

# A Narrative Inquiry into an ESL Teacher's Professional Development: Problems and Recommendations

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## **Abstract**

Using narrative inquiry, this study investigates an ESL teacher's experience of professional development, her perspectives of its effectiveness, the challenges encountered, and the changes in teacher knowledge and teaching practices. The focus is on how the teacher participant perceives the problems in professional development and how professional development can best address teachers' needs in educating ELLs. The problems found to impede teachers from gaining the most from professional development include: (a) failure to tailor to the specific needs of ESL students; (b) neglect of the psychological and emotional well-being of ESL students; (c) lack of empathy for ESL students, (d) lack of content-specific ELL teacher professional development; and (e) professional development not well-attended. Accordingly, recommendations are put forward to render ESL teacher professional development more effective. It is anticipated that this study will provide important insights into how to construct positive professional development that benefits teachers and ESL students to the largest possible degree.

**Keywords:** narrative inquiry, ESL students, professional development, problems, recommendations

## 1. Introduction

The U.S. Department of Education reported that an estimated 5.0 million English language learners (ELLs) were enrolled in public schools in the school year 2018, which represented approximately 10.2 percent of the public school enrollment (Irwin et al., 2021). Among the 50 states, Texas has 18.7 percent of ELLs in its public schools, only next to California (19.4 percent) (Irwin et al., 2021). According to Migration Policy Institute, foreign-born immigrants made up 17.0 percent of the Texas population in 2016, compared to 13.5 percent across the United States (Sugarmann & Geary, 2018). Based on the data of The Texas Tribune (n.d.), in Houston Independent School District (HISD), one of the largest and most diverse school districts in the United States, as of the **2019-2020** school year, ELL enrollment accounted for 34.5 percent of the district population.

Compared to native-English-speaking students, ELLs are confronted with dual learning tasks: learning English as a 2<sup>nd</sup> language and in the meantime the grade-level academic content in the medium of the language they are not fully proficient in. They are held to the same language arts, math, science, and other content-area standards, and are required to take and pass the same standards-based tests as their native-English-speaking peers. It has been found that “on almost all measures of academic achievement ELLs lag well behind their English-speaking peers” (Arends, 2015, p. 76).

Against this backdrop, it is especially critical to systematically and substantially provide high-quality professional development to teachers working with ELLs, in hopes of enhancing their teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Most of the studies on teachers’ professional development thus far have failed to demonstrate how it has impacted teachers’ teaching practices and their student learning outcomes. The extent to which the professional development programs have met teachers’ needs and helped teachers apply the learning to their teaching practices are important questions worth investigating. Likewise, the connection between teacher learning from professional development and teacher change in knowledge and practice is left to be delved into.

This research study aims to investigate an ESL teacher’s experience of professional development, her perspectives of its effectiveness, the challenges encountered, the support received, and the changes in teacher knowledge and teaching practices. More often than not, teachers’ professional development focuses on the “best practices” and “research-based programs,” but provides little guidance on teachers’ day-to-day teaching. This study strives to break this prevalent model of professional development by gearing towards how a teacher perceives the problems in professional development and how professional development can best address teachers’ needs in educating ELLs.

## 2. Literature Review

Professional development is an essential aspect of the educational life of teachers. Guske (2000) defined it as “processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students” (p. 16). Lindstrom and Speck (2004) claimed that the most productive professional development is characterized by a collaborative method, an interactive approach, and a teacher-centered process.

Short (2013) provided recommendations for sustaining teacher development that included face-to-face workshop, classroom observation, coaching, school-based professional learning communities, and measurement of implementation. She particularly alluded to the importance of “provide support, support, and more support” (P.123) and “engage the school administration” (P.124) in teacher professional development. Iddings and Rose (2012) focused on how the design-based professional development model resulted in shifts in teacher thinking and innovations about language and literacy instruction for ELLs. This research pointed to the importance of promoting teachers' critical reflection on classroom practices and of creating hypotheses for pedagogical change. Teachers are more likely to improve ELLs' learning when they become more knowledgeable and willing to engage in the inquiry process.

This study gives more attention to the prior research that focuses more on teachers' voices about the professional development they received. Franco-Fuenmayor, Padrón, and Waxman (2015) surveyed the perspectives of 225 bilingual/English as Second Language (ESL) teachers in a large suburban school district in Texas about the usefulness of the training they received and what type of training they would find useful. Results indicated that teachers are not receiving adequate professional development to support students' language development in the classroom, particularly in the areas of vocabulary, literacy, and differentiated instruction. Furthermore, a significant percentage of teachers reported that they need practical solutions, specific strategies, and hands-on/real-world examples of how to implement the program in their day-to-day teaching to meet the needs of their group of ELLs.

Hall and Cajkler (2008) explored novice teachers' perspectives about their ELL teacher training and found that their primary concern is related to teaching ELLs literacy and assessing their language skills. Coleman and Goldenberg (2010) examined the perspectives of teacher candidates regarding the effect of the training program on their capabilities to educate ELL students through a qualitative case study. They found that the majority of the ELL students thought that the training program was beneficial concerning providing resources and specific strategies. However, they still felt inadequate to teach ELLs without learning their first language and culture.

Not all teachers embrace the idea of being the agent of their professional development. Reeves (2006) conducted a survey of 279 content teachers from high schools with a large number of ELL students and found that their attitudes toward teacher development were ambivalent. Approximately half (148) of the participants (53%) were interested in receiving training, and 126(45%) participants were not interested. The probable reasons suggested by the researches include: (1) Some teachers think that it is bilingual or ESL teachers' responsibility to have the

training about ESL; (2) Some teachers' prior experiences with professional development were not positive; and (3) Some teachers believe that they can teach effectively without professional development.

This is not the only research study that discussed teachers' indifference to professional development. Through exploring the attitudes, knowledge, and skills of Australian secondary teachers from schools with high numbers of ELLs, Gleeson and Davison (2016) found that experienced teachers are not as receptive as novice teachers to learning from professional development. Because of the belief that their expertise is developed primarily through classroom experience over years, many teachers did not readily accept professional learning outside their existing epistemology. This study asserted that "teachers are unlikely to change markedly unless teachers are discomforted by inconsistencies between their beliefs and theoretical understanding." In other words, professional learning occurs only when dissonance disrupts a teacher's existing beliefs. Teachers need to become aware of a disconnection between their beliefs, knowledge, and practice before they are disposed to new learning from professional development.

Uzuner Smith (2014) argued that teacher learning occurs when professional development helps teachers to generate "tentative hypothesis" (p. 456). They then make connections between their prior and new knowledge to "revise, refine, or discard their hypotheses" (p. 456) and go beyond what is known, definite and comfortable to become serious and critical learners. We may find that in these programs, teachers are co-planners who are highly motivated and reflective, rather than merely a medium that translates trainers' information directly into teaching practices. This shift in teachers' roles serve as a big turning point in professional development.

Among different subjects, much attention has been paid to science teaching (Lee & Buxton, 2013; Lee et al., 2008; Shaw et al., 2014; Welsh & Newman, 2010). Shaw et al. (2014) confirmed the findings of previous research that the integration of science language and literacy practices can improve ELL achievement in science concepts, writing, and vocabulary. Rebera (2014) discussed the limited training and development opportunities many mathematics teachers have received in teaching language skills, how language plays a role in mathematical reasoning, and the use of scaffolding to assist ELLs in mathematics learning.

Despite the robust research findings aforementioned, plentiful questions and problems remain to be explored. As Knight and Wiseman (2006) pointed out, "clearly, professional development for teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse students is a neglected area of research" (p. 89). This study intends to build on what has been found in the existing research and shed some new light on ESL teachers' professional development through providing an in-depth exploration of an ESL teacher's professional development experiences and perspectives. The emphasis will be placed on how the teacher participant perceives the problems in professional development and how professional development can best address teachers' needs in educating ELLs, some of the topics that not many previous studies have delved into.

### 3. Methodology— Narrative inquiry

This research employs narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as the methodology to uncover an ESL teacher's experiences and perceptions related to professional development. As described by Connelly and Clandinin, narrative inquiry is “a study of the ways humans experience the world” (1990, p. 2), as well as a “personal experience method” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994), grounded in the belief that stories are the best portal through which human experience is interpreted and made meaningful both individually and socially. Utilizing native inquiry, this study will unpack the stories of Angela, an LPAC coordinator, ESL teacher, and ESL department chair in a high school in the largest school district of a southwestern state in the USA concerning her professional development experiences and perspectives.

Angela teaches a newcomer English course and two beginning reading courses. Her students are mostly 9th and 10th graders, whose English proficiency is beginning or low intermediate. She has a Bachelor's degree in secondary education in history and Spanish and a Master's degree in curriculum and instruction. This is her 10th year in teaching. She started her teaching career as a high school Spanish teacher in another school district and taught Spanish for four years. In the interval, she went abroad for a year to teach English and history. As her teaching career progressed, she became more interested in teaching ESL. When the opportunities came upon to work with the high school beginning ESL students, she took this position and this has been her 5th year in this role.

Her experiences and perspectives, as storied and restoried, will be unfolded through semi-structured interviews and informal conversations. A semi-structured interview protocol was formulated for the interviews that not only targeted the research topics but also allowed for maximum flexibility to maintain a natural conversation for the sake of generating more data. The participant was assured that pseudonyms would be used for all the information that may cause her identity to be disclosed and the data obtained would be used only for research purposes. The interview atmospheres were informal and relaxing. The researcher paid special attention to responding “skillfully to what the subject is saying in order to guide, without leading” by using different types of responses at different stages of the interview (Carspecken, 1996, p.157).

“Narrative inquiry is much more than the telling of stories” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 21); it “need(s) to move to the retelling and reliving of stories, that is, to inquiry into stories” (p. 33). Three analytical tools—broadening, burrowing, storying and restorying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990)—will be used for “narratively cod(ing)” the field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131) in their transitioning to research texts. Broadening occurs when the narratives are situated in a larger social, cultural, political, and historical context, e.g., educational policies, school climate, and teacher learning community. Burrowing allows me to gain an upclose examination of the participant's experiences and reveal the nuances of their stories. Additionally, storying and restorying bring to surface the breadth and depth of participant's perspectives that may change across contexts and over time. Taken together, the three interpretive devices will enable me to channel field texts into research texts that “grow out of the repeated asking of questions concerning meaning and significance” (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000, p. 132).

Like other forms of social science research, narrative inquiry texts “require evidence, interpretive plausibility, and disciplined thought” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 485). This evidence, however, does not rely on criteria, such as validity, reliability, and generalizability, as in quantitative research. Instead, what a narrative inquirer seeks to establish is “not truth but truth-likeness or verisimilitude” (Bruner, 1985, p. 97), “a compound of coherence and pragmatic utility,” as Bruner asserted (1996, p. 90). Lyons and LaBoskey (2002) also suggested that for narrative inquirers, “validity” rests on concrete examples of actual practices presented in enough detail so that the relevant community can judge the credibility and usefulness of the observations and the analysis of an inquiry. Significance, then, is rooted in believability and trustworthiness rather than the absolute consistency or authenticity of events. Therefore, the core of establishing the credibility of this research will lie in authenticity, resonance, and trustworthiness. Strategies, including triangulation, member checks, and peer debriefing, will be applied to achieve these purposes.

#### **4. Angela’s Experience with Professional Development**

Angela is thankful that her campus is very supportive of teacher professional development. She has never been turned down for asking for going to professional development. At her school, ESL teachers work a lot in professional learning committees (PLC). All the ESL teachers have the same period off every day, during which time, they work together discussing what difficulties they are encountering and making a plan to get the issues addressed. This is also an important time for teachers to talk about the professional development they have received, or the professional development they would like to receive to make their teaching more effective. They make sure whoever has a chance to attend professional development presents what is learned in the PLC.

Angela also acknowledges the responsiveness of the multilingual department at her school district in providing them with the support they need for professional growth. She noted that the professional development in her school district has improved drastically over the past 5 years. She recalled that when she first started, other than the general teacher training, she did not receive anything specific related to ESL, even though she had never taught ESL in high schools before. Now there are a lot of offerings across the district, such as the ones about ESL teaching methods, reading comprehension, differentiation, etc. Moreover, a monthly training called “Multilingual Institute” is available, which is open to all teachers at all grade levels in the district. Besides, the district has professional development specialists who work with the campuses. For instance, a specialist has come to her campus to provide three lunch-time training focusing on English proficiency levels, including what they mean, what students are expected to do at each level, and how to move students from one level to the next in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.



## 5. Change in Teacher Knowledge, Teaching Practices, and Student Learning Outcomes

When asked about how the professional development has changed her teacher knowledge, teaching practices, and student learning outcomes, she made the following remarks,

I have received a lot of quality teacher training, and it has made a big impact on how I do reading groupings, how to provide accommodations and modifications, and how I use different ways to make sure students are comprehending materials better, such as sentence stems, partner activities, prewriting activities, so on and so forth. (Angela)

In her opinion, professional development demonstrates to teachers how to employ the various strategies with students that “teachers know they should use but may not know how if they don’t see how it is being done especially in mixed level classes” (Angela). For example, previously, Angela and her colleagues in the ESL department used “more kind of baby materials even though they are in high school, such as colors, numbers, and letters” (Angela). Thanks to the professional development, they found ways to better incorporate more grade-appropriate materials into the content, as Angela described below.

As a department, we have been able to identify what the needs are as far as vocabulary acquisition, the needs for students to be successful in the society in general not just in schools, and incorporate it into the readings we do, the lessons, and how we are teaching. So it’s not necessarily like we are going to spend a week on colors, but we are doing colors as vocabulary that is embedded into grade-level reading we are doing. I think the training has been really helpful. We have done a better job in making sure we are giving students appropriate content, and students are learning better. (Angela)

Additionally, professional development has influenced her knowledge and practices by allowing her to make connections with the teachers from other campuses and school districts she would not normally have a chance to work with. She, therefore, got to learn what they were doing on their campuses, what worked, what did not work, and then applied the new learning to her classroom.

That’s a huge benefit. Being able to say “Okay, I do 1, 2, and 3. Oh, they are talking about 4 and 5 and I can add that to my repertoire to benefit the students.” It’s good to constantly be educating ourselves, being with other like-minded people who are there for the students. (Andrea)

Angela asserted that the professional development she had received was “extremely helpful.” “Students have greatly benefited. We have seen the results in the exit exams, TELPAS scores... There is definite data to show that the changes we made have been effective, the changes driven by the professional development we have received.” Angela said.

## **6. Professional Development not Specific to the Needs of Students**

Angela contended that one of the greatest problems with the ELL teacher professional development she had received was “not specific to the needs of my students.”

A lot of times, they say “Okay, we’ll have a half-day training” and there may be only an hour of helpful information. We just sit in there for three hours. The information is not relevant or useful to us. So sometimes that can be a struggle. People who are not into the needs of the campuses are a problem. They need to know their audience, and better understand their needs. (Angela)

Associated with this problem is a big challenge teachers face in working with ESL students, that is, “a wide variety of differences” ESL students come from. Angela has students who come from many different educational backgrounds and cultures with a variety of language proficiencies in both their native language and English. Hence, there are a large diversity of needs in language development and academic learning. This, in Angela’s terms, makes it “a mixed bag” of what she is working with.

We just need to find ways to meet all of them where they are. It’s fun, but it’s a challenge, which means you are never bored. It’s difficult for the students and difficult for the teachers. It can cause more challenges than in a general ed classroom in a lot of ways. You really have to have a heart for working with these students. Otherwise, it’s pretty easy to get burned out. (Angela)

Teachers’ professional development programs, more often than not, have focused on the particular things they wish teachers to know, but overlook the fact that real-world schools are infinitely more complex than the things teachers are taught (Wei, 2016). For the professional development programs to benefit teachers most, they need to

Look at the data. See where the needs are. Ask the teachers what they need for their professional development, and also ask the administrators what they like for their teachers to get. They are gonna more likely to send their teachers if they feel that it fits their needs. (Angela)

## **7. Neglect of the Psychological and Emotional Well-Being of ESL Students**

Another problem with ELL teacher professional development, in Angela’s eyes, is the neglect of the psychological and emotional well-being of ESL students, which she views stems from the STARR test. The following remarks she made are illuminating,

As far as the students, they are warm, wonderful, and welcoming, and their families are great. But the schools don’t really know how to deal with them and help them. Schools are very often just concerned with STARR scores, passing rates, and graduation rates.



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(Angela)

Just as Angela observed, in a high-stakes testing environment, schools tend to have a single-minded obsession with getting students to pass the STAAR tests, which may cause the neglect of the psychological and emotional needs of students.

Angela also spoke about the gang issues that happened at her school two years ago.

We had students who came in and had no family structure. They were trying to look for a family structure and places where they felt comfortable outside of the home, and they find it in gangs. We tried to bring it to the administration's attention. They were like "Oh, it's not a problem. It's not gonna become an issue." And it became an issue.  
(Angela)

Needs theory in education argues that individuals are aroused to action by innate needs and intrinsic pressures, rather than by extrinsic rewards or punishments. Maslow (1970) posited that human beings have a hierarchy of needs that they seek to satisfy, which can be categorized into seven levels. At the lowest level are the needs to satisfy basic physiological requirements, such as food and shelter, and the needs to be safe, to belong, and be loved. The needs at the higher level of Maslow's hierarchy are more complex and refer to human growth needs, such as self-understanding, living up to one's potential, and self-actualization. According to Maslow (1970), it is only when basic physical needs and the needs for love and self-esteem are met that individuals strive to meet higher-level needs. Children who come to school without lower-level needs satisfied are unlikely to concentrate on having their higher-level needs satisfied.

The need theory helps understand why the ESL students in Angela's school joined the gang. Students cannot be expected to focus on academic achievement before their needs for belonging, love, and self-esteem are met. As Angela pointed out, students joined the gang if that happened to be the only place that met their lower-level needs.

What Angela and her ESL department have been doing since the gang issues arose is trying to identify the newcomer ESL students who are in need of family structure and support and then providing them with such support, so they can establish a level of comfort and confidence.

Often we see a problem after it's already there. It's important to shift that narrative from being reactive to proactive. These issues have really gone down significantly over the last two years because we were more proactive about our approach (through providing more psychological and emotional support to ESL students). (Angela)

## 8. Lack of Empathy for ESL Students

Angela lamented many teachers' lack of empathy for ESL students regarding their needs. She believes that building empathy is crucial. However, as she observed,

So often, especially the educators who have been in education for a long time who haven't dealt with ELLs since the beginning of their career, are not as open to the needs as these students have. They just think okay that's just gonna be part of whatever percentage of kids who can't do it because they can't speak to me in English. There is not always empathy for that. (Angela)

She shared one of her experiences that had touched her greatly. She once had a veteran teacher who brought a student to her in the middle of the class as she was teaching, telling her "This kid doesn't speak English. What do I do with him?" Her immediate feeling was

Is that a child? Be empathetic. Be professional and know that whoever walks in your classroom, that's your job to teach them. That's what you are paid to do. If you need support, that's what we are here for. But don't comment and tell me that these kids can't be in your class as they don't speak English. (Angela)

Being frustrated that "it happens enough and it's an issue," she asserted that "we have to change hearts and minds of educators." "There are people who have never left Texas, who have never tried to speak another language, never traveled, and just don't understand. We have to broaden their eyes the same way we broaden our students," Angela said. It hurts her to think of how the ESL students may feel when being brought before her in the middle of the class for not being able to speak English, and what kind of psychological and emotional impact that may have on students when they are treated this way.

They give up, they give up. They feel defeated. They feel embarrassed. They are not going to talk in the class. They are not going to show people they don't understand. They are not going to ask for help, and they feel defeated from day one that they are not going to be able to do it, and we see that with a lot of kids. (Angela)

As an ESL department chair, Angela tried to schedule ESL students with teachers who were more empathetic and broad-minded. However, she soon realized that those teachers got bogged down with a high percent of ELLs when there are no ELLs in other classes. "It is almost like punishing the empathetic teachers—the good teachers, and rewarding the bad teachers. Okay, you don't want those kids in your class, fine." (Angela)

It is imperative that professional development help teachers to become more sensitive to the needs of ESL students. As Angela commented,

I truly believe that people get into education to help kids. If they don't know how to do

that, we have to educate them on that, with different groups of children they are not used to working with or they've never encountered. That's where the professional development comes in. (Angela)

In Angela's opinion, teachers' lack of empathy for ESL students also "translates to lawmakers." An example she gave was the different passing percentages required to pass the STAAR exam.

You have to get 30 or 35% correct on biology and algebra to pass the STAAR. But for the English I or II STAAR tests, it's like 70% you have to score to pass, and students have many, many, many fewer accommodations on those English I and II STAARs than they do in math, science, and social studies. So even the lawmakers don't understand what those students need and perhaps are not empathetic to those students. If we say "Oh well, you didn't pass the STAAR exams, you are never gonna graduate from high school," you are setting kids up for failure. What effect is it gonna have on our economy and society? That's not acceptable when the kids were born in the US, but somehow it is acceptable when they were not born in the US. We just write them off, and that's so wrong. (Angela)

## **9. Professional Development not Well-Attended**

Angela feels sad that the many offerings of professional development programs across the district, though open to all teachers at all grade levels, are not well attended. She commented, "They are very helpful. They should be well attended, but they are not." Typically, it is the teachers who want to be more effective and who care about their ELL students that attend the training. No ESL training is required in her district. "I wish it was required, but it's just not," Angela said.

Massachusetts requires intensive training for all academic-content teachers with ELLs in their classrooms. The training has three dimensions: (1) the responsibility for teaching language to ELLs, (2) how language is acquired, and (3) the instructional strategies and practices that make up sheltered English immersion (Maxwell, 2012). All teachers, regardless of the subject and the grade level they teach, should receive professional development concerning ELLs. Just as Angela stated,

Everyone has ELLs in the classroom. We need to build a culture that we are going to give you a PD (professional development). We are going to show you, yes, these students are a challenge. There is no question. But you can do this, and we are going to support you, and you are going to grow to love them. They are great kids. They are wonderful, and there is so much fun. I can't imagine going back to a general education class and teaching kids that are all from here and all speak one language... We can change hearts and minds. It's gonna be slow, but you can do it. (Angela)

## **10. Lack of Content-Specific ELL Teacher Professional Development**

A big issue in teacher professional development for ELLs, as Angela perceives, is “there is not very much secondary content-specific professional development.” She claimed that “we don’t do a good job in specializing professional development for ELLs.” She felt a twinge of envy for the bilingual teachers who have lots of opportunities for professional development thanks to the relatively more budget in this field. However, for content teachers at the secondary level, just as Angela said,

Not having much training related to ELLs for math, science, and social studies at the secondary level is a huge issue that needs to be addressed, such as how to differentiate their classroom, what materials to use, what kind of knowledge the students came in with from various countries and educational system, so on and so forth. (Angela)

She was concerned that content teachers at the secondary level were not providing the best instruction to ESL students, especially in terms of the learning of academic vocabulary.

Just because you teach math and numbers doesn’t mean there is no vocabulary involved in that. Just to train teachers on how to keep rigor in the classroom, how to challenge students appropriately. Show teachers how to break down the vocabulary. I don’t see that in content classes very well. (Angela)

Narrowing the achievement gaps between ELLs and their non-ELL peers calls for “teacher preparation programs to incorporate content-specific literacy instruction in their training of content teachers” (Zhang, 2017). Angela appealed to the providers of teacher professional development for paying more attention to the content-specific training for secondary teachers.

There should be a place for general ESL strategies, but we should also do content-specific. It’s not just the English classroom where students are developing their vocabulary and improve their English; it’s all across the board. Every content area teacher plays an important role in promoting ELLs’ English development. All teachers should understand that, and we support them in this role. (Angela)

## **11. More Teacher Freedom Needed**

As Angela alluded to, for many ESL students in her school, the STAAR test seems to be an invincible hurdle. They have students who entered the 11<sup>th</sup> grade as beginning ESL learners. There is so much they have to conquer before they can pass the five STAAR exams and graduate. Angela and her colleagues have tried many different methods.

We do what we can every step in the way to make sure we are working on the content-specific vocabulary, try to put in stories that relate to American history, provide background knowledge, so that when they make it to the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade American history

class, they've got some background knowledge already established, so that they are not failing due to their lack of knowledge. (Angela)

Nevertheless, at Angela's school, there are a fair number of ESL students who fail the three content STAAR exams. Some refugee students are not able to pass the exams for a long time because they just do not have the educational background needed to pass the exams. Some ESL students have unidentified special needs because they have never been tested, not to say receiving the support needed. This has further complicated the problem. They also have SLIFE students (students with limited or interrupted formal education) who haven't been at school for many years. Expecting them to pass these STAAR exams, including the US history that they never studied before, is simply impossible. Just as Angela commented, "for those ESL students who don't know how to act in a classroom, who have never done the homework and are barely able to read or write even in their own language, this is frustrating. We are failing them, 100%." Compared to the content exams, the two English exams are even more difficult. Cummins (2006) argues that it may take 5 years or longer for ELLs to catch up to native English speakers in academic English. It is just not an achievable goal for beginning ESL students to pass the English exams in such a short period.

They (ESL students) get very frustrated with that. They feel beaten down because three times a year they are taking the exams that are so far beyond their comprehension level. They feel stupid. It's not that they can't do it. It's just that they are not there yet. (Angela)

There is not a "one size that fits all." The education of ESL students is highly individualized. The most ideal education for ESL students starts from finding where they are academic learning-wise and language-wise, and then striving to fill those gaps and developing to their greatest potential. However, with the high-stakes testing policies, schools and teachers are having more and more pressure to make sure they are teaching to the test so students can pass it.

Angela feels fortunate that she is "at a school where administrators understand that it's not possible for them (to pass the exams) in one year and that's okay as long as they see growth in students." "The problem is that they've passed the courses and they've done their coursework; it's just that their English isn't there," Angela remarked. Her school gives ESL students an allowance where students who fail the English exams but pass the three content exams will be able to conduct a project with the guidance of teachers. The school graduation committee will then meet for each individual student and decide whether the student has grown sufficiently that allows him/her to complete high school level work and graduate.

For some students, it's not possible, and it's not fair. We individually have those discussions with students. You are probably not going to pass those exams right now, and that's okay, but there's an expectation that I have of where you are supposed to be, and I know what score you should get based on English level, and that's where you want to see you. Even though it's a failing grade, and this is what you get after making

effort. (Angela)

Angela attributed the success her school has made to the more freedom teachers have in working with ESL students.

Compared with a lot of schools, we can be a little more innovative, which, I think, has caused us to be more successful, as we have that freedom to be innovative to see what we need this week, this month, or this year, for this specific group of students and do it. Other campuses don't have that freedom. We've had a lot of success because of that. Really that's where I think the success is from—having that freedom. (Angela)

## **12. More Hands-on Professional Development Needed**

Angela perceives the most effective professional development as the ones that allow teachers to have a hands-on experience and see how it's done in classrooms. In her own words, "it's so different than someone just getting up reading off some research from a PowerPoint." She described that she had a training a few weeks ago where there were stations set up with different reading comprehension strategies. The participating teachers did not spend very long in each station as teachers, as about five minutes as practice the way the students will do it. She felt that even if she may not necessarily use all of the strategies, if she can come away with one or two, that would be the goal. Angela aptly expressed her wish for hands-on professional development.

If I take a day off from work, I want to know that I'm getting things that are readily useable in my classroom. Here are the strategies you can use, go to your class, use the strategies in their reading comprehension. That's what teachers need, not the theory necessarily, but the whole application. (Angela)

If teachers see improvement in the applicability of the professional development they have received, and each time they walk out with something they can immediately utilize in their classroom, they may become more willing to take time to participate in professional development.

## **13. Concluding Remarks**

A high-quality education of ELLs requires the special knowledge and skills of teachers. Though teacher professional development has been improved dramatically within the last decade, many teachers of ELLs still do not feel that they have been sufficiently prepared. The most common form of professional development lacks much consideration of teacher input and the connection with teachers' actual teaching situations. Consequently, teachers fail to transfer the knowledge and skills gained from professional development to their classrooms. Research has found that



professional development is most effective when it is long-term, collaborative, school-based, and linked to teachers' daily practices and prior knowledge and experience (Hunzicker, 2011). Therefore, this study explored how and what an ESL teacher learns through professional development, how contextual factors shape her teaching practices, and how the learning influences teacher knowledge and teaching practices, what problems she has encountered in receiving professional development, and what recommendations she has in order to render ELL teacher professional development more beneficial.

Overall, professional development has benefited Angela and her ESL students significantly. However, problems exist that prevent teachers like Angela from benefiting more. The problems include: (a) failure to tailor to the specific needs of ESL students; (b) neglect of the psychological and emotional well-being of ESL students; (c) lack of empathy for ESL students, (d) lack of content-specific ELL teacher professional development; and (e) professional development not well-attended.

For professional development to better benefit teachers, it is essential that the providers become more sensitive to the needs of students. Students' needs should be where to start when designing an effective professional development. Second, among the various needs of ESL students, teachers, administrators, and teacher educators should be more aware of the importance of the psychological and emotional needs of students. Before their psychological and emotional needs are met, their needs for English development and academic achievement will be doomed to take a back seat. Closely linked to the importance of assuring ESL students' psychological and emotional well-being is the call for teachers, administrators, and policy makers' greater empathy, understanding, and appreciation for linguistically diverse students. All students, regardless of their home language, race, ethnicity, and cultural origin, are entitled to equal educational opportunities. Next, this study also brings to the forefront the need for more content-specific ELL teacher professional development. The best education of ESL students requires efforts from both ESL teachers and content area teachers. Content teachers need to be better trained through more content-specific professional development to serve ESL students more effectively. Furthermore, this study points to teachers' inclination for hands-on professional development as opposed to the research-oriented ones. The well-planned training that revolves around practical classroom applications tends to be more helpful for teachers' day-to-day teaching. Additionally, this narrative inquiry reveals the necessity of making some important professional development mandatory, instead of optional.

Last but not least, this narrative inquiry unfolds teachers' longing for more teacher freedom in working with ELLs and more teacher voices in designing and delivering professional development. Clandinin and Connelly (1992) posit two images of teachers: teacher as curriculum maker and teacher as curriculum implementer. It contends that for their teaching to make the greatest difference in students' learning outcomes, teachers should have discretionary space in their teaching to enact what they perceive as the best for their students rather than simply being expected to act as conduits through whom the prescribed curriculum and directives pass. The curriculum and instructional decisions made by those from the outside are less powerful, meaningful, and sustainable than the ones that are self-initiated, self-motivated, and self-valued.

In a nutshell, what distinguishes this study from most of the others on ELL teacher professional development is its rich description and illumination of the teacher participant's experiences and viewpoints. It helps teacher educators, trainers, and school administrators make sense of how ESL teachers' experience of professional development has influenced their teacher knowledge and practices, how they perceive the challenges in professional development, and how to make professional development better meet their needs. It is anticipated that this study will provide important insights into how to construct positive professional development that benefits teachers and ELL students to the largest possible degree.

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