

ELL INSTRUCTIONAL CONCERNS OF A LOW INCIDENCE SCHOOL
DISTRICT:

A CASE STUDY

by

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The emerging presence of English language learners (ELLs) in low incidence school districts is a recent phenomenon calling for a renewed attention to how these districts address the instructional needs of ELLs within the stringent requirements of the law. Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, all public schools are required to give an account of the presence and progress of ELLs (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2002). In addition, changing demographics are impacting districts where low enrollment of ELLs equates with minimal resources and services. Of the research done on what school districts are doing to address the instructional needs of ELLs, very little has focused on what is being done in low incidence school districts. This research studies the case of a low incidence school district addressing the instructional concerns of providing English language learners with equitable access to curriculum.

Background of Study

The case in this study is a low incidence school district where the English language learner enrollment is less than one percent of its total student population. Located in the fastest growing county in the state, it also resides in a state that has experienced a triple digit growth in the number of elementary-aged ELLs in a ten-year span

(Flynn & Hill, 2005). Identifying live births and increasing housing development as the main contributors to growth, this district projects a continuing increase of its student enrollment. The impact of these statistics is felt most acutely in the classroom, where limited funding and staffing translates into the average teacher being unfamiliar and inexperienced in teaching ELLs. Since the inception of the district's ESL program, several major shifts have occurred, calling for a more in-depth look at how the district can best allocate their limited resources to provide instruction that addresses both academic and language objectives for English language learners.

Nine years ago, when the first family of English language learners enrolled in this school district, the district hired its first English as a second language (ESL) teacher. The teacher was licensed as a classroom teacher and was in the process of obtaining an ESL endorsement through the state. Her job as the district's ESL teacher was to support the ELLs in the classroom by providing instructional support in English. The ESL teacher implemented a program that provided ELLs with tutorial instruction in speaking, reading, and writing skills. In the elementary school, students were pulled out from the mainstream classroom for support, while in the middle and high schools, school tutors were called upon to support ELLs in the mainstream content classes.

At the beginning of the 2006 school year with the resignation of its current ESL teacher, the district administrators foresaw the need to develop an ESL program that would provide instruction to ELLs in a coordinated, district-wide framework. ELL enrollment had steadily increased to include all three of the district's school buildings. Since that time, several major shifts have occurred affecting how ELLs are

instructed in the classroom. The first shift happened with the arrival of a Vietnamese 6th grader who had neither oral nor academic English skills. This presented a new challenge to teachers who were accustomed to instructing ELLs who demonstrated limited English proficiency. Within the first month of school, it was decided that the ELL would receive daily assistance from the school tutor, be pulled out of reading to meet with the ELL coordinator, and be the district's first ELL to receive a 'No Grade' in the other content subjects which was to be assessed on a quarterly basis.

The next shift occurred when a ninth grade ELL with limited English skills required language acquisition instruction that only the ESL coordinator was qualified to provide. Though this plan was only needed for one semester, it raised the concern of future scenarios that would require ESL-endorsed content teachers in the high school.

The most recent shift occurred at the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year with the presence of ELLs in the middle and high schools requiring significant instructional and assessment accommodations. These students represented a language minority that was new to both the schools and the surrounding community. Many of the students' teachers were unfamiliar and inexperienced with making the necessary content and language accommodations to instruct these ELLs effectively. As a result, the first quarter of the school year presented a high learning curve for both the students and their teachers.

Accommodations for the high school ELL included changes to his schedule at mid-quarter and mid-year, granting him credit for courses taken in his previous school, requiring him to meet with the school tutor during his daily study halls, and bi-weekly instruction times with the ESL coordinator in oral English. Although this student was

promoted to the next grade at the end of the school year, the implementation of accommodations addressing the language needs of ELLs was not readily apparent in all of the content teacher's instruction and lessons.

The need appeared greatest at the middle school, requiring the ESL coordinator to meet with the school principal and content teachers to discuss scheduling and class changes for one of its two ELLs. In addition, a 'No Grade' policy was put in effect for three of the four quarters in Reading, daily assistance from the school tutor was provided in the content classes, and significant instructional and assessment modifications were made including one quarter of language arts being taught by the ELL coordinator. Several conferences with the student's parents revealed that this student had experienced interrupted schooling prior to arriving in the United States, and entered formal schooling a year later than his U. S. classmates. Before the end of the school year, the principal recommended retaining this student due to his failing grades in several content classes. This was communicated to the student's parents, who agreed that this was in the best interest of their son.

Background of the Researcher

Four years ago, I was hired as the district's English's language coordinator. My responsibilities included coordinating a district-wide ESL program that focused primarily on providing English instruction for ELLs. Over the years, the steady increase of ELL families in the district's community along with the overall growth of the district's student population has impacted my role as the district's only ESL-qualified teacher. Besides instructing ELLs in grades k-12, I have also functioned as the district's liaison with the

ELL families in the community and other community organizations. In the past year, my responsibilities broadened to include collaborating with and providing resources for teachers in making instructional and assessment accommodations for ELLs.

The learning curve for both myself and the district has increased significantly with the arrival of ELLs knowing very little English, and the mainstream of teachers having little to no experience in working with ELLs. In addition, the conversations and visits I've had with neighboring school districts struggling with the same reality reinforced my thinking that researching this topic would be of great value and benefit to both my school district and other low incidence districts.

Research Question

This capstone examines the case of a low incidence school district in their instruction of ELLs, in order to find out what instructional concerns should be addressed in providing ELLs with equitable access to curriculum. The question I will seek to answer is, What are the instructional concerns that a low incidence school district needs to consider in providing English language learners with equitable access to curriculum? To accomplish this, I begin with an analysis of the district's demographics, staff, ELLs, and current ESL program by interviewing teachers and administrators. The interviews' purpose was to discover the staff's identification of the district's instructional concerns in the following areas: providing a positive learning environment, ELL parent involvement, curriculum, and assessment for ELLs. The data collected from these interviews is used to make recommendations for low incidence school districts intent on providing ELLs with equitable access to the curriculum.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter Two of this paper includes a review of literature done on low incidence school districts and the major challenges they face in providing equitable instruction for ELLs. Chapter Three discusses the case study research design, the interview investigation as the method of inquiry, and the data, site and participants of the research. In Chapters Four and Five, I present the results of the study, discuss its implications, and make recommendations to guide low incidence school districts in providing effective programming for ELLs.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter begins with a brief overview of what state and federal legislation requires of school districts concerning the education of English language learners (ELLs). Next is a review of the data that defines low incidence districts according to demographics, staffing, and programming characteristics. I will also discuss the unique challenges commonly faced by these districts, with a look at how two low incidence districts responded proactively to the challenges of instructing their ELLs. The chapter concludes with a review of research-based principles for providing ELLs with equitable access to curriculum.

The recognition that English language learners (ELLs) have become a critical mass in our nation's public schools is calling districts and states to give serious consideration to how they provide ELLs with equitable access to curriculum. Of the research done, much of the focus has been on how high incidence schools and districts are responding to this challenge. This capstone looks at how this phenomenon is affecting low incidence schools districts, with the goal of answering the question, What are the instructional concerns that a low incidence school district needs to consider in providing ELLs with equitable access to curriculum?

Legislation

Titles I and III of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 holds states and local school districts accountable for the presence and academic progress of their English language learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Under Title I, ELLs are a designated subgroup to be considered in states setting standards, assessment, annual yearly progress (AYP), and other accountability requirements. Title III provides funding to state education agencies and schools requiring the use of research-based language curricula that aims at increasing the English proficiency and academic content knowledge of their ELLs. Funds may be used for staff training and professional development, remedial tutoring, technology acquisition, parent involvement, and support for teacher aides trained to provide services to ELLs (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2002). Schools and districts receiving Title III funding are held accountable for reporting ELL progress and accountability to parents, the state, and the federal government. In addition, state agencies must outline how they will define the ELL subgroup, and explain a plan for assessing increased proficiency in the four language domains of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

Although all states must adhere to the definition of a LEP (Limited English Proficient) as stated in the NCLB Act, they are given considerable flexibility when it comes to the designation of ELL services and programming. In the state of South Dakota, the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State (ACCESS) is used as the annual state assessment of ELLs. Currently, the state requires a cumulative score of 4.8 or higher, and a minimum of 4.0 in the reading and writing domains for an

ELL to be considered proficient and no longer requiring ESL services (South Dakota Department of Education, 2009). The state also requires its teachers of English language learners to have an ESL endorsement that may be obtained through two of its state's colleges. Teachers have the opportunity to get reimbursed for the undergraduate credits required for this endorsement (South Dakota Department of Education, 2009).

Low Incidence School Districts

Low incidence school districts share the following demographic characteristics: low ELL enrollment and a rural or suburban location. The number of ELLs in low incidence districts account for less than 25 percent of its total student population (Consentino de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005). Most defining of these schools and districts is the statistical growth that has been occurring in the recent decade. Consider the data -

1. Over one-half of ELL students in public schools nation-wide are in schools with less than one percent of their students designated ELL (NCES, 2004).
2. Low incidence schools account for 47 percent of all elementary schools.
3. In the central region of the United States, low incidence school districts have seen double and triple digit growth in the elementary schools (Flynn et al., 2005).

In a study done by the Urban Institute (Consentino de Cohen et al., 2005), the following are cited as administrator, staffing, and programming characteristics.

1. The lack of remedial and special programs, as well as program models for structured language instruction.
2. The absence of academic support programs and foreign language

immersion programs that are present in high incidence schools.

3. The use of native language instruction to maintain a student's language or teach them in the content areas.
4. Principals and staff are less racially diverse than those in high incidence schools.
5. Teachers are less likely to hold ESL, bilingual certification than those in high incidence schools.
6. The absence of standardized means for identification of ELLs.

Researchers conclude that the lack of instructional services for ELLs and teacher training in low incidence schools to be serious concerns that need to be addressed if ELLs are to succeed in the classroom.

The Challenges

Bernard Berube, a forerunner in ESL instruction in rural school districts, says the challenges small districts face include the lack of qualified, experienced ESL teachers, the lack of formal policy for effectively accommodating ELLs, the low likelihood of incorporating pedagogical approaches that are reflective of diversity, and the lack of nationally well-known ESL program models transferrable to help measure accountability (Berube, 2002). In his book, *Three Rs for ESL Instruction in U.S. Rural Schools: a Test of Commitment*, Berube speaks of non-negotiable principles that are often absent in districts where ELL enrollment is low. Referring to these principles as the three R's, he calls school districts to a:

- 1) **recognition** of the existence of English language learners;

- 2) **responsibility** on the part of all school staff to meet ELL learning needs; and
- 3) **respect** for each language learner as shown by respect for the ESL profession when programs are held to the highest standards (Berube, 2002).

School districts that embrace these principles not only provide ELLs with access to equitable curriculum, but calls on staff to collaboratively embrace change; even when it's not easy. This was the case for two school districts that responded to the challenge of providing for their English language learners.

Case #1 – ‘Hansen’s Story (Edstam, Walker, Stone, 2007)

Located in a small community in the rural mid-west, Hansen elementary experienced the rural realities of geographical isolation, professional isolation, and limited funding. The lack of collegial support with no local access to mentorship by qualified staff, the need to rely on tutors for student support and instruction rather than licensed and experienced teachers, and the lack of staff development addressing ELL-related concerns were just some of the challenges that provoked six staff members to participate in a professional development program at a nearby state university. Their goal was to create a school action plan to address the needs of their ELLs.

Hansen’s proactive approach to addressing the needs of their ELLs required changes that affected administrators, teachers, and students. Having a low incidence of ELLs made administrative and teacher buy in difficult at first. The principal’s main reason to participate was because of his concern over the rapid demographic increase of the ELL population. Mainstream teachers were looking to the ESL teachers to remove ELLs from the classroom “until they speak English fluently” (p. 6). Veteran teachers were especially

resistant to any change that would require them to change their instructional paradigm. Hansen's ESL teachers were understaffed and minimally qualified, causing them to rely on paraprofessionals to fill in the gap. Necessary scheduling changes affected both students and teachers in lessened content instruction for students, and minimal collaborative communication between ESL and mainstream teachers.

The school action plan developed by Hansen's six-member staff occurred over a two-year period. The plan established four goals within a collaborative model of classroom instruction.

1. Goal 1: Increase collaborative efforts between mainstream teachers and ESL teachers.
2. Goal 2: Develop and improve procedures for ESL programming.
3. Goal 3: Increase parent involvement for ELL students.
4. Goal 4: Provide staff development that addressed ESL issues.

As a result of their proactive response to the challenges of instructing ELLs in a low incidence setting, the Hansen team heightened the visibility of ELL concerns at a district- and community-wide level, and established a district ESL program guidebook to include forms, procedures, and service model that is available to staff as well as parents.

Case #2 – Rural Virginia (Wrigley, 2000)

This district's story began with the can-do attitude of the non-ESL-certified teacher who was commissioned to provide instructional services for ELLs who were spread out among different schools. Her proactive approach to helping the district establish a formal ESL program involved the following steps:

1. Contacting the state ESL person for information.
2. Studying the Office for Civil Rights guidelines and requirements.
3. Presenting to the school board the district's need to hire qualified ESL staff to comply with federal legislation.
4. Instituting a home language survey for district-wide use.
5. Researching a test to be used for assessing English proficiency.
6. Beginning a hiring process to hire qualified ESL staff.
7. Assigning the most qualified ESL teacher to be the district's lead teacher.
8. Tasking and compensating the lead ESL teacher to write an ESL plan for the district.
9. Sponsoring and encouraging professional development for mainstream teachers in instructional and assessment strategies to be used for their instruction of ELLs.

The precedence set by this teacher and the district that supported her efforts has been a model for surrounding districts of providing ELLs with quality education, even when it called for a commitment to change.

Hansen's and rural Virginia's stories showcase what collaboration between district administrators and staff can do in building school environments that encourages and supports the instruction of English language learners. Their programs model a commitment to change and the necessity of building a framework that are necessary if low incidence districts are to succeed in providing ELLs with equitable access to curriculum.

The following is a summary of research-based principles that are crucial in

understanding in order to develop a framework that ensures effective programming for ELLs (MC3: Mid-Continent Comprehensive Center). They call schools and districts to a commitment that is both intentional and collaborative.

Principle #1 – School leaders, administrators, and educators recognize that educating ELLs is the responsibility of the entire school staff. The role of administrators is key in the effective development of any school-based program. As Berube (2000) states, responsible administrators hire qualified ESL staff, have knowledge of the legal requirements relating to ELL instruction, and are advocates of ESL staff and ELL parents. Providing staff with data-driven professional development, and working together to institute schedules which fosters professional learning communities are characteristic of strong leadership that promises successful programs.

Principle #2 - Educators recognize the heterogeneity of the student population that is collectively labeled "ELL" and are able to vary their responses to the needs of different learners. This is especially challenging in low incidence districts where the ‘minority’ status of ELLs equates to a low awareness in the minds of staff of the distinct differences that do exist among the school’s ELL population. Differences of language history, prior schooling, and age of arrival are what research findings show to influence the rate at which an ELL learns English (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008).

Attending to processes and consequences of assessments of ELLs is another area that districts committed to embracing the many faces of their ELLs need to consider.

Principle #3 - The school climate and general practice reinforce the principle that students' languages and cultures are resources for learning. How do schools and teachers

of ELLs integrate a student's first language and literacy to help students make connections between their prior and new knowledge? The Hansen school team began at the staff level by having a mini in-service at each faculty meeting to help staff develop an awareness of ELL needs. The following year, staff binders filled with ESL related articles on instruction, assessment, parent involvement, and culture were created for teachers to access information. At the all-school community level, ESL oriented information was added to their school bulletin.

Principle #4 – ELLs have equitable access to all school resources and programs. Do ELLs have equal access to technology and special instructional programs to further their language learning? Are the teaching strategies and instructional practices developmentally appropriate, accommodated to students' language proficiencies and cognitive levels, as well as culturally supportive and relevant? Is the opportunity to participate in school-based activities and extracurricular programs made available to ELLs?

Principle #5 – Teachers have high expectations for ELLs. The need to adapt curriculum due to match language proficiency should not be an excuse for not providing ELLs with challenging curriculum. Research shows that ELLs will perform at a higher level if placed according to academic achievement rather than language proficiency (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008). Challenging curricular content should involve authentic and relevant reading and writing experiences, prompting students to integrate prior knowledge and learning.

Principle #6 – Teachers are properly prepared and willing to teach ELLs. Teachers

who take the initiative to know about a student's history and culture help to create a learning environment that is beneficial to all learners. Studies show a growing consensus that teachers of ELLs be equipped to (1) make content comprehensible; (2) integrate language with content instruction; (3) respect and incorporate first languages; (4) recognize how culture and language connects to classroom participation; and (5) understand the needs of students with varying levels of formal schooling (Flynn & Hill, 2005). Districts that sponsor professional development to equip teachers with research-based instructional strategies understand the principle of sowing and reaping. An example of this is the New Teacher Center (NTC) at the University of California, Santa Cruz, that was established for the purpose of training administrators and teachers using research-based instructional methods (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). With a focus on mentoring, the program pairs teachers with mentor teachers according to grade-level or subject-area expertise. This program has since been adopted by almost 200 school districts in more than 30 states.

Principle #7 - Language and literacy are infused throughout the educational process, including curriculum and instruction. Understanding this principle means that teachers *explicitly* teach and model academic skills and a variety of strategies. It also means that ELLs are provided with comprehensible texts and comprehensible language, providing them with opportunities to engage in a meaningful context.

Principle #8 - Assessment is authentic, credible to learners and instructors, and takes into account first- and second-language literacy development. Utilizing multiple forms of assessment is important to measure an ELL's academic achievement as well as their

effort, engagement, and attitude in the classroom. Frequent and formative assessments provide results that are also helpful to refine teaching strategies.

To effectively implement these principles, a framework aimed at accessing school resources for the delivery of services is required. Hill and Flynn (2004) have prepared a resource guide that clearly articulates for low incidence districts how to build a comprehensive program that meets the academic and language needs of ELLs. Drawing upon relevant literature and discussions with other professionals in the field, the guide identifies building leadership capacity, instructional support, and parent involvement as essential components in building a framework that delivers appropriate instruction for ELLs. Like the previously reviewed literature, this guide affirms that addressing the instructional needs of ELLs requires a collaborative effort on the part of all school staff to ensure benefit for all learners.

Conclusion

The research affirms that the recent and increasing growth of English language learners in low incidence school districts is calling districts to give serious consideration to how they provide English language learners with equitable access to curriculum. A collaborative commitment between district administrators and staff is necessary to discern effective implementation of resources that comply with state and federal requirements. Schools and districts that model effectual programming for ELLs understand the necessity of change and process. Their ESL programs reflect research-based principles that are built within a framework that call teachers to rethink

instructional and assessment practices if ELLs are to be provided with equal access to curriculum.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how data were collected to answer the research question, What are the instructional concerns that a low incidence school district needs to consider in providing ELLs with equitable access to curriculum? I will also provide a description of the case study site and participants.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Introduction

This chapter provides a description and rationale for the methodologies used to answer the research question, What are the instructional concerns that a low incidence school district needs to consider in providing English language learners (ELLs) with equitable access to curriculum? Research design, methods of inquiry, data, and the data's link to previous literature are discussed in this chapter. The research site and participants will also be described.

Research Design

The method I have chosen for this research is a qualitative case study. Qualitative research makes five basic assumptions (Merriam, 1998) that form the basis of my study. First, the qualitative researcher is interested in understanding the participants' perspective of the situation being studied. Second, the researcher is the researcher-participant, being the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. A third assumption is this type of research involves fieldwork, necessitating the physical presence of the researcher. Fourth, the researcher builds towards theory from observations and intuitive understandings of the situation by employing inductive research strategies. The final assumption made in qualitative research is that words and pictures rather than numbers

are used to convey the outcome or product of the study. As a type of qualitative research, the case study is designed to gain in-depth understanding of a situation and meaning for those involved (Merriam, 1998). It is widely used in the field of education because being anchored in real-life situations, the insights gained can directly influence policy, practice, and future research, which is the aim of my research. Case studies are also well-suited to small-scale investigations and can provide more specific and comprehensive information about individual learners within a particular setting, such as a specific school district. They focus on a bounded system, usually under natural conditions, so that the system can be understood in its own environment (Stake, 1988).

I chose a case study approach for my research because I believe that being the researcher-participant and eliciting the participation of administrators and teachers would provide the most relevant and insightful data in answering the research question. The value in a case study approach to research is that the learning gained is a shared experience benefitting all involved.

Research Methods

Interview Investigation

The primary method of inquiry for this capstone is the qualitative research interview. Kvale (1996) characterizes qualitative research interviewing as including the following.

1. Life World – Topic is the everyday lived world of the interviewee.
2. Meaning – Interviewer seeks to interpret meaning of central themes, and interprets the meaning of what is said and how it is said.

3. Qualitative – qualitative knowledge expressed in normal language, does not aim at quantification.
4. Descriptive – aims to obtain open nuanced descriptions of different aspects of subjects' life world.
5. Specificity - specific situations and action sequences are elicited, not general opinions.
6. Focused on themes.
7. Change – process may produce new insights & awareness.
8. Interpersonal situation – knowledge is obtained thru interpersonal interaction.
9. Positive experiences for interviewee or case.

The main task in the interview investigation as cited by Kvale (1996) is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say, thereby deriving what the issues or concerns are in the particular area of study.

Effective qualitative interviewing requires advance preparation and interviewer competence. Kvale (1996) identifies the stages in an interview investigation that helps the interviewer to achieve this. In the next section, I will discuss how these stages guided me in the data collection process.

Focus Groups

In the teacher interviews, participants interacted with peers in focus groups. Group selection, composition, and group size were intentional. Participants were selected based upon their current or previous experience in working with the district's English language learners. Groups were formed according to school buildings and grade-levels with

numbers that were small enough to insure everyone the opportunity to participate, and large enough to provide for a diversity of opinions. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to respond to questions by asking questions, commenting, and interacting with one another.

Designed to elicit participant perceptions in a non-threatening environment, this method of data collection has the following advantages: low cost, quick results, high face validity, and it allows the researcher-participant to probe and explore unanticipated issues. Several disadvantages include varying group size, difficulty in assembling groups, and less experimental control.

Research Data

The purpose of the data collected in this study was to investigate a low incidence district's response to addressing the instructional needs of its English language learners. I interviewed administration and staff who were currently or previously working with ELLs in the district. Building principals and the district's curriculum director were interviewed individually, with the classroom teachers being interviewed in focus groups according to their respective buildings. I began my data collection in the middle of the second semester. I purposely chose this time of the school year because I wanted participants to have enough real-life classroom experiences to reflect on in the interview. From start to finish, the process of preparing for and collecting data took place over a period of several months. The following stages as cited by Kvale (Kvale, 1996), outline how I proceeded with the interview investigation process.

Thematizing - In this stage, I clarified the purpose of my study by asking, *Why is*

eliciting the response of district staff important in addressing the instructional needs of ELLs? and *What* specific areas of ELL instruction should be investigated to reveal the concerns that a low incidence district need to address?

Designing – Planning the design of the investigation required thought about the number of participants, the time and resources involved, and the ethical dimensions of the study. I decided on the five building principals, the district’s curriculum director, a high school counselor, and selected staff. I sent out a letter introducing the focus of my research and explained the purpose of my writing, which was to elicit their participation in a 30-minute audio-taped interview about their experiences and concerns in working with ELLs. I assured them that their names and the name of the school would be kept confidential, and that my study had been approved by the Hamline University’s human subjects research committee and the district superintendent. Of the 33 participants invited, five declined due to a scheduling conflict, four declined to participate, and three did not respond. Total participation included four building principals, the curriculum director, a high school counselor, and fifteen teachers. The building principals and curriculum director were interviewed individually during the school day. I met with each principal in their school office, and the curriculum director in my school office. The rest of the interviews were conducted either before or after school, and in groups according to the participant’s school building. The interviews were held either in a classroom or the school conference room, depending on the size of the group.

Interviewing - This was a semi-structured type of interview for the purpose of validity and reliability, in which I used an interview guide with predetermined questions to insure

a uniformity of the data gathered and to reduce interviewer bias. This structure helped to keep the conversations focused, while also allowing for the flexible nature of qualitative research designs. I began each interview by thanking interviewees for their participation, reminding them of the study's focus, and informing them of the type of questions they would be asked. Though the sequencing of the questions was predetermined, the guide was semi-structured, allowing for spontaneous responses and interaction among group participants.

The questions I wrote focused on the four standards of access developed by the TESOL Task Force on the Education of Language Minority Students in the United States (TESOL Journal). These standards are based on current research in language learning in the K-12 classroom setting and are designed to help schools assess the effectiveness of their ESL programs.

1. Access to a positive learning environment.
2. Access to appropriate research-based curriculum.
3. Access to full delivery of services.
4. Access to equitable assessment.

I addressed each standard in the form of two questions for a total of eight questions. In the teacher interviews, I added two questions focused on professional development. Each interview followed the same format: introducing the topic of my research, explaining the expectations of the interviewer and interviewee, outlining the interview questions, asking the questions, giving a short debriefing. Careful thought was given to the writing of the questions, beginning with several drafts before the final set of questions was determined.

Although the questions varied slightly for each group, the questions I asked (See Appendix D) in each interview were shaped by the following focus questions.

1. What are your concerns regarding the instruction of ELLs?
2. What are your concerns regarding the assessment of ELLs?
3. What are your concerns regarding ELL access to school programs?
4. How would you like to see the district supporting your instruction of ELLs?

The questions asked of the curriculum director (See Appendix C) focused on curriculum and assessment demographics, while those asked of school principals (See Appendix B) focused on how they provide direction and accountability in their role as school leaders.

The teachers and tutors were asked to draw upon their classroom experiences in working with ELLs. In each interview, I wanted to elicit responses that were experience-based and vested to the interviewee because identifying the instructional concerns in instructing ELLs requires an in-depth look at what happens both in the classroom, and in the mind and heart of the teacher. I closed each interview by inviting interviewees to add comments or ask further questions. I thanked them again for their participation and told them that I would be emailing them a transcription of the interview to verify, with a brief follow-up survey to complete.

Transcribing - All of the interviews were tape recorded to ensure that I recorded every verbal nuance as data. After each interview, I transcribed the tapes into written form noting pauses as well as words, and used codings to make the data easier to recall. I used a format that documented the following information of each interview: date, time, location, interviewee names, questions, and responses. I also wrote out field notes in

which I described the setting, the participants' relationship to one another, and my observation of their mannerisms, and other nonverbal nuances. I included my impressions and assumptions that might have affected the data collected. To ensure maximum recall, I analyzed each interview no more than 24 hours after it was conducted, and revisited each tape twice after the initial transcription.

Analyzing - In addition to each transcribed interview, I compiled interviewees' responses to identify any emerging patterns and themes. I also considered group size and grade-levels to be variables affecting the data.

Verifying – Participants were emailed transcriptions of the interview and asked to confirm its accuracy by adding to or deleting from the transcribed text, sign their initials, and return the initialed copy to me. I made a hard copy of each verified transcription to keep for future records. In addition, I asked each participant to complete a brief educational profile indicating gender, educational coursework, and teaching experience (see Appendix E).

Reporting – This study was conducted with the final report in mind. I will communicate the findings of this study and the methods applied in the format of a bound book to be made available for the case studied and other low incidence school districts.

Research Site

The case in my study is a low incidence school district situated in the central region of the United States. The district resides in a small town of fewer than 5,000 people, located fewer than 10 miles from the largest city in the state. The district's high school, middle school, and the oldest of three elementary schools are located in the rural part of the

district, with the two newest elementary schools residing in suburban neighborhoods. There has been a substantial increase in student enrollment warranting the future projection of building a fourth elementary school to open within the 2011 school year.

The district's ESL program began in the oldest of the three elementary schools. This school has consistently served the highest number of ELLs in the district and is the district's only Title I school. The other two elementary schools are located in neighborhoods outside of the district's zipcode area, and currently serve only four of the total 14 elementary-aged ELLs. In the middle school and high schools, ELLs are mainstreamed into content classes, receiving daily support from the school tutor during the assigned study hall period.

The ELL community represented in this school district is predominantly Ukrainian and Russian, with the recent arrival of two Spanish-speaking and one Bosnian-speaking families. All of the district's ELLs come from families where either one or both parents have limited English skills. The Ukrainian and Russian ELLs were the first language minority group in the district, most having transferred in from the neighboring urban school district where they were receiving ELL services. Their younger siblings in contrast, had no prior formal schooling at the time of enrollment.

The Spanish-speaking ELLs enrolled as immigrants to the United States. Unlike their Ukrainian and Russian peers, this language minority population comes from households where both their native language and English are spoken, and assimilation into the English-speaking community is very intentional and desirable. In addition, these ELLs have progressed in their English social and academic skills in a relatively short time, in

contrast to their Ukrainian and Russian peers.

The district's Bosnian ELLs arrived as recent immigrants with literacy skills in their native language, and little to no English social and literacy skills. Enrolled in the middle and high schools, these students have presented a new challenge for teachers in this district who are not accustomed to teaching ELLs who have few English social and academic English skills.

Research Participants

The participants in this research were myself as the researcher participant, and selected administration and staff. As the district's ESL coordinator, I have an informed awareness of the challenges facing a low incidence school district intent on providing ELLs with fair access to classroom instruction. My role also calls me to what Kvale (1996) outlines as the necessary qualifications of a researcher participant: sensitivity to identify ethical issue, responsibility to feel committed to acting appropriately in regard to issue, and a scientific responsibility to the profession.

The district administrators I sought to interview were the five building principals, high school counselor, and the curriculum director. All but one chose to participate. Although administrators in school districts rarely are involved in the instruction of ELLs, they play a crucial role in the vision-casting and vision-realizing ends of the spectrum. As Berube (2000) points out, school administrators play a decisive role in supporting a high-quality ESL program. In particular, the principal has a dual responsibility of being both a stakeholder and collaborator in overseeing an ESL program that seeks to be effective for both students and teachers. As the stakeholder, he/she is held to knowing

what the legal requirements are, and taking the appropriate action to ensure that these requirements are met. As a collaborator, the principal works with the ESL teacher and mainstream teachers to ensure that professional development and training are made available, as well as engaging in strategies to address the issues at hand.

The teachers I selected were elementary, middle, and high school classroom teachers, and school tutors, all of whom have worked with ELLs in the mainstream classroom. Participants were selected on the criteria that they would have something to contribute to the topic of ELL instruction. Of the twenty-five invited, fifteen participated. Of the fifteen teachers interviewed, seven taught for 1-4 years, five for 5-10 years, two for 11-20 years, and one for more than 21 years. Prior to their teaching in the district, only one teacher had previous experience in instructing ELLs.

Conclusion

In choosing to do a qualitative case study, I hoped to gain an in-depth understanding of how a low incidence district addresses ELL instructional concerns. I interviewed a focus group of administration and staff within the context of a lived experience to encourage participants to engage and contribute positively with the process of the study. Ultimately, my goal is that the insights gained from this research would directly influence policy, practice, and future research for this and other low incidence school districts.

In the next chapter, I will present the data I collected from the interviews, documenting the steps taken in the process. I will include a description and analysis of each school site, along with an explanation of other factors that contributed to the study's findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction

In this chapter I will explain how the results of this study respond to the research question, “What are the instructional concerns that a low incidence school district needs to consider in providing English language learners with equitable access to curriculum?” I begin with a summary of the interviewees’ responses highlighting the relevant themes that emerged in the process. In my analysis of the data, I will discuss how participant responses portray a district that is just beginning to identify Berube’s three Rs: a **recognition of** ELLs in policymaking and services, a **responsibility** among *all* staff in meeting ELL learning needs, and a **respect** for ELLs reflected in a program held to high standards. I conclude with a discussion of how the results connect to the literature review.

Interview Responses

The interview questions that the case’s participants responded to focused on the four standards of access developed by the TESOL Task Force on the Education of Language Minority Students in the United States (TESOL Journal). Based upon current research in language learning in the K-12 classroom, these standards can be used as a rubric to guide schools towards effective ESL instruction. The four standards address a positive learning environment, appropriate curriculum, full delivery of services, and equitable assessment.

Positive learning environment

Learning within an environment that is safe and positive is important for all learners, but especially critical for the student faced with learning a new language in addition to academic content. This standard addresses the physical and emotional learning environment for the English language learner. Administrators and teachers were asked questions that focused on the district's schools providing a safe and welcoming learning environment for ELLs, and communicating with parents of ELLs.

Teacher responses conveyed the perspective that the district's schools are safe and welcoming to ELLs. *Both teachers and students extend a welcoming environment for ELLs. Teachers work with ELLs in trying to make the necessary accommodations.*

Although school administrators agreed with this perspective, the middle school principal also commented on the need for a liason to avoid potential miscommunication between parent and teachers. *I think that to truly help these students, we need a liason that acts between the student and teachers, and also the parents and teachers. I believe that's where the disconnect could occur.*

Responses to the question on communicating with parents of ELLs show that teachers rely on translator services that are provided mainly for school conferences as their primary means of communication. *I think all the help with parent-teacher conferences, making sure that all the communication gets sent home and the opportunity to have that translator there when the family needs it. I think the district does a good job in making sure that each family is provided with as much help as possible.*

An interesting suggestion came from one of the elementary school principals who

recognizes that ELL parent involvement is absent in the district and saw a current situation as an opportunity to address that issue. *We're doing the Parent Walk-thru. We really should have a Ukrainian community member, and I naturally think of parent X. Maybe she could give us a little more perspective into what would make it more universally friendly. One thing I'd like to do if we had room would be to have a parent resource center in our building to start to incorporate some of these ideas.*

Appropriate curriculum

This standard looks at curriculum that accommodates the academic and language needs of the ELL. Teachers were asked to comment on grade-level curriculum and the implementation of curriculum incorporating content and language objectives. Responses varied across the grade-levels with lower elementary grade teachers stating that their language-rich learning environment provides ELLs with accommodations that are built into the curriculum. Secondary teachers reflected that the curriculum for older grades does not meet the needs of ELLs requiring teachers to make their own accommodations. *I feel like everything we do has to be restructured for them, completely. I don't think that it's (curriculum) friendly at all to ELLs, in any way, shape or form.* Even when textbook resources are available for ELLs, teachers said that the accommodations are often dummy-downed.

Asked how they incorporate language and content objectives into their lessons, elementary and middle school grades responded with the following: *What do you mean by language? I don't know that I do. I think that most days, we're so focused on what we have to read thru that day. But in the midst of all of it, it just gets lost and I forget to do*

it. The high school teachers on the other hand, communicated more understanding and experience in adapting curriculum for their ELLs. Speech is about language, so I'm always mindful of accommodating the students who need help. I make my own accommodations as I see needed.

Full delivery of services

Providing ELLs with access to full delivery of school services, both academic and social, is the focus of this standard. Teachers were asked if they utilized special instructional programs to support language development in instructing ELLs, and to comment on the kind of support available to ELLs and their families that specifically addresses language and cultural needs.

In the lower elementary grades, teachers rely on assistance from the reading specialist for ELLs in addition to ESL services. It is not uncommon for an ELL to be pulled out of the mainstream several times a week to receive additional support. *Student X sees the ESL teacher twice a week, and goes to reading three times a week.* However, at the middle school, teachers look to the school tutor in addition to the ESL coordinator for additional instructional support. *I feel like I have a high need for you (ESL coordinator). Having her (tutor) there as a support is a huge support for me.*

Teacher awareness of support available to ELL families addressing language and cultural needs was minimal as reflected in the following responses. *Organization X would teach them English if they want lessons. So, you could refer them to English language classes for parents. Honestly, I'm not aware of any. I would contact you (ESL coordinator).*

Administrator questions concerning the full delivery of services addressed the policies and procedures in place that specifically address the language and cultural needs of our ELLs and their families. Responses varied with one administrator giving a general assessment. *We do what it takes to serve our ELLs and their families.* While another administrator's response provided a more specific awareness of the situation. *I think they're (policies) loose. I think whatever you've done is all we have for policy. I think a lot of policy is built on precedence, and maybe we haven't had a lot of precedence.*

Administrators were also asked to comment on the special instructional programs available to ELLs that support the second language development necessary to participate in the mainstream classroom. One administrator's comment brought up the issue of mislabeling ELLs that is common in schools where untrained staff attribute a student's language proficiency to their cognitive learning ability. *We've had discussions where we're trying to determine whether it's a language issue or a true special ed issue. Sometimes I think our kids are going to get pushed into sped because that's where the help is, and they technically do qualify for it. But, since we don't have a lot of other services available regarding ELL, that maybe they're going to get mislabeled.*

Equitable assessment

Providing ELLs with equitable assessment that adequately measures academic progress is a key component under Title I of NCLB (Flynn, et al, 2005). Questions addressing this standard asked teachers to share their experience in assessing ELLs and their knowledge of the district's ESL programming procedures.

Teachers that provide ELLs with accommodated assessments found oral versus

written formatting to be most effective in assessing ELLs. *I would say oral would be more effective than written, as a general rule. When I'm working with the students, I ask them to kind of explain it, and I help them put it into words. So, kind of a verbal assessment.* In addition, teachers in the upper elementary and secondary grades found that allowing students to retake an assessment was a helpful practice.

When asked about their familiarity with the district's entrance and exit procedures for ELLs, teacher responses were short and gaping. *No clue. I'm not at all.* Those most informed were from the school with the highest number of ELLs, being led by a building principal that has consistently had the ESL coordinator presenting an overview of the ESL program to staff at the beginning of each school year. *I think I know just a little bit after talking with the ESL coordinator. She has an exam that the state requires that she gives to the kids to see if they qualify.*

The closing set of questions that were asked of teachers focused on professional development. Previous studies show that equipping and training teachers to provide equitable access to curriculum for ELLs is a characteristic of proactive school districts. When asked to name specific topics and format of staff development that would support their instruction of ELLs, teachers voiced a unanimous desire for district-sponsored in-services and workshops that would address instructional strategies, assessment, and cultural awareness. *Anything that might be beneficial to them (ELL) that we've never thought of would be helpful as far as our instruction and strategies. And of course, learning any kind of assessment that we may not be familiar with. I think it would be nice to have an in-service that is just Ukrainian. Just knowing what is proper when you*

approach them. Middle school and high school teachers specified working with ESL-qualified staff in the format of mentoring or collaboration. Mentoring would be really cool. I would rather have somebody in here showing me how to do it and how to apply it. Collaboration with ELL or resource teacher for feedback on accommodations.

Though administrators were not asked questions about professional development, there was consensus that most staff in the district are not well-versed in instructing ELLs affirming the need for district-sponsored training. *Our staff is not well-versed. I don't think they think about it until a little person walks into their room and needs it. I think they know lots of strategies of just what's good teaching, which does apply to ELL learners a lot of times. But specifically, I think that that's a weakness.*

Data Analysis

In areas of consensus and varying perspectives, participant responses portray a school district that is just beginning to identify and address the challenges of providing ELLs with equitable access to curriculum. The recognition of ELLs in policymaking and services, responsibility of all staff in meeting ELL learning needs, and the respect for ELLs reflected in a program held to high standards is noticeably elusive.

Recognition of English language learners

There was strong consensus among administrators and teachers that the district's schools provide a safe and welcoming learning environment for ELLs and their families. Though this perspective may reflect a positive affirmation of the presence of ELLs, the principle of recognition also extends to policy-making. When asked about curriculum planning that addresses ELL instruction, an elementary school principal and the

curriculum director acknowledged that this has not been a topic of discussion in curriculum planning mainly because ELLs are perceived as a minority. Recognizing this student population also means providing appropriate intervention, when needed. The middle school principal's comment on the need for a liaison to avert a disconnect between students and teachers, and teachers and parents, questions participant statements about recognition.

Responsibility on the part of all staff to meet ELL learning needs

Having access to special programs and providing accommodations that support the language development of ELLs is a manifestation of this principle. Elementary school principals and teachers agreed that these services are available and accessible to ELLs in the lower grades. However, in the middle and high schools, teachers voiced concern that they lack the training and experience in making instructional and assessment accommodations for ELLs. As a result, they rely heavily on assistance from the ELL coordinator and school tutors.

Responsibility on the part of administrators translates into hiring qualified ESL staff. The curriculum director and building principals referred to this several times during the interviews. When asked about the policies and procedures that address the language and cultural needs of ELLs and their families, and about the district's entrance and exit procedures for ELLs complying with state and federal guidelines, administrators expressed their confidence in having an ESL-qualified coordinator on staff.

Respect for each language learner

Schools visibly display respect for language learners when programs are held to the

highest standards. Minimal understanding of the district's ESL programming and procedures was the consensus expressed by teachers. Though there was an awareness of who the ELL coordinator was and the program's existence, most teachers could not explain the process used for identifying and exiting ELLs.

Respect for ELLs also means holding students to the same high academic standards as their peers. Except for the few who expressed confidence in making accommodations that did not modify the content standards, the majority of teachers expressed a frustration in integrating language with content objectives.

Respect for ELLs is also visible in the social realm of opportunities such as extra-curricular activities. How are ELLs and their families made aware of non-academic programs that often occur outside of the school day? Though addressed in a question under the 'full delivery of services' access of standard, neither administrators nor teachers made reference to this type of program.

Summary

The data collected in this study show a low incidence school district where *minimal* and *absence* are key words to describe how they are presently addressing the instructional needs of their English language learners. There is minimal understanding of how to assess and instruct ELLs with curriculum that addresses both language and content standards. Though the district's ESL program has been in existence for four years, there is minimal awareness and understanding of its entrance and exit procedures of ELLs. Most concerning are the absences: the absence of ELL representation in district-wide curriculum planning, of ELL parent involvement in the schools, and of professional

development targeting the concerns voiced by teachers in the interviews. These minimal and absent realities present in this low incidence district need to change if this low incidence district is intent on identifying and understanding the instructional concerns in providing ELLs with equitable access to curriculum. As the literature attests to, effectual change intersects building leadership capacity with providing instructional support for all staff.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

What are the instructional concerns that a low incidence school district need to consider in providing English language learners with equitable access to curriculum? This was the overarching question that guided my research and has led to insights and learning about the principles and processes that are characteristic of low incidence districts intent on addressing the instructional needs of ELLs. In this chapter, I reflect on the major findings of this study that connect to the literature reviewed. I also discuss their implications for low incidence school districts, their limitations, and make recommendations for future research. I conclude with a plan for communicating the results of this study to the administrators and staff of the district where I am currently employed as the ESL coordinator.

Major Findings

The results of this study portray a low incidence school district that is just beginning to identify what the instructional concerns are in providing ELLs with effective instruction. Similar to previous studies, participant responses show a district where the absence of appropriate curriculum for ELLs and trained teachers are more often the rule than the exception. Though the research question aimed at eliciting participants' identification of instructional concerns, administrators and teachers communicated their views on how well the district is serving its ELLs, instead. What is most concerning is that their perception that the district provides a safe and welcoming learning environment for ELLs does not reconcile with their

admission of not understanding how to provide ELLs with effective instruction in the classroom. The gap between their perception and awareness correlates to what previous studies have found to be true in districts where ELLs are viewed as a minority.

In the Hansen and Virginia stories, the minority status of ELLs in the minds of leaders and staff needed reframing to support the changes needed to address the instructional needs of its ELLs. The desired outcome in both cases was a model for ESL programming that embraces Berube's three R's to **recognize** ELLs in their policymaking and services, equip all staff to be **responsible** in meeting ELL learning needs, and have a **respect** for ELLs reflected in a program held to high standards. Participant responses in this case study do not reflect this reality. Instead, as the curriculum director and a school principal stated, ELL instructional needs are not addressed in curriculum planning because as a minority, it's not on the forefront of people's minds. Such a reality portrays ELLs and ESL programming as small in the minds of policy-makers. Districts that are intent on meeting the instructional needs of ELLs do not equate minority numbers with minority status.

Implications of the Study

The following are the implications I see for low incidence school districts intent on providing English language learners with equitable access to curriculum. Though not exhaustive, the following are what research shows to be characteristic of districts that are effectively addressing the learning needs of ELLs.

1. Providing ELLs with equitable access to curriculum begins by creating a school

environment that accepts diversity. The literature affirms that establishing and changing policy to provide for ELLs begins with an attitude that recognizes and respects diversity. TESOL's standards of access identifies ELL parental input as an indicator of a positive learning environment that welcomes and embraces language-minority students. When asked if the district's schools reflect such an environment, the administrators and teachers in the case study saw the schools as reflecting a safe and welcoming environment for all learners. However, the lack of awareness and familiarity with the district ESL programming procedures of staff communicated in the interviews speak of another reality. Add to this the minimal presence of ELL parent involvement and absence of recognition of the ESL program at yearly district-wide staff meetings to paint a reality where the presence of Berube's three R's (Berube, 2002) is *elusive* at best.

2. There needs to be a commitment on the part of administrators to be informed and engaged in the processes relating to the instruction of ELLs. Wrigley (2000) writes that schools successfully educating ELLs have principals who are committed to hiring qualified staff, provide teachers with ongoing training, encourage collaboration between mainstream and ESL staff, and reach out to ELL parents. For example, during my interview with one elementary school principal, this administrator responded to the question of "How do you see our schools reflecting a safe and welcoming learning environment for English language learners?" with the idea of inviting an ELL parent to participate in a Parent Walk-through event. This principal viewed input from the ELL community to be a valuable asset to the entire school environment, and has been a

consistent advocate for the changes in policy and procedures relating to the district's ESL program.

3. Collaboration between mainstream and ESL teachers should be a major consideration in low incidence districts as ELLs are often placed in mainstream classrooms with teachers who are not experienced in working with students of diverse backgrounds. Encouraging and providing for collaborative efforts between ESL and mainstream teachers is one way of addressing this issue. The middle school teachers in the case study expressed how necessary and valuable the experience was for both the student and themselves to collaborate with the ESL coordinator.

Inexperienced in making language and content accommodations, the teachers recounted what they perceived as collaboration as giving them a renewed perspective on teaching ELLs. In addition, teachers across the grade levels voiced a desire and need for mentoring and collaboration to be a part of professional development.

4. To give an account for the presence and academic progress of ELLs requires developing clearly-defined procedures for ELL programming. In Hansen's action plan, the team focused on revising existing procedures and creating policy that made these procedures accessible to classroom teachers (Edstam, 2007). In rural Virginia, the ESL teacher needed to pioneer the creation of a Home Language survey, language-proficiency assessment, and procedures for the hiring and assigning of ESL-qualified staff (Wrigley, 2000). When asked about the district's ESL programming procedures, the case's majority of teachers responded with limited understanding. District administrators pointed to the ELL coordinator to be responsible for knowing and implementing state and

federal guidelines. The curriculum director's and elementary principal's comment that since ELLs are viewed as a minority, they are not recognized in district policy-making is of concern in light of the high level of need for intervention in the recent school year.

5. Effective programming for ELLs also requires providing teachers with training in understanding and developing strategies and assessment that address ESL issues.

Research reveals less than 13 percent of teachers have received professional development on instructing ELLs, and few states have policies requiring teachers to have some competence in teaching ELLs. Hansen provided its teachers with ongoing "mini in-service(s) that keeps us at the forefront of people's minds so they know that we're still out there and that we're the resource people to help them with issues they might have" (Edstam, 2007, p. 9). A policy brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) states that the lack of research-based professional development for teachers could cause even "well-meaning teachers with inadequate training to sabotage their own efforts to create positive learning environments..." (NCTE, 2008, p. 6). In the length of the district's ESL program, there has not been any teacher training addressing ELL instruction, other than the professional development leave granted the ELL coordinator to attend out-of-district training.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations in this study were time and number of staff participants. At the outset, I did not foresee either of these factors to be challenges given the small size of the district and my established credibility with staff.

From the beginning, I had determined a timetable for the interviewing process, anticipating there to be minimal conflict of scheduling for staff participation. My desired outcome was that there would be a fair representation of the administrators and teaching staff from the district's five schools. The initial list of participants I had hoped to interview included the five school principals, curriculum director, high school counselor, and 25 teaching staff. However, in the end, the main reason potential participants gave for declining participation was scheduling conflicts. In hindsight, I wondered, had I allowed for more time in the process, would I have been able to accommodate a greater number of staff to produce more extensive and comprehensive data? I anticipated that my increased visibility and credibility over the years would promise participation representative of all the district schools.

Of the 12 staff who declined to participate, the high school principal's and middle school teachers' absences were most limiting to this study. The instructional challenges of the recent year had been the most pronounced in the middle and high schools. In an attempt to address these challenges, policies and procedures were established requiring dialogue and conferences with school administrators and ELL parents. The overall outcome at the end of the year was a significant gain in terms of district programming and procedures for ELL instruction. Thus, input from the high school principal and middle school teachers would have affirmed this and contributed to the data collected in this case study.

Recommendations for Further Research

The literature and results from this study affirm that there is more to be learned from and for low incidence school districts intent on providing English language learners with equitable access to curriculum. I believe that future research focused on the following questions would prove invaluable in answering the question, “What are the instructional concerns that a low incidence district need to consider in providing ELLs with equitable access to curriculum?”

1. How does a district that enrolls a low incidence of ELLs shape a learning community that embraces the diversity of its minority-language student groups?
2. How does a district that enrolls a low incidence of ELLs provide its teachers with instructional support that equips them to provide ELLs with equitable access to curriculum?
3. What are the necessary components of programming that provides ELLs with equitable access to curriculum in a low incidence district?

A Plan

Putting my learning into practice, I plan to present the following plan of action to the administrators and staff in the district where I currently serve as the ELL coordinator. Using the framework in the resource guide by Hill and Flynn (2004), my goal would be to develop a program framework that incorporates leadership capacity, instructional support, and parent involvement. In that process, I also hope to strengthen an already present awareness among *some* staff to a more informed awareness among *all* staff of the need to engage in a collaborative effort in providing ELLs with a learning environment

that benefits learners and teachers alike.

Step 1: Meet with administrators

At the beginning of the school year, meet with the school principals and other district administrators to present and discuss the following: 1) the data collected from my research highlighting the areas of need within the district relating to the instruction of ELLs; 2) the time in individual school staff meetings to address all staff on the district's ESL programming and procedures; and 3) the resources needed to provide teachers of ELLs with instructional support and training to implement effective classroom instruction for ELLs.

Step 2: Meet with the curriculum director

As professional development is coordinated and implemented by this administrator, I will make recommendations for topics and a time framework aimed at providing district-sponsored instructional support for teachers of ELLs. The format of this support would include, but not be limited to, in-services and workshops led by the ELL coordinator, as well as mentoring of mainstream teachers by the ELL coordinator. At the time of this writing, I have received approval to teach a workshop for teachers of ELLs through a local university which would afford teachers graduate credit and fulfill my professional development growth plan requirement for the current school year.

Step 3: Communicate with all staff

At individual building staff meetings, present a brief overview of the district ESL programming procedures for identifying, servicing, and exiting ELLs. Point staff to available resources including the district website, coursework for teacher training, and

shared folder containing materials on language acquisition, online resources, and instructional strategies.

Step 4: Communicate with teachers of ELLs

At the beginning of the school year, meet with teachers of ELLs to provide them with information specific to the ELLs in their classes and to discuss a plan of instruction. Information about the student would include a language acquisition profile of the student's entrance and state-required language proficiency assessments, previous schooling transcripts, family background information, and a list of teacher resources addressing the academic and language needs of ELLs. The plan of instruction would include instructional and assessment accommodations in alignment with the ELL's English language proficiency scores. A third and crucial component of this meeting would be setting up future check points to evaluate student needs and ensure that the needs of ELLs are being addressed in a collaborative effort.

Conclusion

In the field of education, everyone is a stakeholder when it comes to embracing a mindset and responsibility to provide all students with equitable access to curriculum. Especially in districts where low ELL enrollment, limited staffing and programming pose unique challenges, the stakes seem unattainably high. Nonetheless, as the research and data gathered in this study affirm, districts that are effectively addressing the instructional needs of ELLs demonstrate their commitment by educating and engaging all stakeholders. English language learners and ESL programs are not elusive entities in districts that view the challenge to instruct ELLs as an opportunity to grow.

APPENDIX A
STAFF PARTICIPATION LETTER

APPENDIX B
ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

APPENDIX C
CURRICULUM DIRECTOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

APPENDIX D
TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

APPENDIX E
STAFF FOLLOW-UP SURVEY

Interview Follow-up Survey

Part 1: Educational Background

Please provide the following information.

1. Gender - _____ Male _____ Female

2. Educational Coursework

_____ BA _____ BA+ _____ MA _____ PhD

3. Teaching Experience

_____ 1-4yrs. _____ 5-10yrs. _____ 11-20yrs. _____ 21yrs.+

4. Grade-level, Subject/Content

_____ -K-5, _____

_____ - 6-8, _____

_____ - 9-12, _____

_____ - other, _____

Part 2: Interview Verification

Verify the accuracy of your responses in the interview by signing your initials at the end of the transcribed text.

Interview Date – _____ **Participants** – _____

Abbreviations: PLE (Positive Learning Environment), AC (Appropriate Curriculum), FDS (Full Delivery of Services), EA (Equitable Assessment), PD (Professional Development)

I verify the accuracy of the above transcribed text.

_____ **initials** _____ **date**

Additional Comments

Write any comments and/or questions you might have of the interview process and/or interview questions.

Thank you for participating in this research project.

Interview Questions for Teachers

Access to a Positive Learning Environment

1. How do you see our schools reflecting a safe and welcoming learning environment for English language learners?
2. How do you communicate with parents of your ELLs about their child's progress in school?

Access to Appropriate Curriculum

1. How do you think the curriculum you use reflect/not reflect best practice for ELLs?
/What are your concerns regarding the instruction of ELLs as it relates to curriculum?
2. How do you incorporate both content and language objectives in your lesson plans?

Access to Full Delivery of Services

1. How have you utilized special instructional programs (Title I, gifted, sped, ESL, etc.) and services that identify and support language development in your instruction of ELLs?
2. What kind of support are you aware of that addresses the language and cultural needs of our ELLs and their families (translation services, etc.)?
/Have you ever used/needed to use this service?

Access to Equitable Assessment

1. What kind of assessment have you found helpful/not helpful in assessing ELLs?
2. How familiar are you with the district's entrance and exit procedures for ELLs?

Professional Development/District Support

1. What kind of professional development would support your instruction of ELLs?
2. What kind of support would you like to see provided for [classroom]teachers of ELLs (i.e., workshops, mentoring, collaboration) ?

Interview Questions for Administrators/Building Principals

Access to a Positive Learning Environment

1. How do you see our schools reflecting a safe and welcoming learning environment for English language learners?
2. What is your perspective on how familiar our teachers and staff are with teaching content and implementing instructional practices that are effective for ELLs?

Access to Appropriate Curriculum

1. What role do you have in insuring that the mainstream/core curriculum is adapted to meet the needs of ELLs?
2. How do you understand the relationship between content and language instruction?

Access to Full Delivery of Services

1. What are the policies and procedures in place that address the language and cultural needs of our ELLs and their families (translation services, etc.)?
2. Would you comment on the special instructional programs available to ELLs that support the second language development necessary to participate in the mainstream classroom (i.e., ESL, sped, Title I, tutoring)?

Access to Equitable Assessment

1. How does the district's entrance and exit procedures for ELLs comply with state and federal guidelines?
2. Would you comment on how our school psychologists, special education and ESL staff are utilized to provide alternative assessment practices for ELLs?

HS – What kind of plan is in place to support ELLs to pass graduation standards?

Interview Questions for Curriculum Director

Staff Demographics

1. What is the percentage of certified staff in the district?
2. How does our district define ‘highly qualified under NCLB?’ (annual report)

Access to a Positive Learning Environment

1. How do you **see** our schools reflecting a safe and welcoming learning environment for English language learners?
2. How do you see your role in nurturing a positive learning environment for ELLs and their families?

Access to Appropriate Curriculum

1. How does your role address the instructional concerns that teachers have in the classroom?
2. Would you comment on any discussion/concerns that have been addressed relating to [appropriate] curriculum for ELLs?

Access to Full Delivery of Services

1. What percentage of our ELL enrollment receives free and reduced lunch?
2. Where in the district profile/annual report is ELL enrollment recognized as a student subgroup?

Access to Equitable Assessment

1. How do you see the performance of ELLs on state-wide assessment influencing our district’s overall scores/performance?
2. What is your understanding of “access to equitable assessment?”

Professional Development

1. What structures and/or resources are currently in place to provide teachers with adequate training to support their instruction of ELLs in the classroom?
2. How would recommendations to guide our district’s ELL Program relate to your role as the district’s curriculum director?

March 2009

Dear Colleagues,

I am completing a Master's Degree in K-12 English as a Second Language at Hamline University. As part of my graduate work, I am conducting a case study of our school district. The final product will be a printed, bound capstone that will published for public viewing.

My research focus is on the instructional concerns of instructing English language learners (ELLs). The question I am seeking to answer is, "What are the instructional concerns of a low-incidence school district in providing ELLs with equitable access to curriculum?"

The purpose of my letter is to ask for your participation in an audio-taped research interview where I will be asking you questions addressing your concerns and experiences in working with ELLs. I value your input as co-educators and am interested in what are your professional opinions. Participation is voluntary, and you may pull out of the study at any time without any consequences. Your name and responses will be kept confidential, and the district will not be named in the study.

I have already received permission to conduct this study from Mr. Holbeck as well as the Hamline University School of Education. If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Ann Mabbott at the Second Language Teaching and Learning at Hamline University, School of Education at 651-523-2446 or Amabbott@gw.hamline.edu.

Please sign and return the bottom section of this letter to me by March 11, 2010. I would like to begin interviewing the week of March 15th. If you have any questions, I can be reached at 605-595-2538. Your cooperation is appreciated.

Sincerely,

Laurie Dirnberger
ELL Coordinator,
Harrisburg Schools

_____ - Yes, I consent to being interviewed for the purpose of research conducted by Laurie Dirnberger, our school district's English language learner coordinator I would be available on _____ Tuesdays @ 3:45 p.m.; _____Thursdays @ 3:45 p.m.

_____ - No, I decline participation in this research interview conducted by Laurie Dirnberger, our school district's English language learner coordinator

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