

Narrative Abstract

The purpose of the research was to determine whether a direct relationship existed between funding models for ELL student learning resources in Western Washington and ELL student achievement in Reading as measured by the WASL. The literature review utilized information from Washington State's educational system as well as legal documents and published studies. These findings were further explored through use of an informal questionnaire sent to 25 selected Western Washington school district administrators, a Web survey sent to 130 Western Washington ELL educators, and an on-site review of ELL learning resources used in 6 elementary, middle school, and high school classrooms. Findings showed that ELL students as a group do not meet the benchmarks established by the federal government for annual yearly progress, and that distribution of funding and use of textbooks were inconsistent among districts and individual schools. This suggests that Washington's ELL reading programs may be compromised by the varied availability and use of reading learning resources. One way of securing minimal funding for ELL learning resources and introducing consistency across school districts is to require the use of stratified textbooks.

Inconsistent Funding and Use of Learning Resources in Western Washington State: A Case for Stratified Textbooks

The federal government has mandated in the No Child Left Behind Act that all public school students in the United States have equal access to the tools necessary to develop a command of the English language. In Washington State, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction faces many challenges as it strives to provide those tools to English Language Learners (ELL students). In a study undertaken to determine the funding models for learning resources in Western Washington, it was found that the quality and effectiveness of Western Washington's ELL reading programs as measured by ELL student WASL scores may be compromised by the current system of distribution of school funds and the inconsistent availability and use of reading learning resources. One possible solution to achieve some consistency in resource use and ensure at least minimal funding is to require stratified textbooks across Washington State school districts.

Programs for ELL Students

On the whole, experts agree that educating students in a non-primary language is most effectively done through bilingual programs that provide instruction in both the primary language and in the adopted language, encourage mastery of both languages, teach literacy and subject content areas in the primary language, and extend this instruction over a period of several years (Tucker, 1999; Crawford, 1998). Understanding these factors is an important step in setting policies and developing programs to meet the needs of students whose primary language is not English; and indeed, the state of Washington's Transitional Bilingual Instruction Act provides funding, guidelines, and evaluation procedures for state programs that support the effort to improve the English and subject content skills of those students whose second language is English (Transitional Bilingual Instruction Act). It is important to note, however, that "Although

the program is for ‘bilingual instruction,’ relatively few students in the program actually receive much formal instruction in their primary language. . . . Thus, the program could more accurately be called an ESL program” (Bylsma, Ireland, & Malagon, 2003, p. 4).

Washington State has implemented programs in an effort to bring its ELL students up to state standards in reading—and therefore to federal standards. Although in districts that lack sufficient ELL enrollment students are immediately immersed into the student body, ELL students in Western Washington are instructed using one of the four teaching methodologies Western Washington has established to educate its rapidly growing and highly diverse student populations: ESL Pull-Out, Two Hour Block, Self-Contained and Immersion. These methodologies are considered compensatory education.

There are many factors that affect the type of ESL program that is implemented within the different school districts in Washington State. Demographics play the largest role. For example, the state may only have one or two students who speak a certain language. Out of the 190 languages spoken by limited English students, 31 of those languages were each spoken by only one student in the state, and 20 languages were each spoken by only two students in the state (Bylsma et al., 2003, Appendix B). Other languages may have a few more students who speak them, but those students may be scattered: for instance, there are 11 Tamil-speaking students in the state, but they are spread out over 6 school districts (Appendix B). Some school districts have the benefit of large numbers of LEP students who speak the same language; most districts, however, must educate students who speak a range of languages.

The variety of languages and distribution of ELL students throughout the districts make it financially impractical to implement an effective transitional bilingual program even though

current methods are failing. Nowhere is this failure more evident than in Western Washington State's standardized testing statistics in reading for English Language Learners.

The WASL and AYP

In Washington State, reading achievement is measured by several standardized tests, notably the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (the WASL). The WASL, along with other indicators, is used to determine Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), as it pertains to meeting NCLB standards. The WASL is administered to Grades 4, 7, and 10, and measures achievement in reading as well as other subjects.

ELL students in Washington State are held to the same standards as other students and must pass the WASL. Students in their first year of limited English programs were previously exempt from taking this test, but under current federal law, all students—regardless of their level of English competency—must take the WASL. The Washington State Report Card (OSPI, n.d.c) shows that while WASL reading scores for limited English students have steadily improved, the percentage of students who pass the reading portion of the test remains low.

Fourth-grade students have maintained the highest passing rates and achieved the highest rate of improvement. The WASL “4th Grade Reading Trend” for limited English students (OSPI, n.d.c) shows that in the 1998–1999 school year, these students attained a 14.8% passing rate. This went up to 20.9% in 1999–2000 and to 24.0% in 2000–2001, followed by passing rates of 24.8%, 23.7%, and 36.6% in the following school years (section, “4th Grade Reading Trend”). Of the 36.6% of Grade 4 students who passed in 2003–2004, 32.2% were classified as meeting standard and 4.2% were classified as testing above standard (OSPI, n.d.b, section, “4th Grade WASL”).

Grade 7 students have also shown some improvement in reading, but these students have the lowest passing rates. The “7th Grade Reading Trend” (OSPI, n.d.c) indicates that in the 1998–1999 school year, Grade 7 students had a 5% passing rate. This went up only 0.4% in the 1999–2000 school year, to 5.04%, and then dropped to 3.8% in the 2000–2001 school year. The passing rate increased to 6.7% in 2001–2002 and remained there in the following year. These results jumped almost 10%, for a passing rate of 16.5% in the 2003–2004 school year (section, “7th Grade Reading Trend”). Of the 16.5% of seventh-grade students who passed in 2003–2004, 13.5% met standard and 2.8% were above standard (OSPI, n.d.b, section, “7th Grade WASL”).

The “10th Grade Reading Trend” (OSPI, n.d.c) shows that the passing rate for high school sophomores has gone up 10% in the six-year period between 1998 and 2004. The percentage of these students who passed the reading portion of the WASL in the 1998–1999 school year was 6.8. Rates moved up to 12.2% in 1999–2000 and then to 17.8% in 2001–2002. In the following years, rates went down to 13.0% and then to 11.7% before moving up to 16.8% in the 2003–2004 school year (section, “10th Grade Reading Trend”). Of the 16.8% of Grade 10 students who passed the reading portion of the WASL, 7.8% met standard and 8.6% tested above standard (OSPI, n.d.b, section, “10th Grade WASL”).

The OSPI Web site reports desegregated AYP results. In the 2002–2003 school year, limited English students in Grades 4, 7, and 10 met the participation goals in reading, but did not meet the proficiency goals (OSPI, n.d.a, section, “Adequate Yearly Progress Summary, [2002–2003]”). Overall, the State did not meet either improvement or progress goals (section, Adequate Yearly Progress Summary, [2002–2003]”).

Summary results are identical for the 2003–2004 school year: limited English students in all three grades met the participation goal but failed to meet the proficiency goal (OSPI, n.d.a, section, “Adequate Yearly Progress Summary, [2003–2004]”).

One factor that contributes to the level of achievement—or lack of achievement—experienced by ELL students, both in the classroom and on the WASL, is the quality of learning resources available to them. Reigle’s (2005) study, conducted to determine the funding model for learning resources in Western Washington, found that the availability, type, and use of learning resources was widely inconsistent among districts, schools, and teachers. The study was based on a limited collection of qualitative data that addressed the funding models used for ELL learning resources and ELL student achievement in reading, and was supported by informal questionnaires, a Web survey, and on-site observations. Participants were all from Western Washington school districts and included ELL educators and para-educators, administrators and principals, and classroom instructors and students.

Funding

Part of the variability in the availability and use of learning resources may be due to lack of funding and different means of distributing those funds that are available. Funding for Washington State public schools comes from the state, federal sources, and various local resources. The NCLB mandate is largely under-funded (“No Child Left,” 2004) and the state’s own resources have failed to keep pace with educational costs (Bach, 2005). Lack of funding for ELL learning resources is one factor that leads to lack of quality learning resources, and consequently in many districts the learning materials provided to ELL students are not adequate.

Contributing to insufficient funding is the inconsistency of the distribution of funds for learning resources. A review of public documents and the general fund balances for Western

Washington State school districts, along with results from an e-mail questionnaire and Web survey, were used to determine how monies are allocated for learning resources and the fund statuses for Educational Service Districts (ESDs). Findings indicated that the current system of distribution of school funds does not consistently support the use of quality reading learning resources, specifically textbooks, for ELL students.

State revenues are broken into various funds, one of which is the Washington State General Education Fund. These monies are invested by each county in an effort to gain more revenues through interest earnings. Funds are then distributed to individual school districts based on FTE numbers. Individual school districts are responsible for their budgets, and these funds are managed in several different ways: there is no common method of managing district funds. Responses to the e-mail survey showed that school districts in Western Washington have at least three types of management models: eight districts controlled the funding at the district level, five were site-based managed, and two were a combination of district control and site-managed.

Furthermore, there is no common method of determining how funds will be allocated for ELL student reading learning resources across the districts. Each district had different ideas as to what textbooks should be used, with the price of the book playing a key determining role.

The inconsistency of use and funding of learning resources extended to individual schools. Public documents showed that each school is responsible for allocating monies for learning resources based on its individual budget. The decision as to how to spend state-allocated money was based on many factors, most importantly the general education dollars budgeted at the district level. When asked, "Do principals of the schools have autonomy in determining how the funds allocated for their schools are spent?" about half the respondents (7 of 15 responses to the question on the e-mail questionnaire) indicated that principals played an important role in

determining fund allocation. In the other 8 instances, principals were perceived to have no say in how funds for their schools are distributed. The amount allotted to learning resources in particular appears to be a team-based decision, as indicated by all 15 respondents who answered this question.

About half of instructors indicated that they did not bear the cost of supplemental materials. Of those who did pay out of pocket for classroom materials, 61.8% were reimbursed: of the 55 respondents who answered the question that pertained to reimbursement for supplemental materials, 34 indicated they were reimbursed and 21 indicated they were not. The 34 respondents who answered affirmatively were reimbursed to different degrees and from different sources. Reimbursements came from districts, PTAs, and grants. Dollar amounts permitted ranged from \$50 to \$300. Some teachers indicated that they were allotted money for supplies or received a stipend that covered these expenses. Of those who said they bore the cost of supplemental materials, the amount of money spent per year ranged from \$50 to \$1200. The most common amounts reported ranged between \$200 and \$300.

The lack of consistency in the amount of funding that should be allocated for textbooks, and the necessary supplemental materials, and who makes these determinations serves to lower the quality of reading education in Washington State.

Type and Use of ELL Reading Resources

Web survey questions and e-mail questionnaires also inquired about the way texts and resources were chosen, their usefulness, and their availability. Findings indicated that the availability and use of learning resources was inconsistent, and therefore may not support effective, quality instruction in all schools.

Many ESL instructors in Western Washington are not required to use a textbook in their classrooms. Of 81 the respondents who answered the question, “Do you use a textbook to teach reading?” on the Web survey, results showed an almost even split between the number of instructors who use textbooks (a total of 38, or 46.9%) and the number of those who do not (43, or 53.1%). Of the instructors who did use textbooks, the majority of them reported having a sufficient number to supply one for each of their students. For those who did not, funding and suitability issues were cited.

Textbooks that are used were selected in a variety of ways. When asked, “Is this textbook required for use by all ELL instructors teaching reading in your district?” 18 of the 57 respondents to this question on the Web survey indicated that the textbook was chosen for use by the school district while 39 indicated that it was selected by other means. Textbooks were selected in several ways: by the instructors themselves (4 of 60 respondents), by a teacher committee (26 of 60), by a program chair or director (9 of 60), or yet another source (21 of 60).

The textbooks are also supplemented with an array of materials: most instructors who answered the question regarding supplemental materials (46 of the 59 respondents) reported that they used supplemental materials including handouts that they had created themselves, handouts from conferences or workshops, activities from the instructor’s manual for the textbook, software produced by the publisher of the textbook, workbooks by the publisher of the textbook, ideas or activities from teacher resource books, ideas from journals or newsletters, and articles and materials taken from the Internet.

Conclusion

The NCLB legislation specifically requires a reduction in the achievement gap between the types of students who have traditionally performed well and those who have traditionally performed poorly.

This task is assigned to the states, school districts, and schools, all of which must show annual progress, which is measured, in part, by the WASL. Adding to the complexity of this task is the increasing cultural diversity of the state. In the state of Washington, changing demographics have greatly affected the cost and availability of ELL education in various school districts. Western Washington State has set up several ESL programs in an effort to bring its English Language Learners up to state and federal standards in reading. However, because of a variety of factors, including insufficient federal funding, the inconsistency of state funding models, and varied use of learning resources, these programs have not been successful.

While statistics support the idea that it is impractical to have a transitional bilingual program in Western Washington due to the nature of its cultural diversity, the state is still required to provide a quality education—and adequate learning resources—to its ELL students. One way of making sure that at least a nominal amount of money is going toward learning resources is to require a set of stratified textbooks across Washington State school districts. This would provide some uniformity in funding requirements for ELL learning resources; moreover, it would clarify numerous funding and reimbursement issues.

More importantly, using stratified textbooks for reading across the districts would help ensure that all ELL students are on the same page at the same time. The option of using a coherent set of stratified textbooks—suitable for beginner, intermediate, and advanced ELL students—would allow teachers to guide a more individualized curriculum suited to the student's

level of experience in those classrooms that contain students with different levels of mastery and minimize disruptions in learning should students move to different districts within the state.

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