Collaboration and Partnerships for ELLs' Success

SUMMARY

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages collaborate with others in a variety of ways to provide support and access for English language learners in their classes. In this commentary, one educator shares her insights.

The current focus on collaboration

among teachers is interesting. Teachers have always shared ideas informally, perhaps with a student teacher, mentee or colleague. Now administrators and state officials are asking us to continue collaborating in a formal manner to provide evidence for accountability. The moment we step into our first teaching positions we know collaboration is a part of our profession. We can share research-based practices to select those which work best in our assignment and for our students. We can share knowledge we have about students to help focus on specific needs they may have.

My first experience with collaboration in education was during my first teaching assignment, teaching biology in the U.S. Peace Corps. My principal drove me to our school from the island's tiny airstrip and warned me about teaching in a rural school with words like, "We have a small problem with water." I got out of the truck and saw a group of men sitting on the ground in a semi-circle ready for the official greetings and ceremony. I realized I was about to meet the local board of education. I thought about the noon heat and the uncertainty of everything, and really wondered what it would be like working closely with teachers in a culture and setting so different from what I was used to.

Would I be misunderstood? Would I find a colleague who could help me navigate so I could view my students appropriately through my own set of lenses? How would I get to know the families if I lived on the school compound and they lived in their villages? How involved were the community members? And how would I answer these questions knowing I had a steep learning curve ahead of me with curriculum and assessment. Many years later I still ask the same questions.

Sharon Eghigian is a National Board Certified K-6 ESOL teacher. She is a member of the Utica Teachers Association and Mohawk Valley Community College Adjunct and Part-Time Association. Sharon has taught biology and ESOL in Fiji, Malaysia and Puerto Rico.

Sharon Eghigian, Utica Teachers Association

If teachers and support staff share information they know about an English language learner, a more complete picture of the student comes into focus.

Teachers spend days engaged in numerous tasks and are asked to record every decision, assessment, movement, reflection and piece of instruction. Now we have collaboration as another task not only to engage in, but also to record. We often wonder if we are doing "enough" and this has led me to reflect on the many ways in which we collaborate with others.

I know I am responsible for collaboration and that my students will benefit. If teachers and support staff share information they know about an English language learner (ELL), a more complete picture of the student comes into focus. Is collaboration the actual goal? It isn't really. The goal is improving instruction and learning. But when the term now becomes a part of data we must record the original purpose can get lost. For example, one teacher may see a student who is easily distracted, while another sees the student as one who is tired from trying to understand the language or because the acculturation process is causing strain in the family and home. If the teachers communicate together they will be able to address the needs of the student.

Would it be better to use terms such as partnerships? (Does that sound like we need a contract?) Networking? (Does networking sound as if we meet and share ideas simply to get ahead or to promote ourselves?)

Sitting with a classroom/content teacher, discussing curriculum and student progress is a partnership that supports ELLs. In *Necessary Conversations about English Language Learners*, Helene Grossman (2006) encourages us to participate in difficult discussions. For example, she offers suggestions about topics to discuss such as cultural and linguistic background, but also strategies to identify issues that may come up in communicating with colleagues and how to discuss ELLs with each other in non-confrontational ways.

Finding time to communicate effectively can create added stress to professionals who have only 30 minutes per day for planning. Just as our ELLs communicate in ways based on their cultures and world view, we do as well. Miscommunication, as well as differences in opinions, can deter colleagues away from discussions. Does

continued on following page

One of the greatest sources of information and enjoyment is spending time with students and their families in nonthreatening situations, including home visits, cultural celebrations, attending sports events, etc.

the struggle to find ways and time in which to collaborate diminish its effectiveness? Can we do it with authenticity if we don't sit face to face with colleagues? Should our 1:1 work with students be seen as part of the collaboration process?

I would like us to think about all the other ways we, as professional English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) instructors, partner with others to learn more about our students and to help provide access to a sound education.

Families. Research and experience shows if families are engaged in the students' learning and schooling that the children perform better. Balen and Moles report, "Studies of individual families show that what the family does is more important to student success than family income or education. This is true whether the family is rich or poor, whether the parents finished high school or not, or whether the child is in preschool or in the upper grades. (p.1 , 1994)."

Of course, this is also true for our ELL families. I can recall a new grade one student from Vietnam whose mother did not know English and was not literate in her native language. The student's father knew some English but worked nights so he was unable to do the things we might hope a parent would do — help with homework, read together each night, etc. However, the family ensured the child knew school was important, that she had access to materials necessary for school (I remember her first day she arrived with a massive water bottle and reams of lined paper in her backpack), and did her homework, etc. In time, the student reached English proficiency and graduated. So does this engagement and partnership mean PTO meetings? Is it relegated to asking a family to attend a math night? We should not confuse engagement and participation. Just as my grade one student's family could not attend evening meetings and learning sessions, they were engaged in her education.

Many of our families are as busy as we are, working, taking care of elderly family members or children while trying to navigate this new culture. And this navigation doesn't occur overnight.

One of the greatest sources of information and enjoyment is spending time with students and their families in nonthreatening situations, including home visits, cultural celebrations, attending sports events, etc. As ESOL professionals it is often second nature for us to want to attend an event or accept an invitation to a home, a wedding or a graduation. We can learn about these things as students write in journals, discussions before or after school and in our one to one feedback meetings with them. Oftentimes relationships with the family can be developed and a parent

may then feel more confident attending school events and asking questions.

¡Colorín Colorado!, an education website supported by the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Assocation offers tips on successful parent teacher conferences, hosting a bilingual family night, and how to reach out and empower ELL parents. For example, when hosting a bilingual family meeting, allow parents to bring the younger children and have a place for them to play. Make sure that you begin and end on time and have a specific agenda in place. Suggestions include recruiting volunteers and providing a short orientation and tour, with an interpreter, for newcomers and their parents.

Colleagues. We are asked to keep records of occasions in which we collaborate with the classroom/content teachers and support staff who work with ELLs. But how do we do that when we work with so many grade levels, teachers and students? There are myriad ways in which to hold meetings and to spend time with individuals to discuss curriculum and students. It helps us, as professionals, to remember we process information and solve problems in as many ways as students do.

In the book *Data Wise* teachers are encouraged to use protocols. One example is the use of Compass Points to examine our work styles (Protocols & Harvard Data Wise Project, 2013).

At first it seems like a task that takes away precious time. We looked at it in a workshop and we decided that the three ESOL teachers in our school were at different places on the Compass. We are aware of our differences and focus when we communicate and problem solve, but we also said that perhaps it strengthens us as a department.

Some teachers feel we are shirking our duties if we don't sit down almost daily with each other to discuss students. Time is precious, so why not use technology to assist us? We are asked to use technology effectively with students, why not with colleagues? Let's use email, texting, Dropbox, Google docs, and every other kind of application and technology to work for us. For example, in my school the three ESOL teachers sat down and wrote exit tickets we could use throughout the year for our primary grades. We share it in Dropbox so we can access it from home and add/delete if needed.

Technology should ***not*** diminish our relationships and replace in person meetings, but can certainly expedite discussions ideas and concerns. In fact, it may work to help us sort out our thoughts and to think through ideas. For example, in an online class offered by the NYSUT Education & Learning Trust, you experience the process of writing for a discussion board. All

continued on following page

Technology should ***not*** diminish our relationships and replace in person meetings, but can certainly expedite discussions ideas and concerns.

participants read your writing and your words need to be supported by research.

This leads us to the expanding of our definition of colleagues. First, we can look beyond our own school and district. We may form collegial relationships with colleagues at local workshops, New York State Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (NYSTESOL), and TESOL International conferences.

Local college professors and instructors, especially community colleges, have the experience of teaching our former ELLs. Their insight can help us better understand what our students need to succeed, oftentimes skills that are not measured on standardized assessments. We can meet ESOL college professors at conferences and meetings. Professors are an integral part of student teaching. This is an appropriate time for practitioners to share what is happening now in the classroom with colleges so they can better prepare future teachers.

ESOL teachers truly have colleagues all over the world. Now, with technology, we can attend webinars when traveling to a conference is cost prohibitive. Many ESOL professionals do this and we should add this to our system of partnership. Consider joining professional TESOL associations or keeping up with websites such as the Center for Applied Linguistics and ¡Colorín Colorado!

Joining professional organizations not only provides me with additional resources, research articles and a way to meet colleagues, but also assists in providing a voice for the TESOL profession. In order to advocate for our students and families, we need to participate in professional organizations that can help us advocate.

ESOL teachers have a variety of experiences that seem to lead us all back to similar struggles and successes. I taught in Malaysia many years ago and was able to reconnect with a good friend and colleague through social media. Dr. H is very involved in training teachers and part of her community work is with Burmese refugees in Malaysia. Fast forward to 2014 where I was teaching a cultural orientation/ENL class for incoming refugees and I had two students who are Burmese but only speak Bahasa Malay. My colleague and I communicated about my forgotten phrases in Bahasa Malay and I received more informative details about what the students' previous schooling may have entailed. I know I never imagined when Dr. H and I taught many years ago that she and I would still be using social media to share information.

Social media and the Internet can be used by all teachers to share information. A school can have a ***Facebook*** page to get information to students and families. Teachers use numerous websites and share information through writing blogs and ***Pinterest***.

Students. Collaborating with students can mean a two-way system of essential feedback. If collaborating means working together on shared goals, this is another example of how teachers collaborate throughout the year. When we sit with a 10-year-old and develop behavior or academic goal-setting together, this is collaboration. Such interactions add more to the complete picture of the student and can be just as valid as a parent survey about the child.

Field trips, now a luxury in schools, offer insight to students as well. We can take that time to get to know students in another setting. During these out-of-school events there are teachable moments and times when students ask you for advice. It may be as simple as a conversation about ENL class and what they can do to get to the next proficiency level. For example, a student may say something in passing like, "I don't read very good." Or "My teacher talks fast and I don't understand all of it." They may not state that in ENL class in school when you work individually to help the student complete a goal sheet and action plan. But when comments like this are made we can refer to it the next time we are in class writing down goals and plans with that student. If we need to collect data on collaboration then unplanned, anecdotal information should be a part of that.

Former students. One of the most rewarding parts about being an ESOL teacher is you often get to know the students for more than a year. Along the way you may also get to know their families, or teach their younger siblings, and get invited to family celebrations. Each time we meet former students we can get feedback about what was important to them in their academic journey. Each time we meet a family at a celebration, local shop or their home we get more information and a better understanding of our students. While we might not record talking to a former student for APPR purposes, it is an important part of feedback for an ESOL teacher and such encounters continue to push us to do our best. We can invite those students to assist us at some point or help us develop new ideas. Not only do they have the benefit of hindsight, they have developed linguistically and are usually further along in understanding U.S. culture.

At one point my school developed a family literacy program and two of my former ENL students volunteered to help older students with math and science work. Although their first language was different from the students in the program one of them said he knew what their challenges were linguistically and culturally and was able to scaffold content.

continued on following page

With strong leadership, the school can be a welcoming place for families of ELLs.

Administrators. For practitioners, our principal is the immediate administrator we see on a daily basis. If you are in a school with an approachable principal who looks forward to feedback and new ideas to support students, and not just evaluation purposes, wonderful things can be accomplished for ELLs. Perhaps those teachers who aspire to become school leaders can reflect on what a building leader can do for ELLs. You can take chances and try new ideas that your faculty, including ESOL teachers, want to try. If they don't work you can revise or scrap them altogether.

Our principal, Ms. Gerling, ensures that an ESOL teacher is on the School Based Intervention Team and that data for ELLs is appropriately addressed. In addition, our K-6 school has had parent meetings for bilingual families for several years and the principal has encouraged the ENL department to set the agenda, decide on the best time for the meetings, and to appropriate monies to pay interpreters.

This helps to ensure as much participation as possible from the families. We don't just talk ***to*** the families, but ***with*** them. We encourage their children to come with them since childcare may be a problem. Questions and suggestions are welcome and after the large meeting we all go to our ENL classrooms so they can see our materials, sample assessments, etc. If we select days and times when parents are available we fill the library to capacity. The parents ask many questions and provide feedback for new ideas to help their children. With strong leadership, the school can be a welcoming place for families of ELLs. In addition, leadership requires a principal to know students' names, languages and backgrounds. It is not an easy task in a K-6 school of more than 600 students, but our administrator personally greets students every morning. The parents are well-aware of who leads the school and helps take care of their children. This is important for all students but for ELL families, who often see the school community as an extension of their own parenting, it is especially important.

Ayanna Cooper offers four specific steps for administrators to strengthen their program for ELLS: know your population collectively and individually, know the curriculum, include the data, and know best practices for ELLs (Cooper, 2012).

Bilingual nonteaching professionals. Teachers can use community resources to assist students, such as volunteers, parents and interpreters who can be invaluable to a school with one ELL or many. Volunteers can work one on one with a newcomer or assist at the school open house to interpret. It is essential to reach families in a language they comprehend while they are learning English and some bilingual community members might be willing to translate

very short documents. It is important that we remember volunteers and community members have skills to supplement the work we do.

In our district we are fortunate to have bilingual academic coaches from our community whose main focus is to work in the classrooms with newcomers, to assist with content such as math. This support is especially important with entering and emerging students who miss content because they are just beginning to acquire English.

We address the coaches as Mr., Ms., Miss or Mrs. and not by their first name. This shows the students we see them as colleagues and someone with authority within the system. One bilingual coach told me that many students address the coaches respectfully by using the term "teacher" in their native language. "We know we are not teachers," he told me, "But it encourages respect for adults and if we have their respect we can help them and their families even more."

We need to be cognizant of our relationship with the coaches. The students are watching how we relate to each other and we are providing a model for students and families: people from diverse backgrounds working together toward a common goal. Such positive relationships reinforce to students that everyone cares about their well-being and education.

Community. Connections may involve volunteers, leaders in our students' communities and nonprofit organizations. One aspect of an ELL's education that is sometimes overlooked is that of acculturation. The process may be different if a student is a refugee, immigrant or migrant.

One aspect of an ELL's education that is sometimes overlooked is that of acculturation.

As the student and his/her family begins life in the U.S. the differences between their home culture(s) and that of the U.S. becomes apparent. It may be as obvious as language, paperwork for school, and food. It can be less obvious such as understanding how cooperative learning is useful in school — it looks like play and chatting. Or it can be a gesture. Standing with your arms crossed as a teacher talks to you is a sign of respect in several cultures. For someone in the U.S., it might signify defiance.

At one time, addressing the acculturation process was a part of the NYS ESOL Standards. While the ELA Standards include multi-cultural texts, they do not specifically address this important part of ELLs' learning. For example, Collier states that educators need to ensure they obtain correct information about a student, namely education, home language, language proficiency, English proficiency, behavior and acculturation rate (Collier, 2010).The author also points out the importance of this process as it relates to response to intervention (RTI). ESOL

continued on following page

teachers integrate U.S. cultural topics in classes, but with the stress placed on assessments the focus on it has begun to wane.

It is important for us to remember that acculturation is cyclical and the process may repeat itself over time. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may contribute to behavior concerns in some ELLs. This may be a result of something the child experienced in his or her home country or in a refugee camp. Understanding PTSD in children is important as well as understanding how a family is affected if a parent has PTSD (NIMH).

We can work together with each other, and administrators, to assist ELLs in the acculturation process. Our district offers cultural orientation classes to ELLs on weekends and during breaks. Part of this program includes some field trips as well as inviting community personnel to meet our students, such as police officers and firefighters. The speakers discuss safety rules with the students. Our city's police chief noted that one aim is to have the students, especially those who lived in refugee camps or lived under police/military regimes to see officers as "People to go to for help and assistance."

Our bilingual coaches ensure the message is comprehensible to all students. Presentations could also be done after school, with two schools working together if needed. The classes provide students with information in their native language, basic English skills, and explicit lessons that offer students strategies to cope with a new language, culture and classes. Teachers of ELLs may want to work together to consider how this can be addressed in their schools and district.

Conclusion

Teachers are asked to collaborate in a formal manner for accountability. Teachers of ELLs have myriad ways in which to partner, collaborate and celebrate student struggles and successes. This includes colleagues, students, families, and community members (both local, statewide, nationally and globally). These forms of collaboration help us get a clearer picture of each student. We can see not only a student's challenges, but his/her strengths, resiliency and what is important to him/her.

We live in a data-driven, competitive world. Partnering should not encourage competition, which can sometimes be an unintended consequence related to data driven decisionmaking. We should ensure that as much accurate information about ELLs is obtained and used appropriately to support their varying needs. These associations are not the end product or a way to move ahead on the APPR scale, but another means of reaching ELLs to support so they fulfill their aspirations.

References

Asking the Right Questions | Colorín Colorado. (n.d.). 2010, Retrieved from *http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/asking-right-questions*

Collier, C. (2004). A Carrot or a Stick: Using RtI with ELLs [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from *http://www.crosscultured.com/documents/TESOL%20-%20Portland/Dream%20Day%20HO.pdf*

Cooper, A. (2012). Administrators in Action: Four Steps for Strengthening Your EL Program | Colorín Colorado. (n.d.). Retrieved from *http://www.colorincolorado.org/blog/administrators-action-four-steps-strengthening-your-el-program*

Engaging ELL Families: 20 Strategies for School Leaders | Adolescent Literacy Topics A-Z | AdLit.org. (n.d.). Retrieved from *http://www.adlit.org/article/42781/*

Grossman, H. (2006). *Necessary conversations about English language learners: Templates for success.* McHenry, IL: Delta Pub. Co.

The Impact of Family Involvement | Reading Rockets. (n.d.). Retrieved from *http://www.readingrockets.org/article/impact-family-involvement*

NIMH » Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). (n.d.). Retrieved from *http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml*

Protocols § Harvard Data Wise Project. (n.d.). Retrieved from *http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=datawise&pageid=ic.page556408*

Welcome to Crosscultural Developmental Education Services. (n.d.). Retrieved from *http://www.crosscultured.com/index.php*

Resources recommended by the authors

CrossCultural Development Education Services. *http://www.crosscultured.com*

WETA, Colorín Colorado. *http://www.colorincolorado*