Introduction

The fastest growing population in Garnet Patterson Middle School (GPMS) is our Language Minority (LM) students. When I arrived at GPMS in 1994 there were 20-30 students, which include those who were receiving the services of our English Second Language (ESL) Program and the students who did not qualify. These students were primarily of Hispanic origins but we have had a few students from different parts of Africa, Guyana, Bosnia and Viet Nam. Now, almost one-third of the student body is LM students, and this group of students continues to be Latino. The needs of those students who are unable to qualify for ESL are the focus of my research.

Focus

I interviewed our 5th and 6th grade classroom teachers and the 7th and 8th grade teachers, who teach Science, Math, English and Social Studies to gather information on:

- How do our teaching techniques align with the ideas that are commonly thought to be “best practices” when teaching LM students?
- What type of educational environment exists for Language Minority students in our school?

Sample

Elective and Special Education teachers were not interviewed because I wanted the group of teachers to have similar classroom settings, lengths of time with students and utilize similar methods/materials to teach. As I interviewed our teachers, I was so encouraged by their willingness to share from their wealth of experience. The majority of them have over twenty-five years of service and they have spent those years teaching in the inner city of Washington DC. Teachers are usually the untapped resource when schools set out to design professional development. One of the outcomes that I hope will evolve from my research is a guideline for developing the next step in training our staff to handle the flourishing population of LM students. Consequently, I will illustrate my finding with the primary audience in mind, the faculty and staff of GPMS.

Method

I approached my colleagues firmly established in the idea that people do the best they can do, in any situation even when they fail. I hope that this outlook has given them the feeling that I am coming alongside and not heaping on them more impossible situations for them to face alone. The atmosphere in today’s public schools prioritizes standardized testing over other methods of evaluating students, teachers, administrations; and schools. The outcomes of these tests are firmly linked to job retention and merit pay. It stands to reason, that it is as beneficial for teachers to reach
every child, as it is for each child to be reached. Spring boarding from these basic ideas, I interviewed our staff.

The first and second question in the survey addresses the first research question, “How do our teaching techniques align with the ideas that are commonly thought to be “best practices” when teaching LM students?” The data from first question, hopefully will give us the ability to assess our present level of staff development and the second question will help us to analysis, which techniques are being used now and the type of training our staff needs to improve.

**The first interview question:**
What type of training have you received to help you teach and/or meet the needs of Language Minority students?

The data from this question compelled me to categorize the information under four basic topics: No Training was used for staff that felt they had not received any training and I captured why one teacher did not see it as a priority. School Based Training included any training given by the central office, workshops given at other schools (some staff received training at former schools) and sessions that occurred within the our building. Only one of teachers felt that they had received training within our building. Full Classes and/or College Level Training was the largest category. These classes were taken over much longer periods of time and some of the classes were college and graduate school courses. Other One teacher felt that their training in language acquisition courses and special education has been good preparation. The following chart contains the responses to question one:

| Chart of Training |  
|-------------------|-------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| **No Training** | **School Based Training** | **Full Classes and/or College Level Training** | **Other** |
| 7-1 - No training | 7-5 – In school – professional development GPMS– minimal half day | 7-4 – I took a class - Adjusting the class to meet the needs of all minority students. | 8-6 – Three or Four reading courses; some Spanish; some French; special education minor |
| 7-2 – No training | | 6-3 – Multicultural and Equity education training; ESL units in Teach America training; and two other workshops | |
| 6-4 – No training | 8 – In school – professional development at former school – four sessions on LM students | 6-2 – At National Louis U. we received a good comprehensive program that covered multicultural problems in the classroom. | |
| 6-1 – No training - because when I was given the choice I felt behavior management was the more important seminar to attend. | 8 – Professional Development given by LM Office | 8-2 - I had a graduate course that was specifically focused on teaching LM students | |
| | | | 8-4 - I have studied extensively “Diversity Learning,” and Multicultural Education. However, the most significant to me was “ I am different only in language” |
We have a multicultural committee at GPMS. This group has presented at least two sessions in the last two or three years. Only one teacher identified the training as skills that would help them to teach our LM students. I think if I had asked them, “Do you have some understand of multicultural issues?” , they would have responded differently. The multi-cultural committee could utilize the data from this research to plan training for the staff that focuses more on teaching the LM students that are represented in our school. (i.e. Latinos and Africans). So far, the multicultural topics in our staff development have been very general.

**The second interview question:**

*Briefly explain 3 techniques that you have learned from experience, that have been helpful when you are teaching LM students.*

As I read through the responses to this question, another pattern emerged. Peer tutoring, visual and kinesthetic learning, ways of giving directions, ideas about classroom procedures and environment, along with different teaching methods and materials became naturally developing groupings. These grouping actually represented pretty good teaching techniques. After listing each comment under its group, I noticed that some statement really stated more than one technique. So, I went back to my first list under each teacher’s name and color-coded each teacher’s comments by highlighting according to the following heading. Surprisingly, I could give each teacher feedback that I had not expected to find. The more colors within their comments the greater the variety of techniques.

**Groupings**

- Peer tutoring, grouping and teaming with ESL teachers
- Visual and Kinesthetic Learners
- Giving Direction
- Classroom Procedures and Environment
- Materials and Teaching Methods

**Color Coded Teaching Techniques Chart**

7-1 –
1. Use an inclusive approach
2. Cooperative learning
3. Be sensitive to their communication needs, are they tuned into the class

7-2 –
1. Work with another LM students and allow LM students to form a group
2. Meet after school with a student who request extra help

7-4 –
1. Peer-tutoring: cooperative grouping
2. Praise for speaking out
3. Use overhead and videos to help students visualize
4. Performance based learning – give them a task based on their ability. There is a fear of big textbooks.

5. I let them sit where they feel comfortable as long as their behavior is constructive

7-5 –

1. Engage them using the “whole class” method don’t single them out
2. Ask their perspective on current event issues find out how they view the world
3. Constant praise for increased reading fluency

8-2 –

1. Appeal to many learning styles, they seem to enjoy a visual approach
2. Use an Art option for assessment
3. Use poems and stories that are written in English and Spanish the Multicultural office and ESL teachers have provided these resources.
4. Try to prevent them from grouping by race except when translation is necessary

8-3 –

1. Explain directions in many ways; give a demonstration and have another LM student explain,
2. Change the assessment
3. Offer after school tutoring
4. Never assume because they don’t ask question that they understand

8-4 –

1. Enunciation - taking care the time to sound out the things I say
2. Familiarity and connectiveness of subjects to environment or cultures
3. Direct and hands on instruction

8-5 –

1. Use different strategies, pictures, diagrams and other visual techniques
2. Hands on materials – building things together instead of giving written directions
3. Peer mentoring with students who speak the same language

8-6 –

1. Having patience keeps me from needing to repeat instructions; one on one directions
2. Allow student to sit close to my desk
3. Use the bilingual set of the classroom room text (tapes in Spanish) Notice the students that can read English but can’t write in English. Dictation is needed.
4. Use ESL teachers and other bilingual students to help student complete assignments

6-3 –

1. Have a daily oral language lesson, always teach the correct way first – don’t use errors as examples because they are frequently reproduced
2. A lot of visual and modeling
3. Extended time
1. Beware of their need for visuals
2. Making statements and ask questions in more than one way
3. At first, I allow students to sit with another student who speaks English and can interpret. Later in the year I found they are more comfortable and they are very willing to be grouped with other students.

6-2 –
1. It helps when a ESL teacher comes into the class and does the same lesson in Spanish
2. Food is a good incentive (Pizza, cookies and fruit)
3. Put LM students together but I always put another student with them
4. Encourage them to use their language but if they use another language, they need to translate

6-4 –
1. Math is the best student to teach them.
2. I find it is important to teach phonics; I have used “Hooked on Phonics” with LM students
3. Pairing with another LM student that speaks better English and is academically better

Peers tutoring, cooperative grouping and teaming with ESL teachers

Peer tutoring, cooperative grouping and teaming with an ESL teacher were recognized by a large number of the teachers interviewed as helpful strategies. Only one teacher felt that there maybe something negative about allowing Latino students to group themselves together, however, I am not saying that this classroom did not use pairs or cooperative groups. Griggs and Dunn state that:

.........Field dependent individuals are more group-oriented and cooperative and less competitive than field independent individuals. Research generally has indicated that Mexican-American and other minority students are more field dependent than non-minority students. Hudgens (1993) found that Hispanic middle and secondary school students were more field dependent than Anglo students;( ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digest/ed393607)

So, the literature does support the use of cooperative grouping and pairing as an effective practice for LM students. We are going to be effective if we continue to use these techniques. Teaming with an ESL teacher would be ideal. I’m sure, that like most schools we have only two to three on staff. However, maybe we can investigate how we can best use them to create more inclusive experiences for students and teachers.

Also, we need more information that suggests better ways to improve the relationships of African-American and Latino students. Since, we are constantly trying to group African-American students and Hispanic students into cooperative groups, it would be very helpful to know more about the way the groups function together. Griggs and Dunn (1996) site Hudgen’s information on the internal and external locus of controls found in both groups of students. He states that...Hispanic female (and African-American male) students had a greater internal locus of control than other groups; and
Hispanic male (and African American female) students had a greater external locus of control than other groups. (ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digest/ed393607)

More information like this would help us to improve our students’ ability to work cooperatively.

**Visual and Kinesthetic Learners**

The staff recognizes the differences in learning styles and presents their lessons in many ways that show they are sensitive to visual and kinesthetic learners. Identifying the learning style of a student to enhance their ability to obtain new skills is well documented in educational research. Learning Style Models is part of Dr. Barbara Given’s website (George Mason University) that features the work of Howard Gardner, David Kolb, James Keefe, Dunn & Dunn and others. (http://mason.gmu.edu/~bgiven/index.html) This would be a great place for teachers to obtain more information about learning styles. This site is links to research by Grigg and Dunn (1996), who have identified five-detailed categories of learning styles for Hispanic students. Within these styles is a physiological learning style. The articles sites a study by Yong and Ewing (1992), which states that Latino most dynamic perceptual strength is kinesthetic. So, those teachers that said that they are using Art projects as an alternate assessment and building things together are right on target. According to Grigg and Dunn(1996), African-American and Caucasian were found to be markedly more auditory and visual than Mexican-American. I found that a great deal of the research on Latino students has been done on Mexican-Americans. The Latino students in our school are from Central America. Further research is needed to compare the learning styles of the students from Central America to Mexican Americans students.

To expedite our efforts, I found an online inventory, provided by the University of South Dakota that is extremely easy to use, interpret and understand. It was adapted from Instructor Magazine 88-9 and it can be taken and answered immediately on the USD website. (http://www.usd.edu/trio/tut/ts/style.html.) I think students could benefit from participating in the process of discovering their particular learning style. Visual, auditory and kinesthetic approaches are general enough for students to understand. Using this inventory could confirm or dispel a teacher’s beliefs about the best approach to use with a particular student or group of students. Also, students would begin to participate in helping a teacher to help them to understand a new skill.

**Giving Directions**

The teachers interviewed stated that: giving directions in many ways; building things together instead of giving written directions; having patience to repeat direction; giving one on one directions; not using negative examples; not preceding with a lesson just because students don’t ask for directions to be clarified; and pronouncing instructions clearly are practices they find helpful.
Linguistic (Sep-Oct 99) cover story highlighted four key elements found in successful ESL programs in Spokane, Washington. One of the key elements was giving good directions. Leeuw and Stannard ( 1999) stated that :

Something as simple as giving directions orally, followed by a written example on the board, and allowing students to paraphrase the direction back to the teacher, will insure that all students, not just English language learners, have been given ample opportunities for understanding.

You would think that educators would not have to be reminded that giving clear concise directions are a key component in any lesson, but this article makes this statement in very rudimentary terms. Our staff is right again! Almost half of the teachers interviewed empathized the need to give good directions in a variety of ways.

**Classroom Procedures and Environment**

Until I charted my data, I found it difficult to compare the teachers’ responses to the research I found on classroom procedures and environment. The categories for this strategy were: an inclusive teaching approach, praise, seating, and helping students after school. These were the changes in classroom procedures that our teachers found helpful when they are teaching LM students. According to Cohen, inclusive teaching is the key to creating,

.... learning conditions where students perceived as having low status (e.g. limited English speakers in a classroom where English is the dominant language, students with academic difficulties, those perceived by their peers as less competent) can demonstrate their knowledge and expertise. Then, the students can see themselves, and be seen by others, as capable and competent.
### Classroom Procedures and Environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Praise</th>
<th>Seating</th>
<th>Inclusive Teaching</th>
<th>After School</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Praise for speaking out</td>
<td>I let them sit where they feel comfortable as long as their behavior is constructive</td>
<td>Engage them using the “whole class” method don’t single them out</td>
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<td>Constant praise for increased reading fluency</td>
<td>Allow students to sit close to my desk</td>
<td>Ask their perspective on current events issues, find out how they view the world</td>
<td>Offer after school tutoring</td>
<td>Food is a good incentive</td>
</tr>
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Dunn and Grigg (1996) list 8 considerations that teacher should adopt if teachers want to create a comfortable environment for LM students. We should explore providing:

1.) A cool environment  
2.) Conformity  
3.) Peer-oriented learning  
4.) Kinesthetic instructional resources  
5.) A high degree of structure  
6.) Late morning and afternoon peak energy levels  
7.) Variety as opposed to routines  
8.) A field-dependent cognitive style

The ideas under praise, seating, after school help and others can be used to enhance an inclusive environment. However, we need to make sure that students know we value their culture and we need to create environments that allow all students to be
viewed as competent. Four teachers correctly identified this need but we need more teachers to adopt procedures that create a better environment for LM students.

**Materials and Teaching Methods**

According to Trueba and Bartolome (1997) our teacher should be commended for recognizing that their teaching methods might need to change. Our entire staff recognized that their approach needed to change to reach LM students.

Latino students have academic problems because their teachers use inappropriate cognitive, cultural and linguistic teaching methods. Teacher’s are not just neutral scientific technicians, because teaching methods are not “value-free and politically neutral.” Trueba, Bartolome (1997)

Some of the best suggestions given by our teachers were: using performance-based learning that gives students a task based on their ability, changing the type of assessment, and using bilingual materials. However, we need to go a step further. Trueba and Bartolome (1997) site Freire (1995) who states that teachers ***need the skills to critically analyze exemplary pedagogy and to translate it into cultural and linguistic codes appropriate for their students*** (Freire, 1973;1987;1993;1995)

Adding an understanding of how language is developed to our planning for all students would improve all students’ ability to communicate better, not just LM students.

**First Research Question - Conclusion**

*How do our teaching techniques align with the ideas that are commonly thought to be “best practices” when teaching LM students?*

Our staff is employing many teaching techniques that do align with the best practices in literature. Using cooperative groups, giving directions in a variety of ways and recognizing that we need to change teaching methods and materials to fit the needs of culturally different students are our strong points. Creating better classroom procedures and environment and understanding the learning styles of Latinos students (specifically) should be ideas for staff development workshops, since these were our weak areas.
Second Research Question

*What type of educational environment exists for Language Minority students in our school?*

The data for exploring this question was provided by interviews questions 3,4 and 5.

3. *How would you describe the difference between LM students and your regular education students?*
4. *Describe the most successful experience you have had with a LM student.*
5. *Describe the most surprising circumstances or condition in the life of an LM students that was disclosed to you. (Example - I did not know that this student lived on his/her own on the streets of Brazil before he/she came to my class.)*

**The third interview question:**

*How would you describe the difference between LM students and your regular education students?*

Our staff noted differences in presentation, behavior, and attitudes toward an academic task. The LM student’s presentation is described as sly and quiet. They tend to stay together and preferred to sit together, but their teachers felt that this behavior was due to feeling uncomfortable. Some teacher’s stated that LM students were more respectful, conscientious and attentive than their regular native English-speaking students. One teacher said that LM students were more trusting. However, it was observed that the students who have been in our system longer were losing some their eagerness to learn and becoming more concerned with fitting in with their peers.

When teachers compared LM students academically to their other students, they found that language was still a barrier even though these students were no longer eligible for ESL services. When they are assigned a task to do, they start to work quicker than other students but teachers were not as confident that the instructions were really understood. Teachers felt that the cultural barriers were causing examples, and statements to be misunderstood. Overall, LM students lacked the initiative to speak out in class but when they are given a written assignment to do they are eager to complete it.

A few teachers felt that all students seem to have the same limitations and problems. Consequently, they also stated that being a LM student is not a reason for a lack of success.

I used the word differences in the question. The word “differences” can mean many things. Maybe a better question would have asked for differences and similarities. Our cultures, our values and our views color the way we see differences in other people. Therefore, if we are going to help LM students to become more comfortable, maybe we need to take a look at how we define and see differences.
The fourth interview question:

Describe the most successful experience you have had with a LM student.

The data revealed that each teacher has had a success experience with a LM student. LM students are interacting with our facility in extra curricular activities, in conferences away from school and they are having positive experiencing in the classroom. I have listed a few of these experiences and made bold the words that define the points of contact:

As their coach, I really was inspired by their transition into American football. They arrived on the field fairly nervous. However, by the end of the season they had a real sense of self worth because they had excelled in a sport that represents America manhood.

A girl in my 5th period comes to class ready to learn and she even says “thank you” at the end of most classes. If she misses a day, she comes to class in the morning to get any missed assignments. She makes an attempt to complete it before the next class.

I had one student whose behavior was so bad that I knew I had to take a different approach. I began to emphasized the fact that he did his work. I made him student of the month and his behavior improved.

I just returned from an educational conference. A LM student was included, she represented our school unbelievably well.

A boy from Ethiopia in my class just learned the language last year and he received A’s in all of his classes. This is very inspiring to me personally.

Our experiences were limited to school related points of contacts. No one gave an experience with a parent or family. To further our positive experiences with LM students, we need to organize ways to become more involved with their families and their community. The question did not limit the experience to school activities but since the previous questions in the interview asked questions about school related experiences, so this could have limited the flow of our conversation.

The fifth interview question:

Describe the most surprising circumstances or condition in the life of an LM student that was disclosed to you. (Example - I did not know that this student lived on his/her own on the streets of Brazil before he/she came to my class.)

I found that giving an example generated a quick response. The teachers understood the type of experiences needed to answer the question. The process of talking about these responses was more lively and interactive. I felt they were eager to share these experiences and they wanted to understand the cultural issue that caused the student’s
experience to be foreign to their life experiences. Also, teachers expressed that when they learned about a particular circumstance or condition in a student’s life, it caused them to feel closer to that student.

The experiences related primarily to family issues (primarily marriage), immigration and issues/problems that occur in their native counties. The following are representative of the types of responses given by the teachers interviewed.

A student swam the Rio Grande with his father to get to this country. His father works all the time so he basically on his own and his mother is back in El Salvador.

I learned that most of the Salvadorian children in our school come from a part of El Salvador that is considered illiterate even by Salvadorian standards.

The students that been ripped from their families because of the war in El Salvador. One particular student has lost many close family members. (Grandmother, one parent and an uncle)

An Hispanic girl ran off with a growth man only to find out that it was against the law. Her mother had taken her to see this man and she was so young that the mother could not give legal consent. The mother had brought her a dress and cake for the wedding. The daughter was 14 years old.

This data reveals that we need to know more about the native counties, and the families of our LM students. Again we are finding that we need more multicultural training that is specific to the countries and cultures of our LM students. Most of our LM students are from Central America and Africa. The multicultural training that we have received to date has been too general.

Second Research Question - Conclusion

What type of educational environment exists for Language Minority students in our school?

This last group of questions revealed that teachers did see differences between LM students and regular education students. We have had many successfully learning experiences with LM students. Through conversations about the life experience of our LM students, we have tapped into the areas we need to know better if we are going to bridge the cultural gap.

Recommendations

The purpose of this research was to develop a baseline from qualitative data collected from staff with similar teaching responsibilities. This data would reflect our level of training, current teaching techniques and the present educational environment at GPMS for LM students. Both research questions revealed that we are sensitive to the problems
of our LM students, we have taken the steps to develop better ways to teach them and we have taken the time to relate to LM students on a personal level.

To move forward we need:

• to be more involved in the families of LM students and their communities.

• a more in-depth understanding of the cultural differences and similarities, between Afro-American and Latino students (especially in the areas of learning styles.); to explore how to develop and use teaching techniques that are not culturally biased

• to build bridges of understanding that enhance better cooperative learning experience between ESL students, LM students and regular education (RE) students; to provide more inclusion experiences for ESL, LM, RE students and teachers; to provide more bilingual staff and/or language classes for students and staff; to acquire more bilingual teaching material (especially material that is identical to the regular education curriculum), to include material that shows we have value for the cultures represented in our school.

• multi-cultural training that is gives specific information about teaching Latino students and African students; training that explains the current issues and problem of Central America and other native countries of our students; training that gives information about the structure, cultural habits, values and taboos found in the families of our LM students.

Following these suggestions will insure that we will continue to make progress in developing our ability to meet the needs of the growing population of LM students at Garnet Patterson Middle School.

References

