TEACHER-RESEARCHERS ENTERING INTO THE WORLD OF LIMITED-ENGLISH-PROFICIENCY (LEP) STUDENTS
Three Case Studies

MYRIAM N. TORRES
Educational Research Consultant, Santa Clara, California

Given the trends of the increasing percentage of students of color, particularly limited-English-proficiency (LEP) students, and the decreasing percentage of teachers of color in American public schools, many more White teachers are teaching LEP students. This article examines the classroom inquiries by three European American teacher-researchers on their own LEP students. They were seeking to know their students' ways of perceiving, learning, and using their native and second language in different circumstances. Based on their insights, these teachers devised activities and curricula to respond to students' genuine strengths and weaknesses in meaningful ways. These teachers' insights are discussed in the light of the principles and goals of bilingual and multicultural education.

According to the "Schools and Staffing Survey" report (U.S. Department of Education, 1997), in 1993-1994, 2.1 million limited-English-proficiency (LEP) students (5% of the total student body) were enrolled in public schools. They were concentrated in the West (50%) and in urban areas (60%). Concerning teachers, 42% of all public school teachers had LEP students in their classes; however, only 3 out of 10 of these teachers had some level of training for teaching LEP students, and fewer than 3 out of 100 of these teachers had a bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) degree. Of course, the gap between the concentration of LEP students and the existence of teachers prepared to teach them varies from state to state and from school to school. In the case of New Mexico, where this study was carried out, in 1993-1994, 77% of the public schools had LEP students, who constituted 9.4% of all students. Although there are many more trained teachers there than in other states, it is very common to find LEP students in a classroom where the teacher does not have any training to teach them responsively. This article reports the cases of three European American teachers, each of whom carried out a classroom inquiry project on their LEP students in order to understand them better and to develop a curriculum more in accordance with their needs and strengths.

BACKGROUND

This study is part of a larger project on teachers' classroom inquiry and professional growth conducted by the author in a non-traditional master's program for experienced teachers. This program is a 14-month midcareer program, a partnership between the university and the public schools of the area. It is founded on participants' collaborative and reflective understanding of their practices, collegial support, and community development among teachers in K-12 mainstream and special education. As part of the program curriculum, each teacher needed to carry out an open-ended classroom inquiry project of his or her own teaching. As their instructor, I was in charge of teaching and assisting teachers in developing their projects. To do so, I designed and conducted an open-ended research project, a kind of metaproject, which focused on the engagement and transformative processes in the various dimensions these teachers experienced as they conducted their own studies. At the same time, I was modeling for them how to link teaching and research in the classroom. This metaproject included three cohorts. In each cohort, those dimensions of teachers' development that appeared most prominent and relevant to teachers' concerns and educational issues of the time were analyzed. The school district of the cohort of which the cases of these three teachers were part was under the supervision of the Office of Human Rights because of complaints about failures in the education of
many minority, low-income, and especially LEP students in that district. There was a general concern about LEP students as the most vulnerable to be marginalized in the schools where there were not enough bilingual programs for them.

Out of the 27 teachers of the cohort, 4 chose to work with LEP students for their classroom inquiry project. One of them is actually an ESL high school teacher who speaks Spanish, so his conditions were very different from the others'. I chose the cases of the three other teachers because of their language difficulties in communicating with their LEP students. In addition, these teachers did a very good job by showing the honesty and courage to recognize their weaknesses and biases with these students as well as by the seriousness and depth of their thinking in developing sound strategies to work with them.

The purpose of this article is to describe and document the process of transformation of each of three European American teachers as they engaged in working with their LEP students as the focus of their classroom inquiry projects within the context of the Enhancement Program at the master's level. Hence, the focus of this article is to describe the ways in which these three teacher-researchers entered into the world of LEP students, were able to understand the various dimensions and strengths of those students, and devised meaningful and relevant curricula and learning situations for them.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Whereas the enrollment of students of color, particularly Hispanic, increased from 29.6% in 1986 to 35.2% in 1995, the proportion of teachers of color tended to decrease. In 1993-1994, teachers of color were at 13.5%, whereas in the spring of 1996, this number decreased to 9.3% (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Actually, the contrast in the Hispanic group is the most critical. Whereas Hispanic students account for most of the increment of students of color and of the LEP students (from 9.9% in 1986 to 13.5% in Spring 1995), the proportion of Hispanic teachers decreased from 4.2% in 1993-1994 to less than 2% in 1996, that percentage being the total of the "other" category, which included Asians and Native Americans.

The diversification of student population, including ESL and LEP students; the increasing opposition to and cutting of funds for truly responsive bilingual education programs; and the lack of training of teachers for understanding and dealing with LEP students have aggravated the already problematic situation of the LEP students, their teachers, and the schools that deal with them. It is ironic that each student labeled as LEP represents additional money for the school budget, when at the same time this label represents a mark of deficiency for the students.

Being labeled as a LEP student is the beginning of a vicious cycle, as described by Faltis (1997): Labels implicitly refer to a "normal" group, a kind of segregation inside the classroom. The LEP label highlights a particular deficiency and conduces almost automatically to a lower quality of education in terms of materials, interactions, activities, expectations, and so forth, which themselves create deficiencies in many other dimensions. At this point in the cycle, the student is tracked in the system, and the possibilities of escaping become fewer and fewer as time goes by. Thus, what began as a limitation in the second language may become a permanent problem of cognitive and academic development for the child. This may happen, for instance, when teachers who work with LEP students follow strategies such as the one suggested by Richard-Amato and Snow (1992) to content-area teachers. This strategy consists of keeping the content of the lessons at the "concrete" level and only increasing the "cognitive demands" as students progress in English. The basic problem here is in assuming that LEP students do not have first language development, a whole system of meanings and experiences including academics, before they begin to learn English. The association between cognitive-demanding activities and second-language difficulties may have detrimental effects for the child's cognitive development. From a Piagetian perspective, we are only asking for concrete ways of thinking (in English) when the student is capable of formal thinking in his or her native language. From a Vygotskian perspective, mainly alluding to the notion of "zone of proximal development," a noncognitive-
demanding education does not promote development but rather could result in a systematic retardation of students’ cognitive development.

Igoa’s (1995) book The Inner World of the Immigrant Child may be easily used as an exemplary teaching practice for LEP students. She warns us about treating immigrant children as a homogeneous group, which is enforced by labeling them on the basis of their English proficiency. She purposely inquires into their “inner world” by providing them with the materials and support to express their feelings and thinking in creative ways, for example, through film strips: “Children have innate wisdom. They often let us know what they need—if we can only listen and hear what they are saying by their words, artwork, and behavior” (p. 63). As she gets to know her immigrant children and to listen to them, she builds each of them a “nest” in her classroom, a sort of place where the child feels comfortable and safe: “The nest provides them with a shelter where their values and beliefs can come out in the open without being ridiculed” (p. 67). She provides many insights about creating a supportive environment for helping these children to adapt to a new school system and language and also to deal with the internalized feeling of being a problem.

Teaching in a multicultural and multilingual classroom constitutes a real challenge for any teacher. Igoa (1995) faced such a challenge by becoming a teacher-researcher in her own class. She inquired into the schooling characteristics of her students, about parents’ expectations and perceptions of schooling, language development, students’ inner worlds, their expectations and dreams, and so forth. Teacher research is growing as an alternative way of doing research about teaching, learning, and schooling (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) carried on by the insiders to those processes—the teachers. The teacher research movement of the late 1980s and 1990s in the United States, pioneered by Goswami and Stillman (1987), Miller (1990), Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993), Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994), and Wells (1994), is nurtured by the seeds of demystification of traditional research and the acknowledgment of different ways of knowing. Their common claim is the right of teachers to have a voice in the educational dis-

course and in school reform and to advocate for the legitimization of teacher-generated knowledge about teaching, learning, and schooling. Schon’s (1984) epistemology of practice—reflection in action—has been a strong basis for understanding the knowledge generated through reflecting on one’s own professional practice. His ideas on reflective practice have inspired many of the advocates of the teacher-research movement. However, as Zeichner (1993) and Coulter (1999) pointed out, teacher-researchers have not, except for isolated cases, had the impact needed to establish a dialogue in the educational community for reforming schools and producing social change. The emphasis has been put on the act of generating knowledge but not on the transformative dimension of this act of knowing-in-action for improving education and transforming society at large.

The transformation of teachers and their classrooms as teachers engage in systematic research of their practices has been well documented in the literature on teacher research (Fischer et al., 2000; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Miller, 1990; Poetter, 1997; Torres, 1997; Wells, 1994, among many others). A group of teacher researchers reflecting on their own processes of transformation by doing classroom inquiry conclude,

Based on the knowledge gained by studying our practices systematically, we now feel more able to know our students in different ways, and to articulate and justify our decisions in teaching. In brief, our roles as teachers have been enhanced across different dimensions. (Fischer et al., 2000)

METHOD

In this section, I describe the methods used in the metaproject for gathering information and analyzing the data. The methods used by the three teachers who are the focus of this article are indicated in the respective cases in the following section.

Why case studies? The case-study research approach seems appropriate for examining in depth the transformative processes of
three teacher-researchers as they inquire into the world of each of their LEP students. Wallace (1989) characterized a case-study method as follows: (a) One individual is studied in depth, (b) the individual’s life and work are considered together, (c) the individual is studied as a whole, and (d) the focus is on the development of the individual and/or the individual’s work. Both Wallace (1989) and Gruber (1989) have used the case-study approach extensively to study creative people at work. Merriam (1988) recommended the case-study method as a qualitative research approach and as an ideal way to understand and describe educational phenomena and change.

Selection of the three cases. The basic criterion for selecting the three teachers was the focus of their classroom inquiry project on their own LEP students, in addition to their noticeable engagement and remarkable performance in conducting their studies.

Data sources. Data mainly consist of these teachers’ oral and written discourses in work-in-progress reports, inquiry projects, master’s presentations, self-evaluations, peer support teachers’ feedback to teachers (described below), my notes on whole-group and some small-group conversations and on some visits to their classrooms, e-mail discussions among teacher participants, and my journal. Although I looked at the whole corpus of available discourse of these teachers during the year they participated in the program, I am drawing excerpts mostly from their final reports and presentations. The reason for relying more on those documents is because on those occasions, these teachers were more articulate, deep, and thorough about putting their experiences into words.

Reliability checks. Peer support teachers, who were members of the program staff and prior outstanding participants in it, visited teachers in their classrooms to help them with their classroom activities and engaged in dialogues about studying their teaching. Even though the role was not just to check the accuracy of teachers’ descriptions of their teaching improvements, peer support teachers gave reports in the staff meetings, which most of the time confirmed teachers’ descriptions and perceptions of their work.

ANALYSIS OF THREE CASE STUDIES

The classroom inquiry project was introduced to the teacher participants as an exploratory study of their teaching. It was thus planned to accommodate the organization and structure of the program, given the fact that the participants were in their classrooms 4 days per week. The exploratory character of the project made some teachers feel insecure and confused at the beginning. However, it also gave them an opportunity to respond and observe what was actually happening in their classrooms; hence, the design of their inquiry was emergent, and the focus of their inquiry evolved throughout the year.

Because studying their teaching was one of the major purposes of the program, the staff of the program devised several activities and interactions that prompted teachers to make changes, take risks, and accept challenges. All of this took place within a supporting, collaborative atmosphere created by staff and fellow teachers through several small groups. It was somewhat expected that the participants would make teaching improvements and articulate their reasons for the changes and give supporting evidence. By and large, teachers’ transformations of their practices and attitudes were really a composite of various factors, including the characteristics of the program, the specific classroom inquiry project carried out, the interaction with fellow teachers, school personnel support, and the characteristics and engagement of each teacher, to mention some.

The following case analyses of three teachers are aimed at describing the transformation they went through and the insights they gained by engaging in studying their own teaching and the learning of the LEP students in their classrooms. The differences in the length of each case are due to the differences in access to their documents and materials.

LYN

Lyn is a second-grade teacher and has 6 years of practice in teaching. She does not speak Spanish and has no specific training for teaching LEP students. She felt she needed to develop compe-
tency for working with these students; therefore, she focused her inquiry project on five LEP students (all Hispanic) who were in her classroom.

Lyn came to teaching more for exploring the field than by vocation:

I came to teaching sort of more in the sense of what I’m gonna do with my life, rather than having a big desire to actually teach. In the last 6 years it really changed, these years have been more about discovery. . . . I enjoy teaching, it’s something that I want to do. (master’s presentation)

This exploratory vocation actually facilitated her handling of the challenges that the various learning styles and ways of engaging of LEP students posed for her. Thus, the year in this program and the inquiry project were for her a way to dig underneath the surface of her practice and to study deeply her teaching philosophy: “Discovering and articulating the evolution of my philosophy has been the most meaningful aspect of this year” (self-assessment report). She distinguishes between surface and deeper levels of teaching: “This year has been more a study of myself, and my philosophy as a teacher, and how I do best in my classroom. More than accumulation of teaching techniques and new ways to apply things to my practice. . . . Techniques are surface level” (master’s presentation).

Lyn is very aware of the changes in her teaching philosophy. She started with a teacher-centered type of teaching, looking for results in terms of skills and overvaluing the verbal linguistic and math as the basic and exclusive cognitive abilities to look for in the classroom. From this perspective, she formulated her starting inquiry question in these terms: “In terms of increased literacy, which tools or strategies work best with LEP students?” As she began to explore ways to gather information that supported her description of her LEP students’ baseline performance and ways to improve it to share with her fellow teachers in the program, she realized that she was missing something important about students, which was not implied in the first question. She explains:

At that time I was more concerned with the delivery of content versus the process of the student’s thinking. . . . As I began to explore, it seemed that I had missed something along the way: I did not have a strong understanding of the kids as learners. Because of that, it was awkward to make the jump to direct instruction. I wanted to look at their coping skills, the environment in the classroom, my trust in their ability to manage their own learning, how they are valued in the classroom. Does an LEP community exist? What knowledge and experiences are most valued by these students? How do they describe and understand their world? And how do I give them access to what is important?” The question became: “How do I create an environment in my classroom which provides and supports purposeful work for LEP students?” (inquiry project presentation)

Lyn really was not only changing her inquiry question but her teaching perspective. She saw the need to know in depth her LEP students’ worlds by starting from their cognitive styles and then expanding to more cultural and personal arenas. As she recognizes her limitations—“I guess when I really started looking at this I realized that my interaction with LEP students has been sort of without substance” (inquiry project presentation)—she looks for entering seriously into the students’ worlds because she feels that this is a prerequisite of any judgment for teaching action.

Every child has a story behind their learning, something that contributes to it. Sometimes it’s really pronounced . . . and sometimes it’s in the inside. Sometimes it’s something that is very subtle. . . . There is a whole bunch of stuff beneath the surface of teaching techniques that is equally as important, and that is knowing your students, and knowing how they learn fast and making those connections between the personal level and their learning. . . . The underneath level reveals itself to me. It’s difficult to explain to others. It happens also with the kids who reveal themselves, so I can know them. (master’s presentation)

Seeking to substantiate her knowledge of LEP students, Lyn used the Multiple Intelligence Survey to find out the dominant type of intelligence of all her second-grade students, as well as many other ways of gathering information that were feasible to her such as interviews, questionnaires/inventories of interests, observations,
students' written works, and learning groups of her LEP students to determine performance, comfort, communication, use of time, curiosity, and end product. As she gathered, put together, and shared with her group support teachers, she was able to see strengths in the LEP students and other dimensions of their learning that she had not seen before. In the case of Tony, for example, she writes,

He is a student who has always struggled with reading written language, and I never knew until January, and here I am teaching the kid, not knowing that he has a key interest in music. His face comes alive, he’s engaged, he’s entrusted, I never knew that. And I think that is not an OK thing not to know that. (inquiry project presentation)

Lyn’s awakening to Tony’s musical strength provoked in her a thoughtful analysis of her judgments about the teaching and learning of students such as Tony.

Looking at evidence in specific areas of a students’ makeup provides a clearer picture. I learned that I have made judgements about my students that could possibly prevent me from creating an environment which promotes optimal learning. I have learned that I must take into account natural abilities and strengths versus pre-established expectations. . . . In the case of Tony, the learning environment has not been adequately suited for his learning strengths. I have been operating from my own theory of how LEP students learn best, but have never examined what that theory is. I had viewed Tony from a verbal-linguistic standpoint and he came up short. I saw Tony as a poor reader and consequently as a poor student. Unfortunately, this illustrated that there has been little substance behind my practice with LEP students. (classroom inquiry presentation)

Given the fact that Lyn has five LEP students who were at very different stages of their mastery of English and also of Spanish literacy, she was able to see the relationship between the level of literacy in Spanish and their process of becoming literate in English.

And now I want to look more at the process of students’ learning. I think before I was more concentrated on the product, skills. And that really isn’t appropriate with these students. . . . I think it’s kind of like this researcher says about the natural language learning. If the student has a strong or at least some foundation in their first language, they can more easily transfer it to a new language. . . . This explains the different performance among the LEP students. In Ana’s case, she does not have a solid connection to a language. Period. I don’t really know how to work successfully with her.

She also realizes how disengagement is really a coping skill of LEP students for dealing with an environment they cannot understand and with a kind of work that has no purpose for them. This same observation was ratified by Frank, another teacher who also worked with his LEP students.

As Lyn gets to know her LEP students’ strengths, weaknesses, and motivations, she starts constructing a curriculum and learning environment that are “natural” and “purposeful” to them:

The results of my inquiry project support my view that I must look to the child first, then create an environment with purpose. I believe that students will learn more if I step in and guide their learning in a way that is natural for them. (classroom inquiry presentation)

How do I create a classroom environment which provides and supports purposeful work for LEP students? I see purposeful as the key word in that sentence. How do I know what is purposeful if I don’t know the student? How do I know what is meaningful to the child, if I don’t know the child? (master’s presentation)

She describes Tony’s total engagement when she tried to teach him through music. It is important to notice how the situation was initially given to her by the child himself.

I noticed during a couple of weeks that he was always bringing instruments into the school, toys or real, and he was really engaged with them with his friends, showing them, talking about them. So I was really interested in how he does with the musical aspect. And he was really engaged with tuning the song, forming the song. And when he came to write words, no problem. He just did it, because it was meaningful for him, I believe that’s what it was. It had some purpose to it. When I asked him to write a story or do a sentence for spelling words . . . there is no purpose to that. And it will take him a half hour to write two sentences. Because he is just totally
uninterested. ... What I can do is try to inject those areas like verbal-linguistic in Tony's curriculum through music.

The kinesthetic type of intelligence was also explored with the LEP group. She was pleasantly surprised by their engagement and performance.

What I really learned about these guys. Not entirely, but most of them are interested in sort of performance type of thing ... either doing a mime show or doing a play that they create themselves and interacting with each other. And doing it in front of the class. That wasn’t intimidating for them, they enjoyed that; and at the same time it increases their verbal language. So I know at least I need to work on one area, instead of letting it get out of focus. That’s probably more effective for them. (classroom inquiry presentation)

She wonders also about focusing only on the strengths of the students and not on their weaknesses. In the case of Tony, she considers focusing on both his strength and risk areas. In addition, she also ponders how challenging it may be to approach literacy with music when music is a risky area for her: “My evidence tells me that I must incorporate areas where I am naturally ‘unintelligent’. Being strong in the verbal-linguistic area made it easy for me to see Tony’s weaknesses, but extremely hard for me to see his strength in music” (summary statement report).

Then she goes on to redefine her role as teacher of LEP students. Even though she does not name herself as an inquirer or researcher, the description of the roles is just that — the teacher-researcher who seeks to know every student’s way of knowing, story, and needs.

Through this research I have come to believe that my role is to look at the child first, and then to create an environment with purpose, in the way which is natural for them. I think I’m responsible for determining to a large extent what’s natural for them. Not determining but uncovering, making visible to me, what’s going to work. (master’s presentation)

Lyn looks forward to continuing the use of an approach she just discovered/created, which consists mainly of knowing her students first and then devising a purposeful learning environment for them. She is conscious that this approach involves the idea of inquiring first before planning any teaching action.

I’m going to continue this approach next year with a new group of LEP students. I know that they will be different people; they will have different experiences, so in many ways my approach will need to be different to meet their needs, but the basic idea, what I believe works best for LEP students, is there. And it wasn’t there last year or the year before. I have a belief in what I think works best or works well and what I can do well with limited English proficiency students. What worked is a very nice thing to have. So I don’t feel that I’m sort of floating, which is what I have done in the past. (master’s presentation)

She realizes at the end of the program that the approach she discovered/created for LEP students works well with all the other students in her class, so she restates her approach to teaching:

This year and the coming years my goal is: how, through the actions that I take, do I create an autonomous and successful learning community? This community has four things. Which is kind of nice because I’ve never looked closely at what I believe, what I want to create in my classroom. Now that I have it, I can name it, I can look for it. I can create situations which help to promote it. It seems that it’s such a simple thing, but I’ve never done it before. It never really occurred to me to do it before. ... To create a successful learning community the things that I feel I need to install in the classroom are: 1) an environment which is perceived as safe for students; 2) a support system in place, so that they feel supported in their efforts, they feel free to take risks; 3) the environment is inclusive, realistic and contemplated; 4) that knowledge is constructed. (master’s presentation)

As indicated above, for Lyn this master’s program and the inquiry project she carried out was a journey to discover and articulate her teaching philosophy. Yet, she did not fully realize the meaning of this journey until the second semester. In the process, she actually changed her teaching perspective, as described above. She distinguishes two aspects in it: the what and the why. The former refers to the curriculum and the teaching techniques. The latter refers to the underlying principles and beliefs about teaching and students.
Lyn embraced the whole idea of teacher research as an ongoing process: “My philosophy of education has become much more complete. However, the new way in which I approach students and curriculum seems to be at an early stage of development—ready for more investigation” (self-assessment report). In brief, for her the inquiry project “was an exercise of examining my work and gathering evidence to support or change my practice” (self-assessment report). She also is very proud of her inquiry and the way she did it because “the motivation and direction came from me. With the support of my colleagues, I was able to move through an undefined process, question myself, and think originally (in terms of my own thoughts) in a beneficial way” (self-assessment report). Within a year of her participation in the program, she obtained the ESL endorsement and participated in a presentation in American Education Research Association about a collaborative reflection on the experience of doing classroom inquiry.

FRANK

Frank is a fifth-grade regular classroom teacher. During his 7 years of teaching experience, he always looked for help from other teachers to deal with LEP students (mostly Hispanic) because he does not speak Spanish or have special training for teaching them. This time, he decided to ask the two LEP students in his class,

How do they deal with a classroom situation where their teacher does not speak their language? How do they feel when they are thrust into this strange environment? What do they do to adapt and survive? What motivates them to learn English? How can I help them feel comfortable in this setting and how can I help them learn English better? (classroom inquiry paper)

Besides interviewing the two LEP students, he held conferences with the children’s parents, interviewed the ESL teachers, observed these students in his classroom and also in the ESL classroom, and collected samples of students’ writing work.

At the beginning of the program, Frank’s classroom practice was somewhat challenged by his peer support teacher, which made him very uncomfortable and which he refused to accept initially. In his mind, he had shown her how good he was, so he did not need to try different teaching strategies, activities, and materials. Nonetheless, at the same time he was listening to his peers about the innovations they were trying as they got together to share and discuss their classroom experiences. He was also reading and listening to some educators’ ideas about change and how to change others and work as cultural mediators for children. All of these experiences were affecting him directly. The senior professor, a member of the staff of the Enhancement Program, did a presentation on “change,” which made much sense to Frank at that time. He quotes him for his master’s presentation: “You can’t change others’ behaviors before you change your own.” This was what he needed to hear about dealing with LEP students: “I cannot change what they do; all I can do is provide them with the environment or the situation that will encourage them to change.” Frank was working in a school that had a high population of students coming from very different backgrounds. He found in Ayers’s (1993) book To Teach some insights about building bridges for students, which helped him to define his role in that kind of setting.

“The cultural bridge starts by responding sensitively to the deepest reality of the children’s lives. Children are simply allowed to love, respect, cherish and retain what they bring to the school: their language, their perceptions and their values”. When I talk about changing students, these are the things I can change; these are the things I should try to build upon. And I should change my classroom so these things they bring to the classroom will allow them to succeed. (master’s presentation)

Another educator, Vito Perone, in his “Letter to Teachers,” highlights the teacher’s role in valuing differences, which sounds very much like Frank’s situation. He quotes,

“Teaching, wherever it occurs, by being first and foremost an intellectual and moral endeavor, is about differences—being conscious of them, attending to them, and when they apply to children, their parents, and their cultural communities, valuing them.” Those statements made a real profound effect on me as I thought about what I
Frank finally realizes that the challenge by his peer support teacher and the classroom inquiry were the main purposes of his participation in this midcareer Enhancement Program. This was the time for development as a teacher.

Now I realize that’s what this is about. It’s not so much for me to do the same things again and reinforce what I’m doing. It’s about why I do things and why I don’t do things. How I can change the things that I’m doing and make a difference and make myself a better teacher. (master’s presentation)

As Frank entered his LEP students’ worlds of feelings of isolation, confusion, and misunderstandings, he gained precise insights into how to relate to them when he does not know their language and thus provide a welcoming and more responsive environment for them. He found out that there is a crucial time, sort of an imprinting time, when the LEP students arrive in his class to build a rapport with them. When the teacher does not speak their language, he or she should use other means of communication such as eye contact, addressing them directly, and letting them know his or her expectations.

In future classrooms, I will attempt to create an atmosphere that will allow monolingual and LEP students an opportunity to show that their knowledge is valued, that the expectations that I place on them are realistic and that they are considered important members of the classroom community. This must happen as soon as the student enters the classroom. The moment to create the feelings of acceptance and understanding passes quickly. It must be seized in order for the teacher to establish rapport with the student that will foster trust and give the students confidence in a new and difficult situation. (classroom inquiry report)

When Frank asked his LEP students how they felt the first day of class, knowing that their teacher did not connect with them directly, he was surprised but also cued about how to really welcome these children.

They did not want to come back. The fact is that I didn’t connect with them. . . . To me it was a revelation, because I always receive them and you know, help ’em out and do the best I can . . . but that’s not the connection they need. What they valued most, was the time I took to walk ’em around the classroom (four days later). And both remember that. And it’s like wow!, that needs to be first. (master’s presentation)

He realizes that LEP students perceived him as though he did not care about them and expected nothing from them, despite the fact that he arranged a peer translator for them and talked to them through their respective translator.

To them that doesn’t make any difference. . . . I think that they felt that my expectations of them were either non-existent or unrealistic, because I don’t speak Spanish. That I don’t care about them because I’m not talking to them. I’m only talking to a friend, who is translating for them. This is something that makes me think about good teachers versus bad teachers. A lot of teachers of these kids, they don’t talk to them, they don’t make eye contact, so students feel like they’re non-people. . . . At best you talk with the translator. You really need to communicate with them even without words. (classroom inquiry presentation)

Frank acknowledges the connection between feeling welcomed and valued and the motivation of LEP children for learning.

Too often, they’re an afterthought and their needs are only addressed after teaching the other students. The monolingual students’ situation is unique because they are entering a completely isolating situation. Even when given tutors and translators, it is important that the regular classroom teacher communicates to these students that their needs are understood and that their knowledge is valued. When monolingual students feel accepted, then their own motivation will increase and their anxiety will be alleviated somewhat. Because of these factors, the chances that the student will be successful are incredibly greater.

Without knowing it, Frank was making one of his LEP students feel very uncomfortable by calling her by a name that was not her familiar name or by seating her next to a boy, which was breaking the rules of her interaction with peers. He realizes how many things can
hurt these students with little chance for the teacher to know unless the teacher asks them about their perceptions of their teachers and the situation in general.

It's funny to see how these questions were never in my mind. I never would've thought about these things, as I was talking to Martha, to find out how she viewed the teacher. . . . But they have so much stuff to overcome that it's incredible that they do what they do.

Frank was also able to compare performance across time, both in English and Spanish, between a student with solid first-language literacy and a student who had very poor literacy in Spanish. The former showed faster learning of English and good academic performance in general. In contrast, the latter did poorly in English. He even left school in the middle of the year. He was also able to compare for Martha, the one who stayed in his class, her performance, attitude, and behavior in his class and in the ESL classroom: "Martha is like a little teacher in the classroom. She is verbal and fluent with the other kids. In my class she's really quiet and shy. In the other class she's like blooming, walking around, she is translating for kids. She is a teacher . . . very outgoing, very confident" (classroom inquiry presentation).

He asked his LEP students if they were learning English in his classroom. They felt that they were not learning because everything was going so fast that they had no time to process or even ask the translator any questions. As Frank gets more into the whole world of his LEP students, he questions the "sink or swim" English immersion approach for teaching these children English effectively:

The totally merged, I guess the sink or swim method, may work for some kids, but it seems to me it's not really the best way these kids are learning English. Even with the translator available, it's hard for them to ask the children next to them "what is he saying?" . . . They did learn how to respond to the cues, they picked up some . . . . But it wasn't really an effective way for them to learn another language. (master's presentation)

The engagement in the classroom inquiry project as well as the many activities and dialogues with his peers as part of the Enhancement Program curriculum pushed Frank to move from empirical to reflective teaching—the "why," as he referred to it, and to an awareness of his change in perspective. He started this deep transformation as he observed and studied more attentively his teaching of LEP students, but pretty soon, he realized that this also applied to the whole class. Here is the articulation of his teaching change:

I know as I worked with her [Martha] this year, I discovered this has helped the most with my awareness about teaching, while working with her with a math problem, working with her and trying to explain something to her so she could understand. . . . And it occurred to me, like you know, you just explain this to a person who doesn't understand English and she understands it. Why don't I teach that way to all the kids? It makes sense to me. These are the type of things that this program gave me when I . . . . It gave the opportunity, the ability to analyze why I'm doing what I'm doing. When in the past I did it and it worked, I forgot about it, or I did it and it didn't work and I threw it away. Now, I do it and it works, and I wonder why it works, and I wonder how it could work better. And if I do it and it doesn't work, I wonder why it didn't work, and how I can adjust. I'm also able to discuss these issues with my peers and ask them. (master's presentation)

He also is becoming a better collaborator because he was able to experience the advantages of collaborating with peers. He is thinking about establishing a systematic collaborative inquiry with the colleagues in his school in the near future.

I see myself changing as a teacher and being aware of it. I have found that I trust other people much more than I did. I'm not a great collaborator and that stuff, but I try, because working with my peers in the Enhancement Program, they helped to do that. The opportunity to have a meaningful dialogue with other teachers has become very important to me. Next year, when we go back to school, I will try to bring some colleagues together and ask the principal to allow us to have a committee, with time set aside, in which as teachers we do research and ask questions about students and have a meaningful dialogue with our peers. There's been great power in cooperative
inquiry. That's something that I really discovered this year going through the Enhancement Program. (master's presentation)

He highlights the distinct aspects of his teaching that are changing and how these changes affected his enjoyment and awareness of teaching as he teaches:

I don't know if changing circumstances in my school have caused a difference, but I find myself teaching differently. Science has become more hands-on, I am using more adults in my classroom, my students are working with a class of younger students; these have all seemed to help the students and myself enjoy learning more. . . . The only thing I could pinpoint is my awareness of teaching as I teach. I seem to be more conscious of the things I am doing and how they affect students. (self-assessment report)

Frank's perception of his transformation was somewhat confirmed by his peer support teacher in the assessment/commentary she wrote to him at the end of the second semester:

You do know yourself well enough to realize the risks involved for you to invite others into your classroom. Not just to work with students, but to solicit ideas and suggestions on how to maximize your curriculum. . . . In focusing on your teaching style, you have learned how much your learning style has affected the development of opportunities for students' interactions during the lessons. You have been willing to consider and act upon the needs and strengths of others, even when they fall outside your comfort zone.

She stresses what he is doing now without contrasting these attitudes and practices with those at the beginning of the program, when he was refusing her challenge to make innovations in his classroom.

Finally, Frank points at his classroom inquiry project as the steering wheel that moved him to change for the benefit of his LEP students and all the other students: "The inquiry project really changed the way I can deal with my monolingual students and my other students as a whole. Because I may be more aware of myself as a teacher."

PAUL

Paul is a special education teacher. He had 13 students between first and fourth grade the year of his participation in the Enhancement Program, most of his students being Hispanic LEP students or "bilingual students," as he refers to them. Throughout his 18 years of teaching experience in special education, he has had many cases of students whose problem is English-language difficulties and who are not genuinely learning disabled or communication disordered students as they have been labeled. This seems to him a good reason for focusing his classroom inquiry project on the bilingual students.

The main reason for my doing this project was that the bilingual children, a lot of them, are placed in special ed not because they are special ed kids, as you know, but because of their language difficulties, lack of opportunity, sort of creating special ed children because they don't get content in Spanish while acquiring their English. (classroom inquiry presentation)

In addition, he considers that these children do not have the opportunity at home or at school to develop their first language academically, which contributes to learning and adaptation problems at school.

After eighteen years of working with a primarily Hispanic population, I observed that many children have a lack of opportunity, either in their home or at school, to learn content in their first language while they are acquiring their second language. This leads to the students' failure in the regular education setting, and to a referral for evaluation and eventual placement in a special education class as learning disabled students. (classroom inquiry paper)

Paul expresses his concern about the way LEP students receive the help they need by being labeled as learning disabled students.

Bilingual concerns are not being met, and at times the only help the students could receive would be in a special education class. This would give the students a smaller pupil-teacher ratio, and a chance to catch up with their peers. Unfortunately, they would also have to
be labeled as having a disability in order to get these services. (classroom inquiry paper)

Paul elaborates on his reasons for working toward developing the second language linked to the development of the first language when he is challenged by a peer as to only using translation and not the language as a tool of thinking:

My goal is to have them develop their English goals from their Spanish, and maintain both as much as possible. . . For me the Spanish-English connection is very important . . . their speech, language goals, and a vocabulary which they can string together in either language. They can use one to enhance the other. So the children already have a language structure in Spanish, but we’re trying to meet their IEP [Individual Educational Plan] goals in English. And I’m using it as a bridge to meeting their IEP goals. (classroom inquiry discussion)

Some frustration resulted from his lack of Spanish skills. He was pushing himself very hard to develop his Spanish skills. He even voiced a request to the program staff to organize and staff a Spanish study group, which I led during the spring semester. He was eager to learn Spanish and to relate to the other service providers of his students. He wanted to exit the students from his class as early as possible.

I felt very frustrated, because I did not have as many bilingual skills as I needed, and the bilingual services that they were receiving were isolated from the activities I was doing, you know, development of comprehension and language, vocabulary, and all those good things to work on. So I wanted to tie together somehow with what was going on in other areas of the school in my classroom. . . . Although I cannot change the system, I wanted to utilize as much Spanish, and as many resources as I could as a non-native speaker, to help facilitate language development in reading and writing for the students as quickly as possible, so that they could be exited from special education before they were in it for their entire school career. (classroom inquiry presentation)

Given the fact that Paul lacked advanced Spanish skills, he started to rely on his Spanish-speaking students for learning Span-

ish from them and then helping them to learn English. In doing so, he was creating a collaborative learning community with his students in a very unique way: mutual teaching and learning between him and his students and among students. He modeled for them and their parents the effort and interest in learning a new language—for him, Spanish. All this represented for Paul a big change in his practice, which he started to articulate:

Like you, Jane, I was very much the conductor of the class. . . . And learning from my students, other than the basic learning styles, was a new concept for me. . . . They [students] were helping me to learn, and I was modeling learning things for them too. I’ve learned that the most important thing is that even though I don’t speak Spanish fluently, the effort I was putting in modeling, the effort I wanted them to put in learning English. As I was learning more vocabulary in Spanish I could use it more to give cues in Spanish, to help them with English with the same words that I was learning from them. . . . That was the main thrust, it really. . . . And the parents also, I had a parent conference. . . . I was able to conduct a conference with a parent and he understood everything I said. I was shocked that I did . . . we got through. (classroom inquiry presentation)

This collaborative environment truly empowered students by improving their engagement in the various learning situations.

The oldest one I have, Cristina, she just really loves that she can teach me Spanish. And one of my students David, who came to the group later, he wanted to be in the bilingual group so much, because he told me that he was much more intelligent in Spanish than he was in English. And this was the opportunity to show me how smart he was in Spanish and help me become smarter in Spanish. So that was real collaboration with us. (classroom inquiry presentation)

Paul started with one student as a case study, then he moved to a group, because some students wanted to participate, and he saw the opportunity to have some students helping him while teaching other younger or less experienced students. The empowering and collaborative atmosphere has facilitated students to help other students as well as for their parents to come and help him with Spanish. His fellow teachers asked him how this happened. This is his response:
Because they are teaching me, their parents feel more approachable to me, because I’m trying . . . I even have parents volunteering to come in to be in our group to help me with the language. . . . Cristina’s mom’s come several times. So that really helps. . . . With Cristina in the group, she has a lot of vocabulary in Spanish and Mary recognizes a lot of words once Cristina brings ‘em up. So, I’m using the children within the group to help me and each other too. . . . Cristina is a little teacher. She’s very helpful with other kids. I think that this is giving her opportunity to shine. And her English is high too. . . . She goes back and forth really well. . . . I think that the younger students are learning from the older ones, when we have an opportunity like this to share. (classroom inquiry discussion)

Paul summarizes the results up to the time of his classroom inquiry inasmuch as he is able to give evidence about them: “Parents are more involved with their children’s education, the students are eager to participate in activities, and classroom teachers [the mainstream teachers of the children he teaches] have noticed improved language skills” (classroom inquiry summary statement). Paul acknowledges that his teaching was initially pretty much teacher centered and that the changes he experienced have been the result of participating and collaborating in the Enhancement Program and by carrying out his classroom inquiry. In the self-assessment interview held among Paul, his peer support, and me, he pointed to those changes: “Now I am more process oriented. . . . I’m giving students opportunities, like those I have in the Enhancement Program.” He is willing to take more risks by loosening his control on children: “Now I’m more flexible, less controlling. . . . Letting kids have their way is helping them.” He found that opening his teaching still allows him some accountability, something of which he is very aware as a special education teacher: “My opening to children’s learning processes allows them to come up with their own conclusions, although I’m keeping some accountability.” The change from teacher centered to student centered implied for him a change in whose strengths he was teaching: “I was teaching through my strengths, and now I teach through students’ strengths.” The whole experience in the program and with his classroom inquiry made him more inquisitive about his teaching: “I never questioned myself before. . . . Now I am questioning myself every day: Why am I doing what I’m doing?”

Paul’s peer support teacher gives him feedback based on the observations of Paul’s class and the observations of the entire staff concerning Paul’s transformation of his teaching practice:

Your movement to a more open classroom, one not so much in your control, has been a risk for you. This includes, but is not limited to, your allowing your students to read to each other more instead of strictly to you. . . . Moving from a more skill oriented to a process oriented classroom practice has been a risk for you. The challenge for you here is to assess the consequences of this movement from skills to processes. (staff-written evaluation)

His peer support also gives him feedback about the transference of his experiences in the Enhancement Program into Paul’s classroom practice: “The transfer of some of the collaborative methods of the Enhancement Program to your own practice with your students is evidence of your internalization of the value of collaboration in the learning process.”

Paul is aware of the ongoing character of inquiring into his teaching and that it is going to take more time for him to see changes toward achievement of the goals of the IEP. To help in this pursuit, he sees the need for coordinating efforts with the other personnel in the school who work with these same children.

The main thing that I learned from the inquiry project is, as Julie said, when you start with one question, it leads to another and another, and it just grows and you end up with a lot more than when you started, with a lot more strategies than you ever hoped for. . . . Doing this in a special education classroom, people thought that it was oddly unique. . . . Don’t you think that they are bilingual already? Don’t this and that? I thought, well. . . . this is a necessary activity for these children. In the future what I want to do is coordinate activities between the bilingual department, therapists, the mainstream teachers, to make sure that children in classrooms have bilingual teachers, so we can coordinate all the activities to help meet the IEP goals. It takes a long time before I can see progress on them. I’m looking forward to testing and seeing if they made large
jumps, because of these things that we are doing with two languages. (classroom inquiry presentation)

At any rate, his peculiar way of working on English and Spanish literacy has been recognized by his colleagues in the school and also by his fellow teachers in the Enhancement Program when he presented the work-in-progress report to a small group of them. The two Hispanic teachers present applauded his efforts in learning Spanish to help his students and hence create a very empowering atmosphere for them:

*Teresa:* It is not just the language but the validation of their culture.

*Yolanda:* I want to say that the modeling that you are doing is doing so much, as you already said, 'cause it's hard to speak in another language, when it's not your native language. My parents both speak Spanish, but I don't, and I have a very difficult time expressing things in Spanish. So I really admire that you're trying. I think that it is so much of value with these children. And they see that you're learning with them. And they are smarter in something than you are.

**DISCUSSION**

After examining the cases of the above three teacher-researchers, it is safe to say that their whole experience of inquiring into the worlds of LEP students in their classrooms, within the context of the Enhancement Program, contributed to a great extent to the transformation of their teaching perspectives and practices and their relationships with those students particularly. Indeed, these teachers became more thoughtful about their teaching for meaningful and purposeful learning by their students, which resulted in empowerment for the LEP students and for the teachers as well.

By definition, each case study is unique; therefore, it is not appropriate to draw conclusions in the form of rules for action based only on a few cases. Case studies such as the ones reported here may provide educators with insights that facilitate pondering certain perspectives for a better understanding of other situations and the planning of different courses of action in them. The transformation experienced by these teachers, their uncertainties, and limitations they faced should invite other teachers to explore their own classrooms rather than to copy some rules of practice or "how tos." Despite differences in the ways these teachers approached their classroom inquiries, we can highlight some common threads and insights they experienced while working with their LEP students. When it is relevant, these insights are discussed in the light of the principles of bilingual and multicultural education.

*From a few cases to the whole class.* Lyn, Frank, and Paul started their inquiry focusing on one case or a small group; eventually, they realized that what they had learned about their LEP students and about their own teaching innovations could be applied to the whole class. It is important to point out here the specific conditions of the Enhancement Program they were attending that provided them with the assistance and opportunities for studying, reflecting, articulating, and sharing their experiences, problems, and insights with other colleagues within a collaborative but challenging atmosphere. Even though Lyn, Frank, and Paul each took different avenues and did not share small group conversations except for the classroom inquiry presentations, in which Lyn and Frank were in the same group, the focus on their LEP students led them to discover other dimensions of their students' cognitive, emotional, personal, perceptual, etc. and of their own teaching (teaching based on students' strengths, more student-centered pedagogy, etc.). As these teachers reflected on and articulated those new dimensions, they realized that their insights transcended the restricted conditions of LEP students.

Unfortunately, due to the shortness of the Enhancement Program and the ongoing nature of classroom teacher inquiry, teachers were asked to present only work-in-progress reports. Hence, they only provided partial evidence about changes in students as they changed their practices and their relationships with them.

*Reflective teaching.* All three teachers became fully aware of the power of asking themselves questions about their teaching and, of course, finding answers by inquiring into it. For Lyn, the "why" constitutes the foundations of her teaching, as opposed to the tech-
niques that constitute the surface level. For Frank and Paul, finding out why something works or does not work about their teaching has become part of the definition of teaching and a habit of practice.

Connection between degree of literacy in the first language and the predisposition and speed in learning English as a second language. The three teachers found this connection as a condition for success with their LEP students. For Paul, the relation between the development of the first language and the development of the second language is unquestionable. Although he is not completely bilingual, he was trying to use Spanish with his Hispanic special education students as a bridge for their acquisition of English. He also bases his work on the assumption of the interdependence in the development of first and second languages. For him, development of one language enhances the other. Meanwhile, Lyn and Frank discovered the interdependence between the two languages as they were able to observe and compare their cases.

The interdependence between the native language development and the acquisition of English as a second language is well documented and supported by researchers of language development, language acquisition, and bilingual education (Cummins, 1981, 1989, 1992; Hakuta, 1986; Moll, 1992; Moraes, 1996; Krashen, 1996, among many others). On the interdependence of language development, Vygotsky (1935) maintains that “the child acquiring a foreign language is already in command of a system of meanings in the native language which she/he transfers to the sphere of another language” (p. 48, cited by John-Steiner, 1985, p. 350-351).

As John-Steiner points out, Vygotsky’s statement is supported by the current research on these matters. In this regard, Cummins (1981, 1989, 1992) develops a model of the cross-lingual dimensions connecting deeper conceptual and linguistic understanding and, on the surface, the basic communication skills. He maintains that the active promotion of native language constitutes an effective way to develop an academic foundation for acquiring second language proficiency. Although his model has been criticized (e.g., by Edelsky, 1991) for reducing the understanding and development of language to predominantly the development of decontextualized skills, Cummins’ model has generated a great deal of research that supports the interdependence in the development of languages.

From a Vygotskian perspective, Moll and Greenberg (1990) and Moll (1992) demonstrate that recognition, value, and use of children’s first language, culture, and community resources, which they call “funds of knowledge,” create many possibilities for a meaningful and relevant education for students of minority groups, especially for second language learners.

Entering into LEP students’ world. As each of these teachers entered the worlds of their LEP students, he or she became aware of the many other dimensions of their students’ lives (emotions, values, feelings, culture, stories, perceptions) that are as important as the language and intellectual dimensions for creating a learning environment for them. Each in his or her own way was able to explore students’ abilities and strengths other than the ones they used to see in them. Lyn and Paul discovered strengths in their LEP students (musical intelligence or Spanish-language skills) that represented for them a challenge for teaching based on those strengths, inasmuch as they were weaker in those abilities than their students. Many authors (Cummins, 1986, 1989; Freire, 1994; Moraes, 1996; Macedo, 1994; Perez & Torres-Guzman, 1996, among many others) have provided support concerning the crucial importance of stressing what minority students, especially LEP students, can do rather than what they cannot do.

Lyn’s and Paul’s acceptances of vulnerability as well as their new views of their students generated closer relationships with them. Nieto (1999) maintains and documents the role of the relationships between teachers and students as a great but not exclusive contributor to students’ learning and success in the school. For her, teachers’ beliefs and expectations about students’ abilities, culture, and language have a tremendous impact on students, above all students from language minority backgrounds. Because LEP students cannot communicate adequately with their teachers because they do not understand and speak English well and the teachers do not speak Spanish (in these cases), it is very hard to build a nurturing
relationship between the teacher and each of the LEP students, as Frank strongly points out.

Even though these three teachers did not have assistance from language development or bilingual education specialists, they did a good job in avoiding and/or remediating the alienation of their LEP students. Lyn and Frank found that the most frequent manner of coping adopted by LEP students in all-English classrooms is to fall into silence and do nothing. It seems like self-isolation, but it may really be the only resource they have in a situation to which they have no connection. If their teachers have neither opportunity nor willingness to find out what are the students’ strengths and what is meaningful for them, LEP students will be marginalized and isolated within their classrooms. At this point, there begins the vicious cycle through which students become the special education, learning-disabled children that Faltis (1997) indicates and Paul has confirmed through his 18 years working as a special education teacher and with many LEP students. To prevent their students from falling into this vicious circle, Paul and Lyn tried by several means to base their teaching on students’ strengths and to create a meaningful curriculum for them.

The open-ended character of the classroom project forced these teachers to foresee ways of continuing their research in the coming years, given the fact that their studies were only at the initial stages. Unfortunately, I could not follow up on their latest developments. We can speculate about their ability to help LEP children to deal with their inner world. In other words, are they prepared to play the role of cultural mediator for these children? Igoa (1995) concludes that “although instructional methodologies are important to second language learners, the real key is to help the child deal with his/her inner world... get over the hurdle of accepting the new culture without rejecting his/her own native culture” (p. 146).

Focusing as we have on the accomplishments of these teachers does not imply that we should expect that teachers alone can do everything needed to improve education for LEP students. “The school systems need to change. A teacher cannot do it all” (Igoa, 1995, p. 9). In the same vein, Nieto (1999) points to the power of teacher influence on students’ adaptation and success in the school:

“At the core of this book is my powerful belief in the effect, positive or negative, that teachers can have through their interactions with them, their families and their communities” (p. 175). Like Igoa (1995), Nieto (1999) considers that the teacher cannot do everything. There are other societal and institutional factors that affect learning and the whole life of students, such as school policies and practices, attitudes in society toward their language and culture, and students’ identification with their school.

Even though we cannot claim that the changes these three teachers experienced in this year were due only to their engagement in classroom inquiry, we can say that their inquiry was very revealing and insightful for improving their teaching of LEP students and other minority students who are linguistically and culturally different from their teachers. Because there are no universal strategies for teaching LEP students—such would, in any case, be contradictory to the concept of cultural diversity—teacher inquiry becomes a very resourceful way to cope with the limitations of the American educational system concerning the education of minority students, especially the so-called limited-English-proficiency students. We can start helping to improve their situation by stopping the use of the fault-connoting label LEP and replacing it with English language learners (ELL) or English language development (ELD) students, which are labels that do not connote deficiency but rather acquisition of an additional language.

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