

World Language Education and Articulation at Early College High School

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Rationale

Early colleges historically limited admission to students with high-grade point averages and were deemed elite education institutions (Dai, Steenbergen-Hu & Zhou, 2015; Jett & Rinn, 2019). As educational stakeholders endeavor to prepare more students, particularly underrepresented populations, for postsecondary success, the construct of Early College High School (ECHS) launched by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2002 has gained national attention as a way to narrow equity gaps in higher education (Webb, 2014). In response to making college more accessible to at-risk and underrepresented populations, a newly founded early college (a Title I school with a majority of historically underrepresented student populations) in the District of Columbia. The new institution accepts ALL students “by offering high school-age students, particularly those from low-income and historically underrepresented communities, a tuition-free college program of study in the liberal arts and sciences, and by working to influence and lead a national movement for early college education focused on quality and equity” (the school website). In addition, most studies in the ECHS context chiefly focus on students’ coursework in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) as well as English Language Arts (ELA) (Edmunds, Arshavsky, Lewis, Thrift, Unlu, & Furey, 2017; Song, Zeiser, Atchison, & Brodziak de los Reyes, 2021); yet limited research exists on world language education and articulation. Recent studies have found that students from historically underrepresented communities are encouraged to explore and study foreign languages in K-12, while they “see no benefits in the academic study of a foreign language” (Hubbard, 2014, p. 300) in higher education. Thus, it seems urgent to continue with this research line by discovering how faculty and administrators can best support students’ world language education from secondary to postsecondary levels in the ECHS setting.

Literature Review

In ECHS settings, two different systems of the partnership between the postsecondary institution and the school district create complicated work conditions as well as instructional challenges – teachers received instructions from the K-12 side of the partnership that contradicted those from the college, which undermined implementation and compromised course rigor (Duncheon & Relles, 2020). In the case of world language education in two urban ECHSs serving 85-88% economically disadvantaged, 83-85% at-risk underrepresented student populations, a Spanish teacher mentioned some challenges she faced – (1) her lack of a pedagogical background for high school students, (2) lack of communication when there is a change of schedules, (3) technological (class access to computers) and physiological (behavior management and student engagement) challenges to class instructions imposed by big class size (29 students), (4) lack of maturity of some students to participate in the college courses, (5) presence of some unprepared and underprepared students in classes (Elias, 2015). Although Elias’ study made commendable attempts to address the issues regarding world language learning in ECHSs, the faculty is from a community college, while the college and high school courses are offered under the same roof by the same faculty in the ECHS in D.C. Thus, multiple perspectives are necessary to gain an understanding of successful language learning in the ECHS in DC.

Methodology

This study is theoretically informed by the literature on sensemaking (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weick 1995), which implies how faculty and administrators interpret world language education and articulation at ECHS. Two research questions guide the study: How do faculty and administrators make sense of world language education and articulation at their ECHS? How do faculty and administrators support students’ world language education and articulation at their ECHS? Findings offer insight into whether and how research and policy discourses about world language education and articulation are translating to practice at the classroom level, which may be useful for ECHS reform as well as college completion initiatives.

Employing the qualitative research method, data were collected using individual interviews with six world languages faculty members and an administrator who work at ECHS in Washington, DC, Ohio, and Maryland.. The researcher began the open coding process by reading each interview transcript, highlighting, and writing themes line-by-line, and then categorizing these themes (Creswell, 2012).

Findings/Data Analysis

After joining the ECHS, the faculty soon realized that their schools serve traditionally underrepresented student populations, which are different from traditional early colleges deemed as elite schools. Student preparation was one of the most difficult challenges that faculty encountered. When identifying unprepared and underprepared students in the classrooms, the faculty/staff wish to make a difference. The challenge is to engage in collective meaning-making to help faculty/staff translate the vague objectives in the mission, such as college readiness or rigor, into concrete, shared practices that increase students' readiness for college. Moreover, too much emphasis was put on the high school curriculum and too little emphasis on the college curriculum, where college readiness was missing. Also, there was still no Year 2 world language curriculum in DC.

Among all the subjects offered in ECHS, only a few students are interested in learning a foreign language even though world language education is recognized as important to African American students' cognitive and non-cognitive development (Warren, 2002). For example, a post-secondary survey was conducted in the ECHS in DC in early January 2021, and the result showed that only four students (out of 160 respondents) chose a foreign language as their favorite subject. Culturally relevant pedagogy, such as incorporating educational and/or historical experiences of students of color into the world language curriculum, was adopted to better engage students. There is a need for changes to that world language instruction is not peripheral to the general curriculum.

The class size was another issue that many faculty faced since it would impose physiological (behavior management and student engagement) challenges on their instruction, which conflicted with the ideal pedagogical world language instruction for "individual" attention in education settings. While differentiated learning was adopted to overcome this hurdle, the faculty advocated for continuous and active professional development (PD) opportunities related to world language teaching practice, though not PD in general.

Recommendations

As a result of this investigation, the researcher suggests the following:

1. Extra support is needed when teaching in schools where the majority come from underrepresented student populations (Stichter, Stormont, & Lewis, 2009). Academic and Social-Emotional Readiness is essential at the high school level for the transition to college (Ari, Fisher-Ari, Killacky, & Angel, 2017). For social-emotional readiness, intentional advising should be facilitated by the certified SEL instructor. The Individualized Education Program (IEP) is much more needed for academic readiness, especially for world language education, due to students' low motivation. The literature also suggests a Back-on-track program for struggling students and former dropouts (e.g., X-Cel Education, Massachusetts (Ndiaye & Wolfe, 2016).
2. Smaller classroom size should be strictly implemented as the ECHS model allows traditionally underserved student populations to earn college credits through dual enrollment courses taught through an established high school curriculum that provides social support in a smaller school environment (Miller et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2018).
3. A corporation partnership is highly recommended in world language education just like in STEM. Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) model, established in New York in Fall 2011, blends secondary with the first two years of postsecondary education (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015).
4. World language immersion programs are especially needed for K-12 articulation. Language learning requires time and effort just like learning anything else that calls for the development of skills. World language education has been shown to provide strong social, cognitive, and academic benefits across all groups, but is also where we see the lowest levels of underrepresented, underprivileged student access and participation (Anya, 2020), and such postsecondary preparation should start before high school (Gaertner & McClarty 2015).
5. Modifications to current admission policies between ECHS and college should be addressed in DC, Virginia and Maryland (DVM) areas to smooth the transition from secondary to post-secondary. ECHS graduates have sometimes found that they have requirements specific to their intended degree program at their new institution that extend the amount of time they needed to stay to complete their bachelor's degree (Smith, 2015). Similarly, students in world language programs faced such challenges in secondary to post-secondary (Diao & Liu, 2021).

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