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"They come with nothing:" How professional development in a culturally responsive pedagogy shapes teacher attitudes towards Latino/a English language learners

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HIGHLIGHTS

- White Southern monolingual teachers often hold prejudiced opinions towards Latino/a students.
- IC pedagogy helps teachers get to know their Latino/a students in their own words.
- IC mitigated participating teachers' negative attitudes towards Latino/a students.

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ABSTRACT

Especially in the United States' "New South," rapid growth in numbers of Latino/a students, particularly Latino/a English Language Learners (ELLs), has resulted in a cultural clash that is reflected in the often prejudiced attitudes of predominantly white monolingual teachers towards such students. Drawing on qualitative data collected as part of a mixed-methods multi-year study of the effects of teacher training in the culturally responsive Instructional Conversation pedagogy on ELL academic outcomes, the authors argue that while New South teacher attitudes towards ELLs often remain prejudiced, Instructional Conversation training seems to mitigate those negative attitudes over time.

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1. Introduction

In the United States, rising numbers of students are currently classified as English Language Learners, or ELLs (US Census Bureau, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015)[1]; that is, students who are simultaneously learning how to communicate in English and the academic content expected of them in each subsequent grade level of the US school system (E. García, Arias, Harris-Murri, & Serna, 2010). 77.2 percent of current ELLs are Spanish speakers, predominantly from Latin America (National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy, 2010).

In many parts of the United States, such as the American South, this situation is further complicated by the fact that Latino ELLs are typically enrolled in schools that do not have experience serving either Latino students or ELLs. Generally speaking, the American

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[1] While many scholars, for reasons we as authors agree with, have moved beyond the use of the term English Language Learner because of its framing of certain students in terms of what they lack (namely, English fluency) rather than what they possess, we use it here and throughout the article because it was the term used by the larger study from which this data is taken, which was submitted and accepted when we as authors still commonly used this terminology (as a result, this term is still seen throughout the data sources cited hereafter). In our own contemporary usage, several of us as authors have begun using alternate terms that frame students more positively in terms of what they possess, rather than what they lack—in particular, we find the terms Dual Language Learner (Oliva-Olson, Estrada, & Edyburn, 2017; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2008) and Spanish Dominant Learner (Kibler, Atteberry, Hardigree, & Salerno, 2015) compelling. We feel it important to document this here because, just as in this article we call for an "ideological shift" (Palmer & Martinez, 2013) among teachers, we want to be transparent about the ideological shifts we have experienced as researchers.

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South has undergone a significant demographic shift over the last several decades due to increasing numbers of Latino immigrants following the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA (Beck & Allexsaht-Snider, 2002). While other states which have had historically sizeable Latino populations, like California (Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2008) and Texas (Straubhaar, 2013), only post-NAFTA did an aggressive private sector recruitment campaign bring Latino agricultural laborers to the South in significant numbers (Gill, 2010; Murphy, Blanchard, & Hill, 2001; Villenas, 2002). Sustained immigration in the decades since NAFTA has meant the creation of established Southern Latino communities (Furuseth & Smith, 2006) that have now had several generations of Latino children go through Southern schools (Portes & Salas, 2010). This sustained demographic shift has led several researchers (Straubhaar & Portes, 2017) to use the term the "New South[2]" when discussing Southern Latino populations.

However, while student demographics have shifted drastically in the New South, the teacher population throughout the region remains largely monolingual (Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006), white, and lacking in either personal or professional experience with culturally different populations that speak a different language, such as Latino ELLs (Howard, 2006). Teachers often feel unable to meet these challenges, and this feeling, back-dropped by the ever-increasing demands of high-stakes testing and all-or-nothing teacher accountability measures (Harper & De Jong, 2009; Walker, Shafer & Iiams, 2004), can potentially create negative attitudes toward the English language learners that arrive in their classrooms. Unfortunately, in some settings scholars have documented that monolingual white teachers who work with linguistically diverse students in their classrooms often do develop deficit-based beliefs about those students, their communities and their abilities (Byrnes, Kiger, & Manning, 1997; Garmon, 2005; Hadaway, 1993; Pettit, 2011; Valdés, 2001). Given the relatively yet-undocumented nature of teacher beliefs in the New South, the focus of this article is the documentation of New South teachers' beliefs about Latino ELLs, language acquisition and immigrant populations more generally, on the basis of the growing existent literature on teacher beliefs and their effects on student achievement.

Towards this end, we draw on several qualitative data sources collected over a two-year period from New South teachers participating in an on-going professional development program focused on the culturally responsive Instructional Conversation pedagogy. Using qualitative analysis of teacher responses over time to questions regarding their beliefs on Latino ELLs, language acquisition and immigrant populations more generally, we here argue that many deficit-oriented prejudices towards Latino ELLs continue to be common among New South teachers. However, perhaps more hopefully, we also find that as these teachers receive training in culturally responsive pedagogical practices, their deficit-oriented beliefs change over time.

To make this argument, we will first base our discussion in the existent literature on teacher beliefs and their influence on student achievement. We will then provide a brief introduction to the Instructional Conversation pedagogy, which served as the basis for the pedagogical intervention in this study. Lastly, we will provide our findings showing the existence of deficit-oriented prejudices among New South teachers, and their mitigation over time as teachers are exposed to and trained in culturally responsive pedagogical techniques.

2. Review of the literature

The reason we give teacher beliefs such focus and primacy in this article is because of the prominent role that they have been shown in the literature to have on teacher expectations, teacher beliefs, and student achievement (Pettit, 2011). In this section, we will explore the literature showing all of these effects of teacher beliefs, as well as the literature on specific teacher beliefs held towards Latino ELL populations, and ELL populations more generally.

First, teacher beliefs have been shown to have an effect on their expectations, both of their students and of themselves. As Macnab and Payne (2003) have stated, "the beliefs and attitudes of teachers—cultural, ideological and personal—are significant determinants of the way they view their role as educators" (p. 55). Sugimoto, Carter, and Stoehr (2017), in one study of preservice teachers placed in classrooms with large numbers of ELLs, found that both preservice teachers and the mentor teachers who led the classrooms in which preservice teachers were placed held deficit beliefs towards ELLs that led them to both feel uncertain about their own ability to teach ELLs effectively and unsure about their students' ability to overcome what they saw as the insurmountable hurdles their students faced in trying to reach their academic goals.

Second, teacher beliefs have an impact on teacher actions, or the way they comport themselves in the classroom. As Richardson (1996) has said, teacher beliefs "drive classroom actions and influence the teacher change process" (p. 102). Beliefs "drive" teacher actions in the sense that they shape the way teachers interact with students (Molle, 2013), as well as the way that they teach (Farrell & Ives, 2015). Specifically with reference to ELLs, research has demonstrated that when teachers hold negative attitudes toward ELLs, this deeply affects the way teachers choose to behave toward their students (Harper & De Jong, 2009; Richardson, 1996). Monolingual biases and linguicism (Phillipson, 2009), exacerbated by misunderstandings about bilingualism, language learning and cognition, inform teachers' attitudes about language learners in their classrooms and may blind these teachers to opportunities to cultivate and capitalize on their students' strengths and to leverage their linguistic resources.

Third, teacher beliefs have an impact on student behavior and student learning. Rueda and Garcia (1996) argue that teacher beliefs are the primary value system teachers use to base their judgments of their students, and those teacher judgments are perceived by students and thus affect students' behavior. Mantero and McVicker (2006) take this analysis one step further, arguing that perceived teacher judgments shape not only student behavior, but student achievement. Burant and Kirby (2002) find that these teacher attitudes can place immigrant students (who may already be battling a number of socioeconomic disadvantages) at even more risk for academic failure.

Unfortunately, negative or deficit-oriented beliefs such as these can be especially common in rural areas, such as many of the areas in which Latino immigrants have settled in the New South (Murphy et al., 2001). Walker, Shafer and Iiams (2004) suggest that "in rural and small communities, where the majority of residents often have little or no experience with diverse populations, these sudden and dramatic demographic changes can translate into community misunderstanding and fear." (p. 133). Valdés (2001) reports that a community-wide misperception of a cultural or ethnic group inevitably finds its way into the attitudes of teachers and

[2] We here define "New South" as the Southern portion of the United States which, as a result of continued economic and industrial growth, has experienced significant Latino/a immigration from Spanish-speaking countries and territories (including Puerto Rico) in the Caribbean and North, Central and South America over the last several decades. While much of this immigration came from Mexico after such movement was facilitated with the enforcement of the North American Free Trade Agreement beginning in 1994 (Mohl, 2003), not all of the Latino/a immigrants represented in the New South are from Mexico, as immigrants from all of these regions are represented among the New South's Latino/a population.

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