopefulness.

If you lose hope, somehow you lose the vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you go on in spite of it all.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Hope for successful student outcomes is a critical and perhaps even defining disposition for today’s classroom teachers (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Freire, 1994). Hopeful teachers understand their students’ sociocultural and economic lives (Freire, 1994), which includes valuing students and their families (Nieto, 2003). They believe that they can be instrumental in the success of their students. Teacher hopefulness is particularly important for English language learners (ELLs) (Banks et al., 2005; Zeichner, 2003), the fastest growing student population in U.S. schools. In this study we explore teacher hopefulness for teaching ELLs during the time of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

The intent of NCLB was to improve educational outcomes for U.S. students by improving teacher quality and demanding accountability for the educational success of all student groups, as measured by standardized tests (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Requiring educators and education systems to be accountable for the achievement of ELLs was a positive step forward. However, the ways teacher quality and accountability are defined and operationalized by NCLB have been highly problematic for ELLs and their teachers.

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NCLB’s narrow definition of “highly qualified” teachers neglects the specific preparation needed for teaching ELLs, including pedagogical expertise and dispositions, such as critical hope for positive student outcomes. Duncan-Andrade (2009) defines critical hope as the moral authority to view the children we teach as if they were our own, which includes a willingness to bear witness and share in students’ suffering that stems from
inequity. NCLB’s prime accountability measure is student performance on tests designed for students who are fully English proficient—tests that measure proficiency in academic English rather than mastery of a content area (Abedi & Dietal, 2004). Consequently, content-area teachers who are often insufficiently prepared to teach ELLs are held responsible for ELLs’ performance on tests that are inappropriate for students’ levels of English proficiency. Either of these factors—lack of appropriate teacher preparation or inappropriate accountability measures—could easily diminish any teacher’s hope for achieving successful educational outcomes with ELLs, and many teachers of ELLs experience these factors on a daily basis.

In this article, we use Snyder’s theoretical framework for hope (Jacobs, 2008; Snyder, 1994, 2000, 2005) to understand teacher hopefulness for positive outcomes for ELLs within the context of NCLB. We draw from findings of a study we conducted with 20 middle school teachers who taught in schools labeled “underperforming.” We asked participants how they defined student success and about the course work or professional development they believe prepared them to teach ELLs. We also asked them how prepared they felt to teach ELLs and to work with families who differed from them in language and culture. Our findings explicate how lack of teacher preparedness and the use of inappropriate metrics undermine hopefulness for teachers of ELLs. We suggest that loss of teacher hope creates a downward spiral in which expectations for students are lowered and hope for positive student outcomes is further diminished. We propose that assessing ELL performance with appropriate metrics and more fully preparing teachers with an understanding of second language theory and pedagogy, as well as what Duncan-Andrade (2009) refers to as critical hope, will facilitate a positive cycle of teaching and improved education of ELLs.

**Hope: A Framework for Teaching**

The important relationship between hope and teaching ELLs can be understood through an empirically tested theoretical framework for hope and its interrelated components: goals, pathways, and agency (Jacobs, 2008; Snyder, 1994, 2000, 2005). According to Snyder (2000), “Hope involves the [teachers’] perceived capacities to come up with various means of reaching their desired goals (pathways thinking) and the perceived capability to use those pathways (agency thinking)” (Kindle Version, location 3494). Hope is “goal pursuit thinking” in which “agency and pathway thoughts are emphasized prior to and throughout the pursuit of a goal” (Snyder, 2002, p. 258). When confronted with a goal that is unattainable, hopeful individuals tend to reformulate the goal into one they have the agency and pathways to achieve.

The ability to set appropriate goals is directly related to teachers’ belief they can accomplish these goals (agency) and the preparation to accomplish set goals (pathways). Teachers with multiple pathways for teaching ELLs are likely to set appropriately challenging goals and display the agency to reach these goals. For example, one such goal might be that ELLs make measurable progress in developing academic language in English language arts or mathematics. Another goal might be to find various and meaningful ways to involve the families of ELLs in their children’s education.

**Teacher Agency and Pathways to Classroom Instruction**

Agency for teaching ELLs is directly connected to the belief that ELLs can succeed academically and that teachers can prepare ELLs for this success. This agency depends on teachers’ instructional pathways, which include a deep understanding of English language development and the necessary instructional tools and strategies for teaching ELLs (Menken & Antenuz, 2001). With these pathways, teachers can set appropriate instructional goals, develop effective assessments, and carefully select instructional strategies and materials that support both content-area understanding and the development of academic English.

Teaching, however, is more than providing effective instruction. The most effective teachers reach the whole child, which includes valuing the child’s out of school life (Freire, 1994). Teachers who see value in children’s home lives likely possess the agency to reach students beyond the classroom. They also recognize multiple pathways for establishing meaningful connections with children and their families and communities.

**Methodology**

We conducted interviews with 20 middle school teachers. We asked about their goals for student success, the pre- and in-service preparation that provided them with pathways for teaching ELLs, and about how their beliefs about teaching have been influenced by children and families whose language and culture differ from that of the school.

We sought licensed middle school teachers from five Massachusetts schools that were labeled “underperforming” based in part on ELL subgroup scores. Despite repeated advertising in the schools, the promise of confidentiality, and the offer of a $50 gift certificate for school supplies, only 20 licensed middle school teachers...
responded. This small number may be due to the reluctance of teachers in schools labeled underperforming to discuss their preparedness. As one participant, Ms. Green, explained, “One teacher worried about participating in the interviews because she felt she hadn’t had enough training and doesn’t feel as knowledgeable as she would like.” The teachers who responded taught ELLs who spoke Khmer and ELLs who spoke Spanish; the majority of the Spanish speaking ELLs were from the Caribbean.

We conducted one 50–60 minute, semi-structured interview with each participant. Considering the sensitive nature of asking teachers in underperforming schools about their preparedness, and consistent with recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985), we scribbled rather than audio-taped the interviews. Each researcher captured direct quotes, transcribed interview notes immediately following the interview, and sent a detailed script with verbatim quotations to the participant for review.

**Participants**

The teaching experience of the 20 participants ranged from 4 to more than 20 years, with a median of 11.5 years. Eighteen teachers had spent four or more years teaching in their current school districts. Two participants had only one year’s experience in their current positions. Three teachers were educational generalists, seven taught special education, and 10 were content-area specialists. All participants were licensed in the subjects they taught, and thus highly qualified as defined by NCLB. Fifteen of the participants were female and five were male, which is not surprising, given that more females than males teach at the middle school level. All participants taught in classrooms that had both ELLs and English proficient students.

We used a constant comparison method (Charmaz, 2006) for data coding within NVivo software. The standardized interview protocol, verifying transcripts with participants, and triangulating data across interviews contributed to validity. We further validated findings and interpretations by coding all interview data using at least two approaches: each of us broad-coded each participant’s entire interview, then we coded across all 20 interviews by interview question. We accomplished further analysis through axial coding (within and across nodes: Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

**Findings**

Regardless of differences in their schools, content areas, and specific experience, the participants’ responses were remarkably similar. They appeared to care deeply for their students, spent substantial time planning lessons, and often spent their own money on school supplies.

Yet, they typically did not discuss intellectually rigorous instructional goals, nor did they seem to be able to connect with ELLs’ out of school lives, both important components of critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Examining study findings within the framework of hope (goals, pathways, and agency) offers a new way to think about lack of teacher preparation, the effects of using inappropriate high-stakes testing on teachers’ hopefulness for positive outcomes for ELLs, and ultimately for the educational outcomes of ELLs.

**In-Class Instruction of ELLs: Goals, Pathways, and Agency**

Study participants discussed two types of instructional goals: the externally set goal that all ELLs attain a passing score on the state-mandated test and the goals that they themselves set for ELLs. Every participant discussed the preset NCLB goal that all students (including ELLs with low levels of English proficiency) score “proficient” on state tests each year. Nine participants specifically mentioned what the research suggests (e.g., Abedi & Dietzel, 2004)—that success for all ELLs, regardless of their level of English proficiency, as measured by tests administered in English is an unattainable goal. As Ms. Bryant, an inclusion teacher with 20 years of experience, explained, “It is so incongruous. We are expected to differentiate [instruction] and then we [give] the standardized test, written in a language that [ELLs] cannot understand well. Standardized test results are discouraging.” Ms. Black, a reading teacher with 29 years of experience, described the consequences of high-stakes testing for ELLs and her school in general: “I fear for the newcomers this year. They’re [testing] so low . . . and that pulls down [standardized scores] for the whole school.” In this case, NCLB’s goal of passing test scores for all students actually resulted in teachers viewing ELLs as a problem that will bring down the school’s test scores—scores for which teachers and administrators will ultimately be held accountable.

Participants mentioned that administrators also felt pressure to ensure that ELLs attain passing scores on these tests. Thus, both teachers and administrators were held to an externally set, unattainable goal, over which they perceived they had no influence. The unattainable nature of this goal promotes an atmosphere of hopelessness within schools and within classrooms—one that diminishes teachers’ agency for effectively teaching ELLs and portrays ELLs as a problem.

Rather than accept this cycle of hopelessness, teachers are likely to replace the perceived unattainable goal with more attainable self-set instructional goals. Attainable instructional goals that continually scaffold ELLs’ academic language and subject-area knowledge would
introduce a hopeful cycle of instruction that would likely result in ELLs’ steady academic progress. Yet, setting appropriate rigorous and attainable instructional goals for ELLs requires both agency (the belief one can help ELLs to reach these goals) and pathways (depth of knowledge and strategies needed to achieve the goals).

Participants reported that they believed that all students could succeed. In defining success, they often blended social and academic goals they had for ELLs. For example, Ms. Willis, a 6th-grade generalist, explained, “I think success to me is a student feeling confident—successful; [she] can do work independently [and] so is self-assured and feels she can do the work.” Ms. O’Connor, a generalist with 24 years of experience, also referenced the way ELLs feel as an indicator of success: “Something that pleases me, or satisfies me that I’ve done my job is to have a student say, ‘I understand, I get it.’” Ms. Johnson explained, “For my kids to see them get an answer right, to know that they understand, to see that smile, my day wouldn’t be the same without that.”

Participants often lacked sufficient preparation (pathways) to believe they could reach this academic success with ELLs (agency), resulting in self-set goals that sometimes lacked academic rigor and reflected low expectations. As Ms. Jones, a special education teacher, explained “A successful day is when out of six hours I have the students’ attention for at least two of those hours. If I have their full attention for half of the time in all core subjects, I am successful with the students.”

The lack of pathways to set and meet appropriate and rigorous goals was prevalent even when participants had been teaching ELLs for several years and even though they understood the importance of differentiating instruction. For example, Ms. Ludden, a teacher with seven years of experience teaching Spanish-speaking ELLs, discussed the importance of high standards and differentiated instruction and then explained that she often did not know what to do (lacked the pathways) to ensure that ELLs understood her instruction. Participants often mentioned methods that reflected “just good teaching,” which de Jong and Harper (2005) indicated were insufficient for teaching ELLs. The notion that “just good teaching” is sufficient for ELLs suggests that teachers do not require special preparation, such as an understanding of developmental nature of second language acquisition, knowledge of the ways that ELLs acquire academic English, and the pedagogical expertise to both make instruction comprehensible and to promote language development. Without this preparation teachers are unlikely to differentiate in ways that matter for ELLs. Ms. Carlton, a mathematics teacher with seven years of experience, illustrates this misconception: “I do the same for all students. I provide students as many resources as possible to make learning enjoyable and so they do not struggle. I provide equal access to everything. Some students have to learn in other ways so I differentiate and use technology.”

In some cases, teacher agency—a key element of critical hope—seemed directly influenced by teachers’ perceptions of ELLs’ out of school lives. Several participants cited deficits they perceived in ELLs’ home lives as obstacles to reaching the academic goals they set for ELLs. Participants made comments such as: “Environment has a lot to do with knowledge” and “We only have them [the students] six hours a day.” Ms. O’Connor expressed both caring for students and a lack of agency when she explained “Unfortunately I can’t go beyond their school day. That is one of the worst things. I try to take the kids home with me in my mind. I think, ‘How can I help them feel successful?’” Other participants were clear that families wanted what was best for their children, but did not know how to involve themselves in the school system, and these participants did not suggest ways to reach out to support families in this effort.

Unfortunately the lack of teacher agency (and pathways) is not surprising considering the type and amount of professional development for teaching ELLs typically available to pre- and in-service teachers. Only two participants in this study had completed coursework related to teaching ELLs, which is consistent with the fact that 48 U.S. states do not require preservice teachers to demonstrate competence in teaching this population (“Quality Counts,” 2009).

Eighteen participants had not completed any preservice coursework that emphasized instruction for ELLs. Referring to her first year of teaching, Ms. Allen explained, “I had to wing it.” And, once they entered the classroom, some participants received little professional development. Fourteen participants in this study received a 15-hour workshop series that provided strategies typical for sheltering content-area instruction. In some cases the workshops were to be followed with the formation of professional learning communities, but without structures in place, professional learning communities were left to individual teachers and fell by the wayside. Despite the limited scope of the professional development participants described, many expressed confidence in their strategies for teaching ELLs.

Although participants cited some strategies for differentiation, they did not convey an understanding of second language development or second language assessment, two constructs necessary for setting appropriate instructional goals for ELLs (Colombo, 2011). In fact, most participants were vague about strategies they used, stating that they differentiated for all students, often with mixed results. For example, Ms. Fields, a veteran teacher with a degree in special education, explained, “I know sometimes I treat them [ELLs] as special education students. Sometimes when I have materials in Spanish,
I’ll give them to a student and that doesn’t seem to help.” Without an understanding of second language theory and pedagogy, participants often lacked the instructional pathways to set goals that would provide ELLs with access to an intellectually rigorous curriculum and would develop their academic language proficiency. Consequently, many participants focused on the immediate and attainable goal of implementing strategies and activities, rather than on student outcomes.

**Outreach to Families: Goals, Pathways, and Agency**

Extensive research suggests a positive relationship between family involvement and student achievement (i.e., Epstein, 1984, 1992, 2001). Researchers, such as Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, and Brissie (1987) and Epstein (1991) have shown that teacher agency correlates positively with family engagement. That is, teachers who believe they are able to involve families find multiple pathways for doing so. Yet, study participants showed limited agency and pathways when they discussed ELLs’ out of school lives.

Teacher agency for involving families is likely related to the belief that families have strengths that will contribute to their children’s education even when these strengths differ from those of middle-class families. Similarly, when teachers understand the multiple forms of family involvement (Epstein, 2001) they develop pathways to involve families in myriad ways. However, the majority of participants narrowly defined family involvement as parents’ attendance at school-based events. As one participant explained, “We had open house, and only 12 of 100 parents came.” Citing open house attendance as a proxy for family involvement resulted in the belief that families who did not attend either could not or did not want to be involved in their children’s education.

Participants offered multiple reasons for the apparent lack of family involvement. Ten participants suggested the challenges that parents of their ELLs might encounter. As Ms. Jones offered, “Many of these parents are working two jobs. They can’t come to school. They may not be highly educated, but they want to know that you’ll do right by their child.” Other participants suggested that parents were apathetic, saying things such as, “I don’t know what it is. Whether it’s that it’s not as important to them, or they don’t understand and can’t help.”

Further reflecting compromised agency for engaging families, participants seemed to view family engagement as a larger school goal rather than one they could impact. For example, several participants suggested that schools needed to make families feel more welcome by increasing parents’ representation on the Parent Teacher Organization or by extending open house hours for working families. Participants reported that their pre- and in-service preparation provided little to no understanding of families who differed from them in language and culture. In fact, only eight teachers reported completing a graduate or undergraduate course that encompassed any aspect of cultural diversity, and when diversity was addressed, it was often limited to activities such as trying new foods and understanding nonverbal cultural behaviors, such as making eye contact. Coursework and professional development were unsuccessful in providing experiences that led participants to understand strengths in ELLs and their families, which would have likely promoted a cycle of critical hope and connections with ELLs’ out of school lives.

Some professional development may also have inadvertently perpetuated teachers’ lack of agency, as illustrated by one participant’s description: “It [the professional development] explained why parents don’t show up for things at the school. They send their child to school; the teacher is seen as the expert, so they don’t come to the school.” While it may be useful for teachers to understand differing cultural expectations for home-school responsibilities, the professional development did not appear to provide alternate pathways for connecting with these families.

**Conclusion**

Our study findings are consistent with informal conversations we have had with educators (teachers, building and district administrators, and other school leaders), who we believe are dedicated to educating all children. We struggled with our analysis and interpretation because we viewed (and continue to view) our participants as caring and in many ways very competent teachers who spend their own money to buy supplies and who are indignant at the injustice of the high-stakes testing. Yet, the burden of high stakes testing using metrics that are inappropriate for ELLs coupled with insufficient preparation to teach and assess ELLs diminishes the likelihood that teachers will have the critical hope (agency or pathways) to transform the lives (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Freire, 1994) of ELLs.

In the era of NCLB, the policies and practices of the U.S. educational system actually promote an educational culture that lacks critical hope. As a nation, we use metrics that are inappropriate in assessing ELLs to test, measure, and then evaluate students, teachers, schools, and school systems. We allocate monetary resources to test preparation that could otherwise be used for student services and for teacher preparation aimed at fostering a culture of critical hope. We also allocate to test preparation the valuable resource of instructional
time, which further diminishes critical hope by not only dictating what teachers teach but also how they engage students. Rather than helping ELLs to acquire English and connect the curriculum to their out of school lives in a meaningful way, teachers often are pressured to teach to a mandated test, resulting in instruction that is totally irrelevant to many ELLs. The consequence is disengaged students, decreased teacher agency, and decreased hope for ELL achievement.

While inappropriate testing under NCLB is highly problematic for ELLs and their teachers, it is short-sighted to suggest that simply replacing inappropriate tests with other accountability measures will foster critical hope and positive outcomes for ELLs. A change in the way we define and thus prepare highly qualified teachers is crucial to fostering the agency and pathways necessary to engage with ELLs and their families in meaningful, caring relationships—cornerstones of effective teaching (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

**Recommendations**

Fostering a culture of critical hope for both ELLs and teachers of ELLs requires a rethinking of educational policies with regard to accountability and the preparation of highly qualified teachers. It will also require changes in the allocation of monetary and instructional resources.

**Policy**

Revising national educational policy to ensure that tests are not the sole measure of student success would be a promising first step in promoting a culture of critical hope. Although standardized tests play an important role in accountability, educational policy must also provide structures for transformative learning (Freire, 1994) that is connected to students’ out of school lives. Measuring transformative learning requires authentic assessment.

When standardized tests are used, these must accurately measure the progress of ELLs with differing levels of English language proficiency. Assessments developed by World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) and adopted by 28 states measure language proficiency across content areas. Unlike state tests that conflate content with language and lead to diminished hope for teachers (and students), WIDA offers teachers of ELLs rigorous and attainable goals and pathways to reach these goals.

The current definition of teacher quality must be expanded to include specific dispositional (agency) and instructional indicators (pathways) necessary for effectively teaching ELLs. Redefining teacher quality with these indicators will increase the likelihood that new teachers enter classrooms with critical hope (agency and pathways to effectively teach ELLs). Teachers who are critically hopeful will be more likely to resist the tendency to respond to systemic oppressive forces (i.e., testing under NCLB) with sympathy, blame, and compromised hope. Critically hopeful teachers will be prepared to set rigorous and meaningful goals and provide the instructional supports to help students reach these goals.

**Resources**

Re-allocating monetary and instructional resources from test development and test preparation to supports for students and teachers will also contribute to a culture of critical hope. Necessary resources for students include in-school supports (e.g., ESL services and access to teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, and social workers who speak the language of the family and are advocates for ELLs) and out of school supports (e.g., access to homework help, enrichment activities, and community youth group programs). Teachers will need access to these student supports as well in terms of structure (the time to meet with English language development [ELD] specialists, counselors, other school personnel, and community group personnel) and training to help them understand how to use these resources. Connecting teachers to ELL advocates, both in and out of school, will foster teachers’ ability to connect to students’ out of school lives.

Resources are also required for extensive and ongoing professional development for teaching ELLs that begins in preservice preparation programs and is ongoing throughout in-service careers. This professional development must provide time and structures for reflection and conversation about dispositions with others, which is likely to increase agency. Participants mentioned the potential of Professional Learning Communities to improve their teaching of ELLs. Professional Learning Communities could provide the structure necessary for reflective conversations and for developing understanding about second language theory and pedagogy, thereby increasing critical hope of teachers of ELLs.

**Future Research**

This was a small qualitative study of the perspectives of 20 teachers, yet our findings are consistent with comments we have heard from many in-service teachers of ELLs in our courses, professional development workshops, and at numerous conferences in which we have participated. We believe that the strength of this work is the use of
the theory of hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Snyder, 2002) as a theoretical framework for understanding the structures that promote or detract from the effective education of ELLs. A logical next step would be to survey a large sample of teachers to further explore the relationship between their preparedness, their agency, and their hopefulness in teaching ELLs. Further studies that correlate critical hopefulness with the outcomes of ELLs as measured by an appropriate metric would shed further light on the importance of the framework of teacher hope in the education of ELLs.

References


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