

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER PROGRAMS AND SERVICES:
A CASE STUDY OF NEBRASKA MIDDLE SCHOOLS

By

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER PROGRAMS AND SERVICES:

A CASE STUDY OF NEBRASKA MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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University of Nebraska, 2008

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The purpose of this multi-site case study was to examine how middle schools in the state of Nebraska delivered services to students who were identified as English Language Learners or Limited English Proficient students. This case study focused on what middle schools in Nebraska were doing to assist ELL students and how personnel had been developed to meet the needs of these students. Key school personnel were interviewed from a set of 12 purposefully selected middle schools. Schools were selected for this study if they contained grades 5 through 8, or a combination of those grades. Schools also had to contain at least 3% of ELL students in order to be selected for this study.

Five themes emerged from the interviews. These themes were: People Make the Difference; Training and Professional Development is Essential; Curriculum and Materials Vary; Thoughtful Programming for Student Needs is Critical; and, A Positive School Culture and Climate is Necessary. These themes were described in detail. The researcher found that a wide range of services existed for ELL students across the state of Nebraska. Types of services varied from school to school, and often depended on the size of the ELL population in the school. The informants also discussed training opportunities that existed for general education teachers, ELL teachers, and other support staff

members. Training of personnel emerged as an area that each of the schools that participated in this study reviewed as an area for continued growth. In general, this study found that a wide variety of ELL programs, resources, and training opportunities are being utilized in schools across the state of Nebraska to meet the emerging needs of ELL students and families.

PREVIEW

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This has been a long journey for me, and my entire family! It has definitely been a team effort. I would like to thank my mother for inspiring me to continue my education. She has been there cheering through each of my degrees, as I labor over papers and deadlines. She has read every one and has been my editor since 1987. She has taken care of my son when I needed to work on this paper. I would also like to thank my husband, Walter, for never complaining, always supporting, and for listening to my many and various complaints along the way. In short, I could not have completed this project without the support of my mother and my husband. Thank you so much! I would also like to thank my dad for contributing with financial aid when necessary, and for always being so proud of me. While working on this degree, my husband and I were fortunate to welcome our son Ethan to the world. I have, unfortunately, had to tell him many times to, “Stay away from Mommy’s paper,” or “Don’t touch Mommy’s computer.” So, I thank him for being patient with me and for, most of the time, listening! He is such a joy in our lives. So, Ethan, now you don’t have to ask, “Done with paper Mommy?”

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Nationwide, according to the data for 2003-2004, 5,013,539 English Language Learner (ELL) students were enrolled in grades pre-K through 12. This number represented approximately 10.1% of the total public school enrollment, and a 65% increase over the reported 1993 ELL enrollment. The number of ELL students had grown at an average annual rate that was five times that of the total public school enrollment (Cartiera, 2006). Among the states, California enrolled the largest number of ELL students, followed by Texas, Florida, New York, Illinois, and Arizona (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004; Perkins-Gough, 2007). Although these six states accounted for 60% of all ELL students in grades 6-12, they were not the states with the fastest growing populations. North Carolina, for example, showed a 500% growth in the number of adolescent ELL students between the years of 1993-2003 (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

In the state of Nebraska, the number of students who qualified for English Language Learner programs grew tremendously. From 1991-2002, the number of Limited English Proficient students grew 570.9%, while the total number of student enrollment during this same period declined 9.9%. In 2005 there were 17,618 students in the state of Nebraska who were identified as English Language Learners. The majority of students in those programs, 76%, spoke Spanish (Nebraska State Department of Education, 2005).

Academically, these students were in crisis. In 2005, only 4% of 8th grade ELL students scored proficient or advanced on the reading portion of the National Assessment for Educational Progress. This translated to 96% of 8th grade ELL students who scored below the basic level. These young students continued to experience failure throughout their secondary years, and the result was a high school drop-out rate of 31% for ELL students (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

Schools were struggling with the question of how best to deliver services to this growing population of students. Administrators and teachers across the country were attempting to deal with the fact that 1.3 million teachers had at least one ELL student enrolled in their classes (Meltzer & Hamann, 2006; NCTE, 2006). It was estimated that an additional 2.2 ELL teachers would be needed within the decade. Additionally, according to new standards from the No Child Left Behind legislation, these teachers had to be “highly qualified” (Cartiera, 2006; Echevarria, 2006). Teachers and schools needed to be trained in order to work effectively with ELLs. Indeed, one survey found that less than 13% of teachers in the United States had received professional development to prepare them for teaching linguistically and culturally diverse student populations (Antunez, 2002; Decapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2007).

In the state of Nebraska, there existed no comprehensive information about how the English Language Learners in our state were being served. At the time of this study, I was a principal at a middle school in Southeast Nebraska. This middle school began to see an increase in the number of ELL students that were enrolling. In an effort to meet the needs of the students and the teachers, this author began to research ELL programs and

curriculum across the state. This author also met with a state department representative about this study and was told that there was a definite need to study how the needs of ELL students were being met in middle schools across the state. Specifically, there was a need to clarify exactly what ELL students were learning, how they were learning the material, and who was teaching them the curriculum. These questions were the focus of this study.

Purpose of the Study

As described previously, the growing number of students in the United States who did not speak English brought the issue of educating ELL students to the forefront of educational discussions across the states. The requirements of No Child Left Behind, which made schools accountable for students in various cohorts, accelerated these discussions. Most of the students who entered the schools unable to speak English were eager and excited to learn. However, the sad fact was that by the time they reached the secondary level, they had experienced a pattern of failure and lagged significantly behind their native English speaking peers on state and national assessments. These failures were due, in part, to a lack of instructional opportunities (Cartiera, 2006; Echevarria, 2006; Olsen, 2006).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how middle schools in the state of Nebraska delivered services to students who were identified as English Language Learners or Limited English Proficient students. This case study focused on what middle schools in Nebraska were doing to assist ELL students, and how personnel had been developed to meet the needs of these students.

I interviewed key school personnel of selected middle schools across the state in order to determine the answers to the questions outlined below. These interviews were then examined for key concepts that were consistent from one school to the next. I attempted to discover a pattern to the responses. These patterns were analyzed for their significance in answering the research questions. The conclusions in this case study provide a guide for other schools as they struggle with meeting the needs of all learners.

Research Questions

This study addressed the question: “How did Nebraska middle schools serve English Language Learners?” More specific questions included the following: What curriculum was being used to serve ELL students? What instructional practices were being utilized in ELL classrooms? How were teachers being prepared and trained to work with ELL students? These questions were addressed in interviews with key personnel in selected middle schools across the state.

Methodology

The qualitative, multiple case study was utilized in this research. This type of study allowed for a close examination of how schools were meeting the diverse needs of ELL students. I selected a group of middle schools from across the state of Nebraska. Middle schools were defined as schools that contained grades 5, 6, 7, 8, or a combination thereof, as indicated on the Nebraska State Department website in 2005-2006. Middle schools were selected for the focus of this study as research indicated that as ELL students reached the secondary level, they lagged significantly behind their English-speaking peers (Decapua et al., 2007; Echevarria, 2006; Olsen, 2006). Middle schools

were also selected if, as identified by the state of Nebraska on the State Report Card, they contained more than 3% of English Language Learners among their student enrollment. There were 27 schools that met this criteria in the state of Nebraska. Schools from suburban, rural, and urban areas were selected for this study. I conducted multiple interviews to gain a complete and thorough understanding of how schools were delivering services to ELL students.

Definition of Terms

Bi-Lingual Programs—“Programs that use the students’ native language, in addition to English, for instruction. Students are grouped according to their home language, and the teachers are proficient in both English and the students’ language” (Parrish, Linqanti & Merickel, 2002, p. 37).

Dual Language Programs—“An enrichment bi-lingual multicultural education program in which language equity is structurally defined as equal time exposure to two languages, that is the 50/50 model” (Torres-Guzman, 2002, p. 1).

Case Study—A study in which the researcher explores a case and collects information by using a variety of techniques, over a period of time (Creswell, 1994).

English Language Learners (ELL)—Students whose level of fluency in reading, writing, understanding, or speaking the English language could limit their academic achievement in a regular education classroom. The term Limited English Proficient is the federal and state terminology (Nebraska State Department of Education, 2004).

English as a Second Language Programs (ESL)—A program that may be used with students with different native languages in the same class. ESL teachers are trained

in principles of language acquisition and in language methods, but are not fluent in the home languages of their students (Parrish et al., 2002).

Limited English Proficient (LEP)—Students who have a first language other than English and have difficulty speaking, listening, and writing, which does not allow them to function in the content classroom and meet state content standards (Nebraska State Department of Education, 2004).

Office of Civil Rights (OCR)—“A government agency that provides technical assistance and monitors compliance with all Federal civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination in programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Education” (Nebraska State Department of Education, 2004, p. 79).

Sheltered English Immersion Programs (SIOP)—An approach to teaching in which teachers use a variety of strategies to provide English language support while students learn content subjects. These types of program are used for classes of students from various native language backgrounds (Echevarria et al., 2004; Parrish et al., 2002).

“School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System” (STARS)—The Nebraska Assessment system that used locally designed assessments, national assessments, and a statewide writing test to determine the performance of students in academic content areas (Nebraska State Department of Education, 2004).

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)—The language needed to understand the material in a content area classroom. It often takes students 5-7 years to acquire CALP (Nebraska State Department of Education, 2004).

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)—The language used for conversation by students. Students can become fluent in BICS in 2-3 years (Nebraska State Department of Education, 2004).

Assumptions

The following assumptions existed in this study:

1. Middle schools in the state of Nebraska had programs for English Language Learners.
2. School personnel would share their experiences/knowledge with the researcher.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study was delimited to a purposeful selection of 12 middle schools with ELL programs in the state of Nebraska. The sample did not represent all middle schools in the state of Nebraska. It was also restricted by the fact that some of the schools selected had programs that were larger and more developed than others.

Significance of the Study

The results of this study will be significant to administrators across the state as it will provide them with examples of ELL programs. The results can assist administrators in developing their own ELL programs and may guide them through problems or concerns related to their programs. The results demonstrate to administrators that others have gone through the process and have experienced changes and difficulties along the way. The results may also be useful to state department officials as they assist schools across the state in planning for English Language Learners.

The results of this study will also be significant to educators across the state. They will demonstrate the different programs that exist to serve ELL students and how these programs are being utilized in the classrooms. Teachers will be able to review this material in order to adapt what they do in the classroom to better serve ELL students.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, individuals at the state department have talked to me about the importance of the information that this study will provide to ELL educators, administrators, and classroom teachers. The information in this study can be utilized to assist schools that are beginning to have a need for ELL services, as well as those schools who are already working with ELL students. The results of this study will be able to give educators specific information about training staff members to work with ELL students and about how new ELL teachers are being prepared. All of this information will be useful to administrators, teachers, and other staff who want to meet the needs of our ELL learners.

This study could also act as an example to other states who are also looking for ideas and suggestions about meeting the needs of their growing numbers of ELL students. In short, the information provided in this study will be useful to both many scholars and practitioners as they search to meet the needs of all students.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Each year, the United States becomes increasingly diverse both ethnically and linguistically. From the 1991-1992 school year through 2001-2002, the number of ELL students in schools across America grew 95%, while the total school enrollment grew by only 12%. In 2001-2002 more than 4.7 million students were identified as Limited English Proficient. This number was almost 10% of the total K-12 school population (Echevarria, 2006; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). This growing diversity reflected the increasing numbers of immigrant children in the United States. As of 2004, one in five children under the age of eight was the child of an immigrant. This number tripled between the years 1994 and 2004 (Lachat, 2004). While several states contained the majority of ELL students in 2007, California being the largest, the number of ELL students continued to show growth in nearly every state. States that were not traditional “gateway” states showed increasingly high numbers, particularly those states in the South and the Midwest. Due to limited resources and the inexperience of staff members in working with students with diverse needs, smaller school districts in these states were particularly affected by the increases and the changing enrollment patterns of ELL students (Echevarria, 2006; Lachat, 2004; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

Given the increase in the number of students who needed ELL services each year, the need for programs, training, and staff was clear. How did schools and school districts address this need? What were the legal requirements involved in meeting these students’

needs? What were the current programs and services being utilized to meet the diverse needs of ELL students? How were regular education teachers and ELL teachers being trained to meet these needs? This literature review addresses these questions.

Legal Background and History

There are three major groups of people in the United States who have been involved with and affected by English Language instruction: Native Americans, African Americans, and Latinos or Hispanic Americans. However, since the beginning of this nation, other languages have been recognized. In the 19th century, non-English or dual language instruction was offered in a dozen different states in various languages, including Italian, Czech, Danish, and Norwegian to name a few. German concentrations in the Midwest resulted in large dual-language programs that flourished until the onset of the First World War (Santa-Ana, 2004).

The Native Americans first began to be “instructed” in the English Language in the 1800’s. The federal government considered off-reservation schooling to be the best and most appropriate way to educate young Native Americans in the white man’s worldview. Students were separated from their parents and encouraged to adopt the white perspective. Many were taught using an English only approach (Santa-Ana, 2004). However, where locally controlled educational systems were allowed, students were often educated in both languages. The Cherokee nation established a system of 21 schools with 1100 students enrolled. This system produced a literacy rate that rivaled their Caucasian peers (Santa-Ana, 2004).

The second major group of individuals affected by English Language instruction was African Americans. Teaching slaves to read was forbidden. Southern states were more restrictive and African Americans received little education until the 1900's. The Northern states allowed more freedoms. Massachusetts prohibited segregation as early as 1855. However, it took numerous court cases before schools in the South opened their doors to educating all students (Santa-Ana, 2004). Finally, in 1954, the monumental *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling declared that segregating black students violated their constitutional rights to equal protection of the law (Feinberg, 2002).

The third and largest group of language minority individuals was Latinos. In 1848 the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed into law. This treaty was designed to protect the civil rights of Mexicans in the Southwest. It also served as a means to end the Mexican American war. The treaty offered all Mexican citizens who had been living in Northern Mexico all of the rights accorded to American Citizens. However, the U.S. Congress weakened the treaty and effectively denied Mexican Americans these rights (Santa-Ana, 2004). In 1931, *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School district* was the first successful desegregation case won by Mexican Americans. The *Delgado et al. v. Bastrop Independent School District* decision by the Supreme Court ruled that segregation of Mexican American students is discriminatory and illegal as it violates their Fourteenth Amendment rights (Feinberg, 2002).

Legal Background

The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) within the U.S. Department of Education has the responsibility of enforcing Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This act prohibits

discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in programs and activities that receive financial assistance from the federal government. Therefore, school districts that receive funding from the government may not discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin in any of the following areas: services, financial aid or benefits, enjoyment of a privilege that is enjoyed by others, or deny an individual the right to participate in federally assisted programs. These protections have been interpreted to apply towards students with limited English skills (Commission on Civil Rights, 1997; OCR, 2000).

In the late 1960's the OCR became aware that many school districts were making little or no provisions for students with limited English proficiency. The OCR issued a memorandum titled the Identification of Discrimination and Denial of Services on the Basis of National Origin. This memo clarified the requirements of school districts for students with English language limitations. The memo stated that school districts must take affirmative steps to rectify any language deficiencies in order to allow equal participation in the educational program. It did not describe to districts how to make this happen. However, it did explain that title VI was violated if the following occurred: students are excluded from participation in school activities or programs because they do not speak English, students are assigned to special education classes because of their inability to speak English, programs for ELL students are insufficient or result in a permanent placement, and/or parents of ELL students do not receive school information in their native language (OCR, 2000).