

LA 3.4: Serving EL's in Schools and in Classrooms

Exploring Pat's Story



Learning Outcome

Understand and apply knowledge of how cultural identities impact language learning and school success by creating an environment that is inclusive of all students.

Assessment: 25 pts.

TA: 30 Minutes

Pedagogical Intent

Teachers can speak up for change in programs when they know better ways of working with students and families and are aware of their own biases.

Student Position

Students have studied conscious and unconscious bias as well as laws governing the teaching of English Language learners. They read an event that brought change to a school and apply it to their respective schools.

Instructions

1. In groups, read "Pat's Story" which is posted here immediately following the directions.
2. The story reveals how ELs can sometimes be overlooked.
3. After reading the story, in your group discuss what unsubstantiated assumptions (unconscious bias) that teachers hold about ELs and their families. Consider the way that assumptions and stereotypes played a role in the story.
4. Share experiences as you consider your school's program for working with English Language learners.
 - a. Does your school program for ELs help these students or does it harm them?
 - b. Are students pulled from the classroom to attend ESL classes?
 - c. Do ESL students miss out on important classroom activities and learning to go to ESL?
 - d. Does every teacher teaching ESL students have an ESL endorsement?
 - e. Are parents included in your school following the National PTA Standards? The Office of Civil Rights Requirements?
 - f. Do parents know how to 'speak up' for the child to advocate for better systems of helping students learn English?
 - g. Is your school or district under pressure from OCR to change 'the way we've always done it'?
5. In relationship to the story and your responses to the questions posed and your experiences in your groups pause and identify the ways in which your school is and has been successful with support the language and learning of ELs Also consider the ways in which your school or classroom practices are not working and might need adjustment. Suggest possible changes to each other.
6. Create a list of strategic changes you could propose in faculty or district meetings.

Pat's Story

My last 4 years of work in Salt Lake City School District was as a mentor for new teachers. I was assigned to my first non-Title 1 school where I mentored 3 new teachers. This was an eye-opening experience for me as I had always taught in Title 1 schools for my entire career. It was enjoyable to be there and work with the staff and my teachers. The school had 63 ELLs attending out of 500 students and was in a very affluent area on the east bench.

I arrived one day after being with several of my other teachers I mentored, and as soon as she saw me, the principal said, "Pat, I need to talk to you. Can you come to my office right away?" In my brain, I was thinking 'oh, no, which one of my 3 teachers here did something she shouldn't have?' I left my things in the faculty room and immediately went to the office.

Rae, the principal, asked me to shut the door. I did, and sat down across from her, and she immediately told me that the district equity office people had visited the school earlier in the day. With a sigh of relief, I commented that I was sure they were pleased with what they saw. Rae's reply to me was that the question they had asked her was: "What is your school doing for your 63 students who are ELLs?"

My response was, "Well, what did you say?"

She said that she had described that when she goes into classrooms, she notices that teachers are pulling groups to work with at a table a lot.

"So, when they are working with groups, are they building academic language or background knowledge with those students?" I said.

"I'm not sure," she stated. "I just thought they were doing something to help those kids with the language."

My next thought was, 'I wonder why they asked that question'. So, I asked, "Why don't you pull up your last three years of test scores. Maybe that will give us a clue as to why they came today."

Rae went to her computer and pulled up the data. This was a very eastside school in the district, and usually their test scores are in the mid 90s. I was a bit surprised that this school's test scores averaged 82%. Quite a bit below my expectation.

I suggested, "Try disaggregating the data and let's look at the scores then. Take out your English language learners and see what that does to the percentages."

She did, and we were both surprised to see that without those 63 students included, the school average was 92%. Quite a difference. Then we looked at the scores of the English language learners by themselves, and noticed that their scores had plummeted to 27%! Quite a difference, too. Rae and I were both appalled by that figure. Most of these ELLs are children of parents who teach at the U of U or are students there. They come from educated families, but the teachers had assumed that they didn't need to worry about them.

In my head, I was thinking 'Just 4 years ago I taught the BYU ESL endorsement classes right here at this school because so many teachers had enrolled in the classes. What did they not get? I really believe that because these students' parents were educated, the assumption was that they didn't need any help. The teachers hadn't realized that background knowledge and academic vocabulary work was needed for the students to really grapple with and understand the learning that English speakers had already known.

Rae asked me what I thought they should do to improve those test scores. I told her my thinking, and she asked if I would do a faculty meeting training the following Monday to remind teachers of what they need to do when working with ELLs.

I responded to her that I would be happy to do that, but only if she would begin by describing the visit from the district personnel and then show the faculty the test scores. When the teachers saw the difference in scores between native English speakers and second language speakers, there was a big communal gasp. We reminded ourselves that one should never assume that any student gets everything we do along the way without informal assessment to measure it.

Together, we agreed that they would immediately begin working on background knowledge and we came up with many ways to teach vocabulary. They agreed to end the year by working harder with ELLs and they began the next year armed with an arsenal of vocabulary strategies and practices to use.

Always remember: to assume that every student 'gets it' right away can become a very disabling experience for the students who need it. Teachers now were aware that they had sorely neglected this group of students across all the grade levels.



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