

ELL

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER



English-language learners, or ELLs, are students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds, and who typically require specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses.

"I wish they didn't separate ELs from the normal kids".
~Joe



ATTITUDES T O W A R D EDUCATION

A research brief for Schools, Teachers, and Parents

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What Factors Contribute to ELLs Attitudes Toward Education?

English Language Learners (ELLs) are in our classrooms and growing in numbers. As teachers we see them, we interact with them, but do we really know them? Who are they? Where do they come from? What are their needs? Are we meeting their needs? Research in the last ten years suggests that ELLs have lacked support in our classrooms mostly because teachers are struggling to understand and accommodate the needs of these children (Yoon, 2008, p.495). Up until now the focus has been on teaching the language and getting them to speak like us. In implementing this narrowly focused pedagogy,

we have been successful in increasing their oral and written proficiency but we disregarded the individual, the learner within. We cannot continue to ignore them because their numbers in the classrooms are increasing, and a, "new urgency" (Yoon, 2008, p. 495) to shift our teaching practices to include their social-emotional and cultural needs is required.

A study conducted by Adelson and Niehaus (2014) found that, level of school support was directly correlated to level of parental involvement. And, increased parental involvement had a positive impact on the

students' social and emotional well-being resulting in academic achievement (Adelson and Niehaus, 2014, p 24). Hence, school support and parental involvement are two major factors that contribute to ELLs attitudes towards education. This research brief will present current research on school and parental involvement in the life of an ELL and will then share findings from a series of six interviews conducted of now adult ELLs, highlighting the impact of school and home in the life of an ELL student, and finally share implications and recommendations for schools and parents.

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Who Are ELLs and Why Their Attitudes Matter?

America is a melting pot. For over two-hundred years families from all over the world have chosen to call America their home. Children of these families have enrolled in schools, graduated, and are now part of our workforce. So why is it important today to know what factors contribute to ELLs attitudes toward education and what role does a school play? We need to gain this understanding for one urgent reason - ELLs

make up more than 10% of US public schools and the number is growing rapidly. Moreover, ELLs experience difficult situations in their daily lives and the cultural conflict between home and school disengages them from school; additionally, and not surprisingly, these students' lack academic confidence (Adelson and Niehaus, 2014, p.2); further, ELLs academically underachieve when compared to their peers and their drop-

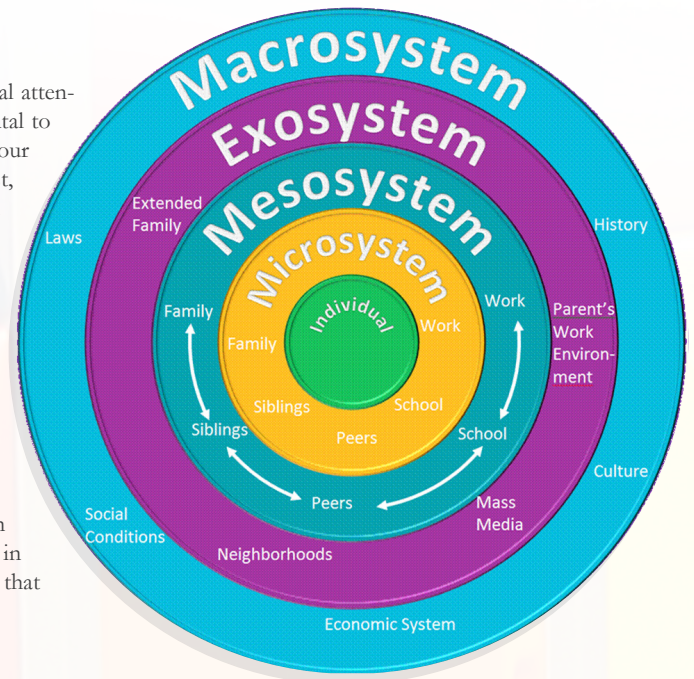
out rate in 2000 was twice the national average (Janzen, 2008, p. 1010); lastly, they tend to be referred more and are disproportionately placed in special education classes due to our lack of understanding of their needs (Orosco, 2010, p. 265).

ELL attitudes towards education matters. They are our students, our future workforce, our economy, our future leaders.

Literature and Research

From the above description of ELLs it is evident that they require special attention and extra support. Our conventional teaching practices are detrimental to their academic success as well as their well-being. This calls for a shift in our teaching practices early on in the primary grades for several reasons: first, elementary years are foundational for acquiring academic and behavioral skills; secondly, during these early years children also acquire developmentally appropriate skills that are responsible for, “establishing positive trajectories...” (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014, p. 2); additionally, elementary age students tend to spend the majority of their time either at home or school, two spaces from which the student garners support.

These two spaces as per Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model provide context for individual growth. In Bronfenbrenner’s model the school is the “microsystem” - child’s immediate environment in which the child performs daily activities and builds relationships. The “mesosystem” - is the connection between home and school and parent involvement is an example of this space (Adelson and Niehaus, 2014, p. 3). As demonstrated in the literature below, in essence, schools and parents are two critical factors that contribute to children’s attitudes towards education.



Schools and Teachers

Adelson and Niehaus (2014) found from their study of 1,020 ELLs the importance of parental involvement in the school had a direct impact on the student’s social and emotional development, students had superior social skills, and decreased behavior problems. The authors draw our attention to “sociocultural factors” (Adelson and Niehaus, 2014, p.6) that work as barriers and prevent ELL families from participating in their students’ academic lives.



“Being labeled ELL made it easy for me. I did not have to work for anything. No one cared! Not even me!”
~Yasmin

Some barriers include: lack of language, a new education system, cultural differences, long work schedules, transportation concerns, and “the manner in which they are perceived” (Adelson and Niehaus, 2014, p. 6). To help overcome these barriers, schools need to make themselves easily accessible and forge strong relationship with the parents for the benefit of the student. The authors’ recommended schools to provide interpreters for school events and parent teacher conferences; all outgoing mail to be bilingual and in multiple formats assuring access to all parents; offer educational classes for parents at multiple convenient times to explain and demonstrate school processes and school culture.

Another study done by Yolanda De la Cruz *Who Mentors Hispanic English Language Learners?* recommends mentors for hispanic ELLs. Her study revealed that students who had a mentor throughout their aca-

ademic life had, “effective and life-changing outcomes” (De la Cruz, 2008, p. 34). Further in her study *Uninvited Guests*, Yoon found that the teacher’s view of a student plays an important role in the attitude of the student. She claims that mainstream teachers position themselves *for* non ELL students, and for ELLs they hold a deficit view. Yoon says that the teacher’s positioning and interaction with the student is reflected on the student’s poor performance in the classroom (Yoon, 2008, p.497-515).

The above research reveals a vital role of schools in the lives of ELLs. School policies and practices not only attend to the needs of the student, but their families, their culture and their social-emotional health. Thus, schools bridge the gap between home and academics, provided mentors, and help change teacher attitudes.

Parents and Parental Involvement

One important role of parents is to create a “positive learning environment in the home” (Panferov, 2010, p. 106). Research has shown that when learning is reinforced in the home and when homes provide access to books, technology, study space, study time, modeled reading and writing, student literacy increases (Panferov, 2010, p. 106). This research points to the parental role at home and parental involvement

in student’s academic life at school. In another study done by De la Cruz (2008), she found that ELL families may not be visible at school due to factors discussed above (language, work time, culture), however, the “emotional support” they provide is vital for the student’s success. In keeping with the same view as De la Cruz, Abe Feuerstein (2000) claims that these silent and invisible parents are involved in their

students lives. Making a school choice, bringing them to and from school, providing for them and student-parent dialogue at home about school are all considered parental involvement. He says, the role of the school is to empower the student to carry school conversation home thereby engaging the parent in the process (Feuerstein, 2000).

Methodology

Adding to this existing research on factors that determine ELL student success, the following case study was conducted as a face-to-face interview with six adults in a semi-structured interview format over five weeks. The sample included: two adults who were designated ELL and remember school as arduous years filled with pain; one adult who was designated ELL and had a positive experience in school which led him to pursue and gain a Bachelors degree; one parent whose child was an ELL in a dual-immersion school up until third grade and thereafter reclassified as English Proficient; and two veteran teachers who have had much experience with ELL students in the classroom and in after school coaching programs.



The interview results match what research has proven - school and parental involvement are two major contributing factors that affect ELL attitudes toward education. The two adults (both females), who did not pursue higher education said they struggled to complete high school and couldn't wait to be done.

Hannah came to the U.S. when she was ten years old and was placed in a fourth grade classroom. She said she did not speak any English nor did her parents. When asked how she managed in the new English speaking environment, she said, "I followed my cousin who spoke English. I sat next to her, I copied her work, and turned to her whenever I was stuck." Hannah continued

to say that her teacher did not know she existed, she kept a low profile afraid to speak or engage in the classroom in the fear of being rebuked. What Hannah is expressing here is what a few studies have shown that, mainstream classroom teachers see ELLs as, "deficient" and not worth their time, making them the responsibility of the ESL teachers (Yoon, 2008, p. 497).



Yasmin on the other hand responded to her hostile and uncaring school environment by displaying defiance. To avoid being labeled "stupid" she got in trouble, resulting in referrals and suspensions. When I asked her how her parents responded to this behavior, she said, "My mom would say, good! now help me with your brothers and sisters and go with me to work!" Yasmin said her parents were too busy working to support them with school work and in her parents' opinion it was school's responsibility to teach her. Yasmin's story is consistent with Dolores C Pena's claim that, "Effective parent involvement correlates with students' earning higher grades...as well as increased positive behaviors and emotional development" (Pena, 2000, p. 42). Yasmin was left on her own without the support of her "microsystem" and "mesosystem" each looking away from Yasmin who coped with rejection by acting out.



Joe and Enrique's experiences were different. Interviewee Joe was successful. He attributes his success to his teachers and responsive parents. He said, "The teachers made me work hard and pushed me to get better. My parents were involved in school, they helped me at home and reminded me of my ultimate goal - college!" While Enrique the only parent in this case study said, "Teachers are good but my wife is proactive and we speak English unlike other Mexican families who don't and who have a hard time communicating with the school." Enrique's response as well as Hannah's response resonate with Pena's claim based on a qualitative study she did at an elementary school with a large population of Mexican American families. She claims that, "cultural attitude and language" (Pena, 2000, p. 46) are some of the factors that determine parental involvement in schools. Pena says, that many Mexican American parents believe that it is the school's job to teach and they must not interfere, Hannah's parents do not. Pena also found that language is another barrier that discourages parents who are not fluent in English. Enrique did not have to overcome this barrier as he and his wife both spoke English fluently.

Furthermore, interviews with both the teachers emphasized the importance of 'knowing' the student and reaching out to the parents for support. One of the teachers said, "parents are part of the equation - student, teacher, and parent." Both these teachers exemplify Yoon's ideal teacher, a teacher who is responsive to the ELL's cultural and social needs, thus promoting the students' interactive process. Ultimately, these teachers do not hold a deficit view ELLs but embrace their potential.

im Implications

From these interviews we can gather the important role of the teacher and the school in building the bridge between home and school, which Adelson and Niehaus research substantiates. These authors' suggest that, "a supportive school environment may be particularly important for ELL children..." (Adelson & Niehaus, 2014, p. 3), and, "ELL children reported fewer social and emotional concerns when their parents were more involved in their education" (Adelson & Niehaus,

2014, p. 23). Further, the two authors found that when social-emotional well being of the ELL is not attended to, academic achievement goes down and the student begins to either "externalize" by acting out, or "internalize" by hiding; in both cases disengaging from the learning happening in the classroom. Yasmin and Hannah illustrate, one by acting out and the other by hiding behind her friend, keeping a low profile. Another important element that surfaced was ELLs opinion of

themselves as learners. The two ladies who did not have any support labeled themselves as 'stupid', incapable of learning, and projected a very low self-esteem. On the contrary, Joe who had all the supports had a positive experience in school and continued further to get a college degree. Adelson and Niehaus call this "academic self-concept" (Adelson & Niehaus, 2014, p. 28) and urge educators to, "foster ELL children's beliefs in their capabilities for success..." (Adelson & Niehaus, 2014, p. 29).

Recommendations

Given the theories and prior research calling for an increased role of the school and parent for ELL student success and the interviews conducted for this brief, here are four recommendations for schools and teachers.

1 Schools should set up opportunities to bring in parents as often as possible. These immigrant parents are new to the school culture in the U.S. and are often busy working to survive in their new home and have limited time. Therefore home and school connections/partnerships must be actively built and the school should make it a high priority issue. This can be achieved by ensuring all communication that goes out from school is in dual language. Secondly, every effort should be made to make the parent feel welcomed, and lastly, schools should increase the number of contacts with the parent either to call to find out how the student is doing at home or if there are any concerns.

2 The classroom teacher, the resource teacher, and any other adult involved in the students' life should all collaborate and work for the student together, rather than independently.

3 Have mentors in place. They can be peer mentors from upper grades, advisor mentors who the student can go to, or parent mentors that volunteer their time for all students.

4 Schools need to provide on going professional development for teachers that focuses on understanding ELLs history, their culture, and their challenges.

Limitations/Area for Further Study

This research brief is limited in both sample size and sample diversity. For further research to build on what we already know and what this research brief found, interviewing those silent and invisible parents would inform current research and provide evidence to the claims made.

“I only remember my teachers using words like, *these folks* and
headache when they talked to me”.
~Hannah



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Citations

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