

Aidan Mulligan
Learning Evidence
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Cameron College Prep

A Personal Approach: The Integration of Migrant Children at Cameron College Preparatory School

I. Overview

This following report will highlight a qualitative analysis on the process by which migrant children from various ethnic backgrounds are integrated into the 5-8th grade Cameron College Preparatory School (CCP) located in Southeastern Nashville. The paper was written and findings were comprised from external research, observations and numerous informational interviews with various teachers, administration workers and students themselves. I decided to choose this as my topic as I have been teaching the ELL Program (English Language Learner) which is comprised of migrant and recently immigrated students. I wanted to learn more about their experience since coming to the US and specifically, Cameron. The initial purpose of the paper was to provide a more quantitative and fact-based document outlining the various laws and regulations associated with foreign students coming to America and enrolling in charter schools. However, after beginning this process, I quickly realized how removed I was and how rapidly I was losing sight of the my target stakeholders: individual students and student body as a whole at Cameron. For this reason, I decided to tweak the style of the paper so it reflects a more personal and relevant approach to my fellow coworkers and students at CCP. The paper will be broken down as follows: background, enrollment, identified themes, challenges and opportunities and finally, recommendations for improvement.

II. Background

CCP is a public charter school located in Southeastern Nashville. It is a part of the Metro Nashville Public School (MNPS) system. CCP is zoned in one of the more poor districts within metropolitan Nashville, Glenciff.¹ CCP is a middle school and provides education for 5th-8th grade students. CPP shares a building and with, and serves as a feeder school to, LEAD Public High School, which serves grades 9 through 12. CCP currently has 631 enrolled students. Of these 631 students, there is a 88% minority enrollment. Furthermore Cameron has an ELL population of 38%--this percentage refers the number of students who recently migrated to the United States-typically within the last month or two. The enrollment of CCP is constantly fluctuating, primarily due to the transient nature of many families, however, the general ethnic

¹ <https://www.tn.gov/education>

breakdown is as follows: 57% hispanic latino, 28% black, 12% Caucasian 1% Asian.² CCP is frequently in the bottom quartile of Tennessee public schools in terms of both mathematics proficiency (29.5% in 2017) and in English (15.3%).³ CCP possess a student to teacher ratio of 13:1, however this number is skewed slightly higher up to 8:1 for ELL programs.

III. Enrollment

The application, school selection and admission processes differ between charter schools and traditional public schools. Charter schools are a form of public school, but they are operated by independent, non-profit governing bodies. In the case of Cameron, this is governed by the LEAD family of schools, which manages 5 other charter schools. Cameron is in a very unique position in that it was the first conversion charter school in the state of Tennessee. Conversion charter schools are typically formed when a public school is authorized to take on charter status. This is done primarily to address significant school quality or progress concerns within the associated community.⁴ LEAD schools took over Cameron Middle School (CMS), one of the lowest-performing schools in the Metro Nashville District in 2010. In 2011, they converted CMS to a charter and CCP was born. Because of their unique position as a conversion charter, Cameron's application and enrollment process is identical to any other 'regular' public school within the MNPS family, as it has grandfathered in CMS's public school process. While most charter schools have an application and lottery process, students are enrolled at CCP based on their geographic location.

The application process for residents of the US and recent migrants is similar, with a few additional steps for the latter group. Upon coming to America and moving to Nashville, all migrant families are required to register their household and their students with the Metro Nashville Admissions Office. If the family has a primary home language other than English, they are sent to Metro Nashville's EL (English Language) office. From here, all students are screened and required to take a series of placement tests. The WAPT english proficiency test is given to nearly all migrant students entering the Nashville school system. Students are then placed in grade levels based on their performance, although according to multiple teachers at CCP, this is typically a "crapshoot," and is often very inaccurate, requiring grade level restructuring during the students tenure at CCP. After testing, students are placed in the requisite school based on their family's place of residence. Even though Cameron is a charter, it is still zoned identically to public schools, meaning the majority of enrolled students didn't have the opportunity between a classic public school and charter. Cameron is however, able to receive students from external zones due to their status as a charter school. However, due to low test scores and proficiency

² <http://www.cameroncollegeprep.org>

³ <https://www.greatschools.org>

⁴ <https://charterschoolcenter.ed.gov>

rates, CCP is rarely a target school from out-of-district families-- around 90-95% of students are live in the localled zoned district.

IV. Themes

The following themes were identified from numerous informational interviews with instructors of the ELL program, the ELL program director, the EL administrator and 12 students in the ELL program.

V. Vast Diversity of the ELL Students

Cameron has one of the most diverse student populations in all of Tennessee. Having such a diverse student body naturally means CCP also has one of the most diverse need sets among students. Students come to CCP from all corners of the world, with the biggest being Latin America (Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama etc.), Mexico, Northern Africa (Egypt, Sudan, Somalia) and the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran). Because these students are already 11-14 years old, they have missed a large portion of foundational education of the American Educational system. Many of these students attended primary schools within their respective home countries (75% of the students I spoke with), however, these tended to be far more rudimentary to the American alternatives primarily due to resource inadequacies. Furthermore, even when provided primary education, none of the students I spoke with had taken English classes. The result of this is nearly 40% of Cameron's student body comes to middle school with zero formal English instruction. A handful of the students were taught rudimentary phonics and vocabulary by parents, friends or other family members, however they was certainly in the minority. Of the 12 students I spoke with, only two said their parents could speak English fluently.

Opportunities

Being exposed to such high levels of diversity seem to break down racial barriers within the ELL program. Despite speaking different home languages, I have observed the majority of students choosing to sit and interact with other students from across the globe. It is amazing to watch a group that can barely communicate verbally, interact physically and share emotional experiences. Of the 12 students I spoke with, 8 referred to the ELL program as their family at school and 11 of 12 said their best friends were in the program. This differs from the rest of the CCP student body. I sat in on lunch hour for grades 5th through 8th for an entire week. I observed the demographics of the groups students chose to sit in. It is a slightly rough estimate, but around 80-85% of students sat with peers of a similar racial background. The EL program, while smaller, seems to have almost complete racial integration

Challenges

This drastic diversity poses a large challenge from an administrative perspective. It is nearly impossible to deliver equitable teachings to so many students from diverse pasts with different home languages and educational backgrounds. In my EL class alone, there were 8 different home languages among the 15 students in the class! Within the EL program, students are typically broken up by English proficiency level, regardless of ethnicity or primary language. While this helps to ensure students are equally matched and can progress at the most appropriate and efficient rate from themselves, it can be extremely difficult to communicate across various languages to the same group of 3 to 4 kids who are learning the same material.

VI. Building Community Relationships

One of the primary focuses of the CCP administration is to bring the in-class teachings back with the child to their household. According to a CCP guidance counselor, “students are influenced by nothing more strongly than their homelife and familial dynamics.” This is especially true for students within the EL program. CCP provides support resources that can help both students and their families. CCP has 4 school counselors, 3 of which are fluent in Spanish and Arabic. They recently hired an additional counselor who is fluent in Somali. These counselors, in tandem with the teachers, perform bi-monthly outreach calls to the families of the ELL students outlining their progress, areas for improvement and tips for assistance. CCP has gone even further and has contracted out to Centerstone, a non-profit counseling service that works exclusively with migrant children. In the event that parents are too busy to come to the school, Centerstone will send a representative to the student’s home for a personal meeting with the parents/family.

Opportunities

One of the teachers of the EL program commented on how involved many of the parents seem to be in their student’s performance. After speaking with the director of the program about this, It became apparent that many of these students are expected to be the English translators and eventual breadwinners of the family by their elder relatives. This naturally places heightened levels of stress on these students who need to balance their learning of an entire new language with their remaining school work and social life as a pre-teen. However, this positive reinforcement in the household gives students an increased desire to learn English and causes many to take school more seriously than their English speaking counterparts.

Challenges

According to the director of the program, ELL students across the board tend to have weaker support structures at home than the rest of the student body. Many of these students were forced to flee from their home country, often leaving behind parents and other family members. For the students who were lucky enough to come over with parents, the majority of them are typically absent from the house due to long and inconvenient work hours at poorly capitalized jobs. The EL program director said “we have noticed a direct correlation between time in the states and family cohesion, with the newest students having the most disjointed families.” While there is no doubt that these parents wish to provide their children with the best quality education, their means simply don't allow for many opportunities.

VII. Difficulties socially assimilating

Perhaps the biggest theme I gleaned from my interviews with students was their fear of assimilating with students who didn't speak their language. Of the 12 students I interviewed, 11 said their biggest fear about coming to school in America was that they wouldn't be able to make friends because no one could understand their language. The vast majority of students at CCP speak English conversationally with their friends. As a large portion of the student body is Hispanic, many kids also speak Spanish, although this tends to lean more towards Spanglish, as students are encouraged to speak in English and all classes are taught in English. Because of this, many of the ELL students feel left out as they have only recently begun learning English. This is even more difficult for the ELL students who don't come from a Hispanic heritage and speak Arabic or Somali. These fears are certainly mitigated within the EL classrooms as the children are in a similar boat and can communicate freely with each other without fear of mockery if they don't understand or make a linguistic mistake. While these concerns are certainly merited, I have noticed the vast majority of English speaking students to be extremely accommodating and friendly to the ELL students, often inviting them to eat with their friends during lunch.

Opportunities

From an administrative standpoint there are a number of opportunities and initiatives put forth to help integrate the ELL students with the rest of the CCP student body. During lunch hour students are typically assigned seating tables based on their previous class. However, the ELL students are allowed to sit freely, which allows them to make friends outside their homeroom class (which they are in for 6 of the 8 periods in the day). CCP is great about embracing and promoting diversity. In the 3 months I've been at CCP, they have had 6 weeks dedicated to learning about a different culture, sometimes asking students to talk about their family and home country- this is very popular among the ELL students as it helps bolster their sense of community.

Challenges

Naturally, the school can't force students to befriend one another. While many of the students in EL expressed concerns about making friends, around half of them said they are too shy to try to establish these connections. It seems extremely daunting to come to a completely foreign country and be thrown into middle level education with no prior background. Furthermore there are many social norms present in CCP that are novel concepts to many of the ELL students. While the staff is certainly aware of the social gap between these students, there is only so much that can be done from an administrative standpoint to integrate the children

VIII. Lack of resources/technology

One of the larger themes taken from my conversations with the EL director and the EL program administrator was the role of technology within the EL program, and how, at least to this point, it has been largely detrimental to the CCP faculty and students. According to the program director, one of the best ways to teach students new languages is by using engaging and fun software programs designed to improve students' literacy capabilities. Especially at this age (11-14), students quickly become bored from the rudimentary repetition associated with basic phonics-the cornerstone to new language development. To address this, the EL program has diverted the majority of its budget into securing computers and software programs for their students.

Opportunities

Very limited--generally only possible with increased funding!

Challenges

As CCP is very poorly capitalized, the demand for the requisite instructional EL tech is rarely (if ever) met. As a result, students are forced to share equipment and reduce their time on the programs in order to ensure everyone is getting equitable practice. Furthermore, the majority of these students don't have access to technology at home, so they are unable to continue their learnings outside the classroom. Another major cyclical issue comes from merit-based funding. Across the country, ELL students are given the ACCESS test to measure performance. The ACCESS test is an online-computer based adaptive assessment that measures students' proficiencies in listening, reading, speaking and writing. CCP's EL program director said this is a major issue as, "we don't have the adequate tech to prepare students for this test. So when they have to take it on a computer they are often confused and perform significantly worse than they would on paper or in person." As EL programs are given funding based on their performance scores, this hurts Cameron, which leads to a cyclical system based on poor funding and resulting poor performance.

IX. Recommendations for Improvement

❖ 1. Hire a EL Specific Counselor

- As 38% of the student body are ELL students, CCP should hire an additional counselor or counselors to work specifically with this student population. Additionally, (if legally appropriate) they should adopt a similar policy to that of Centerstone and have the option for home visits. This will bolster community relationships and will likely improve student/parent integration which tends to drive student performance.

❖ 2. Create an ELL/American student club or forum

- There is no formal sort of organization that pairs ELL students with students from the states. Children love learning new things about their peers. By exposing them to more cultures and individuals, we will likely be able to further their world view and hopefully make them more caring and emphatic citizens. This will also help mitigate some of the ELL students' assimilation fears.

❖ 3. Create an ELL Student Ambassador Program

- Give these students increased responsibility and allow them to share about their culture and experiences with students in their Crew groups (weekly "homeroom-esq" groups with same age and same gender peers). Students could be asked to prepare small presentations with the help of their EL teachers to present to fellow students in lunch groups, or at library/mark/homework time. Another component to this could be a mentorship program where ELL students are paired with one another based on age. The older students would act as a buddy and resource to the younger student.

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