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A holistic view of English Language Learners
and linguistically diverse classrooms
in Berks County

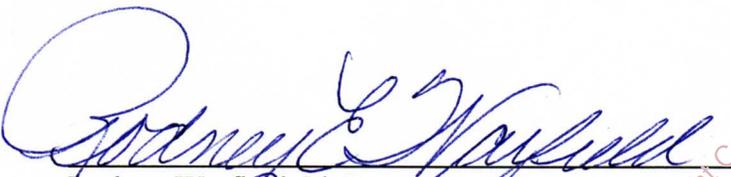
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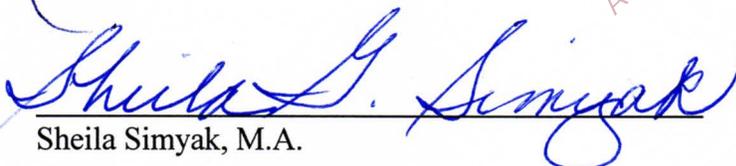
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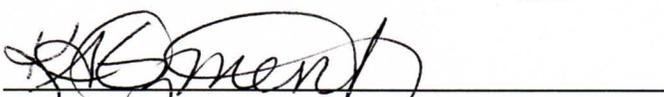
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Departmental Distinction in Education


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A holistic view of English Language Learners and linguistically diverse classrooms in Berks County

Author: Sophia Rivera

Honors Senior Thesis

Abstract

This study looks at the current situation of English Language Learners and the rise of student diversity in Berks County. Consisting mainly of a rise of Hispanic and Latino students, this new diversity calls for an action plan to accommodate these students. The research aims to assess the current options available in classrooms today that both accommodate and celebrate diversity of both culture and language. To research this topic, a meta-analysis of literature was conducted to find the current limitations of teaching English Language Learner students along with a study of the current Hispanic population. Next, a survey assessing the options available in Berks County was sent to participating principals. These findings aid in assessing what schools are currently lacking when it comes to aiding the needs of diverse students. Additionally, these findings may aid in future planning for ELL education.

Introduction

In March 2014, the *Reading Eagle* published a survey article on the adjustment of Latino immigrants to their Reading surroundings (AP Wire.) The reporters focused on several fields, notably learning with friends, conversing with Latino neighbors from other countries, and the matter of English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes. All eighteen schools in Reading offer ESL courses to a very diverse population, though primarily Latino. What the article did not consider specifically was how ESL courses are structured and how this structure affects what English language learners (ELL) go through. This thesis offers to examine holistically this issue in Berks County. In doing so, I hope to extract lessons that may help teachers exemplify the standards issued by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC.) Indeed, these standards influence not only students in Berks County at present (one of the largest Latino populations in Pennsylvania,) but it could have an impact on the shape of Latino culture a generation from now. If we consider the complexity and richness of Latino culture in all its variations, the "one-size-fits-all" model of ESL, while a strong start (it acknowledges foreign cultures,) may actually hurt rather than improve language acquisition. This also has implications for the future of United States at-large, since the Latino population is set to grow at an increasing rate.

As the cultural diversity of the United States continues to grow, classrooms are also evolving. To keep up with this movement, the NAEYC continues to update the statement that all teachers are expected to follow regarding teaching reading and writing to all students. This position statement has recently been revised to include children who are bilingual. It is important

now that schools can “address bilingualism and second-language learners” and also “address cultural diversity” (NAEYC 4.) One of the most important learning milestones for all students is the ability to acquire literacy skills and vocabulary development (NAEYC 4.). Therefore, students who are coming from a different language background need the appropriate amount of additional help to balance their levels of proficiencies in both of the languages they speak. At the same time, limiting their native language can disrupt the growth of their English skills. Therefore, the language and cultural identity of these students form a vital part of their education. Additionally, “including non-English materials and resources to the extent possible can help support children’s first language while children acquire oral proficiency in English” (NAEYC 4.) In other words, understanding the structure of a first language may help when developing the structure of a second language.

To support this statement, I propose investigating what is actually being done in classrooms for these students. My research includes the following three research questions:

What is the current situation of ELL accommodations?

Why is it important to implement ELL programs within schools?

What are the main challenges that ELL students and teachers are facing?

These three questions provide a holistic view of the current problems, challenges, and importance of ELL programs. A holistic view of the situation gives a concise but brief explanation of the current problems. Additionally, they set the purpose for the research and provide insight into what has been occurring in linguistically diverse classrooms today.

To support my approach, I offer first a meta-analysis of previous literature that pertains to the three questions raised. Next, through surveys administered to elementary school principals in the Berks County area willing to participate, I explore the central question of local ELL

education: How do elementary schools accommodate linguistically diverse students in Berks County? This data from local schools provides a representative sample of the classroom environment in an area that has a growing Latino population.

The following three figures describe the increase in diversity of the Latino population in Berks County. Beginning in 2010, Figure 1 presents the percentage of the Hispanic population residing with corresponding colors to highlight the different percentages. In 2010, Reading was in the blue with the surrounding areas being in the blue area. Through analyzing this figure, the viewer can see that the Hispanic population in Reading was at 11% to 23.62% (Community Analyst.) The surrounding areas range from 3.85% to 10.99% (Community Analyst.) When looking at the next figure, Figure 2 shows that there is in fact a rise in the Hispanic population. Once in the blue area, Reading moves into the purple area in 2014. Therefore, in 2014 Reading exemplifies a Hispanic population ranging between 14.05% and 26.83%. In four years, the Hispanic population raised 3%. In the last figure, Figure 3 exemplifies the projected growth in the diverse population in Berks County. Not only does the Reading population rise up to 17%, the surrounding boroughs in Berks County rise up to 9% (Community Analyst.) Therefore, this data shows that there is, and there will be a need for programs for diverse students.

Figure 1. Hispanic Population in Pennsylvania by County in 2010. Source: Community Analyst

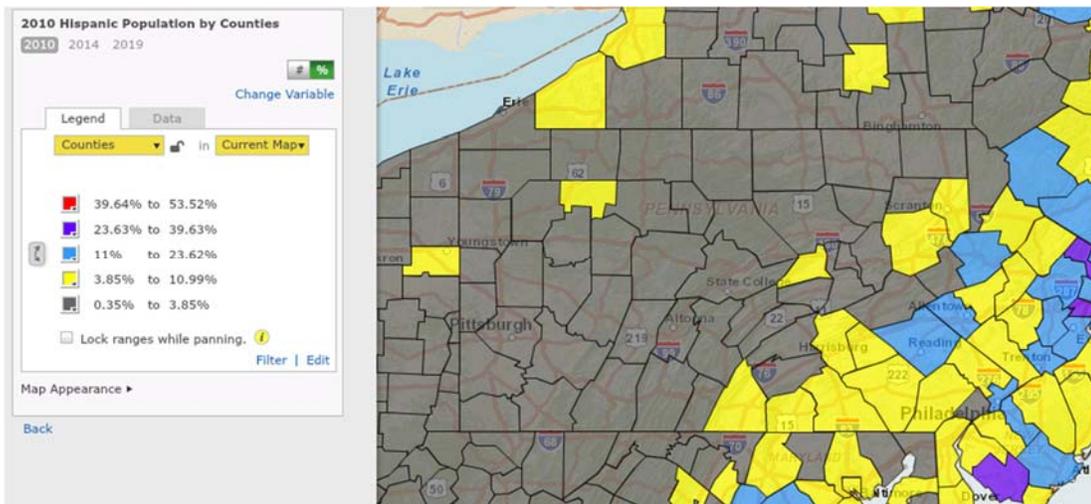


Figure 2. Hispanic Population in Pennsylvania by County in 2014 Source: Community Analyst

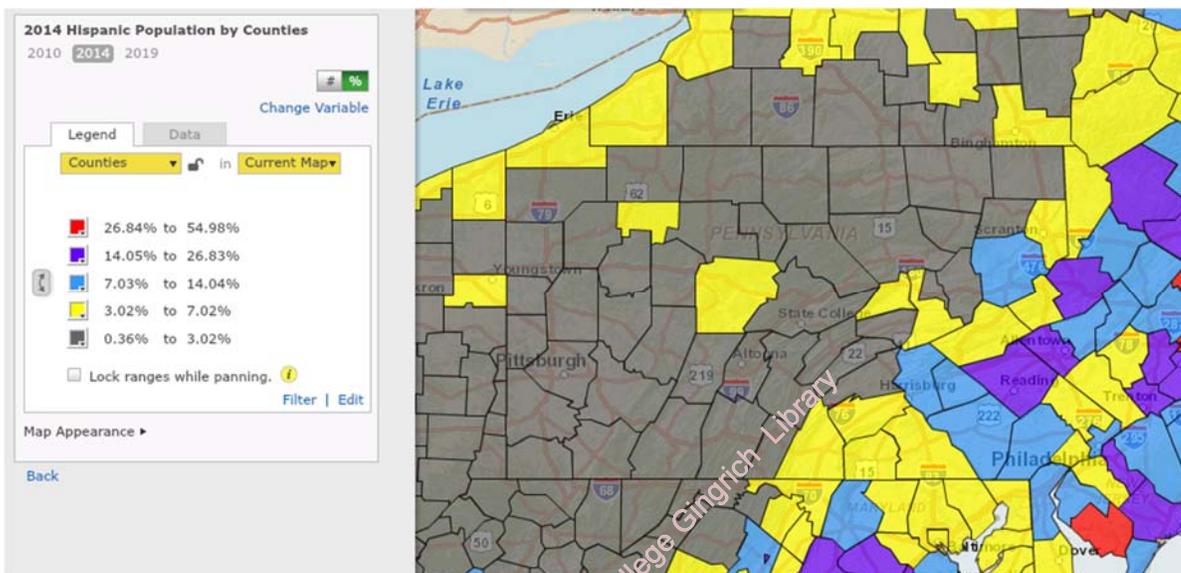
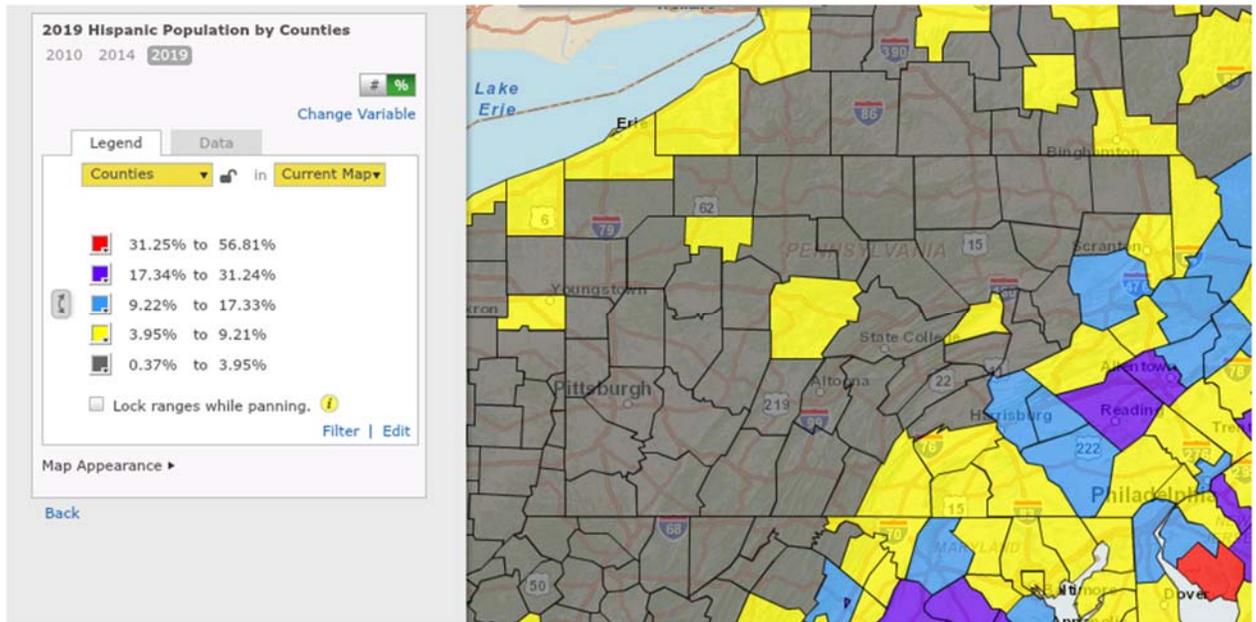


Figure 3. Projected Hispanic Population in Pennsylvania by County in 2019 Source: Community Analyst



In Pennsylvania, the numbers of Latino residents alone have risen from 394,088 in 2000 to 719,660 in 2010 (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, and Albert 6.) Currently, 6.1% of the population of Pennsylvania is Latino, as stated by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2013. More specifically, Berks County has a Hispanic/Latino population of 18.1% (U.S. Census Bureau 2010.) The data presented available shows that 16.7% of the population in Berks County speak a language other than English in the home. Berks is not unique in this case.

In addition, Lancaster County, a neighboring county to Berks that is also in Pennsylvania is experiencing a similar growth pattern. In Lancaster County, the population of Latinos is currently at 9.5% (U.S. Census Bureau.) This information presents that there will be students of different cultural backgrounds who will speak languages other than English in the homes in Berks County. Teachers will be accountable to teach these students. Lastly, in public schools, these students will be required to undergo standardized testing.

I hypothesize that the surrounding schools are beginning to experience a drastic increase in diversity, but are progressing extremely slowly in accommodating these new changes. This

research thus seeks to serve as an information resource that would contribute to this emerging educational topic, but would be available to new teachers.

Literature Review

The current situation of ELL accommodations and what misconceptions exist about teaching ELL students was analyzed through a series of publications in a literature review. Four key misconceptions exist in the current situation of ELL, along with difficulties with standardized and high stakes testing. The misconceptions associated with the current situation lead teachers to rely too heavily on vocabulary, especially when standardized testing is involved.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the English language learner (ELL) population is currently at “9.1% or an estimated 4.4 million students” from the years 2011-2012 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 52.) In Pennsylvania specifically, the ELL population is below 3% according (NCES 52.) Although the sample is smaller in Pennsylvania than nationwide, the need for teachers to be informed and prepared to teach the English Language Learner population is still prevalent. Many misconceptions exist that prevent teachers from encouraging the students to reach their true capacity for learning. Among the numerous data available, of greatest use in my own work is the study Candace Harper and Ester de Jong have conducted. In it they identify four main misconceptions that exemplify the kind of teaching behaviors and mindsets that ought to be avoided when preparing ELLs. These misconceptions revolve around English language exposure, the rate of learning, mainstream teaching, and nonverbal support.

The first misconception described by Harper and Jong is “exposure and interaction will result in English language learning” (Harper and Jong 153.) Contrary to popular assumptions, being fully engulfed in a new language will not guarantee the growth of this second language.

This is especially the case for older students who may struggle with grammar, syntax, and phonics (Harper and Jong 154.) Because their mother tongue will not necessarily follow the same grammatical structure, they face additional challenges as they hang onto what has become a part of their personal identity. Therefore, simply placing a student in a mainstream classroom, especially a student who is in middle school or higher, will not “teach” the student English without actual grammar lessons that reinforce the language as well. Lessons need to reinforce oral language ability as well as written language ability. Additionally, the speed of learning will change according to each student thus contributing to the next misconception.

The next misconception addressed in this study is the assumption that “all ELLs learn English in the same way and the same rate” (Harper and Jong 154.) Mainstream students learn at different rates in all subjects and in all language; ELL students are no different. In fact, no two students will learn the same verb tenses or vocabulary at the same rate. Linguistic scaffolding, or accommodating language learning with written phonemes, is not only helpful to mainstream students, but definitely so to ELLs as well. Harper and Jong describe errors that ELLs may make that are not conventional. As they further note, teachers “should realize that many of these errors are developmental and/or influenced by the student’s native language and are not equally responsive to correction” (Harper and Jong 155.)

A third misconception further explains not only the difference in ELL language acquisition, but the difference between ELLs and native English language speakers. Harper and Jong describe this misconception by stating that some educators believe “good teaching for native speakers is good teaching for ELLs” (Harper and Jong 156.) As lessons are mandated by state standards, and more recently by the Common Core standards, teachers need to use these standards when creating the content for their classrooms. However, these grade-aligned

standards may not apply to the learning that an ELL may be capable of achieving. Intervention and adaptation of the learning material is vital when ELLs are present in any given classroom, but especially when reading comprehension. One of the differences between ELLs and native speakers is the ability to know what “sounds right”. Harper and Jong describe this as native speakers having “intuition” (Harper and Jong 157.) Through hearing the English language in their everyday environment, even young native speakers can navigate through choosing correct phonics and syntax. However, a student who is learning English after speaking their native language for years without any English background is not equipped with this same intuition. Therefore, a teacher cannot expect the same teaching that is efficient for native speakers to be effective learning for non-native speakers. In this study, they explain how using authentic and well-known literature rather than passages can help native speakers become better writers.

However, this attempt did not have the same result for the ELLs in the classroom. For example,

While process-oriented approaches to instruction using literature logs and dialogue journals provided students with increased exposure to authentic literature and greater opportunities for connected reading and writing, these techniques were not successful with ELLs when teachers failed to make linguistic and cultural modifications for them (Harper and Jong 167.)

In instances like these, other strategies may need to come into play such as nonverbal support.

However, anything support is only one type of accommodation out of an array that could be offered through an ELL program.

The last misconception that Harper and Jong discuss in this study states “effective instruction means nonverbal support” (Harper and Jong 157.) Examples of nonverbal support include additional teaching tools such as graphic organizers and picture cues. However, even these tools fall short when teaching content areas, such as mathematics (Harper and Jong 158.) The vocabulary associated with content areas, such as the vocabulary through mathematics, cannot be taught solely through pictures and the language that is used to define these vocabulary

terms may not be understood by ELLs. This particular fact is also noted by Joy Janzen as she explains “one of the challenges for ELLs in learning mathematics is that it can only be acquired in school and not through conversational interaction” (Janzen 1017.) It is instances such as these that showcase the crucial importance of linguistic scaffolding and ELL program implementation.

The Importance of ELL Program Implementation within schools

The availability of ELL programs in schools provides a variety of benefits that promote the growth of ELL students while also preventing students from dropping out later in their learning career. Currently, one in every ten students today in the United States is a classified English Language Learner (Janzen 1010.) In a study she conducted, Joy Janzen reports that the “dropout rate for Latino/Latina youth, who comprise the majority of ELLs, was 22.4%”(Janzen 1010.) Noting that the Latino/Latina youth comprise the majority of ELLs is important when discussing this dropout rate in Berks County as the population of Latinos has been rising, as noted above.

Main Challenges Facing ELL students and Teachers Nowadays

One of the main challenges teachers are facing that also affects ELL students is the lack of training and preparation to work in a classroom environment where English Language Learners are present. This lack of preparation time makes the teachers feel unprepared and disconnected from their students. Russell Gersten notes this in his article, “Lost Opportunities:

Challenges Confronting Four Teachers of English-Language Learners." The challenges these teachers face beyond discomfort and lack of training include a feeling of distance and a lack of curriculum for them to adhere to. Through the study addressed in the article, Gersten finds that teachers were not prepared to teach English Language Learner students in even the most basic of content areas. For example,

everyone interviewed in the process during the first few months of the project was aware that appropriate instruction for this group of students was one of the biggest problems facing the district and that many of the teachers were overwhelmed" (Gersten 40.)

The method for this particular study included classroom observations and teacher interviews. In the majority of the teacher interviews, the teachers felt uneasy with their preparation to work with the students. He writes "when asked about the quality of training and professional development, one teacher laughed and later went on to say 'That's really an area where I think something needs to be done, I mean I have no background, absolutely no background, as far as limited-English-speakers'"(Gersten 49.) In the same way that teachers are taught the milestones and challenges that mainstream students face, teachers should receive multiple trainings on what challenges an English Language Learner student faces in his or her daily experiences within the classroom.

Another study conducted by Joy Janzen confirms the fact that teachers are not well-prepared to instruct non-native English speaking students. Janzen explains that "41% [of teachers] have ELLs in their classes, but only 12.5% of those have had more than 8 hours of training" (Janzen 1011.) Every teacher who will have non-English speakers in his or her classroom should be required to take professional development training to ensure that they will be equipped in the classroom. However, through many of these studies, it is revealed that not all districts offer these types of trainings nor are teachers required to undergo them. A prime

component in ELL success is that the teachers are trained because assuming that students will learn just by being in an English speaking environment is a misconception.

As they want the students to reach standardized test scores, they feel the need to over drill the students with various exercises to force memorization rather than pragmatic use of English.

They also concentrate too heavily on vocabulary instead of letting the ELLs explore content areas. Teaching this way will create comprehension problems for ELLs that will extend into all subject areas, not just learning English. In a recent study by Stacey Lee in 2012, she explains

Instead of offering students access to academic subjects and the opportunity to develop critical and independent thinking, schools too often subject ELLs to vocabulary drills. When they do exit ELL programs, they're often unprepared to handle the academic content in mainstream classes because they haven't been prepared to do so (Lee 66.)

Therefore, the sole reliance on learning vocabulary does not create understanding of a new language. Context, grammar, and syntax all play a part. As described by Lee, the current situation of ELL programs may not be benefitting the students when the teachers are teaching under false misconceptions.

Methods

The survey administered to the elementary schools consists of eight multiple choice and three open ended questions assessing the current state of diverse practice at the school. The survey administered to the elementary schools can be seen in Appendix I. Table 1 describes the responses of each school to the survey questions.

Results

Table 1. Answers to Multiple Choice Questions from Survey.

Question	School A	School B	School C	School D
In your opinion, has there been a rise in diversity in your school in the past 10 years?	I don't know	Yes	Yes	Yes
If you answered yes, what percentage indicates this rise?	I don't know	0-20%	0-20%	0-20%
Do you have an English Language Learner Program at your school?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Does your school have language classes for general students to take, such as Spanish or French?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Does your school host an international day or week where the cultures in the school are celebrated through food, music or other cultural activities?	Yes	No	No	Yes
Is social studies taught at your school?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
If you answered yes, does social studies at your school include world cultures?	Yes	Yes	No	No
Are ELL students included in the general classroom at your school?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

The results of the study and survey answer the last research question: How do elementary schools accommodate linguistically diverse students in Berks County? After reaching out to elementary schools throughout the different school districts in Berks County, four principals responded back to me stating that they would enjoy participating in a short survey asking about the educational programs available at their school. While some of these programs are available to view online on schools' websites, not all schools have updated websites with curriculum and additional programs available. Through having the information provided by the head of these four schools, the reader can determine what programs and events are truly available in each school. The results of these surveys demonstrate the availability of programs, the cultural awareness of the school, the inclusion of the students in the mainstream classroom, and the testing process of ELLs in the school.

All located in Berks County, these four elementary schools are in different sections of Berks but they are also located within close proximity to Reading. Therefore, these schools truly showcase the diversity of the surrounding boroughs of Reading, the most diverse section of Berks County. Programs available at these schools are represented by their respective principal. Out of four schools, three schools claimed to have a program designated for English Language Learners. It is important to note that the school that does not have an English Language Learner program sends all of the students who need language services to a neighboring school in the same district that has programs for these students. Both of these schools were respondents of this study and are included in this study.

A very important point when reading these surveys is the answer to the question pertaining to world cultures in the classroom. Out of the four schools studied, half claim to teach world cultures in their social studies units. Having students exposed to these different cultures

opens a field of diversity in their everyday school life. These students are aware that there are students in other parts of the world who are both similar and different from them. They may eat different foods or wear different clothes but they are still children learning like they are.

However, half of these students are not being introduced to world cultures in their primary years of education. If world cultures are not being taught in the classroom, the students are only being introduced to American history and American culture. Without learning about world cultures, the students are missing a crucial lesson, which is that not all people have the same culture. Having world cultures not only spreads awareness of other people in the world, it spreads awareness of the diverse children that may be in their very own classrooms.

The following question continues the discussion of world cultures being involved in the classroom. Out of four elementary schools, three offer language classes to all students. These are classes other than English, such as Spanish and French. It is interesting to see that the majority of these schools do offer languages as an option to take at the elementary level. This majority showcases that the students of Berks County are being exposed to languages other than English, which is definitely a step in the right direction. Additionally, the last question revolving around the celebration of diversity and world cultures is “Does your school host an international day or week where the cultures in the school are celebrated through food, music or other cultural activities?” Half of the respondents answered yes to this question with the other half answered no. Celebrating diversity and culture through culturally diverse music and food would further expose the students to the diversity that exists in the world and that is growing in Berks County. While this response shows that half of the schools are celebrating diversity, not all of the schools are there yet, which means that more needs to be done to expand this celebration of diversity in an area that is continually growing more diverse.

One of the most crucial questions on the survey is #2. This open ended question, “Does your school offer any programs for parents of linguistically diverse students?” allows for a candid response to be given on levels of ELL parent involvement. Many parents who do not speak English will feel intimidated and discouraged to involve themselves in school events if they do not feel welcome. To welcome these parents, having special programs for ESL or ELL parents can give them the encouragement and warm welcome that may need to walk past the internal barriers and enter the school. Out of four schools, only one of the schools has a program for the parents of ELLs. This school has an orientation program for parents of linguistically diverse students in the beginning of each year. In addition, the same school also has a homework club for both parents and students to attend to learn the current concepts being taught at school in the classrooms of their children. While only four schools are included in this study, the ratio of only one out of four having these beneficial programs shows that there needs to be more programs for ELLs and their parents implemented in elementary schools today.

Conclusions

When discussing the hypothesis for this study, the study shows that there is an increase in a more diverse population and the schools are noticing this change, as hypothesized above. The majority of the schools in this sample do have programs for these students in response to the population changing. There are limitations to this study, such as not knowing exactly what occurs in each of these programs and whether or not the misconceptions studied in the meta-analysis are present in the teachings of this school. Ultimately, the respondents to this survey displayed knowledge of the needed accommodations for diverse students and classrooms.

Appendix I. Survey Component for Berks County Elementary Schools

Part 1

1. In your opinion, has there been a rise in diversity in your school in the past 10 years?

- A) Yes
- B) No
- C) I don't know

2. If you answered yes, what percentage indicates this rise?

- A) 0-20%
- B) 20-40%
- C) 40-60%
- D) 60-80%
- E) 80% and above
- F) I don't know

3. Do you have an English Language Learner Program at your school?

- A) Yes
- B) No
- C) I don't know

4. Does your school have language classes for general students to take, such as Spanish or French?

- A) Yes
- B) No
- C) I don't know

5. Does your school host an international day or week where the cultures in the school are celebrated through food, music or other cultural activities?

- A) Yes
- B) No
- C) I don't know

6. Is social studies taught at your school?

- A) Yes
- B) No
- C) I don't know

7. If you answered yes, does social studies at your school include world cultures?

- A) Yes
- B) No
- C) I don't know

8. Are ELL students included in the general classroom at your school?

- A) Yes
- B) No
- C) I don't know

Part 2

The following are open ended questions.

1. Does your school offer any programs for parents of linguistically diverse students? Please explain.

2. How are English Language Learners placed into grade levels and classrooms?

3. What kinds of tests are administered in this process and if they are tested, are these tests in their native language?

Any additional feedback:

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