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FLARR Pages #39: Perceptions of Foreign Language Education in the Rural High School

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FLARR PAGES #39

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File Under
-Perceptions of Foreign Language Education
-Foreign Language in the High Schools

"Perceptions of Foreign Language Education in the Rural High School," Mara M. Gust, Greenbush/Middle River High School

Introduction

This study was conducted by the foreign language instructor of a rural school district in Northwestern Minnesota. The population of the high school (grades nine through twelve) is 144 students. The racial composition of the district is nearly 100% white. The district is classified as "low-income" with 41.3% of the district's children qualifying for free or reduced hot lunch. Of the most recent three classes, an average of 39% of graduates planned to attend a four-year college, 37% planned to attend a two-year college, and 24% planned to enter the work force. This study evolved from the observation by the researcher that foreign language study was perceived by some as unnecessary, impractical or even frivolous. Some students, parents and even faculty did not see foreign language as a necessity in high school education. The goal of the study was three-fold: to investigate the beliefs and attitudes toward foreign language study in the community, to try to determine why these beliefs existed, and to investigate how foreign language can better be promoted as an important course of study for all students. An important note is that Spanish is the only foreign language offered to the students of the district. This may affect the student's choice to study foreign language, if the student would have preferred a different language, for example.

Description of the Research Process

Research for this study began with an investigation of published literature about the topic, specifically, poverty class citizens and their views on education, what kinds of students benefit from foreign language education, and how to promote foreign language as necessary for most students. The study continued with research concerning the families in the high school. Students were surveyed about their perceptions of foreign language, whether or not they planned to study foreign language and the reasons for their choice. Parents of high school students received a similar survey, including questions pertaining to their educational level and whether or not they themselves had studied foreign language. Teachers in the district were questioned, as well as teachers from other area districts. Anecdotal data was also used.

Analysis of the Data

The first premise of the study was what kinds of students study foreign language in the school. According to the student surveys received, 65% of high school students had studied or planned to study foreign language, and 35% did not. School records verified this with 63% currently or previously studying foreign language and 37% not. The split between males and females who chose either to take or not to take foreign language was approximately even among the classes, with no clear pattern determinable.

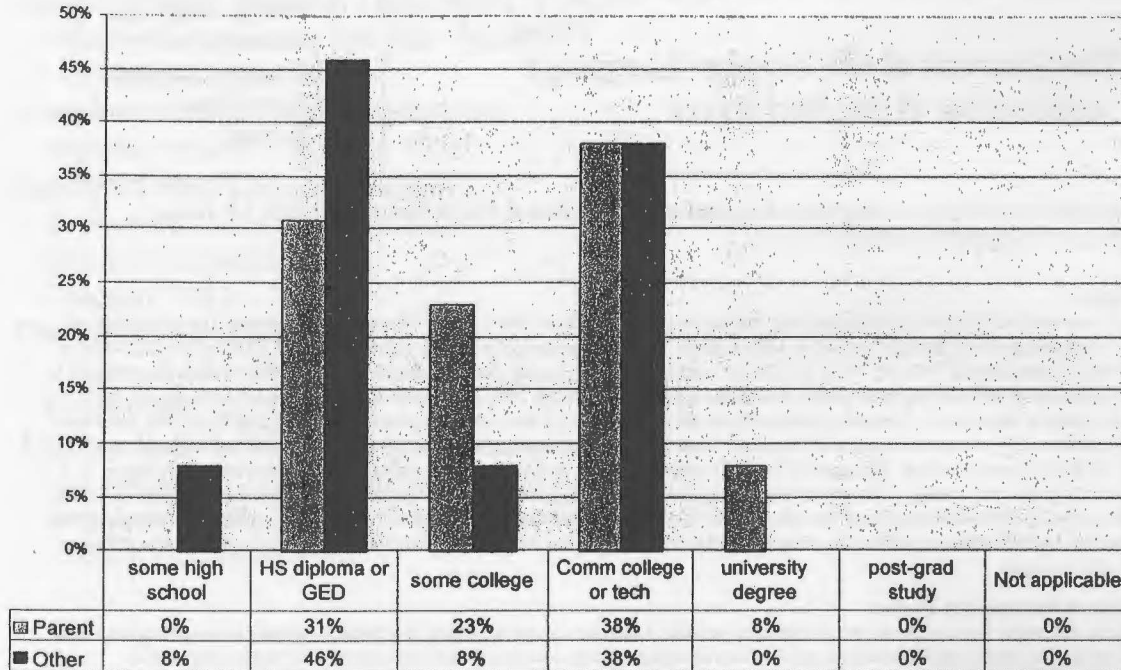
Data was gathered to illustrate the parent's influence on their child's decision to study foreign language. 41.3% of the district's students qualify for free or reduced hot lunch. In addition to economic factors, some families in the district fall into what is called, "the culture of poverty," as defined by Ruby Payne in her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, (2001). She identifies poverty as "the extent to which an individual does without resources" (p. 16). These resources are financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules (p. 16). The chapter entitled, "Hidden Rules Among Classes" explains:

One of the biggest differences among the classes is how "the world" is defined for them. Wealthy individuals view the international scene as their world...Middle Class tends to see the world in terms of a national picture, while poverty sees the world in its immediate locale. (Payne, 2003, p. 60)

Parents and students were asked about their foreign travel experience. 31% of parents said they had traveled to a foreign country other than Canada, 69% did not. Of those who had traveled, 72% had children studying foreign language, 28% did not. Of those who had not traveled to other countries, 80% had children studying foreign language and 20% did not. Students were asked the same question about their own travel history, with similar results. Whether or not the parent or student had traveled to other countries did not appear to be a decisive factor in the child's decision to take foreign language.

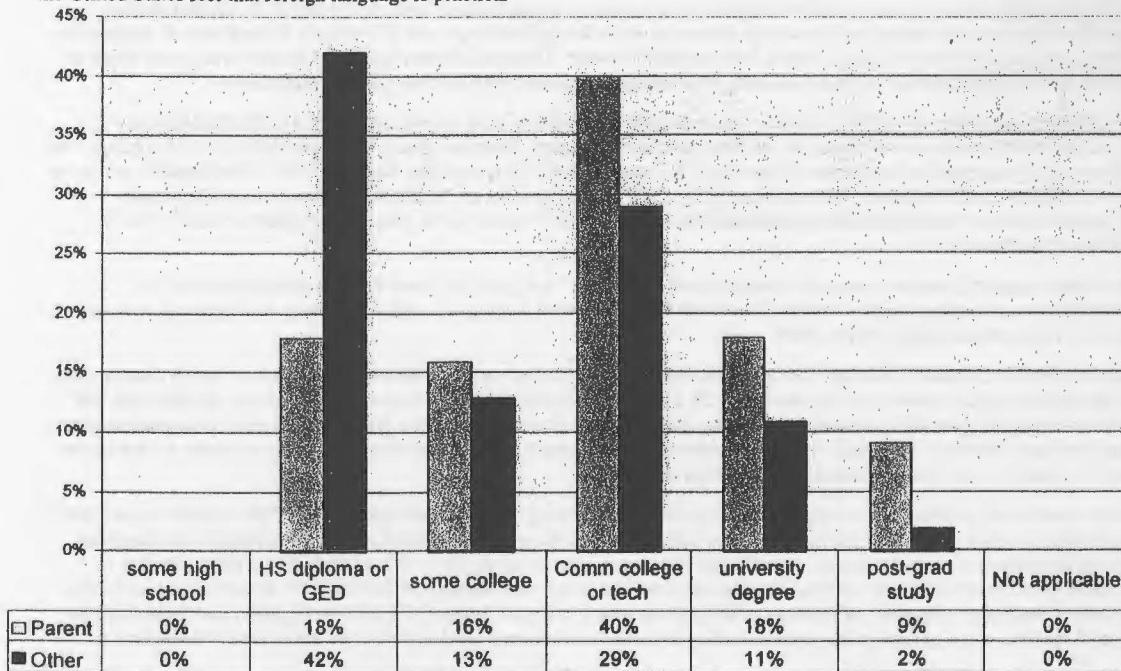
Parents were questioned as to their own completed level of education. Among the parent surveys received, 75% of children have both parents achieving less than a four-year university degree. This may affect the overall number of students studying foreign language. However, the breakdown of students who do or don't take foreign language is not as clear. 92% of students not taking foreign language came from households with both parents achieving less than a four-year degree. 8% did not. 69% of students taking foreign language came from households with both parents achieving less than a four-year degree. 31% did not. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the percentage of students studying foreign language according to parent's educational level and other parent or head of household's.

Degree Breakdown for Parents of students NOT Taking FL (Figure 1)



A significant portion of the research focused on *why* students study or don't study foreign language. What factors influence the decision? Many citizens across the United States feel that foreign language is practical

Degree Breakdown for parents of students TAKING FL (Figure 2)



only for those who might use it in their employment or those who travel to other countries. Marsh (1995) states: