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Promoting Effective Home-School Connections for the English Language Learner

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Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

It was a typical day as a reading specialist in Mrs. Kyle's second grade classroom. It was an energetic classroom of twenty-four students in a small school situated just outside of an urban school district. As Mrs. Kyle instructed the rest of the group, I sat with a small group of remedial reading students in the back of the room. It wasn't uncommon for a large percentage of English Language Learners (ELL) to be referred to the reading specialist, and subsequently, qualify for reading support services. These students typically received a considerable number of additional services, including reading, ELL instruction, learning support, or a combination of various support services.

I had recently stumbled upon a website, <http://www.babelfish.com>, which I believed to be a valuable resource for teachers, like myself, worked with English Language Learners, but did not have the necessary content-specific training or tools to provide ELL instruction or promote effective home-school connections. This website instantly translated the information, written in English, into the language spoken of the student. I thought I had struck a gold mine! I willingly admitted that I possessed limited knowledge of the ELL Standards for Pre-K-12 students, developed by the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) members to describe the language skills necessary for social and academic achievement. Regardless of my limited knowledge, I still aspired to become an advocate of promoting strong home-school connections. Therefore, on a regular basis, I sent letters home with my students to inform parents of upcoming events or reading strategies that could be used with their child to improve reading achievement. So it was with great excitement, that I began composing my first letter using this website. If I used the original letter and did not alter the language, the website's translation was sure to be accurate, right? Furthermore, wasn't I doing something positive to help encourage parents to participate in their child's learning?

Don't Judge a Book by its Cover

The next day, as I was preparing for my groups, the ELL teacher approached me with a disgruntled look on her face. She handed me the letter and asked me how many letters, like this one, did I send home with students. Looking a bit more please after I informed her that it was the first, she inquired as to why I hadn't contacted her before sending the letter home.

Beaming with delight, I spoke of the website that I had discovered earlier in the week. As if to soften the blow, she extended a chair, asked me to sit down, and informed me of the phone call she had received from a confused parent of one of my English Language Learners receiving reading support. Apparently, one of the phrases in my letter had roughly translated into

“slapping a child’s knee during a game.” The parent was not concerned about the child being in trouble, but rather wondered what her child should wear for the upcoming field day! In anticipation, I wondered how many more parent phone calls would pour into my principal or to the ELL teacher regarding my attempt to “promote positive home-school connections.”

Did you Learn your Lesson, Teacher?

In subsequent feedback sessions with the ELL parents, I learned of the profound level of appreciation that these parents had for my attempts to open the lines of communication.

Like non-ELL parents, they too, wanted to stay informed of their child’s progress in reading.

More importantly, I learned that the student, themselves, can serve as a significant tool in my efforts to encourage positive relationships among all who are involved in the process of

educating the English Language Learner. It is common knowledge that schools are currently integrating professional development opportunities into school improvement plans. We

cannot ignore the multi-faceted approaches to ELL instruction and ways to encourage positive parent relationships which support this instruction.

Upon reflecting on this experience, I learned the value of collaboration with other

professionals who are more qualified than you in a content-specific area. Needless to say, that was the last time that I sent home a letter to the parents of my English Language Learners

without having the ELL teacher approve the letter first!

Professional Development for Amateurs

An important factor in student success is family involvement in a child’s education, which is, in fact, more important than family income and education (International Reading Association, 2002). Of greater significance is the educator’s ability to employ approaches which seek to enhance the relationship between parent and school. Creating a strong foundation which adheres to an emphasis on the home-school connection sends a solid message to all who are involved in educating that child; *Regardless of your language, culture, or academic level, we will work together as a team to ensure that you succeed.* This entire team has “ownership” over learning and can be held accountable for that child’s progress. From my experience, this gives students a certain degree of “control.” It also conveys to parents that there are certain expectations regarding their involvement in their child’s academic progress.

One qualitative study reports that when a partnership between home and school is created, children

see a mutual respect develop which, inadvertently, leads to the development of long-term relationships that provide a context in which learning can occur (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992). Particularly, teachers of English Language Learners must work to promote positive relationships between teacher and parents in a way that considers their culturally diverse background. While this idea is good in theory, teachers need to be provided with content-specific professional development workshops which enable them to apply these ideas. Teachers need opportunities to put their theories into practice and experiment with different strategies, all while under the close supervision of a trained ELL teacher who works to support the teacher's efforts. My experience using <http://www.babelfish.com> is a clear example of a teacher's "good intentions," but one who lacks content-specific knowledge of the research-based best practices in effective ELL instruction.

Research-Based Best Practices for English Language Learners and Their Families

Moore (2003) recommends asking **each family how they prefer to communicate**. At the start of the school year, a teacher may discover that families have specific preferences. Be sure to give options in which parents can comply with easily. She cautions that, while schools are very quick to rely on email as the most popular form of communication, ELL parents may not have home internet access. Moore (2003) offers a number of suggestions for advocating a partnership starting at the beginning of the school year. First, **ask ELL parents to complete a personal history record about their child and share it with the classroom teacher**. Parents can be invited to bring this "homework" to a family orientation event, informal program, or "Back to School Night." This conveys to parents that you value their knowledge of their child. It also helps the teacher learn individual needs and preferences of each child, as well as provides the teacher and parents with a topic to discuss in the first week of school. **Second, send home a picture and a personal note to each family during the first two weeks of school**. A picture of the child engaged in an activity and a short, descriptive note will draw families into the activities and offer a common theme to discuss with the classroom teacher. **Third, Moore (2003) promotes developing a parent support group which can act as a liaison between teacher and parents of English Language Learners**. This group can include parent advocates and/or parent coordinators who can poll families, talk to individuals, and share ideas throughout the school. This provides a common ground that sets a positive tone for the school year.

The responsibility of developing a partnership with ELL parents should not be the sole duty of the teacher. The school needs to be held accountable as well. Research conducted by Moore in 2003, suggested that principals devote one staff meeting to discuss the importance of family communication. In 2010, professional development in the area of English Language Learning is essential and, in fact, necessary to accommodate our schools diverse populations. Educators cannot ignore the large number of students who enter our classrooms from different cultures. Consistent with Moore's research in 2003, however, is the notion that brainstorming methods in which to effectively involve ELL parents should be discussed, as well as the resources that are available to teachers in helping to a communicate with parents in their dominant language. Such methods might include involvement on a committee, "team parenting," or appealing to the parent for assistance in their area of expertise.

Newsletters are another effective method used in classrooms with English Language Learners to provide a link between home and school. Berger (1996) stated that the first step toward a successful partnership is the use of effective communication skills. One way to establish a road to communication is through a class newsletter. This newsletter can include information on effective literacy and content

area strategies, inform parents about upcoming activities (i.e. field trips, family nights, guest speakers, special classroom events, etc.), and provide additional resources that may assist the parent in helping their child with homework and other class-related topics. Newsletters can also eliminate sending redundant notices or letters home to parents. They help to develop a partnership between teacher and parent and further lend support in sharing the responsibility in providing the most effective education possible. By inviting ELL parents into the classroom via class newsletters, teachers develop an awareness of students' broader socioeconomic backgrounds (Jensen, 2006).

Newsletters also help to shift ownership of learning from the teacher to the student. It becomes the responsibility of the student to translate the newsletter if the newsletter is not translated in the parent's first language. Having the newsletter available in languages other than English is a benefit to the teacher as well as the family. According to McCarthey (2000), a key component in creating a partnership between the home and school appears to be the sharing of information. This can be difficult with parents who do not read English as their first, or sometimes second language. Some schools are fortunate in having a parent coordinator or parent advocate who can translate the newsletter.

As previously mentioned, it is important to have English Language Learners take ownership of the class newsletter. Holding students accountable for part or all of the newsletter allows that sense of ownership and, subsequently, requires students to take part in reading, writing, and editing practices. ELL instructors, along with parent advocates, can be particularly helpful in translating a newsletter. Popular websites, such as <http://www.babelfish.com>, will translate up to 150 words at a time. Idiomatic expressions and other nuances in the English language, however, translate literally into second languages, as with my experience in Mrs. Kyle's classroom. When using websites to translate information, it is important to have the ELL teachers proofread the contents of the letter prior to sending it home with students.

Conclusion

In recent years, national policies have identified parent involvement as a critical component of public education in the United States. The America 2000 national mandate for education promoted parent involvement and stated, "Every school will promote partnership that will increase parental involvement and participation in advocating the social, emotional, and academic growth of children" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p.1). As stated in the No Child Left Behind Initiative, parents should have a central role in their child's academic progress. In order to support federal initiatives such as these, Title I funds have been identified for schools that make parent involvement a priority, "with particular attention to parents who are economically disadvantaged, are disabled, have limited English proficiency, have limited literacy, or are of any racial or ethnic minority background" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

As our classrooms become highly populated with students of diverse cultural backgrounds, content-specific professional learning objectives for effective ELL instruction need to be an integral component to any school improvement plan. ELL teachers, with their vast knowledge of the ELL Standards for Pre-K-12 students, have a large responsibility to ensure that their practices are working to enhance, support, and increase the knowledge of teachers, administrators, and other support staff. Using these standards to assist in the development of an improvement plan and drive instructional objectives for classrooms will, undoubtedly, facilitate positive home-school connections among English Language Learners and their families.

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