Washington State's English Language Learners Instructors:

The Need for Additional Preparation

In Washington State, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction faces many obstacles as it strives to provide to English Language Learners (ELL students) the tools necessary for academic success. Students' language backgrounds and cultural differences in conjunction with varying district demographics further complicate an already difficult task. Minority student populations are growing rapidly in Washington State. According to "Washington State Public School October Enrollment Comparisons: 1971–2001" (2002), there has been a steady increase in the number of minority students attending public schools in the thirty years since 1971.

In addition to these challenges, a study undertaken to determine the funding models for learning resources in Western Washington suggests that many ELL instructors are not optimally prepared to teach ELL populations.

One possible solution to achieving a higher quality educational experience for ELL students is to allow community leaders to independently contract on a limited basis as state certified instructors.

Second Language Learning

Learning a second language is difficult—either as an adult or a child—and it can take up to six years to learn a second language to academic proficiency (Wallace, n.d.). Research indicates that the way students learn a second language is largely dependent on their native language patterns and their level of proficiency in that language. How a student initially learns a language is also a factor: "The more technologically advanced the culture [of the first language],

the more likely children are taught through language. Children from lower socioeconomic levels, different cultures, or where technology is not a factor, usually learn through non-verbal means such as observation or practice" (section 2, para. 5).

The prior education of ELL students plays another important role in the way ELL students learn. Some students entering ELL programs already have substantial academic experience in their own languages. They have "attended school in their own country, have learned to read and write well in their first language, and are at comparable (or better) levels in such content areas as mathematics (McKeon, 1987, section 2, para. 3). Others have little or no academic preparation, either because it was unavailable to them or because social or political factors interfered with their education (McKeon, 1987).

In short, the learning process for each type of ELL student can vary based on a number of factors including the level cognitive and literacy skills in the first language, and the length of time in instruction in the new language. The needs of these different types of students make implementing a successful ELL program more complicated.

ELL Programs

On the whole, most experts agree that educating students in a non-primary language is most effectively done through bilingual programs that provide instruction in both the native 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. The state of Washington recognizes these best practices; however, because it is not practically or financially feasible for the State to implement bilingual programs for all second

language students, specifically in Western Washington, most Washington public schools rely primarily on ESL models (Blysma, Ireland, & Malagon, 2003).

District demographics play a large role in the type of ELL education available to students. The characteristics of ELL populations include how many students there are and what languages they speak, the size of each language group, and whether the group remains somewhat stable in the district:

> Some districts have large, relatively stable populations of LEP [Limited English Proficiency] students from a single language or cultural background. Others have large groups of LEP students representing several language backgrounds. Still other districts may experience a sudden increase in the number of students from a given group . . . in direct response to political or social changes in the students' countries of origin. On the other hand, some districts have very small numbers of LEP students from many different language groups. (McKeon, 1987, section 2, para 2)

Demographics are unquestionably an enormous influence on the ELL education available to students in Washington State school districts. For example, the state may only have one or two students who speak a certain language. Out of the 190 languages spoken by ELL 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 (Blysma et al., 2003, Appendix A-2). 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. Some school districts have the benefit of large numbers of ELL students who speak the same language: the Orando school district, for example, served 90 students, all of whom spoke Spanish. Most districts, however, must educate students who speak a range of languages. The

Pullman school district served 89 ELL students—about the same number of students as the Orando district—but these students spoke 14 different languages (Blysma et al., 2003, Appendix B).

Personnel resources also affect ELL programs. Districts with large, stable minority population enrollments are likely to have recruited and/or further trained qualified staff while other districts, some of which experience sudden or fluctuating ELL enrollments, have trouble finding teachers or volunteers (Rennie, 1993).

ELL Reading Instructors

One factor that contributes to the level of achievement experienced by ELL students in the classroom is the preparedness and cultural knowledge of the instructors who teach them. Reigle's (2005) study, conducted to determine the funding model for learning resources in Western Washington, found that while most ELL teachers were well qualified to teach reading, many do not have the credentials or experience to provide for the specific needs of ELL students. 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. Although the study focused specifically on Western Washington school districts, the results likely reflect the preparation and credentials of ELL instructors statewide.

Web survey questions inquired into such issues as the length of time instructors have been teaching ELL students, the level of academic degree attained by these instructors, whether or not these instructors held membership in such organizations as TESOL (Teachers of English

to Speakers of Other Languages), whether or not they were fluent in a language other than English, and if they were, whether they taught students whose native language was that of their second language.

Findings indicated that the majority of ELL instructors who responded to the Web survey had graduate degrees (61.6%) and had been teaching within the Washington State educational system for four years or more (72.7%). Moreover, of the 102 respondents who teach ELL students reading in Western Washington, 98 had current reading endorsements. ELL students' learning experiences are further encumbered by the fact that less than half of the instructors teaching Reading to ELL students hold ESL endorsements (24 of the 98 respondents who had reading endorsements) and only slightly more than half of these instructors (15 of the 107 respondents) hold language-specific endorsements. A slightly higher number (27 of 107 respondents) reported fluency in a second language; however, for those instructors who were fluent in a second language, most did not teach students who speak that second language.

Onsite review and observation further confirmed that teachers in Western Washington were not adequately prepared to teach the ELL student populations they worked with. For example, one classroom teacher spoke fluent French and possessed an endorsement in Middle School Education, Arts and Humanities; however, her student population was a mix of Cambodian, Japanese, Korean, and Russian students. Another middle school teacher, who was in charge of the school's ELL program, held an ESL endorsement but was not fluent in a second language. In both cases lesson plans were not used; rather, students were "taught to the test." When asked whether they had a specific teaching methodology that they followed, both instructors responded that they "prescribed as they went," giving students whatever they thought was needed at a particular time.

In addition to the small percentage of teachers optimally equipped for second-language teaching, teachers also appear to lack sufficient resources to deal with the issues of ELL students. Cultural and student personality differences require the teacher to possess a high degree of cultural competency (Wallace, n.d.). While the extent of cultural knowledge was not directly assessed, an overwhelming number of instructors—87 of the 93 instructors who responded to the question "Are you a member of a TESOL organization?"—do not hold membership in any local, state, regional or international TESOL organization.

Since ELL students in Washington State are held to the same standards as other students and must pass the WASL with minimal accommodations, it appears that teacher training in the EALRs would be an important element of student success; however, respondents to the Web survey questions suggested that the educational system had not required continuous professional development as it relates to the EALRs. Of the 72 respondents, 14 reported having received between 0 and 4 hours of training in the EALRs since 1998, 15 received between 5 and 12 hours, 13 received between 13 and 24 hours, 9 received between 25 and 40 hours and 21 received more than 40 hours. Training was provided by district staff, and the primary trainees were teachers and administrators. Less than 10% of instructors were trained by ELL or bilingual trainers. Further, these workshops are attended by a mix of instructors and administrators alike: there is no professional development program in place specifically for ELL or bilingual instructors in Western Washington. This lack of training has significant implications for all ELL students who must take the WASL.

Conclusion

Learning a second language can be a complex process and depends on such factors as the way students learned their native language and the nature of their previous academic preparation;

in addition, the varied demographics of the ELL population in Washington State make providing optimal resources for each student an impossibility. Students' efforts at successful language acquisition may be further hindered by the minimal preparation of their teachers.

One possible solution is to support the involvement of minority community leaders in ELL programs. Future studies might look at the feasibility of reevaluating the Teaching Certification Program to include special limited license for this group. Encouraging minority community leaders to teach ELL students English in the context of the curriculum may have a number of benefits. These leaders are usually part of the group they represent, and, consequently, are usually sensitive to their community's political, social, and educational concerns. Leaders of minority language communities would likely speak the language of their constituents and have the personal and/or political status to effect change or see gaps in the curriculum that need to be addressed. This puts them in an ideal position to advocate new attitudes toward academic achievement and encourage the positive role of parental involvement, issues an outsider would not be able to promote with the same efficacy.

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