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# Affordances of innovative professional development and learning resources through language teacher associations: insights from educators of English as an additional language

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study investigates the affordances of innovative professional development and learning opportunities provided by one language teacher association (LTA). Specifically, it examines the Maryland TESOL Association's *Handbook for Educators of English Learners*, a comprehensive resource created by the LTA for everything related to English learner education, teacher preparation, and advocacy in the state. Throughout this manuscript, we recognize the Handbook as not only an innovative tool in and of itself, but also innovative as it exists in this professional context as opposed to other traditional educator preparation settings. To explore how localized, context-specific resources can enhance professional growth, the study employed the following research question: *How does the Maryland TESOL Handbook elevate professional development and learning opportunities, according to educators of English as an additional language [EAL]?* Using semi-structured interviews with four educators, the study uncovers key themes, including the accessibility, contextual relevance, and advocacy provided by the Handbook. Findings indicate that the Maryland TESOL Handbook is highly regarded for its practicality, ease of access, and its role in bridging theory and practice for region-specific educators. However, participants identified areas for improvement, such as broader dissemination and inclusivity of diverse pedagogical models. This research highlights the critical role LTAs can play in providing innovative, tailored, and context-sensitive resources that foster both teacher and institutional development and learning.

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## Introduction

The United States has seen a substantial increase in the number of multilingual learners of English (MLEs) just in the past two decades. 2022 recorded the largest immigrant population in the country's history, at around 46.2 million people (Batalova 2024). While this increase is evident in all states, Maryland, in particular, has seen some of the most rapid changes to its resident populations. For the first time, Maryland is one of the top ten states nationally for growth in immigrant populations (Batalova 2024). It is also the state with the highest rate of school-aged migrant children per capita in the country (Archibald 2024), a factor that has contributed to the number of students eligible for English language development (ELD) services in its P-12 system doubling in only nine years (Maryland State Department of Education 2024). Simultaneously, the linguistic backgrounds of these new

Maryland residents are more diversified – refugee populations entering Maryland have led to increases in the numbers of students speaking Pashto and Dari as never before seen in the state (Maryland Office for Refugees and Asylees 2021), so much so that as of 2023 Pashto is now the fifth most common language spoken among students in the P-12 system (Maryland State Department of Education 2024). At the same time, where MLEs live has also shifted. The COVID-19 pandemic led to financial changes for MLE populations, leading many to move from the historically immigrant-dominant areas of the Baltimore-Washington, DC corridor in central Maryland to the more economically-manageable rural Eastern Shore and mountainous western regions of the state. While these rural areas do not have the sheer numbers of MLEs as the central corridor, the percentages of MLE students have tripled and, in some cases, quadrupled (Fagan et al. 2021; 2022).

As a result of these factors, contemporary Maryland educators are contending with multiple and rapid changes simultaneously in academia: increases in general MLE populations across the state, more diversified language backgrounds among those MLEs compared to just a few years ago, and updates to where MLEs live and are being educated, namely in areas that historically were dominated by monolingual English as a first language (L1) speakers. Not increasing at the same rate are professional development and learning opportunities for educators across the state for varied educator populations, leaving many to struggle with addressing these learners' cultural, linguistic, and academic needs across the curriculum (Fagan 2022). Indeed, some programs focusing on non-ELD teacher and administrator education have been developed; however, these have largely been concentrated in certain areas of the state with historically large MLE populations to begin with. The changes described above clearly show the need for professional development and learning opportunities for all educators and stakeholders connected to MLE academic success across all Maryland regions.

Uniquely situated to address this is the Maryland Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (MDTESOL) Association. As the largest language teacher association (LTA) within the state focusing on MLEs, its goals are (1) serving the professional community vis-à-vis networking, keeping members abreast of changes in the field, providing professional learning opportunities, and promoting scholarship, (2) advocating for English learners, professionals, and the field as well as support and inform policy and practice to increase equity in the educational opportunities, and (3) promoting the language development of English learners in Maryland by supporting best practices, strengthening instruction and research in the field, providing leadership in TESOL and professional concerns, and connecting with other associations with shared goals (Maryland TESOL Association 2023). As an LTA, MDTESOL connects educators across educators' settings (i.e. P-12, adult education, and higher education), thus allowing it to reach various stakeholders connected to MLE success. Utilizing this vantage point in the ever-changing arena that is MLE education in Maryland, MDTESOL wanted to consider what types of resources it could provide that could reach the most educators-in-need at once. This led to the idea of creating a 'go-to' Handbook for everything related to the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) field as it connects to Maryland specifically.

The *Maryland TESOL Handbook for Educators of English Learners* was conceptualized, drafted, revised, and published by three past presidents of the association (Pentón Herrera, Fagan, and Lyons 2021). The audience for this Handbook was always varied: in-service ELD and non-ELD teachers in P-12, adult, and higher education working with MLEs in some capacity, administrators in those settings, pre-service teacher candidates preparing to enter the field, those considering entering the field and wanting to know more about it, community associations working with immigrant populations, researchers wanting to know more about Maryland and its MLE education system, and policymakers affecting our MLEs' educational pursuits. Following intensive pre-writing meetings, it was agreed that these varied stakeholders would value knowing a general overview of TESOL in the state, which resulted in the Handbook being divided into six parts (see Appendix). Following its initial release in May 2021, the Handbook was promoted and utilized in various educational settings both inside and outside of classrooms across the state. Up to now, MDTESOL has received

positive, yet anecdotal, feedback. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand how this Handbook, uniquely situated within a local LTA, provides innovative professional development and learning opportunities not found elsewhere in the region to help educators address the rapid changes experienced throughout the state and educational settings as they relate to MLE success. Specifically, the following research question guided our study: *How does the Maryland TESOL Handbook elevate professional development and learning opportunities, according to educators of English as an additional language [EAL]?*

## Literature review

The Modern Language Association of America, which was founded in 1883, is considered the first association devoted specifically to language teaching (Wheeler 2018). This means that LTAs have been around for over 140 years, overseeing the evolution and teaching of different languages, and supporting language teachers in their professional development and learning. However, to date, scholarly work on LTAs remains widely underwhelming, considering that LTAs are ever-present entities regarded as leaders in the field (Banegas et al. 2022; Mahboob and England 2018). Scholars have noted this gap in the literature, calling it an 'alarming paucity' (Aubrey and Coombe 2010, para. 10) of inquiries into general concerns and issues of and within LTAs (Dickey 2022), producing a lack of clarity about different topics related to LTAs (Stewart and Miyahara 2016) such as membership identity (Motteram 2016), roles and expectations (Elsheikh, Coombe, and Effiong 2018), and ways to empower language teachers (Banegas et al. 2022).

Most of the published available work about LTAs has primarily focused on how to develop and run associations for language teachers (e.g. Falcão and Szeszty 2006; FIPLV n.d.; Gómez 2011), as well as some of the common challenges LTA leaders can encounter such as managing volunteers (Ashcraft 2022), advocating for their LTA and its members (Pentón Herrera 2022), and presiding over conferences (Algren et al. 2008). Similarly, the majority of available publications have primarily focused on English language teaching associations (ELTAs), with fewer publications devoted to and authored by LTAs of other languages. Lastly, available publications that would generally fall under the umbrella of LTA scholarship use different terminologies – sometimes interchangeably – such as teacher associations, LTAs, ELTAs, communities of practice (CoPs), foreign language teacher associations (FLTAs), and professional organizations for teachers of world languages, which dilutes and separates the scholarship into isolated islands. To date, the paucity of research available, and the lack of conversations about the operationalization of a central umbrella term to build foundational knowledge for the field, remain two critical challenges for LTAs.

## **LTAs and professional development and learning**

LTAs are generally divided into two categories: (inter)national and local. (Inter)national LTAs are large or umbrella LTAs at the national or international levels, and have more visibility in the field. Local LTAs are usually smaller, teacher-led associations that are territorially defined or separated. Different from larger (inter)national LTAs, local LTAs often work hand-in-hand with their membership to address local issues and needs (i.e. social, political, educational, etc.), which means that the services they provide are specifically tailored to their membership's contexts. Additionally, the professional development and learning opportunities offered by local LTAs generally differ from those in traditional, formal school settings such as higher education institutions. Elsheikh and Effiong (2018) argue that the professional development and learning opportunities offered by local LTAs 'is more egalitarian and probably more democratic as there is no social distance between the provider and the receiver' (72). This practice might be the result of different factors, including the fact that LTAs generally design professional development and learning opportunities with their membership in mind. That is, the leadership in LTAs often speak with their members to identify areas of interest and need and then offer

professional development and learning opportunities to meet those demands. This practice is evident in Kormpas's (2023) chapter, where he reported on the different events and initiatives local LTAs organized during the COVID-19 pandemic to support the well-being of English language teachers.

The modest scholarship exploring the effects of local LTAs on language teachers' professional development and learning agrees that LTAs support teachers' well-being and improve the practice of language teaching and learning (Coombe and Hamam 2023; Falcão and Szesztay 2006; Kormpas 2023). In a study conducted in Victoria, Australia, Slaughter, Bonar, and Keary (2021) found that professional development and learning opportunities offered by a local LTA resulted in participants feeling a high level of professionalism and commitment to their ongoing professional learning. In addition, participants discussed the 'benefits of centralized access to relevant professional learning' (296) through LTAs, which positively affected their experiences as members of the EAL field (Slaughter, Bonar, and Keary 2021). In a separate publication, Banegas et al. (2022), reporting about an ongoing project in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia, shared examples of the positive effects local LTAs have on teachers' professional development and learning in low- and middle-income countries. As concluded by Banegas et al. (2022), local LTAs are particularly well placed to lead collaborative projects and initiatives supporting the quality of language teaching in their immediate settings, as well as language teachers' professional development and learning. Furthermore, LTAs at large, and particularly local LTAs, 'can provide both listening and learning forums, and a lens through which local expertise and practice can be extended and made more widely visible' (Banegas et al. 2022, 75).

Although research certainly points to the positive effects local LTAs have on language teachers' professional development and learning (Lamb 2012), the reality is that there are also barriers that impede participation. For example, Aubrey and Coombe (2010), reporting on language teacher participation at a local conference, found that some language teachers decided not to participate in professional development opportunities, including yearly conferences at their local LTA, due to the high registration fees. The barrier to participating in professional development and learning opportunities offered by local LTAs was also reported by Abatayo (2018) and Rahman and Shahabuddin (2018), who state that 'with teaching being low-paid and often a female-dominated profession, it is very difficult for teachers to access professional development programs offered by the private sector as these are expensive' (Rahman and Shahabuddin 2018, 176). As such, it is important to support and strengthen local LTAs so they can provide free or low-cost relevant professional development and learning opportunities to language teachers (Rahman and Shahabuddin 2018). However, the reality is that LTAs are struggling to make ends meet (Dickey 2022), especially local LTAs (Pentón Herrera 2022), which affects the costs and opportunities for free professional development and learning opportunities.

In the context of our study, the creation of the Maryland TESOL Handbook serves as a prime example of how a local LTA can elevate professional development and learning opportunities as a free and open resource for all. By offering a tailored, context-specific resource, the Handbook not only addresses the professional needs of language educators but also provides a platform for sharing local expertise and best practices. This initiative aligns with the findings of Banegas et al. (2022), who emphasized the role of local LTAs in fostering collaborative learning environments and enhancing language teaching in their immediate settings. Additionally, the Handbook reflects the democratization of professional development mentioned by Elsheikh and Effiong (2018), as it was designed by, for, and with educators, creating a space where teachers can engage with practical, accessible, and contextualized resources that promote professional growth. This study aims to explore how this locally crafted resource affects EAL educators' perceptions regarding their professional development and learning, contributing to the ongoing conversation about the vital role of LTAs in teacher education.

## Methodology

We employed a qualitative case study approach to investigate how the Maryland TESOL Handbook served as an initiative for professional development and learning among EAL educators. A case study design is particularly effective for in-depth exploration of a specific phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin 2018) – in this case, the focus was on understanding educators' experiences with the Handbook in a professional development setting. Qualitative case studies allow for the examination of complex interactions and relationships within a bounded system, providing rich insights into how the Handbook influences pedagogical practices (Creswell and Poth 2024). By focusing on a specific, localized case, this study aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of how an educational resource created by an LTA influences teacher professional development and learning in Maryland, which represents a microcosm of broader professional development practices in language education.

The participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling, a technique commonly employed in qualitative research to target individuals with specific knowledge or experience relevant to the research question (Patton 2015). A call was sent out to professionals known to the authors of this paper as having used the Handbook in various capacities since its publication, thus ensuring that only individuals with direct experience using the Handbook were targeted to participate. The recruitment materials clearly stated the study's focus on understanding the role of the Handbook in professional development and learning, and explicitly invited those who had used the resource in their teaching practice. This recruitment process ensured that the participants were not only familiar with the Handbook but had also engaged with it in meaningful ways, making them well-suited to provide insights into its impact on their professional learning.

Ultimately, four participants were recruited based on their familiarity with the Maryland TESOL Association and their use of the Maryland TESOL Handbook. The four participants represent diverse educational contexts within EAL, including an administrator in higher education, a teacher educator, an adult education instructor, and a P-12 educator, ensuring that a broad range of perspectives was captured. This diversity allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the Handbook's impact across different educational contexts. All participants were engaged in varied ways with the EAL field in Maryland, thus ensuring their direct involvement with MDTESOL and firsthand experience with the Handbook as a professional development tool. More details about the participants are shared in Table 1.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth data on participants' experiences with the Maryland TESOL Handbook. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while still following a structured framework (Creswell and Poth 2024). The interviews were conducted via Zoom and Webex, platforms that facilitated both convenience and detailed discussion. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 min, was video recorded with participants' consent, and later transcribed verbatim. The interview questions focused on how the Handbook contributed to the participants' professional development and learning, their perceptions of its effectiveness, and its impact on their professional practices. This method of data collection was chosen to elicit rich, descriptive details that could reveal the nuanced ways in which the Handbook supports teacher learning.

Data analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, a widely-used method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. This approach involves six phases: (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3)

**Table 1.** Participants' demographic information.

| Pseudonym | Gender | Professional Context | Professional Title           |
|-----------|--------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Maria     | Female | Higher Education     | University Administrator     |
| Noelle    | Female | Higher Education     | Teacher Educator             |
| Mia       | Female | P-12                 | P-12 Supervisor              |
| Avram     | Male   | Community College    | Community College Instructor |

searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. Each interview transcript was reviewed multiple times to ensure a deep understanding of the content. In the initial phase, we individually coded the data to generate a list of preliminary themes related to the participants' experiences with the Maryland TESOL Handbook. This step allowed for the identification of key elements that emerged across the interviews, such as professional growth, access to resources, and collaborative learning.

After initial coding, we came together to compare and refine our codes. This collaborative process ensured the consistency and reliability of the themes identified (Nowell et al. 2017). In the second phase, themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately reflected the data. Codes that were conceptually similar were grouped together under overarching themes, which were then systematically reviewed to ensure that they captured the richness of participants' experiences. The final themes focused on how the Maryland TESOL Handbook facilitated professional development, promoted collaboration, and addressed gaps in traditional teacher training. Through this rigorous analysis, the study produced a comprehensive understanding of the Handbook's role in supporting professional development and learning.

The study adhered to established ethical guidelines for conducting research with human participants. Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, ensuring that the study met all ethical standards (BERA 2018). Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their rights, and how the data would be used. Informed consent was obtained before each interview, and participants were assured that their responses would be anonymized to protect their identities. All data, including interview recordings and transcripts, were securely stored and only accessible to the research team. This ensured compliance with ethical principles of confidentiality and participant protection throughout the research process.

## Findings

In response to the research question, *How does the Maryland TESOL Handbook elevate professional development and learning opportunities, according to educators of English as an additional language [EAL]?*, several key findings emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts. The participants highlighted multiple ways in which the Handbook provides value, particularly in terms of accessibility, advocacy, and its contextualized nature. The findings suggest that while the Maryland TESOL Handbook is well-received and regarded as a useful tool, there are areas for improvement in terms of dissemination and inclusivity.

### Accessibility and practical use

One of the key findings across all participants was the accessibility of the Maryland TESOL Handbook, which was identified as a crucial aspect of its utility. Maria highlighted the importance of open access, saying, 'It being available online ... for my students, for my collaborators, and people that I work with in schools ... was very relevant.' This accessibility allows the Handbook to serve as a convenient resource for educators who need quick and reliable information. Noelle similarly noted that the Handbook is 'super accessible' and appreciated how it served as a user-friendly supplement to more formal academic materials. The participants underscored that having an easily accessible resource that centralizes key information – such as terminology and policies – makes it an indispensable tool for busy educators who might otherwise struggle to find these resources.

Participants also emphasized that the open-access format makes the Maryland TESOL Handbook widely usable across different contexts, from P-12 schools to higher education. Noelle shared that she uses the Handbook not only in her TESOL methods courses but also encourages her students (pre- and in-service teachers) to share it with colleagues, community members, and families of MLEs, emphasizing its broad applicability. Despite this, several participants, including Noelle, expressed concerns that its reach could be broader. She noted, 'I don't know how widely circulated

it is ... it should be disseminated more broadly.' The need for further distribution underscores both the value of the Maryland TESOL Handbook and its potential to reach a larger audience if adequately promoted.

### ***Advocacy as a unique feature***

The section of the Maryland TESOL Handbook on advocacy emerged as one of its most valuable components, with all participants highlighting its unique contribution. Avram praised the Handbook's advocacy section, explaining that it provides 'a clear framework for how to take action' in ways that other resources do not. This guidance is particularly helpful for teachers who may feel unsure about how to advocate for their MLEs. Maria also emphasized the significance of the advocacy section, noting that it includes contributions from 'different voices at different levels,' which makes it particularly robust and applicable in real-world settings.

The importance of advocacy was also linked to the Maryland TESOL Handbook's practical, step-by-step guidance. Mia observed that the Handbook doesn't just talk about the importance of advocacy but provides real tools and instructions on how to engage in it. This approach was described as an important shift from other resources that tend to discuss advocacy in more abstract terms. For educators like those in Avram's and Maria's contexts, the Handbook has filled a gap by providing concrete strategies for advocating for multilingual learners. Maria also pointed out that this section is especially critical because advocacy is often underrepresented in other resources, stating, 'I think there is a gap in information on advocacy in general.'

### ***Contextual relevance***

Another significant finding is the context-specific focus of the Maryland TESOL Handbook, which participants valued for helping educators understand the local context of their work. Noelle highlighted the importance of the Handbook's contextualization to Maryland's education system, saying, 'Our system is very ... specific to Maryland,' and this resource helps prepare teachers for the policies and frameworks they will encounter in the state. For educators who are either new to Maryland or unfamiliar with the state's unique educational landscape, the Maryland TESOL Handbook provides a vital introduction to local policies, demographic information, and certification requirements.

Maria echoed this sentiment, particularly noting how useful the demographic data were for her work within her specific school system. She explained that the information on the different populations, programs, and student demographics helped her 'contextualize where I was going,' especially since she was new to the area. The Maryland-specific details in the Handbook allow it to fill gaps in local knowledge for educators who may be accustomed to working in other states or regions, thereby enhancing their ability to provide effective instruction and support to MLEs.

### ***Gaps and areas for improvement***

Despite the overall positive reception of the Maryland TESOL Handbook, participants identified key areas where it could be improved, particularly regarding inclusivity and dissemination. Maria raised concerns about the Handbook's heavy reliance on specific models, such as the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol® (SIOP®) framework<sup>1</sup> (Echevarría, Vogt, and Short 2017), which she felt excluded alternative perspectives and methods that have been developed in the field. 'If you only reference one particular approach or method, I find that to be particularly problematic and exclusionary,' she stated. Maria called for the Handbook to reflect more diverse voices and methodologies, including contributions from scholars and educators of color. This call for inclusivity is not only about broadening the scope of pedagogical strategies but also about reflecting the diverse identities and experiences within the TESOL community.

Participants also suggested that the Maryland TESOL Handbook could be more widely distributed. Noelle pointed out that many educators and families in Maryland might not even be aware

of the Handbook's existence. She proposed that school districts, particularly ESOL departments, should take a more active role in disseminating the Handbook. This would ensure that it reaches more educators and stakeholders who could benefit from its content. Maria further suggested that the Maryland TESOL Handbook should be translated into other languages to increase its accessibility for non-English speaking parents and families, an idea that aligns with the Handbook's goals of supporting MLEs and their communities.

### ***Professional development and learning opportunities***

The Maryland TESOL Handbook's potential to serve as a springboard for further professional development and learning opportunities was another important finding. Avram mentioned that the Handbook could be effectively integrated into professional development programs, particularly for part-time faculty and new hires. He explained, 'I added it as an example of an independent study aligned to our departmental professional development plan,' allowing educators to engage with the material independently. He also suggested including the Handbook in onboarding materials, stating, 'I want to add it to our new hire module as a resource.' By incorporating it into professional development, Avram believed that educators could develop a deeper understanding of advocacy and multilingual education, which they could then apply to their practice.

Maria similarly saw the potential for the Maryland TESOL Handbook in teacher education programs, particularly in the early stages of ESOL methods courses. She suggested that the first three sections, which cover Maryland-specific demographics and certification requirements, could be used to provide foundational knowledge for pre-service teachers. 'I would use the first three sections for pre-service teachers to get a sense of the population in Maryland,' she explained. Maria also viewed the advocacy section as an ideal resource for practicing educators, noting, 'For practicing teachers, the advocacy section is the most applicable.' By integrating the Handbook into structured professional development and teacher education programs, both Avram and Maria saw opportunities for educators to enhance their understanding of both the theoretical and practical aspects of their roles.

### ***Addressing challenges and barriers***

Participants also discussed how the Maryland TESOL Handbook has helped to mitigate challenges and barriers to accessing professional development and learning opportunities. One of the main barriers identified was the overwhelming amount of information that educators need to navigate, particularly for novice teachers. Noelle noted that the Handbook 'helps us overcome the challenge of ... an overwhelming amount of content to cover' by providing a clear, manageable resource that teachers can turn to as needed. She appreciated that it offers not only theoretical knowledge but also practical examples that make the information more relevant for teachers, saying, 'It provides information that kind of wraps around the child ... there's also community resources, information for parents.' This shift from broad academic theory to more practical, teacher-friendly elements was seen as particularly valuable in addressing the gap between theory and practice in the field.

Maria similarly highlighted the Maryland TESOL Handbook's role in centralizing key terminology and definitions, which is often a challenge in the field due to the abundance of acronyms and specialized terms. She emphasized, 'It's been difficult to find one resource that has the terminology that is so important in the field.' By offering a consolidated resource, the Handbook helps educators avoid the need to consult multiple references, streamlining access to critical information in a field saturated with jargon. Avram also emphasized the Handbook's utility in creating a supportive network for educators, particularly those who are new to the field or Maryland. He stated that knowing such a resource exists 'was really meaningful' and helped him feel more connected to the broader TESOL community. For educators who may feel isolated or overwhelmed by the

demands of their roles, the Maryland TESOL Handbook provides both practical guidance and a sense of professional support.

## Discussion

In response to the research question, *How does the Maryland TESOL Handbook elevate professional development and learning opportunities, according to educators of English as an additional language [EAL]?*, the findings of this study provide several key insights into the ways in which the Handbook serves as an innovative tool for fostering professional growth among its members and, more broadly, the larger educational community. These findings align with broader discussions in the literature about the role of local LTAs in supporting professional development and learning (Banegas et al. 2022; Elsheikh, Coombe, and Effiong 2018). The Handbook stands as an example of how these associations can provide both context-specific resources and accessible tools that address the practical needs of language educators, both of which are often not available or provided in language teacher preparation programs. This finding, and the opportunity to create and offer practical and contextual resources for language teachers, is particularly relevant given the increasing attention being paid to the innovative roles LTAs play in language education (Lamb 2012).

One of the major contributions of the Maryland TESOL Handbook is its accessibility, a feature repeatedly emphasized by all participants. The topic of accessibility for professional development and learning resonates with the broader literature on LTAs, which frequently highlights the importance of providing resources that are easily accessible to educators who may face barriers to professional development due to cost or geographic location (Rahman and Shahabuddin 2018). The open-access format of the Handbook allows for wide dissemination, a key factor in ensuring that educators, particularly those in under-resourced areas, can access the support they need (Abatayo 2018). However, as pointed out by participants, its circulation could be improved, suggesting that more proactive dissemination by Maryland TESOL (i.e. the LTA) could enhance its impact. This point underscores the ongoing challenge of making LTA-produced materials widely known and utilized within and beyond its immediate membership.

Another unique feature of the Maryland TESOL Handbook is its focus on advocacy, which was emphasized by participants as a particularly valuable component, filling a gap in many professional development and learning resources that often address advocacy in abstract terms without offering practical steps. Further advancing Pentón Herrera's (2022) ideas that LTAs can be key players in educational advocacy, this finding exemplifies how LTAs can support educators in their efforts to advocate for their students and families. Participants also made reference to how inclusive the Handbook is, which allows it to resonate with a wide range of educators working in diverse contexts. This aligns with Elsheikh and Effiong's (2018) argument that local LTAs are well-positioned to provide professional development that is both democratic and responsive to local needs, particularly in terms of addressing the specific challenges faced by language educators. Finally, as Mia emphasized in her role as a P-12 administrator, MDTESOL – and other LTAs, by extension – is not bound by restrictive parameters that other institutions are required to adhere to, such as institutions of higher education and Ministries and/or State Department of Education.

The contextual relevance of the Maryland TESOL Handbook was another key theme that emerged from the data. Participants noted that the Handbook's focus on region-specific policies, demographics, and certification requirements made it a valuable resource for understanding the local educational landscape. Preparing teachers for the policies and frameworks they will encounter in the state is particularly crucial for educators who may be new to Maryland or unfamiliar with its particular educational context. This finding is consistent with the work of Banegas et al. (2022), who argue that LTAs are uniquely positioned to provide professional development and learning that is tailored to the specific needs of their members, particularly in terms of offering context-specific resources. By providing detailed information on the local context, the Handbook helps educators navigate the

complexities of working within Maryland's educational system, thereby enhancing their ability to support MLEs effectively.

Despite its strengths, the Maryland TESOL Handbook is not without areas for improvement. Participants, particularly Maria, expressed concern about the Handbook's reliance on specific instructional models, such as the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol® (SIOP®). More specifically, participants argued that this narrow focus could exclude other perspectives in the field, a point that is echoed in the literature on LTAs, which calls for greater inclusivity in the pedagogical approaches they promote (Banegas et al. 2022). Maria's critique highlights the need for the Handbook to reflect the diversity of the TESOL field by incorporating a wider range of instructional strategies and methodologies. In addition to expanding its pedagogical focus, participants suggested that the Handbook could benefit from wider distribution and translation into other languages. Noelle noted that many educators and families in Maryland might not even be aware of the Handbook's existence, calling for more active dissemination by Maryland TESOL. This suggestion is in line with previous conversations on the challenges LTAs face in reaching their full membership base (Pentón Herrera 2022), or even beyond it. Maria's recommendation that the Handbook be translated into other languages to increase its accessibility for non-English-speaking parents and families highlights the potential for LTAs to play a more active role in promoting multilingualism and supporting diverse communities (Mahboob and England 2018).

Finally, participants recognize the Maryland TESOL Handbook as a valuable tool for professional development and learning, highlighting its potential to be integrated into formal professional learning programs. Avram suggested that the Handbook could be used as part of an independent study aligned with his institution's professional development plan, while Maria saw its utility in teacher education programs, particularly in the early stages of ESOL methods courses. These insights parallel the growing body of literature that recognizes LTAs as key providers of professional development and learning opportunities, particularly in contexts where formal institutional support may be lacking (Banegas et al. 2022). By incorporating the Handbook into structured educator professional development and learning programs, LTAs can continue to play a critical role in supporting educators' ongoing professional growth.

## Conclusion

We would like to end this article by situating our study within the broader conversation of the transformative role of LTAs in fostering professional development and learning resources and opportunities to address an ever-changing student population. The findings from this research contribute to the growing body of scholarship highlighting LTAs as key providers of professional growth opportunities, especially in local contexts where formalized institutional support may be insufficient. The Handbook exemplifies how LTAs can effectively respond to the immediate and contextual needs of educators, providing tailored resources that are accessible, practical, and contextually relevant. This aligns with this special issue's focus on the innovative and evolving roles that LTAs play in empowering educators through professional development and learning opportunities (Banegas et al. 2022; Lamb 2012). In particular, the Maryland TESOL Handbook's emphasis on advocacy and its wide accessibility demonstrates the potential for LTAs to bridge gaps between theory and practice, addressing the practical needs of educators in ways that formal teacher preparation programs often overlook. The Handbook's context-specific focus and its practical guidance for advocacy reflect how LTAs can foster professional growth through resources that are grounded in the local educational landscape, one that is continuously changing as the state's population changes. By doing so, LTA-created resources like the Handbook can help educators develop the skills and knowledge necessary to support MLEs and engage in advocacy efforts, a role that LTAs are increasingly recognized for.

Through this study, we underscore the vital function of LTAs in supporting educators at various stages of their professional journey, from novice teachers to seasoned professionals. In this way, LTAs like Maryland TESOL not only support individual educator development but also contribute to the

collective advancement of the field, fostering a collaborative and inclusive professional community. As LTAs continue to evolve, they are uniquely positioned to address emerging educational challenges and to serve as engines for innovation in professional development and learning, particularly by providing educators with resources that are accessible, contextually relevant, and aligned with the diverse needs of language teachers in an increasingly interconnected world. Thus, this study serves as a reminder of the essential role that LTAs play in the professional growth of educators and the community at large. By offering practical, context-specific tools like the Maryland TESOL Handbook, LTAs provide resources as well as a framework for professional development and learning that is responsive to the needs of educators and their communities. Moving forward, it is crucial for LTAs to cultivate the grounding of abstract concepts and information that are pervasive in the field and turn them into region-specific, communal knowledge; this is where LTAs are uniquely situated to provide opportunities for innovative practices in the field.

## Note

1. The SIOP® framework is a model commonly used in some primary and secondary schools (P-12) in the United States to address MLEs' needs across all subject areas, not just EAL-designated classes.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix



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