

**Leadership Growth Problem Analysis:
Integrating LEP Students into the Mainstream**

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EDAD 501 – 23 July 2007

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Hunterdon Central Regional High School [HCRHS or HC] is a large suburban high school in Flemington, NJ. Until fairly recently, the student population has consisted of almost entirely White, native English-speaking students. In the last five to ten years, however, there has been an influx of immigrants, both legal and illegal and primarily Spanish-speaking, into the community. There is not one single country from which the Flemington immigrant population hails; many South and Central American countries are represented. As such, the percentage of students at Hunterdon Central who are Limited English Proficient [LEP] has risen suddenly. This sudden increase has caught school officials “off guard” in the sense that very few resources existed in the past to serve these students, as there was no significant need. Now, however, 5% of the 3,020 student population's primary home language is not English, and problems exist on two fronts: at school, the curriculum does not seem to be serving the needs of the students. Aside from being physically segregated from the English-speaking student body due to the location of the English as a Second Language [ESL] classroom, students report feeling socially isolated from their native English-speaking peers. This isolation at school has bred contempt, fear, and antagonism in both the LEP students and native English speakers, and detracts from the sense of community that Hunterdon Central tries so hard to establish. A second problem lies with the parents of these students: while most of these students have only a basic level of English proficiency, their parents often have little or no ability to speak English, which makes communication between the school and home almost impossible. This leads to not only students, but also entire families feeling isolated from the school and the community at large.

Hood (2003) identifies a 105% increase in LEP immigrant students in the United States between the 1990-1991 and 2000-2001 academic years, a rate that far exceeds the 12% growth in the general population in the same period. Furthermore, the vast majority of these immigrants (79%) were native Spanish speakers (such as the ones at Hunterdon Central). Although they are a distant second, third,

fourth, and fifth, Southeast Asian languages were next highest represented among non-English speaking immigrants: Vietnamese (2%), Hmong (1.6%), Cantonese (1%), and Korean (1%). What this means for the US is that these non-native English speakers will play a major role in determining the quality of the country's labor force in decades to come. Ethical commitments of educators aside, it is therefore in the best economic interest of the American people to ensure access to quality education for these students, not merely at the elementary and secondary level, but at the undergraduate level as well (Hood, 2003).

Initially, I had developed some ideas for what I thought could help alleviate the problems facing LEP students at Hunterdon Central. These ideas were not based in data or research, but were simply products of some mild brainstorming. They included providing reduced teaching loads and/or duty release for foreign language teachers in order to provide translation or other communication services for the school, night classes in English and other outreach programs for parents of LEP students, translation of school documents and policies into necessary languages, collaborative projects between ESL and non-ESL classes, the physical relocation of ESL classes to encourage integration with the greater school populace, and finally, a critical examination and re-evaluation of our current ESL curriculum. Although these ideas are specific to my school, a review of the existing literature shows that I was not too far off the mark with my suggestions. After reviewing the available literature, it seems to me that success in ESL/LEP programs requires three overarching common elements: intense parental involvement, a culturally relevant curriculum, and a sense of integration into the mainstream school culture.

Parental Involvement

In a district like Hunterdon Central, parental involvement in education is sometimes taken to an uncomfortable extreme. While it is desirable for parents and teachers to maintain contact throughout the school year, some parents choose to become an overbearing presence in their child's classroom. The exact opposite is true of the parents of LEP students at Hunterdon Central. In fact, the lack of parental involvement at HCRHS is a microcosmic representation of a larger problem within the LEP community in

the US. Even when outreach programs are implemented, they are often poorly attended (Kauffman, Perry, & Prentiss, 2001). This lack of parental involvement is problematic. Parent involvement in children's learning is positively related to achievement, and the more highly involved (not overbearing) a parent is, generally, the higher the student achieves (Cotton & Wilkelund, 1989; Putnam, 2000; as cited in Roessingh, 2006). For students who are already placed behind an academic eight-ball due to their limited or non-existent grasp of the English language, parental involvement is absolutely critical to their success.

Kauffman et al. (2001) identify several factors that prevent many parents of LEP students from fully participating in their child's education. The overwhelming majority of parents in their survey cited work obligations as the number one obstacle to their participation in their child's education. Cultural and language barriers are also significant contributing factors; often, the children, as limited in their English proficiency as they are, are far more proficient than their parents, many of whom speak no English at all. Culturally speaking, many Asian cultures view teachers and schools as being of higher social status than parents; as such, many Asian parents believe the schools can "do no wrong" and relinquish full responsibility for their child's education to the schools. Both Kauffman et al. (2001) and Gordon (1996) cite the bureaucracy of many public education systems as intimidating to LEP parents, especially for many low-income families. Finally, a lack of self-confidence and unfavorable past experiences with schools, both as students and parents, prevent many LEP parents from reaching out to schools. The responsibility does not lie solely with the parents, however. Kauffman et al. (2001) also posit that many schools have not targeted their efforts to meeting the needs of LEP parents. Most frequently cited as the cause of this is a lack of manpower or financial resources to meet their needs on top of those of the mainstream school community.

The existing literature offers a variety of methods for increasing LEP parent participation in education. Kauffman et al. (2001) and Hendrix (1999) state that outreach programs do no good unless they are tailored to meet the needs of the particular community they are trying to serve. To this end,

Kauffman et al. (2001) surveyed LEP parents in their community, asking them such questions as “How long have you lived in the United States?”, “If you would like to participate in school activities, what times do you prefer?”, “To participate in parent activities, which of the following would you prefer?” (options were *babysitting, transportation, interpreter, and neighbor/friend to accompany*), and “What types of activities would you be interested in?” (options were *room parent, classroom volunteer, parent advisory committee, learn how to help your child with school work, and visit your child's class*). They also suggest that schools make a point of hiring bilingual staff, aides, paraprofessionals, parent advocates, coordinators, and home visit personnel to help meet the needs of their LEP population.

A cognitive-behavioral approach to this problem would suggest teaching the parents English in order to provide them the skills they need to help their children. To that end, Hendrix (1999) suggests programs of family literacy, in which parents and students learn English side-by-side. He cites Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988), who offer that parents and children in these special programs need a voice in program development in order to make the curriculum more meaningful and effective. In one example of a successful family literacy program, Hendrix described a curriculum in which parents and their children received ten hours of ESL instruction per week in the same class. Instruction was reinforced through journal writing and discussion of relevant topics, rather than simply rote instruction in grammar and vocabulary. While this leads dangerously close to the “whole language v. phonics” debate, both parents and students reported the collaborative element of the program – not only between parent and child, but also between family and school – as being the most engaging and effective aspect of instruction (Hendrix, 1999).

Another approach to helping parents to help their children by teaching them English is covered in Gordon (1996). Gordon's class was structured differently than the model Hendrix describes; it is solely a class for parents that meets at night. This model also takes a participatory approach; journal writing and discussion are the prime vehicles for furthering English mastery, and the topics are highly relevant to the

adult students' lives. In the example group from his study, Gordon focused on eleven adults in the class, all refugees from southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam), ranging in age from late 20s to mid 50s. While work and family obligations often impeded many students' ability to attend, these eleven all managed to make fairly regular attendance. This student-centered approach covered a few significant broad themes over the course of the class: the importance of families and various roles within them, differences in disciplinary philosophies between home countries and the US, the greater need for education in urban Philadelphia (where the study took place and these subjects reside) than in their home cultures (mostly rural), the different concepts of respect between home cultures and the US, and the rebellion of most of their children against "traditional" Asian values. This model was successful in that parents did increase their English literacy through regular journaling and discussion, but perhaps more importantly, they were provided an outlet to collaboratively come up with solutions to problems common to many LEP parents, such as how to help children with homework, how to best communicate with teachers, and what they should and should not expect of schools with regard to instruction and discipline. In addition to increasing English mastery, these parents were also provided a support system that allowed them to work constructively toward problem-solving in the name of helping their children to succeed, probably the primary goal of parental involvement in education.

Montecel, Cortez, and Cortez (2002, April) take a slightly different approach to parental involvement. In their survey of best practices in successful ESL programs, they noted that the schools with the highest achieving English Language Learners [ELL] invited their parents in not as "helpers", but rather as partners engaged in meaningful activities in the school. Parents' life experiences were validated and honored in the classroom, irrespective of socio-economic status. Some local businesses facilitated parent involvement by allowing employees with ELL children flextime to participate in school activities. Faculty, staff, and administration in these schools all held very positive views regarding parent involvement, and the parents supported them in return.

Relevant & Inclusive Curriculum

One of the reasons for the success of programs such as the ones described by Hendrix (1999) and Gordon (1996) is the immediate relevance of the subject matter to the lives of the students, both children and adults. It has long been considered a best practice among teachers to engage students by making curriculum relevant to their lives; why should the same not hold true for ELL students? In a survey of ten graduates of an ESL program, Roessingh (2006) found a common theme in the necessity for engaging, relevant materials for language acquisition and academic success. In identifying some best practices among successful ESL programs, Montecel et al. (2002, April) expound further on this concept; the teachers they observed recruited parents and other members of the community to share real-life experiences, addressed multiple learning styles, were student-centered rather than teacher-centered, and maintained high expectations for all students. The observed results were high rates of engagement and time on task, highly interactive lessons, and consistent, positive student behavior (Montecel et al., 2002, April).

Relevance to daily life is just one part of the puzzle, however. Rather than the traditional isolating pull-out model of ESL instruction, much of the current research supports the concept of two-way, or dual, bilingual education (Spaulding, Carolino, & Amen, 2004; Ochoa & Rhodes, 2005; Montecel et al., 2002, April). In this model, classes are comprised of both ELL students and native English speakers. Instruction is provided in both English and a second language, thereby allowing both groups to learn a second language. Such programs are often viewed favorably by both ELL and native English-speaking families: the parents of English speakers recognize the potential future employment benefits of having their child learn a second language, and parents of ELL students feel that their native language and culture is valued because students from English-speaking backgrounds have elected to take this course. Aside from the aforementioned linguistic benefit, this inclusionary model also combats the segregation often caused by traditional ESL classrooms (Ochoa & Rhodes, 2005). Furthermore, Ochoa & Rhodes (2005)

cite Thomas and Collier (1997), who found that LEP students who learn English in two-way bilingual classes and maintenance programs obtained normal curve equivalent [NCE] scores of 61 and 52, respectively, on standardized English reading tests in the twelfth grade. Their peers who enrolled in traditional pull-out ESL classes only attained NCE scores of 24. Clearly, the two-way method, followed up by a maintenance program, is the more effective model from a strictly pedagogical standpoint. From a humanistic perspective, ELL families' home cultures and languages are shown to be valued by the school, both ELL and native English speakers learn a new language, and both ELL parents and students feel included in the school environment: it seems a win-win situation all around. The findings of Montecel et al. (2002, April) and Roessingh (2006) support those of Ochoa & Rhodes (2005). This commitment on the part of the schools to maintaining native languages while teaching English is vital to maintaining the trust of the parents, and therefore increasing their likelihood of involvement with their child's education.

Hood (2003) cites inclusion and personalization as an integral factor to student success in some ESL programs. Personalization of not only instruction, but also instructors, to groups of students is a top priority at International High School in New York City. This is done in order to combat drop-out rates, particularly among students from low-income families who may feel pressure to drop out to care for younger siblings or get a job to contribute financially to their families. Instruction at International High School is largely group based. The school is organized by "clusters"; each cluster has 75 students, four teachers, a teacher/counselor, and a full-time paraprofessional. Students and adults stay together in these clusters for two years, and instructional programs are specifically designed with collaboration in mind. It is this sense of inclusivity and collaboration that the faculty of IHS hopes will help keep students engaged in their education, and they have been largely successful in doing so thus far. In fact, this model has been so successful that the New York City public school system has begun to adapt the model in some of their districts (Hood, 2003).

Implications for Hunterdon Central

As it turns out, many of the initial suggestions I had regarding how to further include LEP students at Hunterdon Central Regional High School are supported by the literature. By far, my most pressing concern is the segregation that has been taking place at this school. Although most would be quick to ascribe the condescending attitudes of many HC students toward “all the Mexicans” to racism, I really think the issue lies more in the linguistic divide than the racial one. LEP students are physically segregated from the general populace by the location of their classroom. Because they spend so much of their day in that room with those students, it is no wonder that they all eat lunch together, stay together in gym class, and walk together in the halls. If these students were placed in classrooms with native English-speaking peers, I think many of the misconceptions (and resultant hostility) would dissipate. From my experience teaching the Multicultural Studies course at our school and speaking with like-minded students, I think there would be enough of an interest in two-way bilingual courses to give it some serious consideration.

Since the majority of our LEP students are native Spanish speakers, we have resources available to us in our school to facilitate home communication, per the suggestion of much of the literature. In addition to the four or five Spanish teachers (one of whom is a native speaker), we also have a guidance counselor and a secretary who are native Spanish speakers, as well as two paraprofessionals who are fluent, though not native speakers. Ideally, this increased communication, along with the best practices described earlier taking place in the two-way bilingual classroom, would increase opportunities for home, school, and community collaboration, engender a greater sense of inclusivity at the high school, and lead to improved academic achievement for our LEP population. While we still run the outdated pull-out ESL instructional model, we can not truly achieve our district vision statement of “Performance Excellence for Everyone”.

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