

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN 21ST CENTURY CLASSROOMS: CHALLENGES AND EXPECTATIONS

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Educating New Americans: Meeting Challenges to Living the Dream

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The dream of a better life for immigrants and their children has been a part of the immigrant experience since the earliest days of settlement on this continent. People from around the world dream of America as a land of education and opportunity, free of religious oppression and fear of war (Thomas, 2007). The culture of the United States perpetuates this dream within its borders, holding up shining examples of famous Americans like Abraham Lincoln, who grew up poor but became the president of the United States. Examples of people who have “made it” against all odds and are living the American Dream are an integral part of the school curricula and national identity (Sleeter, 1992).

Education plays a vital role in living the dream by providing the necessary academic, linguistic, and civic foundation for success (Library of Congress Thomas, 2012). Today, the United States is becoming increasingly more diverse as immigrants and refugees arrive from every corner of the globe, speaking every possible language and looking for opportunities for themselves and their children to flourish (Thomas, 2007). For educators, this mix of languages and cultures can pose a challenge in today’s high-stakes testing environments in which teachers have to teach not only

content but also to ensure that their students' English is developing so that the students can have access to high-quality education and develop their full potential.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to inform teachers and administrators that there may be a lack of consistency and continuity in the language programs English language learners (ELLs) in Texas. These programmatic inconsistencies can lead to inequities that can prohibit students from reaching their full potential. In this article, three student scenarios provide examples of some of the inconsistencies, their impact on student success, and how educators can best address the needs of ELLs while providing a quality, consistent program.

Scenarios

In this article, the stories of three ELLs are presented. They were born in three countries and speak two different languages. Each student in a scenario is an individual and not a composite. In each scenario, a student's story illustrates the issues the student faced in U.S. schools, how the schools either helped or hindered the student's education, and what schools can do to help each student achieve success.

Participants

The three participants in the scenarios were students in Texas public schools. All three entered Texas schools

speaking a language other than English and all were classified as limited-English proficient (LEP). The three participants entered Texas schools at different ages and grades. All of their U.S. school experiences were in Texas. Once they began in Texas schools, they remained in the same geographical location, moving no farther than the neighboring school district.

Alan was born in the United States. He was a native Spanish speaker. Alan began Texas schools in kindergarten and continued through the eighth grade. He changed school districts only one time during his school years. He was in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program for two years and then in a bilingual education program for three-and-a-half years.

Elena was born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States when she was nine years old. She began Texas public schools in second grade and continued through high school graduation. She changed school districts one time. She was in an ESL program for two years.

Huang was born in China and immigrated to the United States when he was 18 years old. He entered Texas public schools as a high school junior and continued through graduation. He attended only one Texas high school and was in its ESL program for two years.

Settings

All three scenarios take place in Texas school public school districts. The first setting in Alan's scenario begins in a mid-sized, class-3A school district in Central Texas where Alan attended the kindergarten ESL program at the school.

The setting then shifts for the rest of the scenario to a neighboring school district, which was also mid-sized and class-3A. This district had a primary elementary school for grades pre-kindergarten through 2, an intermediate elementary school with grades 3-5, a middle school with grades 6-8, and a high school for grades 9-12. Alan began at this setting in first grade and continued in the district through eighth grade. In pre-kindergarten through fifth grade, the school district offered both a bilingual English/Spanish education program and an ESL program. At the middle and high school levels, the school district offered an ESL program for students who were identified as LEP. This school district was also the setting for Huang's scenario, which began when he entered the eleventh grade.

The setting for Elena's scenario is East Texas. It begins in a mid-size, class-3A school district that has the same types of schools as in the other scenarios: a primary elementary, an intermediate elementary, a middle school, and a high school. Elena attended school in this district through the seventh grade. The setting then shifts to a neighboring East Texas 3A school district where Elena finished her education.

Methodology

Alan's and Huang's scenarios were developed by using qualitative data collected by a school district bilingual/ESL director. For Alan, she collected field notes on his education for four years. She conducted unstructured interviews with Alan, his mother, and three of his teachers over the course of three years. The field notes and interview data was coded and organized by themes. The data was then triangulated with

data from the primary source data from Alan's school records.

The same qualitative data collection and analysis process was followed for developing Huang's scenario. With Huang's scenario, the field notes were collected for the two years he attended public schools. The interviews were with Huang, his uncle, and five of his teachers. The data was then triangulated with the primary source data from Huang's school records.

For Elena's story, the qualitative data collection process was different. Elena wrote her own narrative of immigrating to the United States and of her experiences in Texas schools. The bilingual/ESL director who collected the field notes and interviews for the other two scenarios then conducted interviews with Elena. The data from Elena's narrative and interviews were then coded and organized by theme and the data was triangulated with primary source data from Elena's school records.

Scenario 1. Alan's story: A Spanish-speaking student born in the United States

It was the first day of the school year. Alan entered his kindergarten classroom. A pretty lady smiled at him. All of the children were talking and laughing, but Alan remained quiet. He watched what the others did and tried to copy them, but nothing really made sense. All he heard was a lot of noise. Finally he sat down and cried.

Alan was born in the United States, a native Spanish speaker and also an ELL. Because the school district was not required by the state of Texas to have a bilingual education program due to the small number of ELLs, Alan was placed

in a regular kindergarten classroom with an English as a Second Language (ESL)-certified teacher (Texas Administrative Code §89.1225, 2012). He became very good at following his classmates' lead in regard to what was happening in class. After a few weeks, he could answer basic questions with single-word answers. His academic progress was slow. His teacher pulled him aside daily and taught him a few phrases in English, but she believed that, since so much of the early childhood experience focused on oral language, she did not need to do any other ESL-specific teaching. By the end of the year, Alan had made almost no academic progress and was retained, meaning that he would have to repeat the same grade again. His second year in kindergarten, he began to make more academic progress but was still not at grade level. He was, however, placed into first grade.

Alan's first-grade experience was completely different. His family had moved into a different district, one that offered a Spanish bilingual education program. Following the state rules concerning ESL and bilingual placement, Alan was placed in a bilingual school (Texas Administrative Code §89.1225, 2012). Although the school had a documented bilingual program, it was implemented inconsistently, so teachers did what they thought was best. In first grade, the teacher taught 90% of the time in Spanish. While Alan understood basic conversations, he had no academic background in Spanish.

At the end of first grade, he was again significantly below grade level and was retained again. In second grade, the teacher taught everything in Spanish and then translated it into English. Alan finished the year below grade level but was placed in third grade. Alan was in school in Texas, a state

that, at the time, allowed students in bilingual programs to test in either English or Spanish in the elementary grades for up to three years, so his third-grade teacher did a thorough assessment of all of her students in both English and Spanish and then worked on strengthening their language skills for the required state test (Texas Education Agency, 2012). For Alan, his dominant language was Spanish.

Less than a month before the state exam, Alan's mother came to the school for a parent-teacher conference. By then, Alan was slightly, but not significantly, below grade level in Spanish. He was approximately a year below grade level in English.

During the conference, the mother and teacher had a serious disagreement. The mother left the meeting furious and went to the office and demanded that Alan be removed from that teacher's class. Since there was only one third-grade bilingual teacher, changing classes meant removing Alan from the bilingual education program. At that time, the mother also refused special language services for Alan. Because Alan was now receiving instruction in English only, he had to take the state exam in English (Texas Education Agency, 2012). Alan failed the state exam in all subjects and was retained again, meaning that he had to repeat a grade for a third time. By fifth grade, Alan was finally able to pass his state exams and was no longer considered LEP. By seventh grade, having been retained three times in elementary school, Alan was already driving. When in eighth grade, Alan again failed his state exams. At that point, he gave up. He dropped out of school without even attempting high school. He took a minimum-wage job with no prospects for advancement. He

has no plans to continue his education and does not have any real plans for the future.

Alan's retention

Alan was retained *three times* in the elementary grades, meaning that by the end of fifth grade, he was the age of the average eighth grader. While being retained one time in elementary school can greatly increase the likelihood of dropping out, being retained three times set Alan up for failure from a young age (Rumberger, 1995). When the schools considered retaining Alan in first and third grade, they should have examined his records to find that he had previously been retained and was over-age. His physical maturity at the end of his first time in third grade, where he was already the size of the fifth graders and interested in girls, should have been a signal to the school that he should not be retained again. Rather than retaining him, they should have created an intervention plan to help him close the gaps in his education and give him a chance at success. When he failed his state exams again in eighth grade, he saw no way out. He believed that he would be retained again, so he decided to take measures into his own hands and dropped out of school.

Alan's school issues and solutions

Alan's story is not an isolated case. Grade retention is one of the single most powerful predictors of dropping out of school (Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002, p.52; Rumberger, 1995), but research has explored little regarding the relationship between starting school as a second

language learner, retention, and school failure. Because most states do not differentiate student data to include students who were LEP but reclassified as non-LEP, students like Alan often do not appear in the dropout data as a former LEP. LEP students are usually reclassified as non-LEP once they meet the required exit criteria (Texas Administrative Code §89.1225, 2012). Beginning with the 2009-10 school year, Texas began including former LEPs in their dropout data but not in grade retention data (Texas Education Agency, 2011). Second language learners are retained for not meeting the same criteria for passing as non-LEP students.

Changes in retention policies in Texas since the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) have caused an increase in the number of students being retained. Retention, in this case, refers to repeating a grade level (Texas Education Agency, 2001). In Texas, prior to NCLB, a child could only be retained once from first through fourth grade. Since NCLB, that provision has been eliminated, primarily due to the requirements that students demonstrate proficiency in math and reading in specific grades (Texas Education Agency, 2008). This change has led to cases like Alan's, where students are being retained at multiple grade levels.

Retention and English language learners

Retention rates for English language learners (ELLs) are alarming, given the relationship between retention and school failure. In Texas, "in the elementary grades, LEP students overall had higher rates of retention than non-LEP students in all grades except kindergarten" (p. 40) while the retention rate for LEP students in grades 7-12 was more than double the

retention rate for non-LEP students (see Chart 1) (Texas Education Agency, 2011). The retention data in this report, however, does not include retention rates for students who were once classified as LEP and then reclassified as non-LEP.

Chart 1 based on data from Texas Education Agency (Texas Education Agency, 2011)

In a report on Texas secondary school dropouts, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) reported the grade 9 longitudinal graduation, completion, and dropout rates by student characteristics for the class of 2009. For students who were identified as LEP at any time during grades K-12, the dropout rate was 12.7%. For students who were identified as LEP during grades 9-12, the dropout rate was 19.7%. For students who were still identified as LEP in their last year in school, the dropout rate was 29.1%, which, when compared to a state dropout rate of 9.4% for the entire class of 2009, indicates that students who are identified as LEP have a greater chance of dropping out than students who are never identified as LEP (Texas Education Agency, 2001, p. 62). What the data does not show is any possible correlation between the retention and dropout rates, although research

does support the correlation (Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002).

Factors to consider when retaining ELLs

When making a decision about retaining a child who speaks English as a second language, schools should consider several factors. These include the amount of time the student spent acquiring the language, the student's school history, including previous retentions and gaps in the child's education, maturity, and age, as well as academic performance.

The first factor impacting Alan was the amount of time he spent acquiring English. According to research in second language acquisition, it can take a student five to seven years to acquire the academic language proficiency needed to be successful in school (Collier & Thomas, 1997; Cummins, 1984). Alan's language development in both his home language, Spanish, and his second language, English, was hindered by the schools' inconsistencies within their second language programs.

Many students change districts and programs without it adversely impacting their language or academic development. In Alan's case, however, the teachers did not have a clear understanding of what they were supposed to do in either the ESL or bilingual education program. This inconsistency and lack of understanding was a primary factor leading to his retention in both kindergarten and first grade. In kindergarten, the teacher did not understand that even though she included a lot of song, dance, and hands-on activities, without more targeted ESL instruction, Alan could not make the progress

needed in kindergarten. The school administrators also should have looked at Alan's progress as an ELL, not just as a kindergartener.

In first grade, the teacher believed strongly in developing the first language, an approach supported by second language research (Collier & Thomas, 1997; Cummins, 1984). What teachers often fail to realize is that "children can lose their ability to communicate in their mother tongue within 2-3 years of starting school" (Cummins, 2012). Although Alan's first language was Spanish, he had been immersed in English instruction for two years. At home, his older siblings spoke with him predominantly in English. While the teacher believed she was doing what was best for Alan, if she had done a thorough assessment of both his receptive and productive language in both English and Spanish, she then could have targeted his instruction to better meet his needs.

The first time Alan was in third grade, his bilingual teacher did a complete assessment of both languages and then targeted her instruction to meet Alan's needs. He began to make good progress, but a disagreement between the teacher and Alan's mother caused Alan to be removed from the bilingual program. Once out of the program, Alan failed the state exams that he was required to take in English with no linguistic supports. Although the state called for a committee to determine grade placement for students failing their exams, the principal at his school failed to understand Alan's school history, including that he had been working in English only for less than a month prior to the test and that he had already been retained. The school had the option to place him in the next grade and provide him with interventions and support, but they chose not to do so.

Scenario 2. Elena's story: A student from Mexico

Elena's family arrived in the United States from Mexico when Elena was 9 years old. In Mexico, Elena had been an academically strong student who admired her aunt, the only person in her family who had graduated from high school. According to Elena, her mother encouraged her to do well in school and stressed the importance of education.

When Elena arrived in the United States, the family had no transportation. Her father's boss took her father to work, while Elena and her mother stayed inside the house, afraid to leave because of *la migra* (*immigration authorities*); as undocumented immigrants, they had a strong fear of deportation.

After a couple of weeks, Elena's father's boss told the family that Elena needed to be in school. Elena remembered going to the intermediate elementary school and the principal informing the boss that the paperwork was incomplete because she did not have a birth certificate (Texas Administrative Code §89.1225, 2012). The principal did not enroll Elena in his school even though she had school records showing she had completed third grade. The boss then took Elena to the grades K-2 school where the principal enrolled Elena, but in second grade with English as a Second Language (ESL) services.

That first year was difficult for Elena. She was picked on and bullied, but she lacked the English language skills to stand up for herself. Within two years, Elena was out of ESL. By sixth grade, she was at the top of her class. She reported that she approached the principal about skipping a grade to help her catch up to where she would have been if she had

started U.S. schools in the proper grade, but she did not pass the required statewide exam. Her school records did not give any information about whether she took the test or give the results.

When Elena was in eighth grade, her family moved into a nearby district. For Elena, it was a positive move. In her first school district, she often felt discriminated against. In the new district, she was welcomed by a group of students and teachers. The students became a support system for each other. The teachers and counselors often spoke with the students about the importance of education and going on to college. Elena, along with her group of supportive peers, graduated at the top of her class. She completed her four-year degree and went on to graduate school. She is well on her way to living her dream of being an educated professional.

Elena's school issues and solutions

The state of Texas recognizes that not all children who immigrate to the United States will have a birth certificate or other school records (Texas Education Code Section 25.002, 2012). The school could have accepted other forms of identification. Elena's parents did not have a copy of her birth certificate. They did not know that they could work with the Mexican Consulate to obtain her records from Mexico. The intermediate elementary school did not ask if Elena might have other acceptable documentation. The primary elementary school understood that sometimes immigrant children will not have every copy of the documentation necessary to start school, but because Elena had current immunizations, identification other than her birth certificate,

and proof of living with her legal guardians, the primary school principal allowed her to start school in accordance with state law (Texas Education Code Section 25.002, 2012).

Documents may be lost in the process of moving from one country to another. If the students are refugees, the documents may come from a variety of sources (*Refugee children*, 2012). In some cases, parents do not know what documents they need to bring with them. In other cases, documents like birth certificates may not exist. For children born at home or in poor, rural areas, a birth certificate may not have been issued or may not be issued until the family takes a trip to a larger area and registers the birth. For people who come in as refugees from war-torn countries or seeking asylum, obtaining records may be impossible (*Refugee children*, 2012). Today, for a student such as Elena, however, the new school can contact a student's previous schools, except for the most remote schools, in many countries, such as Mexico. Today, even in third world countries, schools have the capability of receiving faxes or e-mails. Consulate offices are also willing to work with families to obtain the necessary documentation.

Parental involvement: Issues and solutions

Elena faced many issues at school. One that the school could have helped with was reaching out to her parents. For immigrant parents, U.S. schools may be seen foreign and as part of the government system. For someone like Elena's mother, who was undocumented, there was a fear of deportation if she came to the school. Although most schools understand that they are not to ask about immigration status,

parents who are illegal may not be aware of this (Borkowski & Soronen, 2012). To make the parents more comfortable so that they can be more involved in their child's schooling, schools can make a few changes that will reap large rewards.

First, create a list of people within the district who speak other languages. One bilingual/ESL director in a small district sent an e-mail district-wide asking what languages other than English faculty and staff in the district spoke and if they would be willing to translate for parent meetings. She discovered the district had faculty and staff members who spoke Russian, Vietnamese, Mandarin, French, German, Portuguese, Czech, Spanish, and Korean. They became active participants in the school's parenting program.

Second, consider having parent information meetings in the home language at a site away from school, possibly in a local community center, church, library, or other neutral ground. At that meeting, explain the parents' rights and that the school has no relationship with the immigration authorities (Borkowski & Soronen, 2012). Immigrant parents need to understand that schools cannot ask for any information related to their or their children's immigration status. If the school district has information about a family's immigration status, they cannot report it to immigration authorities (Borkowski & Soronen, 2012). This information is based on the case of *Plyler v. Doe*, on which the Supreme Court ruled 30 years ago. "This landmark ruling handed down in 1982 has made it possible for undocumented children to enroll in the nation's public schools, and it has been widely acknowledged as a success story" (Olivas, 2012).

Finally, in this age of security, schools usually check the identification of each person entering the school. Schools

often use a machine to scan a person's driver's license before letting the person into the classrooms. For undocumented parents, they might not have a driver's license or state identification. The parents, however, may have a form of legal identification from their home country. Many of the scanner systems can be programmed to accept foreign identifications. Accepting the legal photo identification from their home country will allow more parents to feel comfortable and welcome in the school. Parental support can greatly improve a child's chances at school success.

Scenario 3. Huang's story: A recent immigrant student from China

Huang arrived from mainland China as an 18-year-old immigrant. His parents were still in China, but he lived with his aunt and uncle and helped them run their restaurant. Although he was 18, he had not graduated from high school. He wanted to go to college and study business. The bilingual/ESL director for the district, the principal, the registrar, and an interpreter sat down with Huang and his uncle to talk about what classes Huang would need to graduate. Upon reviewing his transcript, school officials realized he would need to take U.S. history, U.S. government, health, speech, and four years of English to comply with graduation requirements (Texas Education Agency, 2012). Given the language requirements for those courses and the state requirements for testing for graduation, the administrators, Huang, and his uncle realized that if Huang took all of the courses at once, he would not be able to be successful. Instead, they decided that he would enroll as a

junior and each year would take Advanced Placement classes in math and science since he had already learned the content.

Huang's first weeks in school were difficult. He was the only Mandarin speaker in school. While he could understand some written English, he struggled with oral communication. He was the only non-Spanish speaker in his ESL/English language arts classes, but the other ESL students took him under their wings to help him adapt to the new environment. In science and math he excelled with the content and soon mastered the necessary English for those subjects. His reading in English improved quickly, but his writing took longer to develop.

By the end of one year, Huang passed his required state exams in math and science. He missed passing the history/social studies test by a small margin, primarily due to the essay questions. Likewise, on the English/language arts test, he was able to answer the multiple choice questions, but struggled with the essay. By the end of the following year, he had passed the history/social studies test, but not the English/language arts test. He met all other requirements for graduation and even passed his Advanced Placement math and science tests for college credit in calculus, chemistry, and biology, but he could not graduate because of failing the required English/language arts test (Texas Education Agency, 2012).

To help Huang continue with his education, the school worked with the local junior college to allow Huang to take developmental reading and writing classes the next year. He also attended tutoring sessions at the high school. The high school counselor advised him about each testing date for the state exam. Finally, two years after he left high school, Huang

was able to pass the state test and receive his diploma. He has gone on to college and is majoring in business.

Huang's school issues and solutions

Under the requirements of NCLB, ELLs are required to take and pass the state exams to prove proficiency in the students' content areas (Texas Education Agency, 2012). While some states allow testing in the student's native language or linguistic supports on some tests, all require students to pass their English language arts test in English. For an immigrant student coming into high school as a second language learner, this hurdle can be too great to overcome as evidenced by the dropout rates of for LEP high school students in Texas, who drop out at twice the rate of non-LEP students (Texas Education Agency, 2011). For LEP students in high school, there is a high correlation between being LEP and grade-level retention. Chart 2 compares the retention rate for LEP and non-LEP students in eleventh and twelfth grades in Texas in the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years (Texas Education Agency, 2011).

Chart 2 based on data from Texas Education Agency (Texas Education Agency, 2011)

The role of the school in Huang's success

Huang was in a high school that had trained all of its teachers in sheltered instruction practices, incorporating the English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) and differentiation for second language learners. Because his content teachers knew how to provide appropriate linguistic accommodations and because of his strong academic background, Huang was not retained, nor did he need to repeat any of his classes.

Huang faced an issue that immigrant and refugee students may face when arriving in the United States: Huang was already 18 years old (*Refugee children*, 2012). The administrators understood that even though Huang technically could complete the required coursework in one year, with his limited English, it would be difficult for him to graduate. They set up a plan to give him two years to try to graduate. When he was unable to pass the required state exams for graduation, the school did not allow Huang to drop out but worked with him until he was able to pass.

Most states allow students to attend public school until the age of 21, and exceptions beyond those age limits can be made on a case-by-case basis. "Texas is one of only 20 states with a maximum compulsory attendance age of 18, and in 2007, Texas passed legislation allowing individuals up to age 26 to attend public schools to promote high school graduation for all and reengage students who have dropped out. With these laws, Texas makes a strong statement that dropping out of school is not an option." (Texas Education Agency, 2012). For students like Huang, the change in the law in Texas

should allow more students to be able to meet graduation requirements.

Going from “at risk” to success

All three students would be considered “at risk.” They were all over-age for their grade levels, and they all started school being LEP. They were children of poverty and either immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants. Two of the students were able to be successful in English language acquisition while one was not. While all three had factors that put them at risk for retention, dropping out, and low performance, Elena and Huang also had protective factors that helped mitigate the at-risk factors. Protective factors can include family characteristics, individual attributes, school experiences, and peer groups (Chen & Kaufman, 2012).

Family characteristics

When considering family characteristics, both Elena’s and Huang’s mothers placed a strong value on education. The value their mothers placed on education plays an important role in whether a student who is retained will drop out of school. One study found that “the mothers of retained students who later dropped out had previously reported a lower value of education for their children” than the mothers of students who stayed in school (Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002, p. 56). Although neither Alan nor Elena was retained due to failure, they were both held back because of other issues.

Individual attributes

Individual attributes can also be protective factors. Having positive expectations about their abilities, having a positive vision for the future, and being able to seek help when needed are all protective factors (Chen & Kaufman, 2012; Masten, 1994; Rutter, 1987; Westfall & Pisapia, 1994; Worrell, 1996). Elena and Huang shared these individual attributes, but Alan did not. Both Elena and Huang had a positive self-concept about their academic abilities, partly because of their early school success. Having positive expectations about their abilities allowed them to continue to overcome the obstacles of having to move back grades and to work in a second language. They both also had positive visions for the future. In sixth grade, Elena set short- and long-term goals for herself, which included graduating and going to college. She held onto her goals even during tough times. Huang entered U.S. schools with the goals of learning English and going to college. Neither Huang nor Elena were deterred from following through with their goals. Alan reported to his teachers that he did not have positive expectations about his abilities or a positive view of the future. He did not believe he could be successful in school. Although he knew that graduating could lead to a brighter future, he could not envision that future for himself.

The other individual attribute that both Elena and Huang shared was seeking help when needed. They both sought academic support and guidance. They looked for ways to accelerate their learning. They were active participants in the learning process. ELLs need assistance in learning how to

navigate the school system and to discover the resources available to them.

School experiences and peer groups

For all three students, some of their U.S. school experiences were negative, but for Huang and Elena, the positive school experiences offset the negative ones. These positive school experiences included having supportive, positive peer groups and school personnel.

For all three students, the first year of school was difficult and confusing. They did not speak the language and could not understand much of the school culture. Alan did not have the academic background or past positive experiences in school to act as a support system. He became withdrawn, which caused him to have difficulty building the social support system that the others developed. Both Elena and Huang entered U.S. schools having had positive school experiences in their own countries. Elena and her friends made plans for the future and helped each other through hard times. Her teachers and counselors discussed college and the future, helping her see that her dreams were attainable. Likewise Huang was able to build a social network within the school to help him. Although he was the only non-Spanish speaker in his ESL class, the other ESL students provided him with support. The teachers encouraged him to succeed and provided appropriate support throughout his education.

Recommendations

Teachers who work with ELLs need to foster under-

standing of the needs of their students so that the students can be successful. Some recommendations for helping ELLs be successful include

- Build a support system for the students and their parents.
- Give the students opportunities to be successful.
- Help the students set goals for themselves and then help them achieve their goals.
- Work with them as individuals so that they can achieve their full potential.
- Ensure that the school and district provide a consistent, high quality ESL and/or bilingual program that allows the students to progress socially, academically, and linguistically.
- Be an advocate for the student.

If every teacher will provide a supportive and academically challenging environment, perhaps the number of ELLs who are retained and drop out can be reduced.

Conclusion

In U.S. schools today, students come from every corner of the globe. They come to school speaking a variety of languages. Educators have to ensure that these new Americans have every opportunity to achieve the academic success necessary to follow their dreams. Given the data on retention and dropout rates for LEP students, teachers should be concerned (Texas Education Agency, 2011). When looking at retention, review the student's records and ask some basic questions:

- How long has the student been working in English?
- Has the student already been retained?
- Does the student have educational gaps?
- What more can be done to help rather than retain the student?

In addition to paying attention to retention, teachers need to work with the parents. Parents who are involved in their children's education do better in school. For parents who do not speak English, U.S. schools are completely foreign. Parents may not feel comfortable or welcome in the school. Teachers can work with the school to post welcome signs in different languages. Many larger districts have translated school paperwork into other languages; small districts can contact them to see if they are willing to share. If possible, schools can host parent meetings in the parents' home languages or provide translators. Teachers and schools can work with parents and help them understand that they are vital to their child's educational success.

Finally, teachers can work with students to build their beliefs about their educational abilities and to set short- and long-term goals. They need to believe that they are capable. They need to envision a positive future. By working with them, they can have the academic success necessary to achieve their dreams.

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