CARLA-MAIN Website Project

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Introduction

Over four decades of research support the practice of language immersion education to foster advanced levels of bilingual proficiency in elementary and secondary students. Complementing the research, the experiences of practitioners in the field help us understand where future research needs to focus as well as give us practical solutions to the daily challenges of administering an immersion program and teaching in an immersion language. The rapidly growing community of immersion programs in Minnesota is in the enviable position of being able to consult a bounty of immersion practitioners from several dozen schools and researchers from the University of Minnesota – all available locally. For districts contemplating an immersion option this local expertise helps them design and market their new programs. They benefit from wisdom accumulated through others' experiences and the expanding knowledge base of research conducted worldwide.

One result of this keen interest in immersion programming is a growing demand for information and advice. University of Minnesota researchers and teacher educators are increasingly sought after to assist with many pre-planning and program development questions that arise as parents urge districts to open new immersion schools and school boards and charter councils approve them. In a similar manner, Minnesota immersion school administrators, especially those in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area, are finding themselves identified as knowledgeable practitioners of immersion education whether or not they feel qualified to advise others. Some administrators are veteran immersion teachers turned principals with years of experience in the classroom and/or significant professional development in immersion best practices. Others, recruited within their districts to head new immersion schools, are neophytes with no previous experience in immersion education and confront a very steep learning curve as their school opens and grows.

Both university-based researchers and immersion program administrators have received multiple requests in recent years for information and advice including invitations to make in-person presentations before parent groups, district planning councils or school board committees. As members of the Minnesota Advocates for Immersion Network (MAIN), a non-profit organization made up of immersion program practitioners and university researchers and teacher educators, they began discussing ways to reach out to parents and educators eager for information, ideas, expertise, and knowledge in a way that would reduce the pressure on individual educators with job responsibilities to fulfill. The group agreed that disseminating research results - on second language acquisition, literacy development in two languages, the benefits of being bilingual, and so on – was an essential first step. It was equally important to MAIN administrators that information about the nuts and bolts of running an immersion program, e.g. recruiting and hiring teachers, finding ways

to support immersion language development in an English-speaking environment, etc. should be made available, too. Eventually, the idea of developing a web presence where some of the basic issues about immersion education could be collectively discussed was floated and discussed at monthly MAIN meetings.

Several member schools of MAIN contributed funds to hire a grant writer who put together a grant application requesting $5000 to plan and launch a series of web pages that would provide research reviews and experience-based recommendations focused on a few critical topics for interested parties to consult. The essential element of the grant application was the collaboration between the University of Minnesota's Immersion Projects at the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) and MAIN. On the one hand, CARLA's Immersion Projects Coordinator would provide overall vision and leadership for the project and offer a written synthesis of the relevant research in immersion education while other CARLA staff would furnish technical assistance to design and launch the web pages. On the other, MAIN practitioners would identify the most pressing challenges in administering an immersion school and share their experiences dealing with and finding solutions to those challenges. A project assistant would be hired to run focus groups of administrators and then compose the text that would make up the administrator section of the web pages. The University of Minnesota's Office for Public Engagement offered one-time SEED grants to entities within the University to "strengthen public engagement across the University." It was to this office that the grant application was directed and from which, eventually, the grant was secured.

The Planning Stage

The Minnesota Advocates for Immersion Network meets regularly to share concerns, seek advice, plan inter-district staff development days, advocate for immersion with the Minnesota Department of Education and discuss myriad topics of interest related to immersion pedagogy and the management of immersion schools. The meeting attendees, typically administrators or their proxies from elementary or secondary immersion schools and researchers-teacher educators from the University of Minnesota, welcome visitors and observers who may be considering a new immersion school and want to learn first-hand the necessary steps to take. With many years of collective practical experience and knowledge of immersion research behind them, this group has a lot of ideas about what works and what doesn't. It also realizes that many unresolved challenges still face immersion programs.

Not surprisingly, when the first step was taken to develop topics for

the web pages, the MAIN group responded immediately with more than a dozen general themes that were then sorted into a "top ten" list which administrators ranked according to the importance each issue played in their respective program. When the balloting was tallied, these themes were ordered in importance from top to bottom, though it must be said that all of these issues command a great deal of administrative attention in an immersion program.

- Teacher recruitment and hiring

- Professional development and teacher retention

- Supporting the immersion language

- Assessment

- Exceptionality (learning disabled, gifted, etc.)

- Addressing parent concerns

- Communication with the community

- Communication with the district

- Attracting a diverse student body

- Admission policies

Following the identification of general themes, CARLA project leaders began to flush out questions that administrators would be asked to answer during ninety-minute focus groups. The purpose of the questions was to uncover problem-solving strategies, highlight policies and procedures that successfully manage challenges inherent in each topic area, and probe for advice that could be shared with a national audience of immersion practitioners. For example, in Topic 1: Teacher recruitment, hiring, and retention, the following questions were asked:

- Tell us how you find your teachers and other staff members who speak the target language and what challenges you've had recruiting and retaining qualified staff.

- What kind of support from the district is most helpful in your recruitment and retention plans?

- What kind of support do you get from teacher preparation programs? What is most helpful from these programs?

- What recommendations/guidelines do you have for new immersion programs regarding qualified staffing?

Once questions had been developed for each of ten topic areas, focus groups, three for administrators and one for parents (who had expressed interest in weighing in on the topics), were scheduled. The information gathered would later be distilled into text for a question-

response format that would make up the Practitioner Perspectives web pages. Predictably, the ninety minutes allocated for each focus group proved to be inadequate. All groups, whether composed of administrators or parents, had much more to talk about than the hour and a half allowed.

The Assembly Stage

Before the web page format was developed, project leaders did some on-line research to see how other organizations assembled their information sharing sites. We especially liked the way the Center for Applied Linguistics had set up their Two-way Immersion Toolkit in a question-response format with links from questions to answers and further links to a bibliography of relevant research. Using that website format as a model, we consulted with our technology staff and developed a template that would allow similarly easy maneuvering between sections of the website. Visitors to the site (Figure 1) will see all the topics listed on the left-hand side of the page (reduced to seven from the original ten), be able to select one, review the Literature and Research Review section by hot-linked subtopics or go directly to the questions and answers in the Practitioner Perspectives section of that topic. A bibliography of selected readings accompanies each of

Figure 1. *Topic 1 page from the CARLA-MAIN website*

Figure 2. *Links from the Practitioner Perspectives section of the website will take readers directly to individual articles in the ACIE Newsletter Articles Online archives.*

the two sections in each topic - Selected References in the Literature and Research Review section and Readings from the Online American Council on Immersion Education (ACIE) Archives in the Practitioner Perspectives section. The latter references contain hotlinks to those articles that are posted on the archived web pages of The ACIE Newsletter (Figure 2).

Excerpts from the Web Pages

The following excerpts from the CARLA-MAIN web pages are taken from Topic 1: Teacher Recruitment, Hiring, and Retention. The first excerpt shows an example of the Literature and Research Review section as it relates specifically to research that has been conducted on teacher recruitment for immersion schools. The second excerpt is from the Practitioner Perspectives section on the same issue of teacher recruitment. The two excerpts complement each other - one providing the research base, the other summarizing the experiences of our focus group participants.

Excerpt From Topic 1: Literature and Research Review Section

Strategies Used to Attract and Retain Immersion Teachers

Obadia and Martin (1995) gathered questionnaire data based on telephone interviews with representatives of 22 school districts and all ministries of education in Canada. One aspect of the study specifically addressed the question of attracting and retaining French immersion teachers. They found that the two most frequently used approaches to teacher recruitment were through (1) direct contact with faculties of education and (2) newspaper ads targeting both in- and out-of-province print media. Other commonly mentioned ways to attract new teachers involved practicing teachers taking on student teachers and traveling to interview prospective candidates elsewhere. Montgomery County (MD) Public Schools, home to one of the oldest foreign language immersion programs in the U.S., reports their teacher recruitment efforts have included interviewing throughout the U.S., informal networking among parents and current staff members, and engaging in cooperative efforts with embassies and other agencies located in Washington, D.C. (Met & Lorenz, 1993). More recently, Met and Lorenz (1997) also suggested looking for potential immersion teaching candidates in a district's current foreign language teacher pool and native-speaking teachers from abroad.

Excerpt From Topic 1: Practitioner Perspectives Section

In what ways can administrators successfully recruit qualified candidates?

First and foremost, immersion program administrators must follow their district guidelines for posting job openings. Cultivating a good relationship with the district's Human Resources Department is crucial to the department's understanding and appreciation of the unique language proficiency needs of immersion programs. If your district is large enough, creating a pool of bilingual staff can benefit both teaching candidates and administrators who are hiring. Administrators need not recruit for their individual school but can interview all qualified candidates at the same time. By the same token bilingual candidates can see the different career options in the district where their bilingual skills will be used and can make career choices based on their interests. Having said that, if administrators cannot find candidates within their district's ready pool of teachers, they must search externally for candidates who speak the immersion language fluently in addition to having proper licensure.

Because most college and university foreign language departments prepare students to teach the language in traditional foreign language classroom settings, graduates with B.A.s in a foreign language often are not prepared for the high level of proficiency required to teach even elementary content (math, science, social studies, etc.) in a language that is not their native tongue. Consequently, immersion administrators may find themselves in the position of educating local college faculties about the high level of language proficiency needed for immersion teaching. They can offer placements for student teaching and encourage faculty to let students know that if they study both elementary education or a secondary content area and a foreign language to an advanced level of proficiency, they are more or less guaranteed a job upon graduation.

Because it is so difficult to find candidates, native or non-native speakers, who fulfill all the requirements for an immersion teaching position, administrators may find themselves using unusual techniques to recruit candidates. Stories abound in immersion circles of principals chasing down target language speakers in grocery store aisles or on neighborhood playgrounds. Although this may not be the best or most accurate method of finding candidates, the anecdotes attest to the difficulty of attracting qualified candidates. As in business and commerce, word of mouth advertising can be effective because immersion programs often create a buzz (both positive and negative) in a community. Administrators who can parlay the buzz into cordial relationships with other district schools and the community will enhance the program's image creating an interest among prospective parents and potential teaching candidates.

The American Council on Immersion Education maintains a listserv, LIM-A, where administrators can post immersion job openings. However, one must first be a listserv member.

- To become a member, email LISTSERV@lists.umn.edu. The message without subject line or signature should read: subscribe LIM-A your first and last names

- If you are already a LIM-A listserv member, you make use of the listserv by emailing lim-a@umn.edu

Programs that place native speaking classroom assistants or teachers licensed in other countries into U.S. schools may sometimes be a hiring source for immersion programs. However, before hiring international candidates as classroom teachers, administrators must be knowledgeable about visa requirements (some districts or states have sponsored teachers), licensure regulations outside the U.S., and pedagogical differences that may be culturally based. Neither native language proficiency nor outstanding teaching in a school in a

foreign country automatically equates with good immersion teaching. Therefore, it is important to screen native speakers for qualities other than their language abilities or reputations in their home countries. Pay attention to their classroom management skills and their expectations for student behavior, their ability to communicate cogently and comfortably with parents in English and understand the importance of parental involvement in their children's education, and their willingness to work as a team within the context of immersion and U.S. educational practices. If a candidate has already spent time in a school as a successful classroom assistant, an administrator may consider grooming him or her for a teaching position in the same way a U.S. non-native speaker would be groomed given appropriate training and certification.

To view Topic 1 in its entirety, go to www.carla.umn/immersion/main. Topics 2 through 7 are still in the assembly stage but will be on-line later in 2008.

Conclusion

The intense interest in and proliferation of immersion programs in Minnesota in the last decade has challenged the resources of the immersion community which is still relatively small given the overall public school enrollment figures in the state. As university researchers, teacher educators, immersion school administrators and teachers struggle to keep up with the demand for information and assistance, common misconceptions about immersion education and second language acquisition have a tendency to spin out of control, potentially polarizing communities or giving credence to programmatic choices that may not, in fact, be in the best interests of immersion students or their families. The CARLA-MAIN Website Project, based as it is on research findings and practitioner experiences, is a step toward the kind of transparency and accountability that all public education programs should strive for. And, anyone with an Internet connection can access it.