

Bernhard, J. K. (2004). *Swimming upstream: FAU graduates' preparedness to work with English Language Learners*. Final report submitted to the Fulbright Foundation for Educational Exchange between Canada and the United States of America.

ABSTRACT

This report describes the efforts of a state university in south Florida to prepare predominantly in-service teachers and specialists in education to work with culturally and linguistically diverse populations in the public school systems of Palm Beach and Broward counties. This master's program at Florida Atlantic University is of particular interest because of its intense focus on exposing students to the latest research findings in second language acquisition, ethnic studies and other multicultural issues. Further, the program is cutting edge because of the creation of a mass of specialists in education trained in multicultural philosophy, impacting a limited, concentrated yet ethnically diverse geographical area with links to the local school boards and other policy makers.

Although there is evidence of satisfaction of the students, it was important to see the extent to which graduating students entered this context were able to make changes, implement successful practices with children and families and overcome obstacles encountered. The overall study was set up to investigate the impact on the graduates of the master's program at FAU on the pedagogy and conceptions of teaching diverse ethnic students, most especially ESOL.

The population of the study was the entire cadre of graduates from the two master's cohorts since 1991 to 2000. Attempts to contact 195 graduates resulted in 155 valid addresses.

A survey was constructed, piloted and then abbreviated into a tighter 36-item questionnaire. This instrument was mailed at the start of the 2003-2004 school year in September. The survey was sent to the 155 valid addresses on file and drew responses from 57 graduates rendering a response rate of 36.8%. The survey was used to generate demographic data and evaluate responses about program aspects that were particularly valuable in working with the ESOL/ELL population, extent of implementation of program elements in the workplace, assessment of school climate and work with families and communities. Findings in this report reflect the responses of 57 graduates of the program.

Additional instruments developed included three focus groups, five site visits, and nine individual interviews. Focus group sessions were conducted with a total of 16 graduates of the program. An additional focus group session was conducted with five parents of ESOL students on site at an elementary school. Focus group sessions and individual interviews were conducted with graduates, administrators and parents to clarify and elaborate on survey responses. Interviews and focus groups were audio- and video-taped and transcribed. Site visits were conducted in order to triangulate the information

gathered from the masters' graduates and to obtain the views of other teachers and students. Site visit reports were drafted.

Findings indicate that the 57 graduates of the masters program faced many challenges upon working as teachers and specialists in the culturally and linguistically diverse context of the public school systems of Palm Beach and Broward counties. Nevertheless, the program had a considerable positive effect on their sense of preparedness to work with diverse populations. They were able to make connections and establish a repertoire of research findings presented in the program to communicate with their colleagues and justify their curricular revisions and new approaches in their practice. The graduates also benefited by drawing on the networks developed with colleagues who had attended the program. The result was the creation of a mass of specialists in education trained in multicultural philosophy, impacting a limited, concentrated yet ethnically diverse geographical area with links to the local school boards and other policy makers. The ultimate significance of the study may lie in the suggestions it offers to incorporate exposure to research into teacher education programs.