

# 4 The Importance of Student Centered Democratic Education & the Effects on Placement of English Language Learners

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This article explores the theoretical framework upon which a democratic classroom is based, and the effects that a curriculum based on social justice has on English Language Learners (ELLs). Furthermore, it explores authentic means of assessing ELLs, in addition to other more traditional and standardized testing. In a social justice framework, all students should have access to the curriculum (Cunningham, 2001). This study analyzes how the use of rigorous curriculum, paired with targeted support for ELLs, may accelerate English development and academic proficiency. The study focuses on an English language development class, in which a rigorous language arts curriculum is adapted to the needs of ELLs. It also examines three case studies of ELLs placed in mainstream language arts classes. Findings from this study suggest that multiple measures of assessment can be utilized as a basis for placement of ELLs. In addition, ELLs may be well served in mainstream classrooms, with adequate support. A quantitative analysis of test scores at the beginning and at the end of the school year and a qualitative analysis of students' performance and attitude will support the use of instructional practices designed to meet the needs of ELLs within an environment of academic rigor.*

## INTRODUCTION

In Southern California, a small rural school district is nestled among majestic mountains. The community that surrounds the district is largely comprised of affluent families who are very vocal about what their children need. As stakeholders, most parents have assumed a very active role in the school system. Parents are passionate advocates for the implementation and maintenance of enrichment programs.

During the past eight years, the sole middle school in this district has experienced a gradual and persistent change in its demographics. The Caucasian population in the larger community has always been the majority. Recently, however, a population of minority language students, almost all of Mexican parentage, has been growing every year. The district has also experienced a gradual decrease in standardized test scores.

The district has increasingly felt pressure from policymakers at state and national levels, in regard to Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals for all subgroups, including English Learners. The superintendent and board members have felt constrained to implement changes in its instructional programs in order to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

At present, 65% of the student population at this school is Caucasian, and 31% Hispanic or Latino. The remaining 4% is divided between African American and Asian minorities. The English Learners subgroup comprises 15% of the overall population.

Even within the minority population, there is a large discrepancy between backgrounds and socioeconomic levels of the students. While some members of minority groups qualify for free and reduced lunches, many English Learners come from a middle class or affluent background.

For example, many of these students' parents own businesses or large ranches in both sides of the United States-Mexico border. Some of the students come to the school with a very solid bilingual core of knowledge from private schools in Mexico, while some struggle with literacy skills in their primary language. The population in this district comes from great wealth or great poverty, with a few students in the middle.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

English Learners in middle school often struggle with mastering grade level standards in their second language. Most middle schools in California place English Learners in English Language Development (ELD) classes in lieu of mainstream language arts, which do not necessarily address grade level standards, specifically in the domains of reading and writing. Nevertheless, these students are subjected to

standardized testing and held to the same federal and state goals as all other students. In the district subject of this study, ELD classes include students at a wide range of abilities and English proficiency levels.

Despite increasing demands on performance levels in all subgroups, it is difficult to argue that students at the beginning levels of English development should be expected to perform at grade level in reading and writing in English. In these cases, the ELD classes are a necessary pathway towards language proficiency. The problem arises when students are not closely monitored and not readily challenged as soon as their language development permits. Some students at intermediate levels of language proficiency may not be challenged enough, and would be better served in a mainstream language arts class with adequate support. When students are not exposed to grade level language arts materials, it impacts all areas of academic achievement, due to the inability to access informational text at their grade level. It also impacts English Learners' California Standards Test (CST) scores greatly.

According to the Latino Summit report for the San Diego County Office of Education (2007), only about 20% of all Latino students complete the "A through G" requirements for admission to the State University and University of California systems.

Furthermore, even among those students who are accepted to a university, the dropout rate is disproportionately high compared to Caucasian students. There is a proven correlation between the inability to read at grade level and academic success in high school and college (Beers, 2003, Jimenez, 1997, Cadiero-Kaplan, 2004). As a result, many bright, promising English Learners are denied access to a system that has not served them well since the beginning, perpetuating a cycle of self-defeat.

According to state and federal mandates, including the No Child Left Behind law, English Learners are accountable for reading and mastering grade level material in every content area, including mathematics, science and social studies. Without additional support, or the availability of content area material at their grade level, most of these students struggle to catch up with their peers in an academic setting (Mahon, 2006).

Even if students choose not to attend higher education institutions, the ability to read material in English directly impacts their economic success. If knowledge is power, the inability to access that knowledge in everyday life will close access to better jobs and opportunities. Therefore, it becomes a matter of social justice to research and implement instructional approaches and materials that will provide equal access to academic learning to all students.

In this study, an approach that includes English Learners at an intermediate stage of English development in a mainstream language arts classroom at their grade level will be examined. Three case studies

are presented, in which the participating students were closely monitored, and given additional support and flexibility to comply with the requirements of the class. Within a theoretical framework of critical pedagogy, the study examines data in an attempt to identify inequities within a social justice context. The results will define some practical approaches for educators of English Learners in middle school. The study will focus on the following research questions:

How is a multicultural education focused on social justice and democratic values represented in an ELD middle school classroom?

What role does authentic assessment play in the development and placement of English learners?

How can teachers address the requirements of high-stakes standardized testing, while preserving social justice and a student-centered classroom?

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

In our current political climate, the term “achievement gap” surrounds us constantly. Institutions such as the San Diego County Office of Education, through its annual Latino Summit, annually provide statistics that prove that Latino students, many of whom are English Learners, are falling behind their peers. A disproportionate amount of Latino students do not make it through high school and college (Latino Summit, 2007, National Education Association, 2005.)

Within a framework of social justice, it is clear that inequity starts in our schools. In order to address the larger problem, it is necessary to focus on crucial areas that are instrumental to all students’ success. Literacy is essential to academic advancement. If students are not able to access grade level material, they are being deprived of opportunities that are will provide them with an equal position in society (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2004).

The problem of literacy in English Learners extends beyond merely being able to read. Many of these students come to the United States educational system with poorly developed skills in their primary language. The obstacles they encounter are almost insurmountable. To compound the problem, many schools and educators are not allowed by the system to implement what research considers the most logical approach; continuing to develop the student’s literacy skills in his or her own language (Cummins, 1979). This is especially true of the middle school educational environment, where the urgency to prepare these students to access grade level material in all content areas in the English language is palpable.

Although many teachers in California do not have the flexibility to be able to teach students in their primary language, pedagogically sound approaches may still be implemented that take into account the specific needs of English Learners, and their primary and second language development. Assisting students to develop their literacy skills will enable them to access grade level material in all their content area classes.

In order to address the achievement gap and social inequity, literacy instruction must be targeted as a means to achieve higher education and job related goals for all students. The purpose of this study is to examine the best instructional approaches to promote rapid development of literacy skills for English Learners in middle school.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature examined is focused on critical theory, and assessment approaches that are more equitable to all students. If English Learners in middle school are placed according to assessment results, it is important to acquire a clear understanding of the information to be obtained from all assessment sources. The research presented examines issues of social justice in the current educational system, and specifically focuses on alternative or authentic modes of assessing students in order to place them in appropriate classes. Critical pedagogy principles based on Freire (1970) and other researchers will also serve to create a framework for effective literacy instruction targeted to English learners in middle school.

From a social justice perspective, educators are called to provide the tools to help students successfully navigate an inequitable system. Freire (1990) states that

We cannot neglect the task of helping students become literate, choosing instead to spend most of the teaching time on political analysis....students from subordinate cultures have to be *armed* with the ability to engage the dominant language, so as to prepare them to struggle effectively with instructional societal rules, laws, policies and practices that function against their democratic interests." (p.212)

Freire also cautions about using the "colonizer's" language as the only medium of instruction. From a critical pedagogy point of view, literacy should be promoted in both the primary and the target language. This is a lofty goal to attain in the predominant educational environment, where narrow focus on English Only movements hinders teachers to adequately support literacy development in a second language.

Furthermore, Cunningham (2001) speaks of "culturally relevant pedagogy" as an important component of instruction based on social justice principles. She stresses the importance of reflecting and

embedding the social reality and cultural background of students within instruction. Many students who speak a language other than English arrive at middle school at a serious disadvantage in regard to literacy skills in English, which in turn places them at serious risk to even make it through the system, therefore rendering them powerless to effect changes in the future.

“Critical theory...proposes a radically different vision of schooling and urges us to make differences.” (Hinchey 2003, p.15). From a critical pedagogy perspective, it is clear that what is not working needs to be examined, improved or changed. In middle school, particular obstacles abound. During a crucial developmental stage, it is imperative that a critical pedagogy approach be paired with sound methodology.

Cunningham (2001), explores assumptions, constructed consciousness, and hegemony; “the way it is” (p.17). In critical pedagogy, one of the recurring themes is social inequity. Cunningham analyzes a society where assumptions determine the future of the underprivileged. “Teachers...find substance in the belief that all children can learn...this belief transfers well, especially when it is accompanied by a willingness to enter into the life of the learner and to disbelieve the myth that only children from enriched environments can be successful learners” (p.56).

Furthermore, John Dewey (1916, in Cunningham, 2001) argues that the privileged class feels it is deserving of material attainments just by virtue of its position. Evidence such as data provided by the annual Latino Summit (2007) indicates that Dewey’s hegemony does exist, and the system in place, including the educational system, perpetuates the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy. Much has been debated about the reason for the inequities in place, however, all that needs to be done to ascertain the truth of the last statement, is to analyze the enormous discrepancies between races and social strata with regard to educational attainment and poverty rates. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP), for example, provides data on reading proficiency and compares the data by ethnicity groups. According to 2004 statistics, 69% of Caucasian thirteen year olds were reading at a basic level of proficiency, compared with 45% of black youths, and 43% of Hispanics.

A myth challenged by Hinchey (2003) is that underprivileged children can’t learn as well as their peers whose environment is much more enriched. “...the hegemony of the privileged continues without challenge and what is actually a tissue of assumption about the way things *are* becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p.136). When the educational system segregates English Learners without giving them access to grade level curriculum and resources, it perpetuates the assumption that minority students who are not proficient in English will not be able to keep up with their peers.

This ideology also aligns with Cadiero-Kaplan's (2004) views: "Functional literacy ideology, although presently part of most urban curricula...is equated as with the school-as-factory-model" (p.6). Cadiero-Kaplan goes on to elaborate on the different literacy ideologies, including progressive and critical literacy, which ideally should benefit all students, including English Learners.

To emphasize this concept, Darder (1991) states that "in public schools...students from the dominant culture who enter with major social and economic advantages receive as much-and at times even more- than students from subordinate cultures who arrive with far fewer social advantages". This is no doubt true and as a middle-level educator, I see this reality every day.

An important component of a student-centered approach to education is the authentic assessment piece. Authentic assessment is provided by giving the student choices, or alternative methods to demonstrate their learning. O'Malley and Valdez-Pierce (1996) acknowledge that "educational needs and strengths of ELL students can be identified most effectively through multiple forms of assessment" (p.3). Authentic assessment is referred to also as "performance assessment" using a variety of means such as "classroom observations, projects, portfolios, performance exams, and essays" (Aschbacher, 1991, p. 276).

Standardized tests and traditional methods of assessing learners do not promote equity or social justice. Many of our students are not able to reflect their true gains and the depth of their critical thinking by using standardized testing, which in turn becomes an element that promotes social disparity and injustice. Kornhaber (2004) expresses that standardized assessments rely on "multiple choice questions and language skills" (p.93) thereby rendering them inequitable. She also stresses that these tests prevent minority students from obtaining access to higher learning. As educators, it is crucial that we get to know our students, and gain a fair understanding of their abilities by utilizing alternative methods of assessment.

Additionally, Sleeter (2005) stresses the importance of using assessment that is "culturally relevant...using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of culturally diverse students" (p.71). Such tests also perpetuate the notion that there is only one right answer. Although the use of standardized tests is an integral part of our educational system, a teacher who embraces a cultural literacy approach should also use student centered assessment pieces that will more clearly show what the student has learned, such as projects, work portfolios, performances, teacher observation, and anecdotal records.

Assessing and teaching English Learners is a challenging endeavor under the best of circumstances. O'Malley and Valdez-Pierce (1996) make a persuasive case for content area assessment, and the integration

of English Language Development (ELD) standards and content area standards. An English Learner in a mainstream middle school language arts classroom may continue developing his second language, while being exposed to all grade level standards as well. For this approach to succeed, the teacher needs to be very conscious and receptive of the students' needs, and knowledgeable about the stages of English Language development.

Hinchey (2003) presents a "constructivist epistemology", as opposed to a "positivist" approach in which knowledge is something to be deposited in a systematic and inflexible manner. "Instead, the task of the constructivist teacher is to design experiences that will give students an opportunity to develop their own understanding of the data at hand... Whether or not all students have precisely the same experience is often irrelevant; what matters is that every student's personal understanding is moved forward" (p. 47).

Building on this idea of equity in the classroom, Cunningham (2001) states: "Teachers who successfully reversed alienation and demoralization did so by creating experiences in which the learning was owned by the learner" (p.90). There is an observable movement toward forming critical thinkers in our classrooms, but the movement seems to lose momentum when we analyze the instruction given to English Learners, as a specific subgroup. English Learners are often placed in remedial programs which do nothing to motivate them. Focused on repetition and drills rather than critical pedagogy, many students feel alienated. In middle school, this alienation will often directly affect the motivation of an already struggling adolescent.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

This study will follow a qualitative action research model (Falk and Blumenreich, 2005; Sagor, 2005, Stringer, 2007), Falk and Blumenreich write about the cyclical aspect of research, which encompasses identifying a question, gathering evidence, reflecting, and drawing conclusions, only to start the whole process once more (p. 4). This process aligns with Hollins's (1996) reflective-interpretive-inquiry (RIQ) approach (p. 11). Following this research modality, the results gathered from this study will become the starting point for further research and refinement of goals and instructional approaches.

According to Falk and Blumenreich, (2005) "developing a plan will give you a working document to help you ensure that your research is sound-that is systematic, based on evidence, and credible" (p.60). In this study, students who would have been placed in an ELD classes based on test scores alone, are instead placed in a mainstream language arts classroom.

This research project, while overwhelmingly using a qualitative approach, includes some quantitative components. A series of

interviews, classroom observations, student work examination and anecdotal records are used as instruments to determine both placement of students, and to analyze results. Quantitative measures utilized are California English Language Development Test (CELDT) results, and California Standardized Test (CST) results.

The quantitative aspect of this action-research project follows Merten's (2005) "One group pretest-posttest" quasi-experimental design (p.129). Mertens cautions that in this type of research design, the validity of the results may be compromised, due to the lack of a control group. If all students are subjected to the same rigorous methods of instruction, the ability to claim the effectiveness of the instructional design is impaired. Nevertheless, Mertens also states that it may be necessary to establish this experimental design "in a situation in which it is not possible to have a control group because the school would not allow differential provision of services" (p.130). The school subject of this study falls within this category. Education is a field in which multiple dependent variables are going to affect outcomes, many of them subjective; therefore, a qualitative component to the study will lend itself to a more extensive interpretation of data.

### **METHODOLOGY**

I work in a very small rural district in the Southern California area. I am one of two bilingual teachers in the one middle school, which comprises sixth, seventh and eighth graders. I teach English Language Development (ELD) to English Learners, as well as sixth and seventh grade mainstream language arts. My bilingual colleague teaches a daily forty five minute ELD class, and an eighth grade language arts class. Our backgrounds and experiences in teaching English to English learners, as well as English speakers at many different levels, including special education and gifted, have served us well.

In this school, there are about four hundred and thirty students, and approximately fifteen percent are classified as English Learners (ELs). At the end of every school year, I partner with my colleague to organize the classes in which our English Learners will be placed the following year

The placement process is often difficult, as our resources and programs change almost annually. The basic criteria for EL placement has traditionally been the students' English development designation, according to their scores on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), which categorizes students in the following manner:

- Level 1:** Beginning
- Level 2:** Early Intermediate
- Level 3:** Intermediate
- Level 4:** Early Advanced
- Level 5:** Advanced

Students from levels one to three and some "low" fours have been traditionally placed in an ELD class. High levels four and five have been placed in a mainstream language arts classroom. All English Learners are mainstreamed for other core subject areas, with sporadic support provided by a bilingual aide.

The year 2003 was my first year at this school. At that time two ELD classes had been planned. The first one, denominated ELD I, serviced sixth, seventh and eighth graders at CELDT levels one and two. I was placed in charge of this class, and I used an ELD program as my core curriculum. The second class serviced English Learners at CELDT levels three and four. This class was taught by my colleague.

Within a year, I realized this organizational scheme was far from ideal. In my class, I had some older eighth graders who presented very serious discipline issues. Socially, it was not a good fit to have very young sixth graders with these students, especially in a very small district where many of these children had been in the same class from grades K to five, and were relatively sheltered.

Eighth graders often expressed anger at being placed with sixth graders, which probably impacted their behavior. In addition, the scores that had been used to place them were often at least a year old, as students were tested only at the beginning of the school year, and not at the end. By the time these students were tested once again, they had already been placed.

To compound the problem, I felt that the ELD curriculum I was required to use was not challenging enough for some of my students, whom I felt would be better served in a different class. However, one of the advantages of working in a district such as this one is that I am asked to fulfill a variety of adjunct duties, including being an unofficial ELD coordinator. My colleague and I were able to move students around as necessary, during the school year.

By the school year 2004-2005, I was given free reign of EL placement. I decided to try a new approach. I looked very carefully at the data from the incoming sixth grade English Learners. In a group of twenty students, I noticed that most of them were at CELDT level three, with about four in levels one or two. Theory and experience have informed me that when students reach an intermediate stage in their language development, it can be a struggle to lead them into the next level. This is the level at which I firmly believe students may benefit the most from high expectations and academic rigor.

I formed two ELD classes, grouped by grade level rather than CELDT levels. The first class was comprised of mostly sixth graders, and about four seventh graders who had been in the country for one or two years, and were still at levels one or two according to the CELDT. I decided it would be better to teach an academically challenging curriculum geared towards the majority of the class, while making sure to differentiate instruction in order to address the needs of those students whose language was less developed.

My colleague and I studied our eighth grade students very closely. Most of these students had been in the ELD program in sixth and seventh grade, and were at least at an intermediate CELDT level. These students were placed for the first time in my colleague's mainstream eighth grade language arts classroom, with additional ELD support in a daily forty-five minute advisory. The second ELD class, which I also taught, was composed of mostly seventh graders, and five eighth graders whose language skills were still not sufficiently developed to be able to negotiate eighth grade language arts standards.

Another change implemented that year was the curriculum. I wanted my English Learners to be exposed to the rich materials and activities offered to students in mainstream classes. I wanted them to be challenged, and to be pushed towards grade level language arts standards. I used the language arts curriculum at the grade level that fit the majority of students in my class.

At the beginning of the year 2005-2006 I looked very closely at our English Learner's scores, especially at the California Standardized Test (CST) scores. Although we had not yet reached the federal benchmark of proficiency for English Learners, ninety-five percent had shown an increase in their language scores from the year before. Fifty-four percent demonstrated growth from one CST level of proficiency to the next.

This year, declining enrollment resulted in the loss of two staff members. As a result, I was only allowed to compose one ELD class. In trying to avoid the social impact of having three grade levels together, I placed only four eighth graders in this class; all girls at levels one, two, and low three according to the CELDT. All other eighth graders, who were mostly at an intermediate level of English development, were clustered in my colleague's eighth grade language arts class. I clustered about seven of my seventh grade English Learners in my mainstream language arts class. All of these students were also at an intermediate level of proficiency.

Although we had placed some intermediate seventh graders in a mainstream language arts class for several reasons, including parents' request, and quite a few eighth graders, due to socialization issues, the task ahead was daunting. We were careful to choose only the most highly motivated students to be placed in the seventh grade language arts program, and the results so far have been promising.

In the past, we had been guided primarily by students' CELDT levels, making adjustments as necessary throughout the year. In order to place English Learners in a mainstream class, whose scores did not justify this placement, we examined their progress using multiple means of assessment, such as writing samples, and projects done in class which better reflected their abilities, progress and intrinsic motivation. Did these students have "what it takes?" The placement of these students was not lightly considered, and direct dialogue with the students themselves played an important part in this decision.

This study served a dual purpose: to observe and document the academic and language development of English Learners in a mainstream language arts class, and to expose students in ELD classes to grade level curriculum with adequate support, instead of a curriculum designed specifically for English Learners. With increasing accountability from state and federal mandates, administrative pressure to raise test scores for this particular subgroup was deeply felt. Nevertheless, I did not believe that the adopted ELD curriculum was giving equal access to all English Learners.

Based on critical literacy theory, by increasing academic rigor I wanted students to learn how to negotiate grade level curriculum successfully. I chose two students as case studies who had been placed in mainstream language arts classes by parental request. I was particularly interested in focusing on these students, because in my experience, children in this situation often struggle academically, and fall behind their peers. Without parent authorization to place them in a program designed for English Learners, it is up to the teacher to ensure that they still receive adequate services. In the past, this did not always occur.

The students had performed at a below basic or basic performance level on the language arts section of the standardized state test in prior years, and their English development level had not increased in the prior two years. I decided to adapt my instructional practices to specifically target the needs of these students whose academic and language development progress had effectively stagnated.

As a direct result of my study, I chose a third subject who according to her language and academic progress, would have still been placed in an ELD class in seventh grade. Due to certain characteristics observed in this student, and which will be described at length in a later section, I decided she would be a good candidate for placement in a mainstream class with intense and focused support.

I met with the parents of all three students, as well as with the students themselves, explaining what I wanted to do, and asking for permission to record my observations as part of a case study. The parents gave their signed consent to include their children in the study. Pseudonyms are used for the participants in order to protect their privacy. All three participants were native Spanish speakers. They were

closely monitored during the school year, and given additional support. For the results analysis, a general qualitative assessment is determined for the ELD group. For the individual case studies, CELDT and CST scores were compared with the previous year's scores. The qualitative component included interviews, observation, and anecdotal records.

*Clear Expectations: Lucas*

Lucas is a friendly, sociable seventh grader. His parents' first language is Spanish, and they are fluent in English as well. Although Lucas's language scores, according to the Language Assessment Scale (LAS) administered when he entered kindergarten categorized Lucas as an English Learner, his parents declined placing him in the dual immersion program available to English Learners, and requested that he be placed in mainstream classes. Lucas's parents explained to me that they were uncertain of the quality of the program, and they wanted Lucas to learn English as soon as possible. Lucas acquired oral proficiency in English relatively quickly; however his reading and writing scores remained low throughout the elementary years.

By the time Lucas entered sixth grade, he was still considered an English Learner. Lucas was a student whose most recent score on the CELDT placed him at an overall intermediate level. He scored at an early advanced level, or level four, in listening and speaking skills, and at an early intermediate or level 2 on his reading and writing skills. His California Standards Test (CST) scores placed him at a far below basic level in English language arts.

Because Lucas's reading skills were significantly below grade level, the best placement for him in middle school appeared to be in an ELD classroom. However, his parents again requested him to be placed in a mainstream language arts classroom when he entered sixth grade. During this year he received no additional support, as he was placed in a classroom with a teacher who did not usually work with English Learners, and was not fully aware of his status as such, or of accommodations to be made in order to help him. His scores in both CELDT and CST remained stagnant, and even decreased by a few points.

Lucas became my student in my mainstream language arts classroom in seventh grade. I immediately noticed he was struggling to keep up with the class, and that he had difficulty reading and comprehending grade level material. His writing skills were also underdeveloped. In addition, his behavior in the classroom left much to be desired. He frequently did not focus on the lessons and activities at hand, and was often a disruption, as he preferred to talk to his friends rather than pay attention or do his work.

In a ninety minute block, I noticed that Lucas was relatively focused during the first fifteen or twenty minutes of direct instruction.

However, he would become fidgety and distracted after that. During independent practice, Lucas seldom completed his work or finished it for homework as was expected. After the first three weeks in my class, I realized that Lucas was destined to fail if some interventions were not immediately put in place.

Lucas was still categorized as an English Learner, so after a long conference with his parents, I placed him in my ELD advisory class for additional language support. By having him in this classroom, I was able to provide him with additional time and support to complete his assignments, and to supervise him closely. Lucas was very vocal about the displeasure he felt from being pulled out of another advisory class where no additional academic burden was placed on him. I established a dialogue with him, and I explained to him that unless he received and took advantage of the services offered, he would most likely fail language arts. Fortunately, Lucas's parents supported my decision, and with their help I created a more structured environment in which expectations were very clearly set.

Furthermore, I paid special attention to Lucas during my language arts class. I refocused him when necessary, paired him with a more proficient student, and held him fully accountable for turning in his work on time. Not having been in my classroom before, he was surprised the first time I refused to grade an assignment until he resubmitted it to fulfill requirements. Consistency and clear expectations eventually affected his performance, as did constant communication with his parents.

The following school year, Lucas improved his language arts scores on the CST by twenty points, placing him solidly in the "basic" category, for the first time in his life. His CELDT scores finally placed him at an overall four, or early advanced. Both of these sets of scores indicate that Lucas is finally on his way to proficiency. Most importantly, his self-esteem and attitude improved noticeably. As an eighth grader, placed with a teacher who is also skilled in addressing the needs of English Learners, Lucas is still doing well.

#### *The Silent Underachiever: Jesse*

Jesse was a student in the same seventh grade language arts classroom. He was very quiet, never causing disruption in the classroom. A very polite and even shy child, he was one of those students that easily pass unnoticed. He consistently performed at an average level, earning C's on almost all his assignments. Jesse was one of those students that usually escape a teacher's attention. He was not failing, and he was not a discipline problem. Jesse got my full attention when his name appeared in the list of English Learners provided by the administration.

Because Jesse was designated an early advanced English Learner, or level four according to his CELDT scores, he was not placed in an ELD classroom when he entered sixth grade, although he had been part of the dual immersion program in elementary school, from grades kindergarten through fifth. Not officially redesignated as a Fluent English Speaker (FEP), it was determined by the administration that he had sufficient knowledge of English to be successful in an English language arts class.

For the prior three years, Jesse had scored at a basic level on the English section of the CST. Jesse approached grade level standards on reading and writing. He was inconsistent about turning his work in on time, and he usually did not complete it to the best of his abilities.

After scheduling a conference with his parents, I requested permission to observe and document Jesse's progress as part of a case study. I began a series of interventions designed to drive Jesse to the next level, both in English development and degree of academic proficiency. I developed a relationship with Jesse by establishing an ongoing dialogue about his abilities and how his school work reflected or not those abilities. I paid special attention to his writing assignments, making copious comments about his work, and providing clear direction on the skills he needed to work on. We had conversations about his writing as often as possible, letting him know that his success was my priority. I enlisted the help of his mother, and asked her to make sure Jesse was reading every day, and completing all his homework.

Eventually, Jesse became more open to admitting when he had difficulty with an assignment or a concept, and asked for my help. If I wasn't able to allocate enough time for him during class time, I saw him after school or during lunch. I saw Jesse's potential, as he eventually took ownership of his own learning. His confidence grew noticeably, and he became more confident and open during our conversations. I suggested books and readings that I thought may appeal to his interests, and made it a point to sit down with him for a few minutes during each class period to discuss what he was reading.

These discussions allowed me to get to know Jesse very well, and as a result I was able to adapt my suggestions as needed. He was very easy to get along with, and complied with all my requirements eagerly. Jesse never let me down; he would take all my recommendations to heart and immediately act on them. I consider myself fortunate that I was able to discern the hidden jewel beneath the silence; the effort I exerted to draw him out and make him shine paid off.

Jesse was a perfect example of how fulfilling teaching can be. The results of working with Jesse were clear, as I saw him blossom as a student, and even socially within his relationships with peers and teachers. His seventh grade language arts CST scores demonstrated he had finally reached a proficiency level in language arts.

*Multiple Forms of Assessment to Determine Program Placement:  
Olivia*

Olivia is in my mainstream seventh grade language arts this year. She is one of seven students whom I taught in an ELD classroom the previous year, when Olivia was in sixth grade. Olivia was placed in a dual immersion program in second grade, when she first came to the United States. A native Spanish speaker, Olivia is a solid intermediate English Learner in all four domains of the English language; listening, speaking, reading and writing, according to her most recent CELDT scores. Olivia's English CST scores placed her at a below basic level. Through the analysis of her test scores, I concluded that Olivia had not been able to surpass that intermediate level of proficiency in three years. It was clear that Olivia needed more than what she was getting in order to help her achieve the next level in English development.

Due to the fact that my ELD class was smaller than my mainstream classes, I was able to give more individualized attention to my students. Through this interaction, I realized that Olivia was overwhelmingly attentive and followed all my directions and suggestions on how to improve her work. Olivia invariably studied for all her grammar and spelling tests. She asked questions in class during direct instruction, and she was quick to ask for clarification if a concept was unclear. Due to her attributes and work ethic, I was convinced that Olivia would profit from being challenged in a mainstream language arts classroom, and that her language skills would show a marked improvement if she was moved out of ELD.

Olivia was considered very carefully before her placement in a mainstream language arts class. At the end of her sixth grade year, I sat down with Olivia, and together we analyzed her work portfolio for the whole year. This portfolio included writing pieces and assessments, grammar exercises and tests, and rubrics that evaluated her oral skills through projects, observations and presentations. We paid special attention to her writing samples, which showed considerable improvement from the beginning of the year to the end, and clearly demonstrated that Olivia had worked on the specific skills regarding mechanics and organization, as I had pointed them out to her. All these pieces of authentic assessment I had, including anecdotal records and oral fluency observations, indicated that Olivia was willing to work hard in order to achieve her goals.

The process I followed with Olivia in seventh grade is very similar to the one I followed with Lucas. Additional support during class, immediate feedback on all her assignments, forty five minutes of ELD support in an advisory class with my ELD partner who monitored her assignments and kept her on track. Olivia let me know immediately if she was struggling, and I allocated extra time, after school or during lunch, to help her. Olivia's attitude was excellent; she was highly

motivated, and she was always willing to resubmit assignments that were not up to standards. She consistently averaged a B in language arts in her report cards, no small feat for an intermediate English Learner. It remains to be seen if her CELDT and CST scores significantly increase this year, as results are still not available, but judging from her performance, that should be the eventual outcome.

## RESULTS

The results of the study will focus both on my ELD class exposed to an academically rigorous curriculum, and the effect of placement of English Learners in a mainstream classroom. In my ELD classes, the changes in student achievement that resulted from the exposure to grade level curriculum and standards were measurable and noticeable. The combination of high expectations, rigor, and grade level placement influenced most students' attitudes and motivation in a very positive manner. The CELDT results for that academic year demonstrated growth from one CELDT level to the next in 72% of my students. Furthermore, 23% of my students increased their overall proficiency level by two levels, while 5% demonstrated no growth. In a qualitative analysis, based on formal and informal observations and interviews, I realized that my students liked the fact that I was exposing them to the same language arts curriculum as the other classes. My students were very much aware of what other students were doing in their own classes. They no longer felt displaced when other students eagerly conversed about the latest novel or story read in class. My decision to use the grade level curriculum, rather than an ELD program, required that I make many modifications to the curriculum which will be discussed next.

Guthrie (2000) writes extensively about the factors that will affect motivation in middle school students. He indicates that the engagement of the student in literacy activities is a crucial factor in any successful program. Freire (1970) writes about the role of critical literacy in the empowerment of students to govern their own learning. In middle school, student motivation is an integral part of any program's success. A nurturing, challenging environment that fosters a sense of achievement is crucial (Cummins, 1979).

In this era of high-stakes assessment and administrative guidelines, I consider myself fortunate to still have the flexibility to implement changes as necessary, and transfer students from one classroom to another freely during the school year. In my experience, this element is vital to the functioning of our program, and the one component that is completely student-centered. All my students know at the beginning of the year that they may be relocated according to their performance. This capability influences the learning environment directly, which in turns empowers the student to make his or her own educational choices.

No problem has surfaced yet in relationship with sixth graders. Because the first year of ELD the sixth grade curriculum is implemented, I have had no complaints from parents or students. Seventh and eighth grade students, however, as social creatures, want to be with their peers. I have had seventh graders ask me what it will take for them to be in another classroom with their friends. Conversely, I recently had an eighth grader express that she didn't feel "ready" to move into an eighth grade mainstream language arts. I concurred with her, and she is developing her English in a steady and progressive manner in my ELD classroom.

Another important element is the scaffolding and support that have to be in place for English Learners in a mainstream classroom. I closely monitor what my English Learners are reading as part of their independent reading requirement for the quarter. In my school, students use the Accelerated Reading program, and they are all aware of their reading level and corresponding recommended readings. I confer with my English Learners about their reading on a daily basis.

In addition, I allow them more time for some projects such as writing, and preparing for district wide writing assessments. While most of my other students are not required to show me the rough drafts of their essays, my English Learners know I need to look at their writing and hold a conference with them before they submit their final project. In this way, I am able to help them focus on specific skills at a time, such as the proper usage of verb tenses.

Interestingly, my English Learners have never complained about the additional requirements placed on them. Because most of them were part of my sixth grade ELD class, they are familiar with my procedures. They know it is very possible that I will hand back an assignment with the directive that they resubmit it, if it doesn't fulfill my expectations. I am, however, willing to grant full credit for a job well done, even if it was resubmitted. My students appreciate the opportunity to earn the highest grade possible.

In my mainstream language arts classroom, I set aside time for my English Learners in order to clarify assignments and concepts. They also receive additional support from my colleague, whose ELD advisory consists of a language arts extension class for seventh and eighth graders who are placed in mainstream classrooms. There is constant communication between the two of us, and she is familiar with the assignments my class is working on. My colleague, like myself, has a high level of expertise, due to training and experience, in regard to English Learner's needs.

Teacher preparation, expertise and motivation are other elements that need to be in place for English Learners to be successful. I have seen too many English Learners stagnate in a classroom with teachers who have no experience or training to serve their needs or the motivation to give them the additional support they need.

I also offer additional support to my students after school. My students know that if they still need help with an assignment, I will sit down with them and guide them through it if they are willing to stay and obtain the needed help. I have very high expectations for my students, but in order for them to fulfill them; I must be willing to do what is necessary as well.

At the end of the second quarter I moved one seventh grader back into my ELD classroom, as she was really struggling to keep up. At the same time, I transferred another seventh grader who seemed eager for the challenge to my mainstream language arts class. I believe it is this flexibility that is a very important piece for the success of our program.

In our current educational environment, the performance of English Learners is at center stage, due to the steady influx of English Learners in our schools, and the impact this subgroup makes on overall standardized test scores (NEA, 2005). In many districts, English Learners are placed in structured classes, going back to what is considered "the basics". The findings of this qualitative study suggest that such an approach is often counterproductive in middle school, at a time when adolescents are particularly fragile and often suffer from low-esteem issues.

A rigorous approach to the curriculum, with multiple assessment modalities, is more effective. Numerous studies have been made about the role of the critical thinker in his or her own education. Haberman (2006) writes about "reflective" teaching, in which the students reflect on their own lives and experiences, and connect them to literacy activities.

Meltzer and Hammann (2006) developed strategies that have been proven effective with English Learners such as explicit instruction, utilizing instructional approaches that engage all four domains of the language, and activating prior knowledge. They also recommend using culturally relevant pedagogy, engaging in critical thinking skills, and delivering instruction that addresses metacognitive processes. It is crucial to develop a relationship with students by which the students feel empowered to seek and apply new knowledge.

A democratic classroom is one in which students have voice. It is a classroom in which students and teacher learn from each other and a dialogue is established. A classroom in which a student feels empowered, motivated and challenged, and is given a chance to become a productive member of the community at large, no matter what his background or home language is. In the words of Paulo Freire (1970):

When teachers really listen to the voices of the learners they can create relevant discussions about the world of ideas and challenging lessons in which the skills are mastered and values are clarified.... Teachers who listen well speak less but more effectively. Having heard the

extent of knowledge possessed by learners, such teachers assume the role of guides in building connections, linking ideas, and challenging students to make better sense of their lives in this society (p.13).

Opportunities are frequently denied to English Learners by virtue of their placement alone. Placing English Learners who are at an intermediate level of English proficiency and above in a mainstream language arts classroom, can be very effective if the teacher is properly trained in the scaffolding and differentiation of instruction necessary to make the curriculum accessible to English Learners.

A highly motivated teacher and student, as well as specific, systematic guidelines and expectations are necessities to make this type of placement a success. I postulate that not providing English Learners with the opportunity to negotiate grade level material is setting them up for failure, and therefore evolves into an issue of social justice and equity. We can not expect from students what we are not willing to provide. If additional time, resources and trained personnel become necessary to provide access to grade level curriculum to our English Learners, they must be provided in order to guarantee equality of opportunity to all students.

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