

Teachers' Perceptions of ELL Education: Potential Solutions to Overcome the Greatest Challenges

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Since implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates, much attention has been focused on the education of the rapidly growing English language learners (ELLs) in U.S. schools. Disaggregated accountability reports for subgroups are required as a result of NCLB. Schools must report yearly progress in ELL students' growth in English proficiency, reading, and math tests, and schools must assure that all students are taught by highly qualified teachers. Rural school districts are especially challenged to provide inservice teachers with face to face professional development to meet the needs of increasing numbers of English learners (Sehlaoui, Seguin, & Kreicker, 2005).

Background

Demographics

During the academic year 2003-2004, 5.5 million students in the U. S. were limited English proficient (LEP), and 80 percent of these LEP students spoke Spanish as their first language (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Hispanics continue to be the largest and fastest-growing minority group in the U.S. (Bernstein, 2006). The critical concern for effective linguistic minority education in the rural state of Idaho corresponds closely to the nationwide challenge.

Idaho's growth in limited English proficient students from the 1990 to 2000 census was greater than 200 percent (Office of English Language Acquisition, Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for LEP Students, 2004). Over 80 percent of Idaho's English learners come from Spanish-speaking backgrounds (Idaho State Board of Education, 2005), and the percentage of youth nineteen and younger

in the Hispanic population is greater than the percentage of the same age group in the non-Hispanic population. Furthermore, the infant mortality rate of Hispanics in Idaho is slightly lower than the rate for non-Hispanics (Idaho Commission on Hispanic Affairs, 2004).

ELL Academic Achievement

Rapid growth in the ELL and Hispanic student populations demands attention among educators and teacher education programs, as the academic success rate of Hispanic students nationwide and in Idaho has consistently lagged well behind the rest of the student population (Bergman, 2005). From fall 1993 through spring 2004, Idaho's Hispanic cohort dropout rate estimates ranged between 42.61 percent and 23.19 percent. The actual number of dropouts in grades nine through twelve reported by school districts to the state department of education during this time period totaled 7,358 students (Idaho State Department of Education, 2004).

Recent school reports in the state clearly indicate that a gap exists between academic achievement rates of Idaho's Latino students and majority students. Data for the Idaho Standards Achievement Tests (ISAT) compiled by the state department of education following the 2004-2005 academic year reveal discrepancies in achievement for Idaho's largest LEP ethnic subgroup in all three areas tested by the ISAT: reading, language usage, and mathematics (Idaho State Department of Education, 2005).

Teacher Supply and Qualifications

As in the nation as a whole, Idaho educators with the requisite knowledge and skills to work effectively with linguistic minority students have been in short supply. During the 2002-03 school year 5.64 percent of the state's ESL and bilingual teachers were not fully certified,

which represented a higher percentage of non-certificated teachers than all other teaching areas (Stefanic, 2002). Reports indicate that ESL positions have consistently been among the most difficult for schools to fill between the 2002-03 and 2005-06 academic years (Howard, Stefanic, & Norton, 2006). Seventy-two percent of the school districts in the state with vacancies in ESL in 2005-06 reported the positions were hard to fill or very hard to fill (Balcom, 2006).

The majority of ELL teachers of academic content have been education assistants rather than certified teachers, and the state's consulting evaluator who issued the report in 2002 for ELL education in Idaho surmised that most of the ELL certified content teachers had received ESL strategies through workshops or inservice rather than through ongoing, sustained professional development or coursework in their pre-service certification programs (Hargett, 2002).

Purpose

Concern for the status of linguistic minority education in Idaho provided motivation to investigate the perceptions of the inservice educators who work most closely with a large proportion of ELLs in the rural state's public schools. The study sought to learn directly from the state's ELL educators what they perceived as the greatest challenges and needs for improvement of ELL education.

The investigation aimed to directly solicit solutions and priorities from participants in order to design professional development for the short term, and to rethink teacher education in a proactive mode for the long term. The major questions of the study were: (1) What are the greatest challenges impeding effective education for the state's ELLs? (2) What areas of professional development are needed to overcome these challenges?

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Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were utilized in the research project. A focus group consisting of the board of directors of the state association of ESL and bilingual educators initially brainstormed questions for a survey to investigate educators' perceptions of greatest challenges and potential solutions regarding ELL education in the state. The board members also generated multiple anticipated responses to survey questions, reflective of their experiences and opinions in their own educational contexts. Responses of "other" with space provided on the survey were added in order to assure that ideas not generated in the focus group would not be precluded. The researcher refined and formatted the survey, which was then approved by a university institutional research board.

Quantitative analysis of the survey provided a demographic description of the sample, as well as frequencies of multiple responses. Open-ended survey responses and transcriptions of focus group comments and interviews were written into a database and analyzed through a qualitative process. Recorded sentences, paragraphs, and ideas were coded to conceptualize the data and create categories of major concern and proposed solutions. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Yin, 1994). Frequencies of the coded categories were tallied to ascertain the central issues and most compelling priorities across the sample of survey respondents.

Participants

The participants for this study were purposefully selected to attain a maximum, all-inclusive sample of the rural state's educators with a primary role in ELL education. The two criteria for selection were: (1) The participants were educators working closely with a large percentage of ELLs in their schools and (2) The participants were motivated to voluntarily provide thoughtful input for improvement in ELL education.

The study sample consisted of a total of 161 participants, including 157 educators from Idaho and four from a bordering rural county in Oregon. The educators represented 26 counties. The ethnic makeup of the participants was predominantly White (57 percent) and Hispanic (40 percent).

Various educator roles were represented in the study: ESL and bilingual program directors and coordinators, ESL and bilingual education teachers, para-

professionals, and mainstream teachers who teach a large number of ELLs in their classrooms. Twenty-three participants indicated they perform more than one educational role. This paper reports selected findings on the perceptions of the disaggregated group of 102 certified teachers in the survey database.

Among the 102 certified teachers, 80 indicated English as their first language, 21 indicated Spanish as their first language, and one teacher was from a different language background. Fifty-four respondents indicated English as their second language, 22 indicated Spanish as their second language, 7 indicated a language other than English or Spanish, and 19 indicated they did not have a second language. Seventy of the 102 teachers surveyed indicated they hold endorsements in ESL and 31 do not; 39 hold bilingual education endorsements and 60 do not. Some teachers hold both endorsements.

The certified teachers work in a variety of linguistic minority education models, and some teachers split their workday, teaching in multiple models within their school or district. Seventy-nine percent of the teachers indicated they teach in ESL models (52 percent in pullout models, and 27 percent in content-based ESL). Thirty percent of the teachers indicated they teach in bilingual education programs (13 percent in transitional programs, 6 percent in developmental bilingual programs, and 11 percent in two-way bilingual programs.) Twenty-one percent of the teachers work in mainstream classrooms where the average number of ELL students range between 23 and 43 percent.

Procedure

A survey was given to 165 educators in attendance of the annual conference of the Idaho Association for Bilingual Education (IABE), whose primary mission is to provide professional development for educators of English learners during the state's designated inservice days each fall. During and after the IABE conference, the researcher also conducted focus groups and interviews.

In addition to the 106 surveys collected during the conference (a 64 percent rate of return), the survey was mailed to an additional 157 teachers in the state who had been teaching ESL or bilingual education during the previous year; 55 respondents returned the mailed surveys (a 35 percent rate of return), for a 50 percent rate of return overall. To gain an understanding

and specific illustrations of teachers' perspectives in educating ELLs, space to write "other" responses in addition to or instead of those explicitly listed as multiple choices on the questionnaire was provided. The survey also included open-ended questions, and the final question solicited "additional comments."

Survey responses were entered into an SPSS database for descriptive quantitative analysis, and respondents' open comments and quotes from interviews and focus groups were transcribed into a database, analyzed, and coded by the researcher to categorize the central issues communicated. A bilingual education colleague read the database comments and validated the codes. Frequencies of each code were then calculated to establish teacher consensus regarding the most compelling issues and to rank the priorities voiced by the educators on the whole.

Findings and Results

Greatest Challenges Affecting ELL Education

Educators' Qualifications: Teachers perceived that not all educators who work with ELLs in their schools were qualified to work with linguistic minority students. In response to the question whether all staff members in their school who serve ELLs are highly qualified for their positions, thirty-nine percent of the respondents indicated "no" and 55 percent of the respondents indicated "yes." Six percent did not respond to the question.

One of the open-ended questions on the survey asked: "What are the three greatest challenges you face in educating ELLs?" Twenty percent of the respondents indicated that the lack of colleagues' knowledge and skills in educating ELLs was one of their three greatest challenges. Many teachers indicated that their colleagues lacked an understanding of diversity or multicultural education. The following respondents' comments reflect frustration with the level of skills and support contributed by mainstream teachers and administrators:

"The problem in our school is that the mainstream teachers and administrators don't understand LEP needs and how to teach them." "We need some help here! The district's ESL program just doesn't have the staff resources, not to mention an adequate budget to do it alone. Everybody needs to own these kids." "Require all staff members to attend classes on how to work with ESL and ELL students. I have people

in my building that refer to my kids as 'them'." "We need more consistency in our district from school to school. More.....support from mainstream teachers toward ELL teacher & students. We still have a high number of staff who say things like 'They shouldn't be here,' 'Send them back to Mexico,' etc."

The LEP Migrant Programs director of the state department of education observed needs for training of mainstream teachers also, and she solicited the state professional association to assist mainstream teachers:

I would like IABE to be more proactive in helping districts develop and implement professional development for all classroom teachers. As I visit the State, I find that ESL and migrant staff are very well informed on how to work with LEP children. However, most classroom teachers have no training. How can we encourage more classroom teachers to attend the IABE conference? (personal communication, July 31, 2004)

Understaffing of ESL and Bilingual Educators

Participants in the study indicated there was an insufficient number of ESL and bilingual educators employed in their schools. The teachers reported that an average of 2.97 ESL and bilingual staff were employed in their schools, whereas an average of 4.40 were needed. Many teachers voiced their feelings about being stretched too thin. One respondent wrote: "I am the ESL provider for 6 different schools. All grades and travel between the schools. Supposedly getting the job done in 5 1/2 hours per day" [*sic*].

Extra Duties

ELL specialists' extra duties in addition to their instructional roles constrain teachers' effectiveness and create much pressure and personal stress. The responsibilities of ELL education is driving some teachers to leave the fields of ESL and bilingual education, which are already areas of teacher shortage. Bilingual educators reported that they performed many extra duties in addition to their teaching role. Eighteen percent of the respondents specified that allocated time in the workday to accomplish the workload demanded of them was one of their greatest challenges.

One teacher indicated the time factor as her single greatest challenge: "Finding time to teach the English language along with all other things that are expected of me [is my greatest challenge,] such as:

translation, lesson plans, program coordinator, conferences, phone calls..."

Additional insight was gained from the study participants through two of the survey open-ended questions: (1) "If you hold an ESL or Bilingual Ed endorsement, but are not teaching ESL or Bilingual Ed, why not?" and (2) "If you were teaching ESL or Bilingual Ed, but you left the field, why did you leave?" Candid responses echoed an overwhelming feeling of the stress involved in performing a big job solo and in tandem with many extra duties.

Referencing paperwork as an extra duty, one teacher commented, "I'll let you know next year [whether I will remain in ELL education] and my impression is I'll leave because according to my calculations, I spend three hours on paperwork to every 1 hour of my teaching and prep time." Likewise, other teachers voiced doubtful sentiments about remaining in the field as an ESL educator: "The huge amount of paperwork required by federal and state government to teach in this area—I haven't left yet, but I do intend to leave the field *soon*." Another respondent voiced similar frustration:

I may leave after this year because it is too overwhelming, too much to do and little to no support from administrators! The NCLB & ISAT are changing the rules, but no one is helping to change the program for the students.

Proposed Solutions

Professional Development Needed

The teacher respondents identified priorities for professional development. The top six ranked areas in which they expressed need for professional development were: parent involvement (30 percent); ESL curriculum development (29 percent); Spanish language class (28 percent); first and second language literacy methods (26 percent); sheltered English instruction (25 percent); ESL methods (24 percent); and how to establish a newcomer center (24 percent).

Restructuring Needed

The ELL practitioners also recommended restructuring solutions to improve ELL education. In order of priority ranking, they proposed for their school to: hire more ESL or Bilingual Education certified teachers (75 percent); create an ESL consulting teacher position (52 percent); hire more bilingual education assistants (45 percent); create a Sheltered English academy (44 percent); provide effective

professional development (41 percent); group students by the same language proficiency levels (30 percent); change the ESL curriculum (20 percent); and use a different education model (14 percent).

Discussion

In consideration of the aim to leave no English language learner behind, ESL and bilingual educators need the collaboration and assistance of mainstream teachers and administrators to help meet the many challenges inherent in educating ELLs. In order to be academically successful, the ELL subgroup that faces greater challenges in mastering academic content in a second language requires a greater number of teachers with language-teaching skills than are presently in place in their schools. Because hiring more specialized educators in areas of critical shortage poses a very difficult challenge regardless of budgetary constraints, an alternative must be devised to create a general workforce with the skills needed.

Retention of qualified ESL and bilingual endorsed educators to work with the greatest number of ELLs is critical. When the workload demands outweigh the allocated time in the workday to accomplish teaching duties and extra duties, these educators with added-on skills have the option to move over or out to seek an educational context with fewer ELLs, less paperwork, less testing, and less translating and interpreting to distract them from their central role of teaching students. Administrators should be realistic about the effectiveness of teachers who are overwhelmed with extra duties, and hire interpreters and clerical assistants so certified ESL and bilingual teachers can focus on teaching their students effectively.

Dialogue between professionals in schools and in teacher education programs is a necessary first step toward narrowing the gap between the skill set that teacher education currently imparts to pre-service teachers and the skills educators need in today's schools. As the linguistic minority population increases, teacher education must give higher priority to include coursework in diversity issues and ESL methods for all teachers. If teacher education programs fail to supply educators with the subset of critical skills needed for today's students, administrators are left with the costly and logistically difficult recourse of providing professional development to overcome the deficiency in skills needed by inservice educators to help ELLs succeed academically.

Educators no longer have the luxury of time for students to acquire English in isolated ESL programs before they are required to perform on high stakes academic assessments. Integration of language and content of the core curriculum throughout the ELL's time in school is paramount. Whereas research indicates students have typically taken five to seven years to become proficient in academic language to perform on academic tests in English (Cummins, 1981b), or seven to ten years for language learners who have had little or no instruction in their native language (Collier & Thomas, 2002), statistics of these studies must be improved upon.

All educators must rise to the challenge to decrease the number of years in school needed by ELLs to demonstrate language proficiency and academic achievement. By learning and utilizing instructional language-teaching methods and best practices, mainstream teachers can make a significant contribution to the linguistic and academic growth of English learners.

Recommendations

Some of the highly prioritized solutions for ELL education posited by participant consensus in this study may not be logistically or fiscally feasible, given the ESL and bilingual teacher shortage and schools' budgetary constraints, such as hiring more ESL or bilingual education certified teachers, hiring more bilingual education assistants, and creating an ESL consulting teacher position. These recommendations should, however, be taken into consideration by school administrators for improvement of ELL education in their school contexts.

Three of the highest professional development priorities named by practitioners in the study were ESL methods, sheltered instruction, and first and second language literacy methods. These priorities could be addressed through inservice professional development for the short term to overcome gaps in teacher preparation to serve ELLs. Inclusion of sheltered instruction concepts and strategies in an undergraduate course, or teaching the entire SIOP model (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) developed by Echevarria, Vogt, & Short (2004) could potentially address these articulated needs for the long term. Collaboration with foreign language or educational linguistics professors to design and teach a course for all pre-service teachers across the content

areas could be the critical beginning to impart an understanding of second language acquisition and strategies needed to teach ELLs effectively in schools today.

Extensive coursework in the areas identified by participants is required for individuals seeking degrees or endorsements in ESL or bilingual education in colleges having such programs. Too often teacher candidates view their program's minimum requirements as maximum requirements. Teacher educators could positively help remedy the challenges articulated in this study by advising pre-service teachers into courses that may already exist, but are not required per se in the general education core or the teacher certification process.

One prioritized need for professional development identified was Spanish class. Because language acquisition requires substantial time and commitment, a foreign language would be more appropriately acquired during the undergraduate experience than through professional development if teachers hope to gain a meaningful level of proficiency. Teacher education advisors would benefit their teacher candidates by advising them into language courses as a means of gaining a useful skill for their future teaching career, especially in areas where ELLs come predominately from one common language background.

Even if pre-service teachers could not continue language study to the level of superior fluency, they could gain an understanding and appreciation of the minority culture and a degree of empathy for language learners. Furthermore, the instructional modeling and the methods experienced as a student of foreign language study could impart an understanding of the language acquisition process and language learners' instructional needs for comprehensible instruction. The nearly 20 percent of teachers in this study who indicated they had no second language and who work with their schools' largest percentage of ELLs are certainly disadvantaged by never having learned a second language themselves.

Conclusion

This study of teachers' perceptions of ELL education in a rural state identifies their greatest challenges in linguistic minority education as well as ranked recommendations for solutions. Inservice practitioners need professional development to compensate for knowledge and skills not obtained during the teacher certification process, yet needed in today's educational

context. Practitioners voiced a need to hire more specialists, and to provide all educators a multicultural education and training in ESL methods as a means to acquire more assistance from mainstream teachers.

As demographics of English learners increase and shortages of ESL and bilingual educators continue, all educators need the requisite knowledge and skills to effectively educate linguistic minority students. Teacher education programs can proactively impact ELL challenges by modifying course offerings to include minority parent involvement, ESL methods, and sheltered instruction for all pre-service teachers. The success of ELL students cannot remain the sole responsibility of ESL and bilingual educators in the era of No Child Left Behind.

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