

Common Misconceptions About Education of LEP Students

As schools are becoming more knowledgeable and gaining more experience in working with LEP students, they are more cognizant of the numerous misconceptions that direct many thoughts and practices in schools. Principals and other instructional leaders can “shed light” on these misleading beliefs and practices to ensure that LEP students are provided appropriate education. Highlighted are four popular myths that affect educators’ views of teaching LEP students.

Misconception 1: Newcomers are taking longer to learn English than previous generations.

On the contrary, the number of immigrants who speak non-English languages at home increased by 59 percent from 1980 to 1990. The portion of this population who identified themselves as speaking English “very well” rose by 93 percent. In 1990, only 0.8 percent (eight-tenths of one percent) reported not speaking English at all, whereas in 1980, the percentage of non-English-speaking population was 4.5 times higher (Crawford, 1997).

Misconception 2: The more time that children are exposed to English, the faster they will learn English.

Although this concept may appear logical, there is no credible evidence to support it (Crawford, 1997). Contrary to this common-sense notion, McLaughlin (1992) cites research that found that students who were placed in a bilingual classroom and taught in the native language for a longer period of time did better academically than students who were placed directly into the English-only classroom. By remaining in the bilingual classroom, students were able not only to maintain their first language while learning English but also to acquire the academics that were being taught in the general education classes. A five-year research study conducted by Thomas and Collier (2002) identified that one-way and two-way developmental bilingual education programs (or dual language, bilingual immersion) are the only programs found “to assist students to fully reach the 50th percentile in both L1 [primary language] and L2 [second language] in all subjects and to maintain that level of high achievement, or reach even higher levels through the end of schooling” (p. 7). The study also determined that the fewest dropouts resulted from these programs.

Misconception 3: Children have learned a second language once they can speak it.

McLaughlin (1992) believes that there is a difference between the social, one-to-one communication that is typical of “playground talk” and the more challenging “classroom talk.” Describing various research studies, he states that it takes students one to three years to acquire playground talk and five to seven years to acquire the more academic language used in the classroom. According to Cummins (1981), students with no prior schooling in their first language take seven to ten years to reach grade-level proficiency, and those with several years of prior schooling in their native language take at least five

to seven years. Thomas and Collier (2002) determined that LEP students who have at least four years of primary-language schooling require at least four years to reach grade-level performance in a second language.

Misconception 4: All LEP students receive native language support in their education.

Although some believe that all LEP students receive bilingual support and instruction in their native language, this is erroneous and misleading. For example, in 1994–95 less than 30 percent of California’s LEP students were taught in their native language (Crawford, 1997). Of these students, approximately half were being taught by certified bilingual and ESL teachers (Crawford, 1997). In 2000–01, only 12 percent of California’s LEP students received instruction with native language support, and 88 percent without such support (Zapata, 2003, p. 52). Overall, 2000–01 data from the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition & Language Instruction Educational Programs show that 22.7 percent of LEP students receive instruction that incorporates native language, and 53.9 percent receive instruction without native language support (Zapata, 2003).

Overall, no matter what language instruction educational program a particular school chooses to implement, school leadership and teachers must work toward their established goal with a pluralistic perspective to ensure the educational progress of a culturally and linguistically diverse student population. According to Gonzalez, Brusca-Vega, and Yawkey (1997), “Today, approximately one individual in seven age five and older speaks a language other than English at home, compared to one individual in nine in 1980” (p. 12). Schools need to put continual efforts toward meeting the needs of the continually growing population of LEP students.

References

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