Tapping a Valuable Source for Prospective ESOL Teachers: Northern Virginia's Bilingual Paraeducator Career-Ladder School–University Partnership

Jorge P. Osterling
George Mason University

Keith Buchanan
Fairfax County Public Schools

Abstract

This study describes and analyzes a teacher-education partnership between two institutions of higher education (IHEs) and three local educational agencies (LEAs) located in a large suburban area. Working collaboratively, these five organizations designed and developed a career-ladder teacher-education program that prepares experienced bilingual paraeducators currently working full time at local schools to become "highly qualified" teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages, as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). In this paper, we examine the needs and perspectives of an IHE–LEA partnership and their dynamic relationship to address the specific instructional needs of paraeducators.

Introduction

An unprecedented nationwide demand for certified teachers of English for Students of Other Languages (ESOL) exists at a time when new federal mandates require that public schools employ only "highly qualified" teachers in their classrooms.[1] While the new requirements for teacher licensure set high standards, they may compound the shortage of ESOL teachers if provisionally certified teachers lose their positions. They may also result in delays before prospective teachers complete coursework and find jobs.

Currently, more than three quarters of a million paraeducators work in schools throughout the country. A large percentage of these paraeducators already have some type of postsecondary training and want to complete

university courses to become certified teachers. Among this group, there are a number who are foreign born, bilingual, and bicultural and may be a promising pool for future ESOL teachers. This diverse group of foreign-born, tenured teacher aides brings different attributes to U.S. schools from those of graduates of traditional teacher-education programs, such as bilingual and bicultural competence, extensive experience working with PK–12 language-minority students, knowledge of the schools where they work and of the surrounding communities where they usually live, and a commitment to the education profession. These different characteristics may mean, however, that traditional teacher-education programs may not always be the best path for this group.

Northern Virginia's Bilingual Paraeducator Career-Ladder Model

Northern Virginia's Bilingual Paraeducator Career-Ladder (BIPACAL) program is a federally funded program preparing paraeducators (e.g., instructional assistants, parent liaisons, translators), who are currently working in schools, to become ESOL teachers. Program participants are from three school districts (Arlington, Fairfax, and Prince William Counties) and speak English and another language with sufficient proficiency to instruct in both.

During the past three decades, the Washington, DC, area's linguistically diverse student population has increased by 15% to 20% each year. While Spanish is the first language of the majority of these students, school districts count more than 100 other first languages among their students. The current size of the English language learner (ELL) student population in the three suburban Virginia school districts is over 30,000. In Arlington, 24% of the total student population are ELLs; in Fairfax, 13.71%[2]; and in Prince William, 7%.

Participating institutions were enthusiastic about addressing their shortage of certified bilingual and multicultural ESOL teachers by using the paraeducators already employed in their schools. Like other school-university partnerships that have turned to "grow-your-own" initiatives,[3] the participating institutions of BIPACAL believed that school employees' knowledge of and commitment to school and community would be valuable. Such grow-your-own academic programs train school employees, regardless of native tongue or country of birth, who do not have teaching degrees or credentials to become certified teachers.[4] A significant difference between the BIPACAL program and other bilingual career-ladder programs is that two thirds of the participants in the northern Virginia partnership are foreign-born, non-native English-speaking paraeducators who have immigrated to the United States from 12 different countries (see Table 1).

Table 1

BIPACAL Program
Students by School District and Country/Continent of Birth
(1999–2002)

Country/ continent of birth	Arlington (APS)	Fairfax (FCPS)	Prince William (PWCPS)	Total	Percentage
United States	4	2	7	13	33.3
South America (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Perú)	7	3	1	11	28.2
Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala)	2	3	3	8	20.5
Asia (Afghanistan, Vietnam)	0	3	0	3	7.7
Europe (Portugal, Romania, Spain)	1	1	1	3	7.7
Mexico		1		1	2.6
Total	14	13	12	39	100.0

Starting in October 2000, George Mason University's (GMU) Graduate School of Education, Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC), and the three school districts secured Title VII funding for an academic and administrative framework to identify potential ESOL teacher candidates and to provide support services for paraeducators enrolled in the program. The BIPACAL pays for tuition, fees, and books and provides a small stipend for child care and transportation. Participants, in turn, agree to continue working full time in their current positions, complete their course of study, meet academic standards required by the institutions of higher education (IHEs), and, upon receiving their teacher credentials, to teach ELL students in area schools.

Profile of the Participants in the Study

The participants of the study were 39 bilingual paraeducators, 2 researchers, and 2 representatives from the stakeholder school districts. All of the program participants were informed of the nature and purpose of this research project and agreed to share their comments, often volunteering work samples for analysis and interpretation. In addition to English, participants speak nine different world languages: Spanish, Portuguese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Farsi, Romanian, French, American Sign Language, and German (see Table 2). Two thirds are non-native English speakers from Afghanistan, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Perú, Portugal, Romania, and Vietnam.

Table 2

BIPACAL Program
Students by Heritage Language (L1) and Second Language (L2)

Language	L1	L2	Other L2
Spanish	26	4	
English	7	34	
Portugese	2		
Vietnamese	2		
Arabic		1	
Farsi	1		
Romanian	1		
American Sign Language			1
French			3
German			1

After first meeting with advisors from the IHEs, participants, depending on their educational credentials, enrolled at either NVCC or GMU. Non-native English-speaking paraeducators with no Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score or a score less than 570 (paper based) or 213 (computer based), but who fulfilled GMU's academic requirements, were granted a restricted

degree admission and offered English as a Second Language (ESL) classes until they attained academic-English proficiency. Overall, program participants shared some or all of the following characteristics:

1. All worked as instructional assistants, parent liaisons, substitute teachers, school clerks, or translators.
2. All were bilingual or trilingual.
3. Their average age was 41 years.
4. Female students (36) were the majority.
5. Almost all had had some type of postsecondary education in various academic areas (see Table 3).
6. Most came from ethnic groups underrepresented in the teaching profession.

Table 3
BIPACAL Program
Academic Background at Enrollment (1999–2002)

Academic background		Students	Percentage
High school diploma		1	2.6
Undergraduate studies			
	60 credits or less	5	12.8
	Associate's degree (60–120 credits)	17	43.6
Bachelor's degree		13	33.3
Graduate education		3	7.7
Total		39	100.0

Justification

The traditional teacher-training model, in which IHEs train future educators independently from local educational agencies (LEAs), has given way to teacher-education programs developed around closely-knit IHE and LEA partnerships. BIPACAL reflects the school–university partnership model and, as with other grow-your-own school–university partnerships, has experienced challenges requiring special cooperation from all participating partners.

In this study, we investigated the following research questions:

1. What were the underlying needs and perceptions among the partnership of LEAs, IHEs, and paraeducators that required resolution?
2. How have various decisions impacted program participants, participating institutions, and the educational process?
3. What can be learned from the BIPACAL partnership to assist other educators to design programs that fit their communities' specific needs for ESOL teachers?

Methodology

This research project grew out of the authors' professional experience working with bilingual paraeducators in northern Virginia's public schools and the authors' interest in understanding how PK–12 culturally and linguistically diverse students could benefit from elevating these paraeducators to ESOL teachers so they could share their personal multilingual multicultural experiences. Given that the program was launched in 2000 and our commitment to gain a better understanding of the paraeducator career-ladder teacher-training programs, we adopted a naturalistic research paradigm. By using naturalistic and inductive analytical approaches, we sought to understand career-ladder partnerships in context-specific settings and, eventually, to be able to extrapolate them to similar situations.

In developing our research design, we followed the steps that Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend to qualitative researchers who adopt similar emergent designs. We began our study by determining its focus (i.e., inclusion and exclusion criteria) and goals. We collected data from the BIPACAL participants and supplemented it with data collected from their faculty and university support staff. Various qualitative approaches were used for this objective: biographies, case studies, ethnographies, phenomenology, hermeneutic and action theory approaches, and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). Given our inductive analytical approach, these multiple sources allowed us to discover the perspectives and needs of the LEAs and IHEs and, by doing this, we created a study of ongoing process that moved inductively from data to hypotheses to theory.

The project began 3 years ago, using a purposeful sampling (e.g., Patton, 1990). This allowed us to seek information-rich paraeducator cases, which we then studied in depth. As in most qualitative studies, the two most important data-collection methods were interviews and observation. Other sources of data included our notes of the BIPACAL advisory committee meetings, journal entries and memos, preservice teacher responses to an open-ended survey, paraeducators' test scores (e.g., TOEFL and Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers [PRAXIS I] scores), notes from planning meetings, and interviews with IHE course instructors and the three LEAs.

Since both of us work closely with all BIPACAL participants, adopting a naturalistic approach allowed us to observe and interact with all project participants throughout the study, identify the existence of multiple perspectives, and attempt to represent these adequately and within their context. Our attempts to understand complex data within the context in which they naturally occur raised concerns about credibility, transferability, and validity. Following Patton (1990), we enhanced the quality of our data through triangulation (i.e., the use of multiple perspectives, data sources, researchers, data collection techniques) supplemented by the use of "member checks," in which informants were asked to corroborate and comment on our analysis.

Findings and Discussion

BIPACAL's challenge was to seek a balance between the staffing needs of the stakeholder LEAs, the admissions and graduation requirements of the participating IHEs, and the personal needs and expectations of the program participants themselves. We found that there were some unexpected, often unarticulated, needs and perspectives.

From the start, LEAs perceived BIPACAL as an opportunity to reward their best paraeducators by providing them with an opportunity to complete necessary coursework and become licensed PK–12 teachers. The three participating LEAs, experiencing major demographic changes and a dramatic shortage of licensed bilingual and bicultural teachers, saw in BIPACAL an opportunity to train paraeducators to become licensed teachers who would deliver content instruction to ELLs. At an initial planning meeting, an LEA representative emphasized that the school district's dominant need was to increase the number of licensed bilingual and bicultural teachers to work with the district's ELL students. In the LEAs' view, upon graduation from BIPACAL, these paraeducators would become teachers in classrooms where a high percentage of their ELL students were working hard to improve their academic English while taking content courses (e.g., two-way language-immersion programs; traditional ESL pullout model). They all agreed, however, that all foreign-born professionals who receive a teaching credential in the United States must be proficient in academic English. An LEA representative commented:

> The value of our bilingual paraprofessionals is their ability to work with ELL students on the content of their studies. We are not interested in training them *only* as English teachers [italics added].

The academic English-language requirements for acceptance in BIPACAL generated extensive discussion among partners. If BIPACAL was committed to helping some 30 bilingual paraeducators earn an ESL teacher license (PK–12), what level of English proficiency should be required for their

initial admission to either NVCC or GMU? Should English-language proficiency be the main criterion for admission, or should more weight be given to the bicultural and bilingual professional experience? Another major feature was the need for all program participants to pass the three PRAXIS I tests with a composite score of 532 in order to get a teacher license. Clearly, only those fluent in academic English would be able to pass PRAXIS I.

On the one hand, the stakeholder school districts reassured IHE authorities of the outstanding professional skills, experience, and credentials of participants they had nominated. The LEAs' perception was that the paraeducators operated successfully in oral English. They emphasized that one of the biggest assets of these paraeducators was their ability to work as cultural brokers, and to deliver instruction through a language other than English.

On the other hand, university faculty felt that in order to succeed in an American teacher-training program, the paraeducators nominated to BIPACAL needed to achieve higher academic English-language levels (Cummins, 1979, 1981). IHE authorities stressed the English demands of both the university and state license requirements. Some members of BIPACAL's advisory board[5] argued that participation in the program should be limited to candidates who scored 600 or higher in the TOEFL test taken at the time of admission.[6]

However, the majority of the advisory board members held a different point of view. The decision they made was twofold: They agreed to administer the TOEFL to candidates who were non-native English speakers and declared that they would accept all candidates recommended by the LEAs. They felt that teacher-training programs such as BIPACAL should provide all qualified non-native English-speaking participants who had enrolled in the program with limited working proficiency of the English language with advanced academic English-language courses that would raise their English proficiency to a "low" superior level (i.e., general professional proficiency). They agreed to give participants sufficient time to improve academic English-language proficiency levels prior to their enrollment in GMU's Graduate School of Education. This approach recognized professional experience, valued native language, and provided an opportunity to acquire academic language skills.

The IHEs accepted these parameters and committed themselves to preparing bilingual paraeducators to become licensed PK–12 teachers. NVCC took responsibility for training those who had not yet earned their associate's degrees. GMU assumed the responsibility for remaining coursework. It was agreed from the outset that each program participant would use the same teacher-training pathway as other preservice teachers seeking a state teaching license.

A significant difference between the participants in BIPACAL and those in a traditional teacher-training program is their experience in classrooms. BIPACAL made necessary accommodations for the wide range of experiences,

personal backgrounds, and educational preparation that paraeducators brought to the program. Those with foreign credits and life experience were authorized to use them toward their bachelor's degrees through a Bachelor of Individualized Studies Program. Some students, however, discovered to their dismay that they needed to return to an undergraduate level of instruction in English.

As part of its commitment to helping all bilingual paraeducators, particularly foreign-born and adult learners returning to an IHE, BIPACAL funded support programs and insisted on scheduled meetings with counselors and advisers. All services have an on-campus office and are staffed by bilingual and bicultural staff professionals with experience working with international adult learners. The support services with greatest impact were counseling and academic advising. Not only did these services improve students' academic performance, they also helped students navigate a different educational system, confront stress-related issues, and work their way through competing family, job, and IHE demands. On occasion, these issues were compounded by life transitions and medical and personal problems.

Eighteen non-native English-speaking paraeducators had no experience in American higher education but had strong basic interpersonal communicative English skills. However, participants' TOEFL test scores

Table 4

BIPACAL Program
TOEFL Test Scores (Paper Based), 2000 Academic Year

Scoring range	BIPACAL students	Percentage of students in each scoring range
650–above	2	11.1
600–649	1	5.5
575–599	4	22.2
550–574	4	22.2
500–549	3	16.7
450–499	3	16.7
400–449	1	5.5
Total	18	100.0

highlighted a wide range of academic English proficiency (see Table 4). TOEFL test scores ranged from 445 points to 650 points or above. The BIPACAL decision on admitting all candidates differs from GMU's standard policy, which requires all prospective non-native English-speaking students to achieve a minimum TOEFL score of 570 on the paper-based test (230 on the computer-based test), and therefore required flexibility on the part of the IHE.

In later discussions about academic language proficiency with the 18 participants who took the TOEFL, three things became clear. First, several paraeducators, particularly those who had scored lower than 550, had never taken advanced academic English-language courses. Whatever English they used had been informally acquired or learned through short-term courses. Second, many were not acquainted with American higher education, particularly assessment methods. Many program participants were unfamiliar with multiple choice. Others needed additional assistance with test-taking techniques, particularly in developing time-management skills. Finally, for a few, such tests carried a large burden of emotional stress.

The above findings led BIPACAL to provide them with the skills and strategies necessary to succeed. As a result of initial assessment experiences, BIPACAL briefed participating IHE faculty on these issues, and referred those suffering from test anxiety to counseling services. In high-stakes tests such as the PRAXIS I, BIPACAL organized test-preparation programs that, in addition to reviewing content issues, would help familiarize participants with test-taking skills. After analyzing language-support needs based on the preliminary TOEFL test results, BIPACAL asked GMU's English Language Institute to design intensive courses on academic English for professional adult learners who lived and worked in the United States and were fluent in social English. Paraeducators, who scored 600 or less, enrolled in the English Language Institute classes. BIPACAL also contracted with GMU's Department of English to offer an advanced English-language composition course, with additional time for adult non-native English-speaking paraeducators. This system dramatically improved the academic English-language skills of most participants. The academic English-language proficiency level of those BIPACAL students who had graduated from American public schools and received BA degrees from American universities was also mixed.

When we examined the academic files, we found that although the 39 participants had had abundant professional experience working in public schools with culturally and linguistically diverse students and families, they had been out of college for a long time, and many did not have experience as students in the United States. The majority of the paraeducators had had previous education in Asian or Latin American environments where English was not the language of instruction.

When participants took classes at the university, they encountered different expectations, norms, and values to which they were accustomed. For example, in some Asian and Latin American educational systems, students

were encouraged to develop passive learning habits, to accept uncritically whatever the professor taught, and to not voice publicly their opinions. In their new environment, they were challenged to engage in group work, write opinion papers, and participate orally in class. In academic writing, while the American tradition requires a linear style of exposition involving a logical and direct move from the central idea to explanation or examples, many paraeducators were trained in a contextual, more indirect style of writing, without the greater conciseness and linear sequence demanded in the American system.

As with all staff development opportunities for full-time school employees, the school systems' immediate need was that BIPACAL coursework schedules not conflict with the education of children in the schools. The LEAs were amenable to the overall BIPACAL study plan because courses were almost always scheduled after the paraeducators' normal work hours. In cases where IHE classes began earlier, LEAs promised to allow the paraeducators to leave school before the end of their contracted day once their responsibilities to children were completed. Substitutes would be hired only in rare cases to replace paraeducators who were compelled to leave their jobs to attend class.

Once coursework began, the LEA district offices' commitment to provide each participant with some 5 to 10 hours of midafternoon release time became an issue. While this matter had been discussed and agreed to at a school district level, adequate consultations had not been carried out with the principals and teachers with whom these paraeducators worked. Therefore, at a school level, program participants rapidly discovered from their immediate supervisors that their services in the schools were still needed for more than 40 hours a week and that, on a weekly basis, they were not authorized to take time off. Although they were indispensable, there were no funds to hire substitutes for 1 or 2 midafternoon hours. Although BIPACAL strenuously argued for this release time, not all schools agreed.

A review of the current academic status of BIPACAL participants yields insights into the impact of decisions made by the partnership to date. Of the 39 program participants enrolled in the program, 23 needed to complete their undergraduate studies; 13 already had a bachelor's degree; and 3 came to the program with an American master's degree. Of great significance to the LEAs, all 39 continued working at their corresponding school districts, although 4 have left the BIPACAL program.

Nine paraeducators who enrolled in BIPACAL with a baccalaureate degree have been promoted as full-time classroom teachers with a significant salary increase. Two of these nine earned their Virginia teaching license after complying with all state and GMU requirements. The remaining seven were issued a 3-year non-renewable provisional license at the request of their school districts. The result has been that three of these seven have left the BIPACAL program, although they remain working at their schools as first-year teachers.

The main reason reported for leaving the program was that, as first-year teachers, they felt overwhelmed by their new classroom responsibilities (e.g., organizing and implementing instruction, assessing student learning, managing classrooms) and felt that they did not have the necessary time to comply with the requirements of their graduate coursework.

Of the five paraeducators who came to BIPACAL with fewer than 60 undergraduate credits and who enrolled in NVCC to work toward an associate's degree, one left BIPACAL, three have transferred to GMU's Bachelor of Individualized Study Program, and one will receive her associate's degree in fall 2003.

An NVCC student who voluntarily left BIPACAL after three semesters had entered the program with only three credits, received a low TOEFL score, and discovered that she had a learning disability. Juggling parenting and a full-time work schedule, she reported that she felt it would be an uphill battle to find sufficient time to take the necessary 147 IHE credits required to become a licensed teacher in Virginia.

At the time of writing this article, 21 (54%) of the 39 program participants had a bachelor's degree. Of these, in addition to the 2 with a Virginia license, 8 are currently enrolled in GMU's Graduate School of Education (one on U.S. Army leave), and, during summer 2003, 11 will be taking the required PRAXIS I test that will qualify them to be enrolled in the Graduate School of Education.

Implications

Overall, we found that the participating IHEs and LEAs took advantage of the opportunities to discuss the impact that changing demographics and shifting paradigms have on an increasingly diverse PK–12 student population, to analyze the effectiveness of current teacher-training programs that include ELLs, and to discuss the contributions and lessons that paraeducator career-ladder programs can offer to the ESOL teacher-training field. All of the partners were challenged to provide quality education and professional training compatible with the needs of mid-career, noncertified school employees interested in becoming licensed teachers. For the participating IHEs, paraeducators brought unique multicultural and multilingual perspectives to the traditional lecture halls. LEAs gained insight into the IHE teacher-training requirements and helped design a program that would address the specific needs of nontraditional, adult students, the majority of whom are students of color. Paraeducators, particularly those born and trained overseas, learned how to navigate the American higher educational system and to juggle the demands of a full-time job and coursework while balancing LEA and IHE needs.

Differing Perspectives: Paraeducator Responsibilities

It is unrealistic to expect a veteran paraeducator to spend up to 5 years holding a full-time job while enrolling in two or three IHE courses and improving his or her academic English-language skills. While the participating LEAs had agreed to provide some paid release time to paraeducators, the daily running of their schools has often undermined this arrangement. It is worth mentioning that schools traditionally have not budgeted for substitutes to replace paraeducators.

We found that, because of the school-based management structure of northern Virginia school districts, senior LEA administrators informed school principals about the existence of the BIPACAL teacher-education programs and encouraged them to nominate qualified candidates, but did not always inform them of long-term staffing implications. Once candidates were admitted to the program and IHE classes began, it became clear both to the program participants and to the IHEs that LEAs and school principals had not always discussed specific programmatic issues such as each student's required course load and the number of semesters each student would need to attend classes. For example, we found that not all principals or classroom teachers for whom the paraprofessionals worked shared the same attitudes about release time to attend classes or study groups.

We recommend that future bilingual paraeducator career-ladder teacher-training partnerships such as BIPACAL be designed around full-time (i.e., nine or more) credit hours of work per semester from the participants. At the very least, bilingual paraeducators participating in teacher-training programs should only be expected to work at their LEAs a maximum of 20 hours a week. This will allow all program participants to devote no more than 50% of their time to their LEA jobs and the remaining time to the academic coursework provided by the IHE.

Differing Perspectives: BIPACAL—Reward or Entitlement?

For many years, how best to reward successful paraeducators has been an issue for school administrators. Traditional salary schedules are inadequate because they do not reward actual classroom performance, professional background, and sociolinguistic skills. Consequently, school districts perceived the development of BIPACAL as a mechanism to address this issue. By setting qualifying criteria for such a generous academic reward, and by making it available to the "best tenured paraeducators," BIPACAL sought to distinguish itself from other traditional reward mechanisms in which school staff compete with one another for a share of the limited merit money. BIPACAL's underlying assumption was that grantees would be motivated to perform to the highest required standards and, by doing so, help modernize

the teaching profession. Schools divisions assumed that in the long run, rewarding a limited number of paraeducators would serve to improve student performance.

On the other hand, some paraeducators developed a sense of entitlement for the award, which recognized their many years of outstanding work at local schools. Furthermore, some felt that it authorized them to request various types of exemptions and special accommodations from both their employers (i.e., school districts) and the IHE, which existing LEA, IHE, and SEA rules and regulations could not support. For example, at the IHE level, several paraeducators requested exemptions from having to take TOEFL or PRAXIS I exams or meeting with their academic advisors or counselors.

Differing Perspectives: Bilingualism and English Proficiency Level

The different perspectives of IHEs and LEAs on language proficiency have great impact on a bilingual career-ladder program. In BIPACAL's case, an attempt to reconcile these perspectives yielded a decision to accept all LEA nominations and for both IHEs to require non-native speakers of English who had not previously studied at an American IHE to prove their academic English-language proficiency. Non-native English-speaking program participants who had never studied in an American LEA or IHE were required to take an ESL placement test (e.g., TOEFL) before registering for any courses. Those paraeducators who took the TOEFL and received low scores were required to take English-language courses. Several of them, while fluent in oral English, commented that they had self-taught themselves English but never participated in formal ESL classes. As a result, some paraeducators who would have been initially screened out by the TOEFL eventually passed the TOEFL and became excellent students, while a few others who had graduated from American LEAs or community colleges struggled with their IHE courses and had difficulty maintaining a 3.0 grade point average.

After 3 years of data, we believe that the correct decision was made to admit experienced non-native English speakers who had at least an intermediate level of English proficiency to the BIPACAL program. It challenged IHEs to review their admission policies of nontraditional, non-native English-speaking adult learners—otherwise qualified for graduate school—and to assist them in improving their English-language competence. This meant that IHEs and LEAs needed to give these paraeducators more time to devote to learning English prior to admission to graduate school and to continue structured language support through certification.

We recommend that before admitting foreign-born paraeducators with academic English proficiency to a teacher-training program, LEAs and IHEs discuss their perspectives on the language proficiency of nominees. The LEA need for bilingual and bicultural teachers is immediate and immense. The level

of proficiency required in the PK–12 classroom can differ greatly from the level of proficiency required for successful completion of graduate school and teacher certification. Once this understanding is clear, there are different ways to address the challenge: IHE admissions standards for English-language proficiency can be set at 575 or above for TOEFL. A program can fund language improvement prior to admission (e.g., for those with a TOEFL score between 500 and 575). A policy can be designed that allows for more time during undergraduate training to improve academic English-language proficiency.

Our recommendation is reinforced by the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), which states that beginning with the 2003–2004 school year, LEAs must certify that all teachers in a language-instruction educational program for ELL students are fluent in English and any other language used by the program, including written and oral communication skills.

Paraeducators' Underestimation of Time Demands

In addition to their demanding jobs, all participants had family obligations, several were single parents, and many worked evening jobs to make ends meet. BIPACAL meant an opportunity to fulfill their aspirations to become licensed teachers and to gain significant salary raises at the conclusion of the teacher-training program. At the outset, many did not anticipate the dramatic impact on their personal schedules resulting from the additional role as a part-time IHE student on top of their full-time jobs.

We found that IHE faculty may not always appreciate the adjustments required for paraeducators to come to grips with their new time commitments in their quest to be successful in the academic world. As a result, we recommend that IHEs arrange bilingual and bicultural counseling services, schedule sessions, and require all paraeducators to attend them. As paraeducators do not perceive the need for them initially, they need to attend a sufficient number to grasp the benefit of this support.

Provisional Licenses

Issuing a 3-year nonrenewable provisional license to seven BIPACAL participants was an unexpected development within the program. For those seven paraeducators, accepting a provisional license brought financial and professional short-term rewards. However, in the long run, it means that while teaching full time in the next 3 years, in addition to taking and passing the PRAXIS I, each of them will have to satisfy all state coursework. This is a daunting challenge for any new teacher. We recommend that LEAs should not offer provisional contracts to participants until they complete their licensure coursework and pass the PRAXIS I exam.

Academic English Language Support for Adult Second Language Learners

While all foreign-born participants in this study speak fluent English and have been in the United States for many years, several—particularly those who have never studied English grammar—are still learning English. Their unique needs challenged the LEA–IHE partnership to negotiate and fund English-language courses in small classes exclusively for adult, non-native English-speaking paraprofessionals. Additional contact hours and support services, such as those provided by private tutors and by the university's English writing center, were funded. We recommend IHEs design meaningful ESL acquisition classes at a graduate level to support those professionals who are in transition to native fluency.

Conclusion

Local schools face the formidable task of addressing the needs of the constantly changing demographics of children who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Paraeducators in these schools bring valuable knowledge of the schools, commitment to children, and frequently, in the case of foreign-born paraeducators, similar life experiences to ELL students. When we tap this resource and create teacher-training programs, we cannot underestimate the pressure schools are under to serve their children.

In this paper, we have described BIPACAL's challenge to seek a balance among the needs and expectations encountered by paraeducators, three school districts, and two institutions of higher education so bilingual paraeducators can become certified ESOL teachers. The IHEs have found that the LEAs' enthusiasm for growing their own paraeducators into licensed teachers requires flexibility and support without diminishing academic standards.

While several critical questions remain unanswered with respect to the best ways to recruit and train ESOL teachers who are bilingual and bicultural, particularly in light of No Child Left Behind requirements for "highly qualified" teachers to be in every U.S. classroom, programs such as BIPACAL provide a valuable context for studying the pros and cons and the accommodations necessary for successful nontraditional programs that will train paraeducators to become certified teachers.

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Endnotes

[1] Among the stipulations of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, schools must put a "highly qualified" teacher in every classroom by 2006; instructional assistants must meet specific competencies this year; schools must assess and assure ELL students' progress in English, and all schools must annually test all students in Grades 3 through 8 for progress in reading and math, and eliminate disparities in achievement among Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics by 2014.

[2] In Fairfax County Public Schools, the number of language-minority students has risen from 13,869 students in 1987 to 46,628 in the year 2003; and the number of ESOL students from 3,469 in 1987 to 19,346 in 2003.

[3] During the 1980s, several school districts throughout the United States, which faced a severe shortage of qualified bilingual teachers, began to establish bilingual career-ladder teacher-training programs. Based on a comprehensive approach to recruiting and developing the talent of school district personnel, the career-ladder model offers experienced noncertified educational personnel opportunities, while continuing working in their schools, to be trained as certified bilingual educators in their districts. Already Title VII of 1994's reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the Improving America's Schools Act, contained Section 7144, devoted to bilingual educational career-ladder programs, which authorized the Secretary of Education to award grants to support them. In 2002, Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act also included career-ladder programs among the high-quality professional teacher-training programs authorized to apply to federal grants (No Child Left Behind Act, Title III, §3231c [2002]).

[4] For a review of grow-your-own teacher-training programs, please see: Becket, 1998; Clewell & Villegas,1998; Clewell & Villegas, 1999; Díaz-Rico, Lynne, & Smith, 1994; Flores & Clark, 1997; Flores, Keehn, & Pérez, 2002; Genzuk, 1997; Genzuk & Baca, 1998; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996; Ponessas, 1996; Schnaiberg, 1994; Villegas & Clewell, 1998; Worthington, 1992.

[5] BIPACAL's advisory committee, chaired by the program director, includes representatives from the two IHEs and three LEAs. In addition, it includes GMU's minority student affairs advisor, a principal, and a representative from the paraeducators. The committee meets twice per year and advises on all phases of the program, from recruitment and selection to evaluation.

[6] It should be noted that the passage of the minimal TOEFL requirements does not guarantee a level of English competence expected of a licensed teacher in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

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