A middle level principal discovers the cultural challenges and rewards of starting a center for English for speakers of other languages.

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[Preview]

- Although many aspects of a middle school were thrown into chaos with the arrival of students who did not speak English, the original staff members and students learned some valuable lessons about work ethics, personal responsibility, and their own culture.

- When starting an ESOL program, principals should make it a priority to hire the best ESOL teachers that are available and do whatever is possible to meet their needs.

- There is no one-size-fits-all approach to educating ESOL students. The best ESOL policies and procedures are often developed and implemented through a process of trial and error.
Several years ago, when I became principal of a middle school outside of Baltimore, MD, I learned that my first year would also be the school’s first year as a middle school English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) center for the northern half of our large, metropolitan district. I arrived midsummer to meet with faculty members who had received only one after-school orientation session about ESOL students and were curious but wary of the ESOL program.

Cultural Differences
Fortunately, my concerns about starting an ESOL program were eased when teachers from other ESOL programs in the system volunteered their time to help get our ESOL program started. This began a process that would stretch and alter the minds, hearts, and perceptions of our students, faculty members, and administrative staff members as we struggled to provide a worthwhile school experience for the non-English-speaking students who entered our school.

First, we learned that ESOL students and their parents did not follow the rules. How could they? They didn’t even know the rules existed! The guidance office, usually an organized, efficient, meeting-by-appointment environment, began to be filled with people speaking in many languages. Parents’ varied understandings of time or the need for appointments often exasperated our secretary. As time progressed, however, she learned to work in an assuring manner with ESOL parents. She began to recognize their languages as they spoke, made initial appointments for required immunizations, and scheduled and explained the intricacies of the school system’s transportation services. Our new parents and their children discovered how a bureaucracy runs in the United States and learned that we could be trusted to honor the promises we made. As proof of her kindness and expertise, I often observed newly matriculated ESOL students shyly stopping by the guidance office to visit her on their way to gym, confident they would receive the same welcoming smile and expression of pleasure at their arrival they had experienced on their registration day.

We learned that much of the irritating, seemingly out-of-kilter, parental behavior was cultural, not deliberate or personal. This made it easier to cheerfully redirect and work with ESOL parents because we began to see the humor in the chaotic scenarios that sometimes characterized our guidance office. We learned to suspend judgment about the parents who came to register their children and realize that their lack of English or menial occupations did not reflect the highly cultured and well educated former engineers, doctors, or teachers struggling to gain the English proficiency required to recertify themselves in their professions in their new country.

I often marveled at the drive and ambition that ESOL students possessed in the absence of parental involvement as I had always envisioned it. Although our PTA tried to encourage all parents to become involved in school activities, the parents of ESOL students seldom came to school—not even to see their children perform in

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concerts or receive awards. However, I began to understand that, in many cultures, teachers and principals are expected to know what is best for children in school and, therefore, operate with the full confidence of the parents. Requests for parental involvement, as we define it—including participation in parent teacher meetings, attendance at PTA, collaboration in resolving disciplinary problems, and assistance with or the monitoring of homework—seemed odd to many parents. Parents, regardless of their culture, want what's best for their children, value their academic achievement, and maintain high expectations for their appropriate behavior and performance. However, many parents of ESOL students relied on the wisdom and ingenuity of our school's staff members to resolve problems. Their expectation that school issues would be handled at school was an expression of their faith in our judgment and ability rather than an abdication of their parental responsibilities.

We learned that many ESOL parents and their children do not always share our sense of starting at the beginning and staying until the end. Parents routinely created havoc by not registering their children until several days after the school year began or by pulling them out of school for days or weeks at a time without an explanation. Didn't they read the newspaper notices about school schedules or hear the radio and TV announcements heralding the first day? Wait a minute, they don't read English, nor do they comprehend it. Perhaps they don't have a radio or TV. Perhaps the church or relative who promised to sponsor them only recently materialized. Regardless of the circumstances, the unexpected arrivals of ESOL students caused carefully adjusted plans to go away.

**Adapting to ESOL Students**

Although our administrators were unsettled at the unexpected arrivals and departures of their ESOL students, our teachers reacted even more strongly. Initially, many teachers were exasperated with the newly arrived ESOL students and became downright angry with us when the paperwork heralding yet another student's arrival appeared in their mailboxes. Teachers begged us to hold ESOL students out of their classes until they finished the novel, the unit, or the project they were working on. Even ESOL teachers asked that we not enroll students who materialized a few days before the winter break or summer vacation. Over time, we recognized that the upheaval in our new ESOL students' lives—a new home, an unfamiliar culture, and an unintelligible language—had to be far more severe than the disruption they caused in our school.
Similarly, we learned not to overreact when a student disappeared for weeks or months at a time, sometimes resurfacing at school the next year. After making sure—through a web of student and parent informants who shared the same culture—that the student was healthy and safe, we tried to understand that family obligations often compelled parents to return to their native countries for extended periods of time, taking their children with them. In many cultures, bien educado (well educated) means taking care of family first, even at the expense of the children's formal education.

Adjusting to the Mainstream

As students' English skills progressed, integrating them into the mainstreamed program remained an ongoing challenge that tested the skill and understanding of our students and teachers. ESOL students who remained silent during class or group work handed in flawless written assignments, especially in math. Unexpectedly, often months after his or her arrival, a child would confide to his ESOL or chorus teacher that he or she played the piano or the violin, and the band or orchestra teacher would be belatedly delighted with the new pupil. Other ESOL students couldn't seem to comprehend much of anything unless they had the opportunity to work through an assignment with their peers. Mainstreamed students stared openly at the ESOL newcomers who remained seated after the bell to ask additional questions about the lesson.

Teachers struggled with how to grade their ESOL students. As a result of several lengthy, emotionally charged teacher meetings, we agreed that teachers would issue pass/fail instead of letter grades for newly mainstreamed ESOL students. We thought this practice would reduce students' stress as they adjusted to content-oriented environments conducted in rapid English. It also reduced teachers' feelings of guilt when actual work was substandard, although significant effort was clearly visible. Although the pass/fail practice worked for our teachers, some of the ESOL students disliked it. They came prepared to succeed and if they didn't, well, then the fault was theirs and they needed to try harder. We learned that in many cultures effort, not ability, predicts success. Why should it be different in a U.S. school?

The fact that new ESOL students made relentless efforts to understand, showed a willingness to expose their ignorance by asking endless questions, and accepted personal responsibility for their failures boggled the minds of teachers and mainstreamed students. Their determination encouraged us all to reconsider our beliefs about an appropriate work ethic and the level of personal responsibility we should expect to maintain to ensure our own success.

Most assuredly, ESOL students gain a world of information and experience as they navigate a U.S. school. They adjust and adapt to what Tyack and Cuban (1995) call “the grammar of schooling” in the United States, developing the ability to understand and speak English and produce passable written work as time progresses without making the cultural mistakes that separate them from their native peers. In the meantime, the native English speakers surrounding them gain an understanding of how our own culture is expressed in every action and interaction; how time is perceived differently in other cultures; and how formal education might be an important element, but not the centerpiece, of a student's education. One of our ESOL students once angered his advisory group during a discussion on drug and alcohol abuse by announcing that his family did not drink “the American way” and engage in binge drinking. His exposure to television and his observations of his new American friends and neighbors led him to this sobering conclusion. I still recall the students in an American cultures class who, when asked the meaning of Memorial Day, stated in unison, “shopping.” This was another less than flattering but surprisingly accurate assessment of our culture.

Altering Cultural Assumptions

Learning to see the world through the eyes of others, we come to understand that we are far less culturally neutral than we previously believed. This forces us to reexamine notions that we have always assumed were givens. I can say with certainty that our ESOL population affected every staff member and student in our
school, preparing us a little better for the increasingly global environment in which we live.

Alterations in viewpoints and perceptions seldom came easily and often resulted from mistakes and misunderstandings that caused hurt feelings and distress. The Japanese father who insisted upon meeting me and presenting what he meant to be a business card handwritten on a piece of notebook paper was chagrined, I’m sure, when I did not offer my own card in return. I learned later that the exchange of business cards is a crucial element in a modern Japanese introduction, and I failed to understand or mitigate this man’s embarrassment at not having a proper card to offer. We learned not to make complimentary comments about the exquisite bead-embroidered purses or scarves carried by our female Chinese students; in their culture, as in many others, an expression of admiration for an object demands that the owner present the object to the admirer as a gift. Our physical education teachers figured out how to modify their required gym-suit policy for our female Muslim students who needed to wear their scarves and skirts at all times. Our no-hat policy was adjusted for students in scarves and turbans to reflect their religious beliefs. Sensitive ESOL teachers alerted us to the need to find a place during lunch for students who fasted during Ramadan. Through this seemingly endless process, our knowledge and understanding of a variety of cultures—including the power of our own culture—continued to grow.

I recall the horrifyingly unexpected death of a single mother during Thanksgiving time and the way our school community, including teachers and counselor, students, and parents, cocooned her surviving children for several years after the tragedy. What haunts me more, however, is recalling two of our female students, dressed in long skirts and scarves, who met with a counselor from outside the school system every morning. Their parents did not accompany them to registration, and their lack of even rudimentary English skills made it impossible to ask about their situation. Their teacher told me that they were very quiet in class, doing their assigned work, but seldom interacting with other students and rarely smiling. Even as principal, I was not privy to the details of their sudden appearance in our school; their counselor merely smiled sadly at me and shook his head when I asked about them. As I understand more about the atrocities that befall girls and women in lawless situations elsewhere, I am haunted by what they might have observed and experienced. Where were their parents? Did they have brothers and sisters? Had they watched them die? What had been done to them? Although our school community reacted warmly and supportively to the unexpected death of a mother like ourselves, many of us scarcely wondered about the experiences that might have propelled our ESOL students to us and continued to shape their very being, worrying instead about how well they became acclimated to school and acquired English.

**Advice for Starting an ESOL Program**

What advice do I have to offer other principals who are struggling to offer an excellent academic program to ESOL students and the mainstreamed students in their care? First, hire the best ESOL teachers you can find and then trust them when they tell you what is necessary for them to work successfully. Look not only for ESOL teachers who can tell you how they will help their students develop their BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and CALPS (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills) but also for teachers with sensitivity, courage, and excellent interpersonal skills. You want ESOL teachers who will advocate for their students and educate mainstream teachers when adjustments in scheduling, perceptions, or treatment of ESOL students are in order. Listen carefully to your mainstream teachers as well. Provide them with as much ongoing training, resources, and professional development time to allow them to feel comfortable and competent with their new ESOL students. Finally, recognize that no one-size-fits-all approach to educating ESOL students exists. Our best ESOL policies and procedures were developed and implemented on-site through honest discussions and trial and error.

Finally, be prepared to learn more about the different cultures swirling and sometimes clashing in your school, and most of all, be prepared to rethink culturally induced perceptions and judgments. In a variety of ways, expected and unintended, your school and your staff members will be enriched by the presence of the ESOL students. Margarita Calderon (1998) suggests that a good principal for ESOL students maintains a balance between “nurturing and nagging” staff members and district personnel while also providing support, encouragement, and recognition so that ESOL students get the best in programs, resources, and staff to meet their needs. Our ESOL students are the windows to our future as a successful, multicultural, multilingual society—dare we offer them anything less? PL

**References**