
Introduction

The English language learner (ELL) student population is the fastest-growing population in the United States—at 7 times the overall national growth rate. Nationwide, ELL enrollment increased 18 percent from 2000 to 2005 (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2009). Public school educational leaders were responsible for 5 million ELLs in the 2005–2006 school year, or 10 percent of the total school-aged population in the United States (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2010).

ELLS IN THE CURRENT EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

The current political landscape and controversies surrounding immigration tend to distort educators' understanding of ELLs. For the ELL student population, which represents over 460 first languages, Spanish is the first language of 79 percent of ELLs. The Asian population, specifically Vietnamese, is second at 2 percent. While most ELLs' first language is indeed Spanish, most of them were born in the United States (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2009); they are not recent immigrants. Sixty-five percent of ELLs are native-born Americans who speak a language other than English in the home. Even though the overall growth of the ELL student population throughout the nation has been 7 times higher than the rate for students in general, many educators remain ill prepared to meet the needs of ELLs. Not only do long-time educators in the field lack the knowledge and skills to teach ELLs effectively, but the trend is continuing for many recent graduates of educator preparation programs. However, a new—and growing—population of young students is entering early childhood grades with the potential for bilingualism.

The increased population of early childhood students with the potential for bilingualism is an exciting asset—not an intimidating liability. Our schools have changed and are continuing to change.

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D. Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) assert that “professional development opportunities must be calibrated not to current reality, but to the changing demographics of the coming years” (p. 22). As language plays a dominant role in schooling, principals must rethink the role of language in school as they recalibrate not only to our current school demographics but also to our growing, emergent bilingual and multilingual populations. Longitudinal research shows that bilingual students outscore monolingual peers on achievement tests (Lucido & McEachern, 2000; Slavin & Cheung, 2005). Similarly, researchers (e.g., Reynolds, 1991) have shown that bilingual students also outperform monolingual peers on cognitive and metalinguistic measures. Bilingualism is clearly a cultural, professional, academic, and personal asset; however, educators sometimes perceive emergent bilinguals, or ELLs, as educational risks because there is a pedagogical gap in professional knowledge. Many teachers and leaders have not been prepared adequately to teach ELLs effectively.

A popular adage is, “All you can do is all you can do.” This response issues a fitting challenge for the twenty-first century as we implement practices, processes, and policies in schools to meet the needs of ELLs. While emergent bilingualism is an exciting asset, it becomes a threatening liability when met with ill-prepared educators. To ignore the needs of ELLs is quite simply not all we can do. We can do more and are called to do more in response to real needs. When real needs are not met, the statistics presented in headlines become the reality. High failure rates, low levels of English language acquisition, and high dropout rates become the educational trajectory for the ELL population.

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

This book presents the role of the school principal as a leader of learning (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) to strengthen practices and processes that enhance high academic achievement for all ELLs. Leithwood and Riehl (2005) identified the importance of the principal’s role in setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization in successful campus leadership. In strengthening a positive school culture, the principal’s role is critical (Deal & Peterson, 2009). The culture of a school includes the shared values, beliefs, and norms that characterize that school. School cultures can be toxic or positive, either hindering the improvement of teaching and learning or serving as a catalyst for the improvement of practice. In strengthening a school’s culture to meet the needs of ELLs, a comparison of the change process and the language acquisition process yields enlightening parallels.

Parallels Between the Change Process and Language Acquisition

Just as cultural change occurs over time and is a process rather than an event, the process of language acquisition for ELLs occurs over time. Moreover, the process of language acquisition, like the change process, does not occur in a strictly linear process. Fullan (2009) suggests that the shape of a lightning bolt is a more fitting image than a straight diagonal line for depicting the change process in schools. There may be setbacks as the school seeks to move forward, and growth may occur vividly or faintly in the process of moving forward. Likewise, Fullan's (2001) lightning metaphor versus a linear model depicts the language acquisition process. The learner may have periods of great growth, experience setbacks, and move forward again in the process of attaining mastery of another language. ELLs represent a highly diverse group with varying needs. Teachers must work to meet individual needs and recognize the uniqueness of each student. In the process of language acquisition, as in the change process, positive relationships matter.

Just as a change process includes varying phases, such as initiation, implementation, and institutionalization (Fullan, 2001), in language acquisition, there are recognized phases. Knowledge of the language processes, which are fluid and interrelated just as change processes are, can help the leader understand what to expect and how to plan interventions accordingly. Both in a change process and in assisting students in language acquisition, celebrating successes matters. Shared buy-in to the change effort is essential in achieving the goal of meeting the needs of ELLs campuswide. ELLs will engage in the life of the school throughout the day; therefore, every teacher must become a leader in fostering a school culture that promotes students' language acquisition and furthers students' learning. Ultimately, in a successful school change effort, the values, beliefs, and norms of the educators must support the change for sustained practices and processes. Ultimately, in strengthening a school culture that supports high achievement for all ELLs, shared beliefs include the benefits of a second language, an appreciation of cultural differences, and the need to overcome stereotypes and inequities. The principal is instrumental in establishing a school culture that embodies these beliefs.

ACCOUNTABILITY

With the increasing pressures of accountability performance measures and high-stakes testing based on No Child Left Behind (2001), ensuring that all students meet accountability standards is increasingly important—and

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expected. College and career readiness standards are also being adopted by many states nationwide (Achieve, 2009). To meet challenging academic achievement standards and guidelines for state and federal accountability measures, emphasis on rigorous content is needed for all students. Currently, the academic needs of many ELLs are not being met, which places additional pressure on schools; schools must teach both language and content to ELLs and then assess whether they have taught the content successfully—in many cases, by testing ELL students in English. In a newcomer school, for example, the principal, who had just been hired, noticed that once students were no longer exempt from the state’s high-stakes assessment for language purposes, the students were returned to their home campuses although they had not mastered English. Believing that there was no true accountability to her teachers, the principal worked to change the school’s policy: “We are going to keep our students, and we are going to test.” Her teachers responded, “But we are going to be unacceptable.”

When the fear of accountability overrides what is best for children and their attainment of both content and language, the principal must reevaluate his or her school’s practice, as this principal did. This school was academically unacceptable that school year. However, this principal understood the change process and that this small step back was not an indication of failure but an indication of progress. As new programs were implemented, the school jumped to Acceptable and Recognized ratings the next year—and all subsequent years—based on the state’s accountability system. This principal understood the need for an accountability system to expose achievement gaps and monitor the overall progress of her students. She did not let fear of a short-term dip in scores stop her from implementing new programs that would help her students in the long run. The principal, as leader, must show courage. This courage is founded on a conviction that doing what is right for children will inevitably show positive results.