

Successes and Challenges of EAL Immigrant Youth in Rural Manitoba

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The demographics of rural Manitoba have changed dramatically over the last 10 years, particularly in southern Manitoba. An intense wave of immigration has brought increasing numbers of English as an additional language (EAL) immigrant learners, along with new challenges and opportunities for rural educators.

In Hanover School Division (HSD), which serves Steinbach and neighbouring communities, the EAL student population has grown from 23 to over 1300 students per year (within the four-year identification window), with more than 3000 students identified as EAL learners since 1998. Five years ago, HSD was the ninth-largest school division in the province, but it has grown by 25% over the last 11 years; now, largely because of immigration, it is the sixth-largest. HSD also has one of the largest EAL populations in Manitoba, second only to Winnipeg School Division. This influx of EAL learners to rural areas is particularly challenging for many Manitoba school divisions because little is known about the performance of EAL immigrant learners outside major urban centres in Canada.

In the 2008/2009 academic year, I was part of a team that addressed this lack of data by conducting a research project in HSD to explore how the success of EAL and immigrant youth may be facilitated as they strive to meet their personal, academic, and career goals. The project was co-funded by the Prairie Metropolis Centre and Manitoba Education, and the team included Val Schellenberg, HSD EAL curriculum support teacher, Diana Turner, EAL consultant for Manitoba Education, and Heather Hunter from MERN.

We used a mixed-methods research approach to determine demographic characteristics of 3000 EAL students (within the four-year EAL funding period) for the past 10 years, and to document the perspectives and experiences of EAL immigrant youth, their parents, educators (including educational

assistants, classroom teachers, EAL teachers, curriculum support teachers, resource teachers, and administrators), and immigrant service providers.

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What successes and challenges are experienced by EAL learners and families in HSD?
2. How do EAL learners and parents in HSD define success? What are some of their academic, personal, and career goals?
3. What are the experiences of HSD teachers working with EAL learners?
4. How might the experiences of EAL learners, parents, and teachers inform divisional policies and practices?

A few key findings from the research included the following student perspectives:

- ▶ Most students reported that feeling at ease upon arrival in their new school was greatly facilitated by having someone (a peer, a teacher, or other staff member) who could communicate with them in their first language and help them become acclimatized to the culture and routines of the new setting.
- ▶ Students coming from language backgrounds other than English felt their multilingual abilities helped them to learn English.
- ▶ Students noticed many differences between the structure and content of schools in their home countries versus those in Manitoba (e.g., the school day is shorter, there are more course options).
- ▶ Students did not always feel they were most appropriately matched with courses (e.g., the assumption that Consumer Math would be “easier” for the students proved incorrect in some cases, given the high language demands).

These findings will be used to inform EAL programming and policies in HSD and throughout Manitoba. One of the study’s key recommendations is that HSD consider partnering with Manitoba Education to pilot a system for tracking the progress of EAL learners and the graduation rates of both EAL and non-EAL students, with a view to establishing a province-wide model for tracking graduation rates. This could provide information on how long it takes for EAL learners to progress through the various stages of EAL development, how many EAL learners graduate and how these rates compare with the non-EAL learner population, as well as the pathways graduating/non-graduating learners follow across the division (e.g., how many opt for post-secondary education, vocational training, or employment, and the reasons for these decisions).

Profile

Dr. Schmidt joined the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba in 2004 as an Assistant Professor of Teaching English as an Additional Language (TEAL), after completing her Ph.D. at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto.



She was one of the lead writers of the Manitoba K–12 EAL curriculum framework from 2004 to 2006, and from 2005 to 2008, she served as the founding Coordinator of the Internationally Educated Teachers (IET) Programs at the University of Manitoba. Currently, she is overseeing program evaluation and research for the Winnipeg School Division Adult EAL Program, and continuing her research on systemic barriers to IET integration in K–12 schools.