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The Impact Of The Closure Of Open Enrollment On Language Immersion Program

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THE IMPACT OF THE CLOSURE OF OPEN ENROLLMENT ON
LANGUAGE IMMERSION PROGRAM

By

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Master of Arts in Teaching

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE	1
Open Enrollment in Minnesota	2
History of Open Enrollment in D1	4
Open Enrollment and the Spanish Immersion School	4
Influences	5
The Campaign	6
Conclusion	8
CHAPTER TWO	9
Open Enrollment	9
Cultural Importance of Parental Choice	11
Educational Equity	12
Balancing Enrollment and Budget Benefits	13
Language Immersion	14
Benefits of Language Immersion	15
Conclusion	17
CHAPTER THREE	18
Setting	18
Participants	19
Interview Format	20
Conclusion	22
CHAPTER FOUR	23

Findings	23
Conclusion	28
CHAPTER FIVE	30
My Community Realization	31
My Professional Realization	33
My Personal Realization	34
Future Research Projects	35
Limitations of the Study	35
Conclusion	36
WORKS CITED	39

Chapter One

Introduction

Minnesota has always been known for offering high quality educational programs in our public school system. We are a state with a strong reputation, and are consistently ranked favorably in student achievement, teacher readiness, standardized test scores, college attendance and rich course offerings. According to U.S. News and World Reports, Minnesota is ranked #11 overall for K-12 public education (2017). We are also known for offering a wide array of parent choice in our public school systems and one of the most common options is language immersion.

Language immersion programs provide the opportunity for children to learn another language anywhere from 50% to a full day, depending upon the program (Rhodes, 2010). There is a great amount of research that advocates that immersion programs are the most effective way for children to learn another language (Ballinger & Lyster, 2011; Potowski, 2004, Rhodes, 2010). According to Minnesota Advocates for Immersion Network (MAIN), there are more than 70 immersion schools in Minnesota alone, for ages preschool through high school (2017).

Additionally, Minnesota is known for being the first state to offer open enrollment (OE) as an educational option for families. According to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), the term open enrollment (OE) allows for “enrollment of students who are Minnesota residents and wish to enroll in a regular public school district other than their own” (MDE, 2017). The city where I live has both a thriving language immersion school as well as a percentage of open enrolled students. Until most recently, all language immersion students and open enrolled students were welcomed into the district with “open arms”, but as our resident student population has increased, so has the need for additional facilities. Our school district was unsuccessful at passing a referendum in 2016, which would have allowed the district to build an

addition on the high school and construct a new elementary school. This failed attempt resulted in many students and staff “feeling the pinch” in 2017. Therefore, in December 2016, the school board closed open enrollment for grades K-12, to the statutory minimum of 1% for the remainder of the 2016-2017 school year and also the 2017-2018 school year.

Although many people in the community were supportive of closing open enrollment, I was not one of them, for a few reasons. First, the closing of open enrollment puts the very young immersion school at the greatest risk, due to its dependence upon open enrolled students. Additionally, hinders educational equity by restricting students who cannot afford to live within the district boundary from entering the district, and lastly, it restricts dollars from being brought into the school district. Subsequently, parents became desperate to enroll their children in the immersion program, because if they do not enroll in kindergarten, they cannot enter in later grades. Therefore, the intent of this capstone is to examine the effects of the open enrollment closure on parents and families, and ultimately I seek to answer the question “To what lengths are parents of open enrolled students willing to go, to gain entrance into the Spanish immersion school?”

In this chapter, I will offer a brief history of open enrollment; in Minnesota, the school district, and the Spanish immersion program. I will refer to the school district as “D1” for purposes of this capstone. Additionally, I will share what has fueled my passion in the area of immersion education as it relates to the issue of open enrollment.

Open Enrollment in Minnesota

For quite some time in Minnesota, the term “open enrollment” has been a household word, when speaking of education. In 1988, Minnesota was the first state in the United States to adopt an open enrollment plan, and protect it by law (Corson, 1990). Minnesota state statute

124D.03 states that every public school district in Minnesota has enrollment options where at least 1% of enrolled students, at each grade level, can be from outside the school district boundaries. There are, of course, specific statewide guidelines and regulations, as well as enrollment forms and processes that exist. These processes are consistent across the state and are regulated by the Minnesota Department of Education.

Open enrollment was created, according to Ross Corson, so that “parents be permitted to choose their children's schools and that the budget of each school depend on the parents' choices” (1990). In open enrollment, the state dollars that a student’s home district would normally receive, follow the student to the district that they attend. This is also true for Minnesota’s post-secondary education options (PSEO) that states that high school juniors and seniors can take accredited college courses, at no cost.

Community opinions on OE vary, and so does the percentage of OE students in various school districts. Some schools find themselves inundated with OE applications and students, while others find themselves unaffected. Some communities find themselves thankful for the dollars that the OE students bring in, and have been able to radically change their course offerings because of it. Others, like the community I live in, have fought arduously this year to restrict the number of OE students that can enter, stating they do not have the facilities to support additional students. Although it is true that our district is tight on physical space, I suspect that this community has greater, unidentified issues in terms of race, socioeconomic status, and difference that are just starting to bubble to the surface. We will discuss this further in the reflection of Chapter 5.

History of Open Enrollment in D1

For many years leading up to 2014, D1 was losing more resident students to open enrollment, than they were gaining. This is because there are many private, charter, magnet and homeschooling options in the area. When those students left, they took their educational dollars with them. This resulted in the district looking for creative strategies to maintain resident students in the schools, and they created educational options to do so. In elementary, full-day kindergarten and Spanish immersion became the choice (after much parental and community input) and both programs were implemented in 2014-2015 school year. This also became the first school year that there were more students that open enrolled into D1, than left. The strategy was successful and for the past three school years, the trend has continued; more resident students have remained in-district and D1 has brought in more OE students than ever before.

On December 12, 2016, the school board voted suddenly to close OE to 1%, the statutory minimum, and it caught many in the community by surprise. This decision was made after state demographer Hazel Reinhart conducted a demographic study and presented the findings to the school board. In this report she stated that D1 was experiencing high levels of resident growth and that the district could anticipate over 2,000 new students in the next ten years.

Open Enrollment and the Spanish Immersion School

From the inception of the immersion school in 2014 until December 12, 2016, D1's administration had communicated that open enrollment was "open", because there had been no discussions around closing it at the kindergarten level. Open enrollment was communicated as "open" in printed and online materials as well as in school tours. For three years, parents at the immersion school were told that they could open enroll their children, and although some parents understood the risk of not being a resident, denying their enrollment was a very small risk. This

was strongly assumed especially for the sibling groups, as they receive first preference. Closing OE mid-year, prior to kindergarten registration, with no community involvement or notification shocked the parents and created an intense panic.

At roughly 25%, D1's Spanish immersion school has one of the highest rates of open enrollment (of the seven elementary schools) and as with many new specialty programs, resident enrollment increases with time. It is safe to say that the program has been viable because of both resident and open enrolled students, although each year the resident student growth has increased.

Immersion programs and open enrollment policy have a unique relationship because of second language acquisition. Unlike English speaking schools where students can enroll at any grade level, immersion students most commonly gain entrance in their kindergarten year. Students cannot open enroll in subsequent grades, unless they can demonstrate language proficiency in the target language, which is less common. For this reason, parents are desperate for their child to gain entrance into immersion programs in kindergarten. Many see it as their only opportunity to do so.

Influences

In 2013, I opened a tuition-based Spanish immersion preschool in the city where I live. At that time, the local school district did not have an elementary Spanish immersion program. My preschool was new and different, and unlike anything our town had experienced, yet we had strong and steady growth. The same year, the State of Minnesota distributed \$325,000 to each school district, to assist them in implementing all-day kindergarten for the 2014-2105 school year. D1 decided to the majority of their funds to open a Spanish immersion school, as they already offered full-day kindergarten. I was asked to be a volunteer community member on the

implementation team and I worked closely with the school district to gather information, present to the school board, and create a curricular plan. This idea was also met with open arms and the Spanish immersion program began in 2014-2015, with three sections of kindergarten, and 64 total students. The implementation plan is to add one grade per year, until reaching capacity in the fifth grade. Currently, they have grades K-3. Although I never planned the preschool and elementary Spanish immersion programs to coincide, my preschool acts as a natural feeder into the local district's immersion school. Additionally, the large majority of my preschool students enroll in the Spanish immersion school for their elementary experience. For this reason, the December 12, 2016 closure of OE to 1% was of great interest to me. When the December decision was made, many of our students had already been immersed in Spanish for months (if not years), and their parents were preparing for the January kindergarten enrollment, not the removal of the immersion option for their family. It created a sense of panic amongst the parents enrolled at my school, and as their leader, I began to investigate on their behalf. During this investigation period, I also began to uncover what the potential loss of open enrolled students would mean for the entire immersion program, and how the resident students would also be impacted. As a mother of a first grade student in the immersion school, my concern deepened.

The Campaign

In December 2016, a small grass roots campaign began amongst the immersion parents of both the preschool and the elementary school. The idea was to share the concerns with the school board, for when enrollment decreases in a new school. Additionally, there were many open enrolled students whose siblings were denied kindergarten entrance into the Spanish immersion school because of the closure to 1%. This closure forced parents to either have their children in different school districts or pull their current children from the immersion school. Both decisions

seemed impossible for parents. The potential loss of current immersion students, because their siblings could not gain entrance, was a terrible fate for the immersion school. Neither option seemed acceptable to immersion parents and administration, and so the grass-roots campaign began.

Initially, it began with a letter writing campaign, in which families were asked to express their concern to the school board, and more than 65 letters were sent to the school board. Later, a resident parent created a petition, which was signed by more than 400 people, asking that open enrollment be considered to the immersion program, thus filling the kindergarten seats to capacity and allowing sibling preference. On January 9, 2017, more than 120 parents and community members attended the school board meeting, where myself and other immersion supporters, were speakers. Later, in April of 2017, after months of advocacy, school board meetings, memos, data requests, personal meetings with school board members, etc. the board allowed an additional 75 students to enter kindergarten for the 2017-2018 school year. All 75 students were siblings of current D1 students and the 75 students filled the immersion school to capacity.

Although I was pleased with this vote, many people were not. I received an anonymous letter at my home suggesting that I silence my opinion, various emails with “data” informing me how OE hurts our school district, and open criticism in local papers (calling me out by name) by people that opposed OE. The common theme in the information directed towards me was that OE hurts our district because residents of D1 do not want to pay for “those” people. Additionally, I received emails that said “if they want to go to school here, they can move here”. Although we do not have the demographical data on open enrolled students, there is a common community perception that they people that are trying to enroll are coming from a lesser socio-

economic status and are students of color. As of September, 2017, the two largest populations that open enroll into D1 are from Burnsville (487 students) and Shakopee (315 students) (personal email). Both of these cities report much greater ethnic diversity than D1, however we do not have actual data to confirm or deny this assumption from the school district.

Lastly, in two different public meetings, some residents openly stated that they wish the Spanish immersion program would have never opened, or that it would have opened as a charter school. One resident openly asked me, as the resident immersion business owner, to “take” the Spanish immersion school from the school district and run it as a charter school in my building.

All of the pushback, in terms of difference and equity, greatly fueled me and I did not shrink back. I became louder.

Conclusion

During my months of research, advocacy and investigation, I discovered that parents are determined to have their children open enrolled into the program of their choice, specifically the Spanish immersion program. The unexpected closure of open enrollment created a desperation amongst parents than the district had not previously witnessed. I also was made aware of a deep and dangerous divide within our community in terms of educational equity and the belief system that supports it. Although this capstone aims to investigate the lengths to which future open enrolled parents will go to gain entrance into their desired program, we will also discuss how the closure affects educational equity.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

Introduction

Education in the United States is constantly changing and we have more options than ever before. Neighborhood schools are no longer the only option and parents are researching and selecting schools that fit their educational philosophy, style, etc. The adoption of Minnesota's open enrollment policy in 1988 helped to encourage even more school choice options; language immersion, Dual Language immersion, charter and magnet schools, etc.

This chapter aims to explore open enrollment in Minnesota, the impact of language immersion education, and the cultural importance of parental choice. Combined, this information aims to answer the question "To what lengths are parents of open enrolled students willing to go, to gain entrance into the Spanish immersion school?"

Open Enrollment

Open enrollment, also called Statewide Enrollment Options, is a term that allows families to enroll in a district of their choice, in the state of Minnesota, without residing in that school district boundary. This policy is for students in kindergarten through grade twelve. Although there are twenty other states that allow open enrollment, Minnesota state statute 124D.03 states that each district must allow for a minimum of 1% (one percent) of their student population to be open enrolled students, at each grade level. However, each school district has the discretion to decide the maximum number of OE students they wish to enroll. Many school districts determine capacity limits for the following school year and have those voted on by their school board, mid-year. The school board is able to modify their OE status as often as they deem necessary,

however many boards find it unappealing (to their community) to be constantly changing their OE policy.

The same statute also says that the parent (or legal guardian) of the child must live in Minnesota, and the student must request to attend a Minnesota public school. Statute 124D.03 does not mandate open enrollment to 1% for Charter, Magnet, Parochial, etc. schools.

To enroll, there is a common application form from the Minnesota Department of Education, and all districts must distribute the application to their interested out-of-district families. This form is completed and turned into the Superintendent's office in each district. The statewide deadline for turning in this application is January 15, for entrance into the district the following September. If school districts have more applicants than spots available, they must hold an impartial lottery. There are three groups of people which receive preferences; those with siblings already enrolled in the district, employees with children they wish to enroll and those in early childhood special education. Once the spaces are filled with the students in the preference category, the district holds a lottery for all other applicants. They cannot select specific students based on athletic ability, race, language, etc. Likewise, they cannot reject students with special needs, English language learners, etc. In other words, school districts must be prepared to meet the educational needs of all students, regardless of educational experience and academic achievement.

It is important to note that school districts interpret the 1% minimum differently for students with special education needs in early childhood. Early childhood is considered to be birth to age five, or pre-kindergarten age. Some school districts include all special education students in the 1% minimum, however D1 does not. Our local district states that students that were granted an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in early childhood, do not count towards the

1% minimum. In other words, an OE student in early childhood special education, automatically gains entrance into their desired district (in kindergarten) and will not count towards the statutory 1%. For purposes of this capstone, this statutory interpretation is very important, because it has allowed some students to gain entrance into the Spanish immersion school in kindergarten, even when OE was closed to 1%.

Open enrollment was created for a few very strong reasons; to offer choice for parents and students, to offer educational equity and to help balance enrollment and budgets in school districts.

Cultural Importance of Parental Choice

The United States is a country that thrives on choice. We have thousands of choice options and there are even theories in economics, psychology and marketing that suggest that decision makers benefit from having a lot of choice. According to Schwartz in the Harvard Business Review, there is so much choice in our society that there is a theory called “choice paralysis” which decreases motivation to select an option because people become paralyzed by the amount of choices available to them. In our culture, parents have become accustomed to selecting the school for their children. This choice empowers parents to select a school that they feel will best fit their child’s needs, regardless of their address or income. They select schools based on location, philosophy, affordability, specialty, etc. School choice essentially moves the parents from the margins of their child’s academics, to the center of it. Burke and Sheffield report that “school choice has allowed parents to move from a marginal role as passive recipients of school assignments to active participants in the school selection process” (2011).

Research shows that when parents select their child’s school, graduation rates increase, parental involvement and satisfaction increases, students with special needs are better serviced

and all of this combines equates to improvements to the overall educational system (Burke, 2014). Many say that regardless of race, socio-economic status, city of residency, educational background, etc., the most important idea is that the parent remains in the driver's seat for the school enrollment choice. It is of utmost importance that the choice is not made for them.

Also of interest, according to the American Federation for Children, 68% of American voters agree with school choice options with millennials to be most likely to support (2017). When the data was broken down by ethnicity, Caucasians were the least likely to support school choice options. As a community with a very large Caucasian population, and a vocal elderly population against open enrollment, this data is of great personal interest.

Educational Equity

Open enrollment was created to help “level the playing field” for low-income students and their families. Typically, students with greater financial resources have moved into the district boundaries of the school they wish to attend. Mikulecky reports that the United States Department of Education surveyed parents in 2007 and 27% of parents of public school students reported moving to their current neighborhood so that their child could attend his or her current school (2009). OE options allow for students to attend a specific school even if they lack the financial ability to live within its boundaries. This can have positive effects for both school and students. Mikulecky (2009) states:

“One of the major benefits of open enrollment is that it provides low-income parents with options that they wouldn't otherwise have been able to access. This policy option keeps students in public schools that operate under district and locally elected board control while providing additional public education options that can serve to increase student achievement and success” (p.2).

However, financial resources are not the only factor in open enrollment and many families, unhappy with the performance of their resident district, are also fleeing. In September, 2017, Raghavendran and Webster report, via the Star Tribune that more than 9,000 black students fled Minneapolis Public Schools. The article suggests that families are leaving for a wide variety of reasons “ranging from safety concerns to a belief that academics elsewhere are better than in Minneapolis, which has struggled for years to close the more than 50-percentage-point gap between white and black student achievement” (2017). Although the article reports that about 70% of the fleeing students in Minneapolis attend Charter Schools, in D1 we have seen people flood D1 because of academics and reputation.

Balancing Enrollment and Budget Benefits

In Minnesota, districts receive both federal and state dollars to fund education. They also receive funding from other sources, but each school district receives per pupil dollars, per year. D1 receives \$8,444 per year, according to their audited financials. When an open enrolled student enrolls outside of their resident district, the money to fund their education goes with them. Although their family is still required to pay any local taxes, bonds and levies, the state funding for the student is gained by the district that has enrolled them. For this reason, open enrollment has become a popular option for school district administration, especially in districts that lag in enrollment. Some schools, (like Minnetonka, MN) use OE dollars to fuel and fund programs they did not previously have. Some communities, like mine, resist OE students because they view the student as “not fully funded”.

The financial aspect of OE can also be a reason why communities do not want to allow students from outside district boundaries to enter. Some argue that the state and federal dollars do not cover the entire amount necessary to educate the student. For example, in D1, they spend

\$10,162 to educate each child. This leaves a deficit of roughly \$1,718 (according to their district 2015-2016 audit) that is made up for by local levies and other funding sources. As OE students do not pay the local levy, some residents view this as an unnecessary use of their tax payer dollars and therefore do not want to allow in OE students. The debate to close open enrollment in D1 has been in response to the resident growth but also in response to the funding.

Recently, there has been a common belief in the community that if D1 would have closed OE years ago, there would not be the current need to ask the community for more funds to construct a new elementary building. Although the data demonstrates that the need for additional facilities is because of incredible resident growth, there is a percentage of people who do not believe that. What this population fails to understand is that D1 depended upon the funding from OE students to balance their budget and educate resident students in past years.

Language Immersion

Language immersion schools were founded in the 1970's in French-speaking Canada. It slowly made its entrance into the United States and now is prevalent in many parts of the world, and in various languages. Rega (2015) states:

“language immersion, also known as immersion, is a method of teaching a foreign language in which the second language, or L2, is the vehicle for classroom instruction.

Immersion students learn context, such as math, science and social studies, in the L2. The main purpose of this approach is to develop bilingual students, who are both competent in the L2 and their first language (L1)” (p.28).

Although there are various immersion models (one-way, two-way, dual language, etc.), D1 supports a one-way immersion model. This means that they remain in L2 the majority of the day, and the target language is used for instruction. In this method, children spend a very large

majority of their day in the target language, many learning to read in L2 before they learn to read in L1. According to research, this model has proven itself to be the most successful (Fortune, 2014).

Benefits of Language Immersion

Language immersion is a popular choice with parents for many reasons and for the purposes of this capstone, I will group them into three main categories; neurological, future economic opportunity and sociocultural awareness.

First, the neurological benefits of learning another language while young are incredible. The human brain is far more malleable than previously anticipated and although it is clear that genetics play a role in brain function, we also know that the human brain is not fixed at birth. Rather, the human brain is changed by exposure to experiences and learning. Lach (1997) reports:

“the human brain is already hard-wired for basic functions such as heartbeat, respiration and reflexes at birth. Within higher regions of the cortex, however, the neural circuitry is still developing its potential. In fact, the vast majority of the trillions of synaptic connections that a newborn will eventually make, are determined in the first few years of life. Studies have shown that the more numerous and varied a child’s earliest learning experiences, the more of these neurological connections they will form and keep”.

One author, Fred Genesee, offers a helpful modern-day analogy when he reports that the young brain is like a computer with incredibly sophisticated hardwiring, but no software. He says “The software of the brain, like the software of desktop computers, harnesses the exceptional

processing capacity of the brain.... all individuals have to acquire or develop their own software in order to harness the processing power of the brain with which they are born” (2001).

As an immersion educator, my goal is to take advantage of young children’s unique ability to develop the potential of neurological pathways. The increase in neurological pathways leads to greater cognitive function and bilingual students are known for being stronger in many areas, such as divergent thinking, pattern recognition and problem solving. Fortune (2014) states:

“Bilingual children develop the ability to solve problems that contain conflicting or misleading cues at an earlier age, and they can decipher them more quickly than monolinguals. When so doing, they demonstrate an advantage with selective attention and greater executive or inhibitory control. Fully proficient bilingual children have also been found to exhibit enhanced sensitivity to verbal and non-verbal cues and to show greater attention to their listeners' needs relative to monolingual children”.

Next, many parents are interested in immersion education because of the potential economic and sociocultural benefits to their children. First, bilinguals are able to communicate with a much wider range of people, from diverse backgrounds, which naturally gives them increased opportunity for employment, friendships, and learning opportunities. Additionally, it opens up future employment opportunities and is considered a 21st Century Skill (this term means that students have skills that many consider to be important to be successful in a global workforce). Many professions, both domestic and international, require increased language and sociocultural skills. A few examples include; international business, tourism, health care, law enforcement, national security, etc.

Lastly, bilingualism allows people to experience new cultures and societies more meaningfully, as the level of participation in that community is increased. Fortune states that

“becoming bilingual leads to new ways of conceptualizing yourself and others. It expands your worldview, so that you not only know more, you know differently (2014).

Conclusion

Minnesota has been a leader in school choice since its inception in 1988, and continues to do so in legislation and parental support. Parents have become accustomed to selecting their children’s schools, and are no longer accepting the neighborhood school as their only option. Data strongly supports that there are incredible benefits for students when their parents have increased involvement in the selection of their school. Language immersion is one of the most popular school choice options because of the incredible neurological, economic and sociocultural benefits that immersion provides.

Chapter Three

Methods

After spending roughly six months working with parents of future open enrolled students, it became apparent that parents were desperate to enroll their children in the language immersion program in our community. During those months of advocacy, parents used me as a sounding board for many ideas they had considered implementing to gain entrance. Some of those parents gained entrance while others did not. As our community faces the very real possibility that open enrollment will again be closed to the statutory 1% minimum for the 2018-2019 school year, the question remains: “To what lengths are parents of open enrolled students willing to go, to gain entrance into the Spanish immersion school?” In this chapter, I identify the methods that I employed to further explore this topic.

Setting

The community where I live, and where people are trying to gain entrance, is a third-ring suburb and currently has 8,300 students in grades K-12. The school district is comprised of two cities and the combined population of the cities is roughly 57,000 people, although it is on the rise. Both cities are seeing unprecedented growth which has allegedly led to the closure of open enrollment to the statutory 1%. There are seven elementary schools, one of which houses the language immersion program. A majority of the participants of this study (59%) do not live within the boundaries of the district and therefore it is difficult to state the demographics of all the cities where they reside. The remaining participants recently moved into the district to avoid enrollment problems (41%). The demographics of the students in D1, during the 2016-2017 school year were comprised of the following racial and ethnic information; 84.2% White, 6.1% Asian/Pacific Islander, 4.6% Black, 3.9% Hispanic, 1.3% American Indian/Alaskan Native.

While the district does not track average household income, the average home price is \$326,300 according to the data collection specialist of D1 (personal email, 2017).

Participants

The participants in this study are parents that previously attended or currently attend the preschool that I own. All participants have children ages 2-5 years old. There were thirty-two parents that were invited to complete the survey, and seventeen completed the survey. There were additional parents who began the survey but did not complete it. Their responses were excluded from this data. All participants of this study are parents of students who desire to attend the language immersion program in D1. Only one parent per household was able to participate.

Age range of participants. 43% of participants are between the ages of 31 and 35, while 40% were between the ages of 36-40. Only 13% of participants were between the ages of 41-45 and 3% responded “older than 45”. All participants are biological or adoptive parents. There were no foster parents or legal guardians who participated.

Racial and ethnic origin of participants. Participants reported that they identify as: 88% White, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander, 0% Black, 0% Hispanic, 0% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 0% other.

Gender of participants. The genders of the participants were recorded to be 6% male and 94% female.

Language background of participants. Of the participants, 100% report that English is their first language while only 3% responded that they speak a language other than English fluently.

Household income of participants. The household income varies greatly. Five percent of respondents replied that their household income is between \$25,000-44,999 while an

additional 5% responded that they earn between \$65,000-84,999 per year. There were no families surveyed that reported earnings of \$45,000-64,999 annually. Next, 9% replied that they earn between \$85,000-104,999 while the largest percentage of people polled (45%) reported earnings between \$105,000-184,999. 14% of participants reported earnings between \$185,000-205,000 and 23% reported making more than \$205,000 annually.

Educational background of participants. The levels of education vary in all families. For purposes of this investigation, 12% of participants reported that their highest level of education was a high school diploma. Additionally, 35% have a Bachelor's degree, 35% hold a Master's degree, 12% have a professional degree and 12% have a Doctoral degree.

Home Location. With respect to those living outside of the school boundary, 23% of those participants live less than 1 mile from the district boundary. 23% live within 1-5 miles of the boundary and 14% live 5-10 miles from the boundary. Only 18% live more than 10 miles from the district boundary.

Interview Format

Parents in this study were given a survey to complete in September of 2017. The survey was a one-time, electronic survey survey and consists of multiple choice and open ended questions. Participants had two weeks to complete the survey. It took between 5-10 minutes to respond to, depending upon the depth in which the participants elaborated on the open ended questions.

As I compared methodologies to utilize for this study, I realized that utilizing an investigative methodology that emphasizes the importance of looking at variables would be important. Therefore, I opted to conduct a qualitative research study. Merriam (1998) states that “qualitative investigations are more open-ended and less structured and that participants are able

to define their world in unique ways” (p.74). As I began to think about the unique situations that each family is in, I was attracted to the idea that variables in life need to be investigated in such a way to make space for the discussion of the variables. Therefore, the qualitative research method was selected.

The survey consisted of the following questions, some of which were demographic and the remainder of which specifically related to the actions people are/were willing to take to gain entrance into the Spanish immersion school. The demographic information is important because people’s choices are impacted by their age, educational level, financial ability, past experiences, etc. This will be discussed further in the following chapters.

The following questions were included on the survey:

1. Are you a parent living outside of the district boundary?
2. Are you male or female?
3. What is your highest level of education received? (choices offered)
4. What is your average household income? (choice offered)
5. What is your ethnic origin? (choices offered)
6. Is English your first language?
7. What level of second language skills do you possess? (choices offered)
8. What is the location of your home from the district boundary? (choices offered)
9. To gain entrance into D1, what did you consider? (choices offered)
10. To gain entrance into D1, what did you actually do? (choices offered)
11. If you did not gain entrance, what are your next steps at is relates to enrollment?
(choices offered)

12. If you did not gain entrance in kindergarten, will you open enroll your child as a first grader?
13. If yes, what will you do to maintain their language skills? (choices offered)
14. How did you decide “how far to push” the enrollment? (open ended)
15. Morally speaking, what influenced that decision? (open ended)

Only adults were surveyed and I received permission to conduct human subject research from the Graduate School of Education at Hamline University.

Conclusion

Open enrollment and immersion education are topics of great discussion in the community where I work and reside. In this chapter I explained the method that I used to explore the burning question: “To what lengths are parents of future open enrolled students willing to go, to gain entrance into the Spanish immersion school?” As I gathered information for the purposes of this study, it is important to note that each family situation and opinion varies greatly, which is why a qualitative study was utilized to gather data. Perhaps just as important, demographical information was gathered, as this information greatly influences people’s ability to move within a system, or be rejected by it. Chapter Four proceeds with the results of this study.

Chapter Four

Results

The purpose of this study is to determine what parents are willing to do to gain entrance into the Spanish immersion school, with open enrollment closed to the statutory one percent (1%). At first glance, one could assume that there are not many options; you either gain entrance in the lottery or you do not.

However, I found that parents are willing to go to creative lengths to gain entrance, before they even enter the lottery for open enrolled students. To complicate matters, there are demographical, educational, moral and ethical differences which influence how people move within the system. This chapter aims to discuss the findings of the survey, make connections between how the demographics of the participants influence their decision making, and themes and patterns that have emerged from the data.

As I look back upon the information shared in the Literature Review (Chapter 2) of this study, the three main categories that have emerged in the results are Educational Equity, the Benefits of Language Immersion and Cultural Importance of Parental Choice. In this chapter, I aim to share the survey findings with respect to these three areas. They are uniquely and not surprisingly intertwined.

Findings

First, it is necessary to state that parents must have a strong knowledge of the educational system, or access to someone who does, to even begin to understand what options are available to them when open enrollment closes to 1%. When open enrollment closes, parents with little knowledge would complete the paperwork process (as discussed in chapter 2) and then wait and see if they were selected in the lottery or not. Once you submit your paperwork as an open

enrolled student, all of the options discussed in this survey are void. You cannot “un-do” an open enrollment application, unless you have a purchase agreement in the resident boundary.

Therefore, all of our parents have at least a working knowledge of how to move in the system, to even be able to consider how to work around the system. This is the “first strike” against families who were not raised in the US educational system, are immigrants, do not speak English, etc.

By nature, this survey automatically assumes that people have enough of a connection to the system, to be able to work around the system. By nature, the process does not begin “equitable”.

Once options are introduced and discussed, is when the intersection of what parents want for their children and what they are willing to do for it, takes place. This is where the morality and ethics are considered. Parents commented that 55% of them considered moving into the school boundary, 36% considered using a friend or family members’ address, 32% considered renting or purchasing a townhome or renting an apartment in the boundary (although it is important to note that there are few apartments with D1 boundaries and the resident have fought hard to keep them out, saying the school district is already “too crowded”). Additionally, 14% considered obtaining or using their IEP and transferring in as a special education student, 9% considered entering an English elementary school in D1 to later seek an in-district transfer to the immersion school. 55% considered registering at another immersion school outside of the district. An additional and important comment is that the two closest immersion programs are not within 20 minutes from D1. This does not mean that they are not closer to the homes of the potential student, it does however mean that a parent must have transportation and the ability to drop off and pick up their child each day. This presents a logistical challenge for many families,

specifically those who do not own or have access to a vehicle, work out of the home, etc. Again, this is another “strike” against equity.

Lastly, participants commented that 50% considered attending their mainstream English school while 9% commented that they considered holding their child back another year, in hopes the OE decision would be different the following school year.

Parents were able to give feedback as to what they would never consider doing to gain entrance. Our survey participants reported that 14% never considered moving into the district boundary, while 19% never considered using the address of a friend or family member that is a resident of D1. They went on to mention that 52% of participants never considered renting or purchasing a second home, in district, to use as their primary address. Next, 9% of people never considered trying to obtain an Individual Education Plan (IEP) while only 5% never considered entering an English speaking school, in district, and then requesting an in-district transfer. Next, and not surprisingly, 62% of participants stated that they never considered holding their child back from kindergarten this year in hopes that D1 would have changed their OE policy in the following year. Only 5% of people replied that they did not consider any of these options.

On our survey, we also had a section that consisted of open-ended questions so that we could hear the rationale and heart of each family. This portion of the survey is why I elected to complete a qualitative survey; parents explained their moral and ethics behind what they were, or are not willing to do. First, two parents commented in the survey that they did not consider using a friend or family member’s address to be lying. One family commented that they would not ever consider trying to obtain an IEP because that felt it was the most dishonest; taking time in the process when they feel that their child did not have special needs. Next, two families commented that they felt that renting an apartment or purchasing a townhome felt like

“they were cheating” and that although they thought about it, they did not elect to do so. Two families commented that they would not lie, in any fashion, to enter the Spanish immersion school and should their name not be selected in the lottery, they would forgo their immersion experience. One person commented that they are willing to do whatever it takes to offer their child an immersion experience. These responses varied greatly and it is difficult to make a conclusion about why certain families were willing to do something more drastic and others were not.

I am surprised how much the morals/ethics of this process affected the families. I expected the vast majority of the parents to have an “anything it takes” attitude to gain entrance into the Spanish immersion school. I assumed this because they had already been in a preschool immersion setting, where they had both an emotional and financial investment. I was very wrong. The great majority of parents were driven by their moral and ethical boundaries and only wanted to gain entrance in a way that felt correct to them. I also predicted that the need for parents to maintain their parental choice would override their moral/ethical obligation. I was also incorrect in that assumption.

Therefore, families were asked to comment on what they did do, to gain entrance into the immersion program. There were less respondents in this section because a great majority of the parents will be enrolling their children for the next school year. However, of the responses, 29% parents stated that they moved into the district solely to gain entrance. This was the most popular response, while 19% of families registered to attend in another Spanish immersion program, outside of D1. Only 5% of parents were able to transfer their child’s IEP while another 5% reported that they held their child back one year. There were no parents that reported that they

used a friend or family members address and likewise, no people reported the purchase of a second home within the district's boundaries.

It was very surprising to me that no one reported the using of a friend or family members address, because this is the simplest option to utilize. Our school district utilizes a website that verifies the address is within the resident boundary, but does not verify that the student actually resides at that address. It is important to remember, that in order to use another person's address to gain enrollment, the family would have to know and have close contact with someone in the district. This assumes that they have contact with a family that can afford to live as residents, thus creating another equity issue.

Initially, it was also quite surprising to me that no one rented or purchased an additional home, townhome or apartment within the boundaries. As I began to investigate why that option was initially the most popular, but was never implemented, it became more obvious that the lack of affordable housing within D1 was part of the problem. Although it has been difficult to find data to support this information on the county website, I received feedback in personal conversations from families and professionals. I was told that historically D1 has maintained very low levels of apartments for rent, while the vast majority of apartments are for seniors and/or persons in assisted living. Likewise, according to Zillow, the average single family home in the district is \$348,000 which makes the purchasing of a second home, at this price point, very difficult. I believe that the families that preferred this option opted to sell their previous home and move into D1 thus changing their status from "open enrolled" to "resident".

The greatest personal surprise in the data collected was within the demographics of the respondents, in both the linguistically and financial areas.

First, every respondent was a native English speaker and only 18% of participants speaks another language fluently. The remainder of the participants reported that they have some additional language skills but the large majority (41%) has none. Yet, despite the data, all of the parents have elected to enroll their children in language immersion settings and go to great lengths to give them the bilingual advantage. Also interesting is that the majority of parents who elected to participate in the study do very well financially. As previously discussed, more than 80% of respondents have an annual household income greater than \$105, 000 yet the majority are monolingual. I believe that these parents recognize that they have been fortunate to earn the salary that they do, but wonder if their children will have the same opportunity to do so, given the changing demographics of our country. Therefore, a conclusion I have drawn is that parents recognize that bilingualism, at a young age, will help assure that their child will have similar (if not greater) gaining power than what they have currently. They recognize that the bilingual advantage is a real and tangible concept, and are willing to go to great lengths to assure that their children have it. In order to do so, they plan from their child's birth, to give them that advantage. This requires not only the education but also the ability to position themselves geographically to make this a reality. Many would argue that if a parent has the education, finances and geographical know-how to raise their child in this way, the child is already "ahead". I would agree. It leaves me wondering how we help the children who have not had this advantage gain the same skills? This will be discussed greater in Chapter 5 during the professional reflection.

Conclusion

As I investigated the lengths to which parents would go to gain enrollment into the Spanish immersion program, I was wrong about my initial predictions. The initial desperation that parents met me with at the closure to 1% subsided and sound decision making prevailed. I

was surprised to learn that parent's morals and ethics were of greater importance to them, than personal gain. Although this is refreshing to learn, it was also surprising. In addition to being surprised at some of the questionnaire findings, I was also amazed at some of the personal learnings during my self-reflection time. This will be discussed in greater detail in the final chapter.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

When I began to investigate the question “To what lengths are parents of open enrolled students willing to go, to gain entrance into the Spanish immersion school?” I was expecting to learn only about what drove the parents to make the choices they did. While I was successful in hearing the why’s and how’s behind their decision making, I was also successful in hearing the heart behind the parent’s decisions. However, something (far greater than what I expected) happened during the months of advocacy, research and investigation on this topic. This chapter aims to discuss my thoughts, feelings and conclusions not only about language immersion but also the atmosphere of my community as it relates to educational equity and difference.

To begin, I am thankful for the relationships that I have built over time with the participants in this study. Although their responses are anonymous, I am thankful that they felt safe to share such personal thoughts with me, about the decisions they are making for the educational future of their children. After incredible amounts of reading and data analysis the primary conclusion that I have drawn as it relates to language immersion is that parents are convinced that there is a bi-lingual advantage and they want it for their child, however they are not willing to obtain it at any cost.

A previous assumption I had made is that parents were willing to do “whatever it takes” to obtain entrance into the Spanish immersion school. Although much of the data offered in Chapter 4 discussed what parents considered doing, there was a huge discrepancy between what they considered doing and what they actually did. I imagine that many of the options people considered were “knee jerk” reactions, considered out of an initial desperation. However, with time and sound advice, each parent arrived at a conclusion of what they were willing or not

willing to do. I also imagine that parents had a realization that their children, educationally speaking, would ultimately be educated well, no matter where they ended up. Due to the parent's education levels and financial abilities, I imagine that many parents concluded that they could creatively find other options to help their children become bilingual. They could also find additional ways to give their children "the global advantage". This lessened the desperation to enroll that I had previously anticipated.

I was also surprised at the number of respondents that were willing to give up immersion altogether regardless of their emotional, educational and financial investment in early childhood. I made the assumption that the parents would be willing to move, change jobs, etc. to have the immersion experience because I am willing to do that for my children; bilingual education has that great of importance to me and my family. My personal perspective greatly influenced what I believed to be true for everyone. We know that this bias creates blinders and assumptions, that, once investigated, we realize are not true.

As blinders and assumptions are proved not true during investigative periods, such as this one, we also know that new learnings take place. This is the goal. Since December of 2016, the amount of information I have learned about educational equity and difference in my community has been astonishing. During this time, I have had three great revelations; one about our community, one about my professional impact and one about my personal life.

My Community Realization

First, I learned that the closure of open enrollment, (and a parents need to advocate for their child's education) comes from a deep divide in our community on difference. There is a large percentage of people that do not want to educate people that cannot afford to live here. They have assumed that "those students" are different. I received an email from an unknown

community member, asking me to share the racial, ethnic and financial demographics of the current open enrolled students in D1. Clearly, I do not have this information, as I am not a district employee (I highly doubt the district has this information either). He is interested in the information because he “knows what kind of people want to come here”. What I hear him say is that poor, people of color want to come here, and he does not want them here. He does not want to pay more on his taxes, to pay for “them”. Sadly, I believe this is true for many members of our community.

I also I observed that a large percentage of our community wants to stop growth altogether (asking the mayor for a moratorium) in both our city and in our schools. I read that there are citizen groups dedicated to keeping our city small, and they dedicate time and resources to assure this happens, as they want to remain a “bedroom town”.

It was rumored that a paid consultant helped to “fail” the last referendum, which caused OE to close. Although there is no proof that this person was involved, I received a warning letter in the mail from this person, to my home address, in April of 2016. I do not need much more proof than that. Keep quiet about open enrollment- or else!

I witnessed the strong divide between members of the school board, with utter hate between some members. I watched a school board member say that “open enrollment *only* exists in D1 to help balance enrollment”, thus negating the need for anyone additional to enter (due to excessive over crowding). There has never been a word uttered that open enrollment assists to create educational equity.

I have also read various posts on social media that a large group of people believe that we should have “English only” policies in education, or that “Spanish immersion should be left to someone else”. These comments, and so many others, are incredibly disheartening.

As I took in this information, I realized that the demographics of the city directly support the thoughts represented by its long-term members. This community has not ever had much racial or ethnic diversity, and perhaps many do not want it to change. At one point, I actually wondered if the failed referendum in 2016 was intentional, as to close open enrollment and further keep “others” out. If not for the actual data on resident growth, that may have been the conclusion I was drawing in this thesis. I’m glad that I kept searching.

My Professional Realization

I also had a difficult professional realization during the investigating of this topic. I realized that my school is part of the problem and not a great enough part of the solution. Although it is an accomplishment to have introduced our community to a new way of educating children (immersion), and we have changed the face of education in our community, only the affluent can afford to attend my preschool. My immersion preschool is tuition-based program, which does not have a sliding tuition scale. Although we do accept child care assistance, we rarely have families that receive it, for a variety of presumed reasons. Perhaps families cannot afford to live in our city, due to high housing prices and lack of rentals, apartments, etc. Perhaps the parents are not interested or do not know about the benefits of immersion. Either way, it is not highly utilized in my school.

As I discussed the tuition prices with my administrative team, it was interesting to hear their perspectives. My staff is in support of reaching more students “in need”, however they have concerns about how to do that. In their experience, charging less in tuition means that you receive a different clientele. They said that in their home countries (all are from outside of the United States) the places that charge less, to help more, have parents who are less involved, children who are more poorly behaved, etc. They do not want to work in that environment. They

appreciate the parent involvement, and education. They also find security in knowing that our school is profitable and know that when the school earns more money, they do as well! They suggested that we offer scholarships for families, etc. Although we have done that regularly, we have never advertised it. I have not come to any conclusions about how to move forward with this yet. The only thing I do know is that we must do something different to make our preschool more accessible to more children.

My Personal Realization

During months of investigation, and in addition to my community and professional realizations, I have also had a personal thought continually cross my mind. As I am a mom to an internationally adopted, bi-lingual and ethnically diverse (non-white) child, I have wondered many times “is this the right community for my son to be raised in?”

Although I have never been one to shy away from a good “fight”, what I have learned about this community alarms me; and not just for my brown child. I do not want any of our children to live in a community with such fear of difference. I do not want to live in a community where people on social media are preaching “English only” education or fight against every workforce housing development that comes across our desks. I do not want to read opinion letters in the local paper, which offer only the opinions of some, who happen to be those which pay for their subscriptions.

However, I have also been reminded of something incredible about myself and my role. I do not want to be the kind of person who flees instead of fights; who complains instead of helps; or who thinks of their own comfortability and allows additional generations to tolerate what is wrong. This is for the good of my brown and white children. It is also for the good for all

children. Today, and everyday thereafter, we roll up our sleeves and we get to work, with our words and our actions.

Future Research Projects

Throughout the writing of this thesis, there are two great needs that have become more apparent for me; one directly relates to my school and the other is a city level.

First, as previously suggested in the professional realization portion, is that my school needs to change to make language immersion more affordable in our area. Again, it is unclear the direction that this will take, whether by scholarship or by tuition, but this is a priority. I plan to investigate options to do so upon the completion of this thesis. Some ideas could include the opening of a not-for-profit portion of our preschool or to partner with a current organization and provide language immersion services to them.

Secondly, one of the two cities in D1 has little to no affordable housing. Although I understand this topic could be more complicated, I plan to speak with the Mayor and City Council members to ascertain what current projects they are planning for in this arena. Should there be an opportunity to help make that a reality, I will pursue volunteer options in that arena. I believe that lack of affordable housing is problematic on multiple fronts.

Limitations of the Study

Since the data collection in September, there have been academic changes with three families that responded on the survey. The first family, was holding their child back from entering kindergarten to attend my preschool, was granted kindergarten enrollment in an English speaking school within D1. After much thought, the family accepted the position and entered the school with the intent of transferring to the Spanish immersion school within one year. It is

unclear if that will come to pass or what the family is doing to maintain the child's Spanish language skills.

The second family, who had gained enrollment in another city's Spanish immersion program, was also offered enrollment in one of D1's English speaking schools. They also accepted and have decided to forgo the language immersion experience for their kindergartener. The rationale for the second family was very interesting. As the family has two additional younger children, and understand there is a sibling preference for open enrollment, they accepted the position this year in hopes of giving the younger two children an advantage in enrollment in future years. They plan to pursue Spanish immersion for the younger two children. It is unclear to what extent they are maintaining language skills for the older child, if at all.

Lastly, the third family has 4 year-old twins who will enter D1 in the 2018-2019 school year. This family remains a current customer at my preschool but recently moved out of their home within D1's boundaries. They have been unable to sell their home within the boundaries and now have decided to use that home's address to avoid being open enrolled. They want guaranteed resident enrollment into the immersion program and prefer to not sell their home until after the children have gained enrollment. They are using their home as their primary address to do so.

Conclusion

Minnesota has been an educational leader in regards to open enrollment since its inception in 1988. Parents have grown accustomed to the amount of school choice that open enrollment provides and have come to rely upon the options to meet their family's educational needs and objectives. School districts have also come to use open enrollment to help balance enrollment, budget, etc.

On December 12, 2016 the unexpected closure of open enrollment to the statutory 1% in my school district, created a desperation amongst parents, specifically amongst those in our language immersion school. This closure hinders the parent's ability to enroll their kindergarten age child, therefore limiting the future bilingual opportunities for said child. Parents desire language immersion because of the many neurological, educational, economic and sociocultural benefits, and without another language immersion school in our geographical area, the closure of open enrollment created a panic amongst these parents. The panic forced parents into considering the lengths to which they were willing to go to gain entrance. Ultimately, the parents moved from the "considering" stage into the "action" stage. This capstone aimed to answer the question "To what lengths are parents of open enrolled students willing to go, to gain entrance into the Spanish immersion school?" and we were able to do just that.

During the qualitative data collection process in this capstone, parents shared not only what they considered doing, but what they actually did to gain (or forgo) entrance into the Spanish immersion school in D1. The qualitative process gave me the ability to hear the rationale behind each decision the parents did or did not make...and why. The results overwhelmingly showed that parents were desperate to gain entrance into the immersion program, but not at the risk of compromising their ethics and morals. This greatly surprised me and was not what I had predicted.

During the months of research and community investigation, I also was made aware of a deeper divide in our community in regards to difference and equity. This information caused intense professional and personal reflection and has left me with new insights and goals for our community. I am excited to roll up my sleeves and get to work. This capstone is not the end of the road, but rather the beginning of a new journey of engagement in my community.

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