High School Social Studies Teachers’ Attitudes Toward English Language Learners

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This study examined the attitudes of high school social studies teachers toward the inclusion of English language learners (ELLs) in their social studies classrooms. A mixed-model methodology was employed by surveying all 344 social studies teachers in the school district. Additionally, eight of these teachers were interviewed to ascertain their attitudes toward including ELLs in high school social studies classrooms. More than three-fourths of teachers surveyed indicated they would prefer that ELLs not be in their classroom until they have “learned” English. Furthermore, the main cause of the negative attitudes seemed to be rooted in the inability of the social studies teachers to effectively modify instruction. The possible results of these attitudes and the efficacy of current policies are discussed.

Introduction

Many teachers across the nation from a variety of disciplines teach children who are classified as English language learners (ELLs). According to 2000 U.S. Census data, 18.4% of the population of the United States between the ages of 5-17 (i.e., school-aged children) reported that they spoke a language other than English at home (U.S. Census, 2000). This number is larger than the number reported in 1990 (13.8%) and represents more than 9.7 million students nationwide. While ELLs are typically enrolled in some type of language service program in their schools, cost restraints and general policy dictate that the majority of these students’ time at school is spent in regular content area classes with native English-speaking teachers and peers. This practice is commonly known as “immersion” because ELLs are immersed in an environment which uses English as the primary method of communication (Cruz & Nutta, 2003).

As a result of increases in immersion, secondary social studies teachers have experienced increases in the numbers of ELLs in their classrooms. Why is this especially important? In addition to simply teaching curriculum, social studies teachers have a responsibility unique to the discipline. The social studies are more complex than, as an example, math or science, because the content is subject to opinion, and the learning goals are not short term. It is hard to find disagreement that 2 + 2 equals 4, but much of the content in the social studies is subject to debate. In science, knowing the theory of relativity might be an immediate goal, but the long term goal of a science teacher is not to turn every student into an effective scientist. The goals of social studies may call for the student to know the three branches of the federal government, but the ultimate goal is to create effective citizens. Social studies teachers’ personal interests or personal stakes in social studies issues indicate that content often influenced by the events of the day and tension created when dealing with social studies topics combine to have a unique effect on social studies teachers and their students (Duplass, 2008).

According to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), the “primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (NCSS, 1992). Social studies classrooms, then, should
be places where cultural and linguistic diversity are not only accepted, but also where the unique contributions of ELLs should be incorporated in instruction. The social studies classroom is often the primary school vehicle for an ELL to learn about U.S. history, society, and government. Further, because teacher attitudes toward ELL inclusion can have a significant impact on the educational experiences and opportunities of ELLs (Reeves, 2002; Brisk, 1998), it seems a worthwhile endeavor to examine teacher attitudes in these settings.

Social studies content can be especially difficult to teach to ELLs for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons include gaps in background knowledge, heavy literacy demands (especially in classrooms that rely heavily on the textbook), and few hands-on opportunities to engage with the curriculum (especially in traditional lecture-format classrooms). In a study conducted on this topic, Short (1998) found that ELLs do not receive the language and academic support they need to master the problematic vocabulary and difficult reading and writing that are endemic to the social studies classroom. Because of the language difficulties experienced by many ELLs, it is likely that their immersion in these classes brings unique challenges to teachers. These challenges, in turn, may negatively or positively affect teachers’ attitudes toward teaching, in general, and toward ELLs, in particular. Therefore, teachers’ attitudes toward ELLs seems important to study to uncover the experiences in these classrooms with non-native speakers.

Several studies indicate that teachers in higher grade levels (i.e., middle school and high school) have a less positive attitude toward ELLs than those in lower grades (Bender, Vail, & Scott, 1995; Houck & Rogers, 1994; Rogers, 1987). Two major themes identified in these studies were the extra time required to teach ELLs and the difficulties faced when modifying coursework. A further complexity related to ELLs is that they do not exist in any school district as a homogeneous group. A great diversity exists within these ELL populations, ranging from students who speak little or no English to students whose proficiency resembles native speakers. At the time this study was conducted, the school district had a population of more than 23,000 ELLs enrolled in K-12 classrooms (Florida Department of Education, 2006), and these students represented all levels of English language proficiency.

Florida presented a rich milieu from which to collect ELL data, since at the time of the study it ranked third in the nation in the number of ELLs (203,712) enrolled in the K-12 setting (U.S. Census, 2000). National policy toward ELLs was set forth in the Supreme Court decision *Lau v. Nichols* which stated, in effect, that schools were required to supply “meaningful instruction” to non-native speakers (*Lau v. Nichols*, 1974). The school district in this study and all in Florida have specific policies when educating ELLs at the K-12 level. These policies came as a result of a lawsuit brought against Florida by the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). From this litigation came the “Florida Consent Decree” which was enacted on August 14, 1990, and this decree guarantees:

[Each student has] equal access to appropriate programming that shall include both access to intensive English language instruction and instruction in basic subject matter areas of math, science, social studies, computer literacy which is (a) understandable to the LEP student given his or her level of English language proficiency, and (b) equal and comparable in amount, scope, sequence and quality to that provided to English proficient students. (Florida Consent Decree, 1990, p. 6)

Under the auspices of the Florida Consent Decree, the state of Florida has mandated that all of its high school social studies teachers be required to take 60 in-service hours of English
Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) training or three college credits of a state-approved ESOL education course. According to the social studies supervisor for the county in which the study took place, all social studies teachers in the district were required to participate in the ELL in-service training within two years of being hired as a condition of their employment, regardless of their transferring into the district from another state or being employed prior to the Consent Decree. The assumption under the consent decree is that subject-area teachers will have training to offer meaningful instruction to those ELLs who are immersed in their classrooms. One purpose of this study was to gauge the practical effects of the Consent Decree as measured by teachers’ attitudes toward the educational environment when ELLs are immersed as well as teachers’ overall attitudes toward these immersion practices.

Theoretical Framework

Within the realm of the social sciences, the term *constructivism* refers to the philosophical belief that people construct their own understandings of reality. Some theorists go so far as to argue that there is no objective reality outside people’s constructs or perceptions (Oxford, 1997). One of the many paradigms closely linked with this view is called “social constructivism,” and it was used as the theoretical framework of this study (Cobb, 1994; Cobb & Yakel, 1995; Phillips, 1995). There are several assumptions shared by adherents of social constructivist theory. First, reality is constructed through human activity, and members of a society [or classroom] invent the properties of their “world” (Kukla, 2000). Another belief of social constructivists is that knowledge is a human product that is socially constructed (Ernest, 1999; Gredler, 1997; Prawat & Floden, 1994).

For most social constructivists, the emphasis of learning (whether it be language or content) is on the process (rather than just finished products) in activity-based learning situations with meaningful purposes (Rogoff, 1994). I have chosen this framework because it focuses on the social nature of the learning process and can be applied to the “construction” of reality by the teachers of ELLs. Several research studies have concluded that the teacher’s attitude plays an important part in the overall learning process (Bloom, 1976; Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2002; Garcia, 1999; Krashen, 1981). An assumption I made for the purpose of this study is that teacher attitudes about the educational environment and the process of immersion are directly related to the “reality” of having ELLs in their social studies classroom. Each day, teachers and ELLs are engaged in social interactions inherent in instruction, and these interactions will affect the attitudes of teachers.

Also, societal attitudes toward ELLs may have an important impact as to how teachers perceive ELLs. Horencyzk and Tatar (2002) state:

> Teacher’s approaches and behaviors toward culturally diverse populations do not exist in a social vacuum; rather they tend to reflect—and be affected by—the norms and values both of the larger society and of the educational settings in which the interactions take place. (p. 436)

As members of their communities, teachers cannot help but be influenced by dominant societal attitudes. When teachers internalize dominant societal messages, they may bring these messages into their schools and classrooms. School administrators, other school staff, and parents all internalize societal messages, creating a school culture that mirrors that of the community and the dominant order of society in which they live.

Unfortunately, societal attitudes about English language learners and the educational programs that serve them have become increasingly negative in the US over the past decade.
Evidence of this can be seen in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts where voter referendums have banned bilingual education and negated ELL instruction to a single year of structured immersion. Voters in these states have been influenced largely by prevailing societal attitude, media bias, and propaganda campaigns funded by right-wing organizations such as “English for the Children” and “English Only” rather than rigorous educational research (Krashen, 2002). Groups such as these have lobbied to have English designated as the official language of the US. These groups feel the use of languages other than English in hospitals, social service agencies, schools, voting booths, and other public venues is considered anathema to our collective unity, and for full integration into society, non-native speakers need to be taught English (Boulet, 2001). The above examples show that across the population of the US there exists a broad spectrum of attitudes toward language usage and language instruction in the nation’s classrooms.

Measuring teacher attitudes toward the learning environment and toward immersion in general was the main goal of the study. If social interactions between teachers and ELLs are guided by positive or negative attitudes (however these attitudes are formed), I am making the assumption that there will be a significant impact on teacher behavior in the classroom, which can have either positive or negative consequences for ELLs.

As a result of this line of inquiry, the two most important research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What are high school social studies teachers’ attitudes toward the effect on the education environment when ELLs are included in their social studies classrooms?

2. What are high school social studies teachers’ attitudes, in general, toward including ELLs in their classroom?

**Methods**

Participants of this study were all high school (grades 9-12) social studies teachers who taught ELLs in their social studies classrooms. At the time of the study, there were 344 social studies teachers working in the district, and approximately 70% ($n = 240$) had been identified by the social studies coordinator as having ELLs in their classrooms. Surveys were given to each high school social studies department chairperson, and they were asked to distribute the surveys to teachers at their respective schools. Teachers were asked to complete the survey only if they had ELLs in their classes at the time of the study.

I chose eight teachers from the survey respondents and conducted structured interviews with these teachers. Patton (1990) states, “Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit” (p. 278). In this study, interviews allowed me to further investigate teachers’ attitudes toward immersion, in general, and attitudes toward the effect on the educational environment, in particular.

Five of the interviewees were male, and their experience ranged from 2 ½ years of teaching to 37 years of teaching experience. The three female teachers' experience ranged from 17 weeks to 19 years. To conceal the identity of the eight interview participants, pseudonyms were created for identification. Below are demographic data for each of the participants:

**Stacy** had nineteen years of experience and was a department chair at her high school. She had approximately 15 ELLs who spoke three different languages in her social studies classroom.

**Stephanie** had been teaching at an inner-city magnet high school for five years. At the time of the study, she had six ELLs in her social studies classroom.
Rachel was a first-year teacher teaching at a school in an urban setting. At the time of the interview, she had six ELLs in her social studies classroom.

Ralph was in his third year teaching at a rural school in which most of the school’s students were classified as Caucasian. At the time of the interview, he had approximately 16 ELLs in his social studies classroom.

Peter was in his fifth year of teaching at an urban magnet high school. Almost half of the students at his school were classified as “Hispanic,” and more than ten percent of the students at his high school were classified as “Limited English Proficient.” At the time of the study, he had approximately 40 ELLs enrolled in his social studies classes.

Roger had been teaching social studies for more than 30 years. His school was one of the larger schools in the county. At the time of the interview, he had five ELLs in his social studies classes.

Gary had 11 years of teaching experience at his mostly white suburban school, and at the time of the study, he had 13 ELLs in his classroom.

Steve was a fifth-year teacher at an urban school with a very diverse population. He estimated that approximately one third of his students (approximately 45) were ELLs.

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, a mixed method model was used. The specific model used was a “sequential exploratory model” in which quantitative survey data were analyzed first (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 28) and interview data were analyzed last. The survey instrument included Likert Scales and open-ended questions which allowed participants to elucidate their attitudes toward having ELLs in their classrooms. The interview questions were used to further explore teacher attitudes toward including ELLs in social studies classrooms.

Quantitative Instrument

I used the survey instrument created by Jennelle Reeves (2002) with only minor alterations. Reeves created this instrument when she conducted a study of high school teachers’ attitudes from a variety of disciplines on ELL inclusion in a rural school district in Tennessee.

Return Rate

Of the 344 survey instruments which were distributed, 123 (35.7%) were returned. Assuming that the county social studies coordinator’s estimates were correct in that approximately 70% (n=240) of the social studies teachers had ELLs in their classrooms, the 123 surveys indicate that slightly more than 50% of teachers with ELLs in their classrooms returned surveys to me. Since the surveys were collected anonymously, it is impossible to know if any systematic bias occurred in the data collection.

Findings of the Study

The survey respondents were asked three questions which dealt directly with their perceived effects on classroom environment when ELLs were present. Table 1 contains data from the first two questions.
Table 1

Inclusion of ELL Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creates positive educational atmosphere</td>
<td>9 (7.3%)</td>
<td>34 (27.6%)</td>
<td>24 (19.5%)</td>
<td>47 (38.2%)</td>
<td>9 (7.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In social studies classrooms—benefits all students</td>
<td>12 (9.8%)</td>
<td>40 (32.5%)</td>
<td>17 (13.8%)</td>
<td>41 (33.3%)</td>
<td>13 (10.6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Less than half of the respondents (45.5%) either agreed or strongly agreed that including ELLs in the social studies classroom creates a positive educational atmosphere in the class. An unusually high percentage of respondents (19.5%) reported not having an opinion on this question. When asked if the inclusion of ELLs benefits all students, the responses were almost even. The difference between those who did believe it benefited all (43.9%) and those who believed it did not benefit all (42.3%) translated to only two total participants out of 123.

Because other researchers had identified time constraints for both teaching and learning, the participants were asked about their attitudes regarding how ELLs affect the progress of the entire class. The survey results for this question are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Inclusion of ELL Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Seldom or never</th>
<th>Some of the time</th>
<th>Most or all of the time</th>
<th>No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slows progress of entire class</td>
<td>52 (42.3%)</td>
<td>39 (31.7%)</td>
<td>26 (21.1%)</td>
<td>6 (4.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data indicate that slightly more than half of the participants (52.8%) perceived that the inclusion of ELLs slowed the progress of the entire class to some degree. Seventeen of the survey participants listed some aspect of time constraints as a major challenge when teaching ELLs. Students in Florida’s public schools must take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), and many of the teachers who were concerned with a lack of time specifically mentioned FCAT preparation as problematic when ELLs were in their classes.

The survey instrument included an open-ended writing prompt to explain what teachers perceived to be the greatest benefits of including ELLs in the social studies classroom. Sixty-one participants (49.5%) mentioned “diversity” or some aspect of “cross-cultural awareness” as a positive effect of including ELLs in their classrooms. The following quotes are comments taken directly from the survey instrument:
“ELL students bring another perspective to the class that GREATLY benefits my English-speaking students.”

“ELL students can be an invaluable teaching tool. Some have experienced things like poor labor conditions and immigration. They are living history.”

“ALL students benefit from the inclusion of these (ELL) kids in my class.”

However, not all teachers who responded were in agreement. The following quotes were also taken directly from the survey instrument:

“They (ELL students) are bored in my class because they don’t understand what is being taught. Invariably they are a disruption because they don’t know what’s going on and they start talking to their friends.”

“Including ELL students slows the progress of the entire class and English speaking students don't like the special treatment of ELLs.”

“There are NO [original caps] benefits to including these students. Oftentimes they’ll talk to other ELL students who are trying to help and disrupt the whole class.”

“Including ELL students lowers the level of the classroom (instruction) and creates a tremendous amount of unnecessary work for teachers.”

Understandably, thirty seven of the survey respondents mentioned their main challenge focused on the language barrier when trying to communicate with ELLs, especially in classrooms with students speaking multiple languages. Another finding which related to communication was the inability of some teachers to distinguish ability levels of their ELLs in regards to English language proficiency. Comments such as “I can’t tell if they’re being lazy or if they truly don’t know English,” and “I think they use their inability to speak English as a crutch,” indicate that some teachers may have felt that ELLs were not working to their abilities, despite their status as non-native speakers.

The eight interview participants were asked how having ELLs in the classroom affected the classroom environment. Rachel stated that she did not see any benefits from including ELLs in classrooms with English-speaking counterparts. The remaining seven interview participants echoed the statements of the 61 survey participants by mentioning some aspect of the positive effects of the diverse perspectives that ELLs brought with them into the social studies classroom. Stacy and Gary mentioned a new theme that was not present in the literature and one that I had not encountered until the interview data were analyzed. Stacy stated, “ELLs have forced me to reflect upon what I'm doing as a teacher, I constantly have to rethink how I’m presenting the material when I have a lot of them...it’s definitely good for me.” Gary echoed these sentiments when he said, “It’s challenging for me as a teacher so it keeps me on my toes.”

The survey instrument contained four questions that related to overall attitudes toward immersion practices, in general. Table 3 contains the response data from the participants.
Table 3

Inclusion of ELL Students in Social Studies Classrooms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Should not be included until they have attained a minimum level of English proficiency</td>
<td>4 (3.3%)</td>
<td>20 (16.3%)</td>
<td>3 (2.4%)</td>
<td>58 (47.2%)</td>
<td>36 (29.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would welcome the inclusion of ELL students in my social studies classroom</td>
<td>3 (2.4%)</td>
<td>26 (21.1%)</td>
<td>21 (17.1%)</td>
<td>57 (46.3%)</td>
<td>14 (11.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More than half (57.7%) of the respondents who indicated that they had an opinion stated they would welcome the inclusion of ELL students in their social studies classroom. These data seem to contradict the findings that slightly more than three fourths (76.5%) of teachers who felt that ELL students should have a minimum level of English proficiency before they should be included in social studies classrooms. Due to the contradictory nature of these data, it was hoped that analysis of the interview data would explain the disparity.

After reviewing teacher comments from the survey instrument, it became apparent that many teachers felt very strongly for or against the immersion practices as they were implemented at the time of the study. The following comments, directly from the survey instrument, illustrate some of the negative attitudes toward including ELLs in the classroom:

Negative comments:

- “Instead of being thrown to the wolves, ELL students should be placed in a separate 15-1 ratio class where they can learn English.”

- “Separating kids into separate classes may hurt their feelings, but it hurts their academic progress more when they can't understand the teacher.”

- “It is a disservice to all students to group students in classes with widely divergent language abilities—and the amount of groupthink within education academia (which thinks otherwise) remains troubling to me.”

- “It is my belief that students who speak little or no English do not benefit from sitting in a classroom and not comprehending anything the teacher says.”

- “I do not want it [mainstreaming]. Their (sic) should be a separate social studies class for these students.”

- “Current ELL practices prolong the difficulties and create resentments, frustrations, and added workloads that result in more teachers leaving.”
Positive comments:

- “It’s challenging, but it feels good when ELL students are able to learn new things and express understanding of lessons.”

- “It broadens my horizon! I love to see the smiles on their faces when they realize they can do it.”

- “Some of my most pleasant teaching experiences have occurred with ELL students. Many of my ELL students are my best students.”

- “I thoroughly enjoy their positive attitude toward work, the dedication and interest, and their appreciation of the help I give.”

The eight interview participants were asked to characterize their attitudes toward current immersion practices using the terms “Positive,” “Neutral,” or “Negative.” Rachel indicated that her attitude was “neutral, neither positive nor negative.” Stephanie stated, “I have no negative feelings toward mainstreaming these (ELL) students. It’s just a part of life. It’s the changing demographics of the area, it’s a reality. It’s what’s happening.”

Four of the participants indicated that their attitude toward current ELL practices was positive. Peter stated, “Absolutely it’s positive, I think tracking hurts kids. And if you put all these ELL kids in the same basket, they’re going to struggle together. I think the help they get from a heterogeneous setting is invaluable.”

Two of the participants stated emphatically that their attitude toward including ELLs in the classroom was negative. Steve said, “Very negative because of the lack of support (from ESOL personnel). It’s unfair to them (ELLS) and it’s unfair to me.” Ralph echoed these sentiments when he stated, “Definitely, the way it is now, negative. It’s really not fair to the ELL kids and it’s definitely not fair to teachers. I’m frustrated and I know they’re frustrated.”

Discussion

Based on the survey instrument, less than half of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that including ELLs created a positive educational environment. Nearly 20% of the participants \( n = 24 \) chose “no opinion” when answering this question. As a researcher, this leads me to wonder if these teachers did not want to indicate a “socially undesirable response” (Popham, 2008, p. 228) in regards to ELL inclusion. What needs to be examined is why so many teachers feel that ELL inclusion does not improve the environment in classrooms which purportedly study other cultures and which should value diversity as a way to strengthen citizenship skills.

Many of the negative comments from both the survey instrument and interviews seemed to be rooted in the pedagogical philosophy of the teachers. Whether it was students not understanding instruction or not being able to “keep up” with their native-speaking counterparts, the difficulties seemed to originate in the weakness of the classroom teacher to effectively modify instruction. While many of the survey participants had very negative feelings about the district-mandated training, none seemed to feel that the training was particularly effective.

Below are several comments taken directly from the survey instrument explaining the attitude:

- “Training programs for ELLs are poorly funded and notoriously ineffective, especially at the senior high level.”

- “I spent 60 hours of District-mandated training watching videos it didn’t help.”
“My district training didn’t help, unless I have another bilingual student in the classroom I can’t even communicate with them.”

“The District training takes a ‘one size fits all’ approach. It is WOE-FULLY inadequate.”

“Training teachers inadequately is NOT a substitute for supplying ELLs with a comprehensible education.”

“The ESOL training is a waste of time and a joke. The county could do much better at this.”

All of the interview participants who indicated positive attitudes toward ELL inclusion were able to give several examples of effective instructional modification. It should be noted that the two teachers who felt most efficacious at modifying coursework (Peter and Stacy) indicated that they had learned effective practices by “trial and error” rather than by the training provided by the school district. Peter mentioned using images from the internet to provide context which, in turn, greatly increased student understanding. Stacy mentioned using other ELLs as “classroom aides” to help students at the early levels of English acquisition understand content. Stephanie mentioned the success she had by relating her content to the life experiences of ELLs. Conversely, those with negative or neutral attitudes focused primarily on difficulties they faced when ELLs were included in their classroom. Steve (who had the most ELLs) mentioned the extreme difficulties the ELLs had in understanding even the basic concepts he was trying to teach in his American History class. While all the teachers in the study had completed district-mandated training or college coursework, few seemed comfortable with modifying coursework. For example, the only instructional modification Rachel mentioned was “writing directions on the whiteboard,” which indicates a significant lack of ability when modifying coursework for ELLs.

Throughout the literature, there are frameworks and examples (see Banks, & Banks, 1999; Cruz & Thornton, 2008; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000; Salinas, Fránquiz, & Reidel, 2008) which document successful teaching experiences with (even late-arriving) ELLs. Cho and Reich (2008) provide an excellent list of research-based suggestions for classroom teachers when teaching ELLs. While none of these suggestions is new to the field, all offer classroom teachers suggestions for modifying coursework to more effectively teach ELLs. Undoubtedly, a focus on some of these techniques (e.g., using graphic organizers, using realistic, hands-on activities, as well as promoting language objectives) could improve the overall quality of instruction in these classrooms, but ELLs would particularly stand to benefit.

Perhaps the most important finding of this study was that three out of four social studies teachers (76.5%) who responded to the survey indicated that ELLs should not be in their classroom until they have attained a minimum level of English proficiency. It would seem that of all content area teachers, social studies teachers (given the discipline’s focus on culture, geography, history, and the like) would be most accepting of culturally and linguistically diverse students. The question remains: If this high percentage of social studies teachers shares this view, what are the attitudes of other content area teachers (e.g., English, science, and math) toward ELLs?

When Reeves (2002) conducted a study of all secondary content area teachers in a rural school district in Tennessee, a remarkably similar number (74.9%) of teachers indicated that ELLs should not be included until they were proficient in speaking English. An important difference between the teachers in Reeves’s study and this one was that only 18% of those teachers had any training to work with
ELLs, while all of the teachers in this school district were required to attend training as a condition of employment. Important questions to ask include “Does any amount of training make content area teachers more willing to allow ELLs in their classroom?” and “Which types of training are most effective to ensure equitable access to education for ELLs?”

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study’s findings confirm that there is a broad spectrum of attitudes toward ELLs in the social studies classroom. What is also apparent is the underlying cause of many of the negative attitudes is the inability of many of the social studies teachers to effectively modify instruction for ELLs. While some of the teachers felt it was clearly not their responsibility to teach students English, many teachers, like Stephanie, recognized that ELL inclusion was a part of the changing landscape of 21st century schools. Based on the high number of negative comments directed at teacher training, the school district in which the study took place should examine the efficacy of existing training methods for working with ELLs.

Gonzalez and Darling-Hammond (1997) asserted, “Many (ELL) teachers have experienced one or more sessions in which experts from outside the schools present ideas...in the manner of traveling salesmen” (p. 35). This “one-shot” approach seems to lead to a general lack in teacher efficacy when teaching ELLs and may actually be counterproductive. Most of the interview participants indicated that they felt the ELL training offered by the district was just another requirement of their job rather than an effective tool to help them teach ELLs. To reaffirm this, when asked if teachers should have more training, Stephanie (who indicated a positive attitude toward ELL inclusion) said, “Teachers are over-trained as it is. We don’t need more training.” There is no easy solution to this problem, but it is apparent that districts, as well as universities, should look into new and innovative ways to effectively prepare their teachers to teach ELLs.

Last, the teachers in the schools with the highest percentage of ELLs reported the least amount of support from ELL personnel in their respective schools. Whether it be the administrative strains placed on the time of ELL support personnel or the sheer number of ELL students in these schools, the district should consider redistributing resources (e.g., adding more ESOL personnel at schools with higher number of ELLs) to ensure a more equitable experience with ELL support for the content area teachers in these settings. Of all the content areas, social studies classes are the one place where ELLs have the opportunity to learn important citizenship skills which can help them become effective participants in a democratic society. Since the data indicate an inherent appreciation of diversity and cross cultural awareness by many of the teachers, higher efficacy by the teachers to teach the ELLs social studies content may lead to a greater appreciation of linguistic diversity and lead to a more positive educational experience for the ELLs.

**References**


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