Artifact K

Reflections on Tusculum Elementary School's Performance on ELL Teaching

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Underneath the motto "Soaring to Higher Standards", Donna Gill, assistant principle in Tusculum Elementary School explained, " Our goal is to ensure every student makes progress each year." (personal communication, October 25, 2013) Weeks ago, I went on a field trip to Tusculum of 649 students in Metro Nashville. I interviewed several key players in school and had an opportunity to observe a 2nd grade class taught by Jocelyn Taylor. In this article, I will inform what I saw and learned in the school site and in class. In line with my observation, I will share my personal insights and critically evaluate school programs and class instructions in Tusculum. At last, the article is going to show a teacher believes in multicultural and educational mission but cannot execute in class.

In Tusculum, more than 80% of students are English Language Learners and each semester 17 to 20 classes receive new students. (Donna Gill, personal communication, October 25, 2013) In 2011-2, the school demographic information states students from Hispanic background counted for 42.1% of the school population. After Hispanics, most were white students (22.4%) and then were followed by Asians (19.9%) and blacks (15.7%) (school demographic information, 2012). As of May 2013, more than 75% of the students speak English as a second language. The approximate breakdown of the primary languages is Hispanic (46.8%), Arabic (4.41%), Kurdish (3.59%), Burmese (8%) and Nepali (8%). The school also has Farsi, Korean, Chinese and multiple dialects within one language. (Susan Mcginnis, personal communication, October 25, 2013) By using the number of free or reduced price lunch program participation, the most reliable figure related to socioeconomic status (Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010), it indicates that 96.8% of students are poor. Such a large number of diverse and underprivileged ELL populations throw out numerous challenges at school and classroom level,

with regard to community, school and family partnerships, implementation of programs and class instructions and interactions.

Community, School and Family Partnerships

Tusculum values the diversity of school and community and devotes itself to facilitating a bridge between community and families. At the reception lobby, there is a "resources" corner where parents can get informative flyers about children healthcare, school activities and donations to school. All of them are in English and Spanish versions. Walking along the hallway, I could see maps of the world on the wall or posts where students' nationalities are marked on them. One of them stars Nashville, saying "So glad you are here". When students come to a new environment, especially immigrants or refugees, normally they feel frightened as they don't know how to speak English and they feel they are "different" from everyone else. Tusculum, through affirming students' identities, creates a safe and supportive environment and conveys an implicit message that "We are better when we are together in Tusculum." It is not an exaggeration to say students coming from all around the world make up one family in Tusculum, Nashville.

The school has many community or business partners to get volunteers and donations for parents and children's sake. Tusculum Family Resource Center (FRC) is one of the products of the partnership between Tusculum and a non-profit lead agency--PENCIL. It links community organizations, school faculty and families together to help parents know what happens in their children's class and help remove language and cultural barriers that may hinder academic success and productive communications. "There are ESL classes mainly for adults," Casaundra Ivey said, " We also have *Cultural Café* in which one family could do presentations about their own culture, bring music and food for other families. " (personal communication, October 25,

2013) Through this parent-school empowerment process, parents are aware of their children's conditions in school, learn their rights to collectively join with others who share their experience by forming cooperative linkages with schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Mutual understandings are conducive to a decrease of racism and discrimination against a particular ethnic group. In addition to that, there are other ways the school engages parents. They are invited to attend *Literacy Night* to read with children. They are part of the decision makers in implementing the Elementary and Secondary Act program that provides funding for teachers as well as equipment and materials for classrooms. It is therefore obvious that Tusculum is working hard to make parents be part of the school.

However, considering over 25 languages, the school needs more financial support and further makes use of funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez, 1992) for teaching in class. According to Donna, the district provides translators whenever it needs for parent meetings, but there is only one full-time Spanish-English translator. (personal communication, October 25, 2013) Due to widely spoken Spanish, there's sufficient support for Spanish speakers; nevertheless, other relatively more marginalized languages cannot be ignored as well. Under Lau's Remedies, it required school districts to provide adequate notification in the parents' home language. (De Jong, 2011) Different degrees of exposure to home language produce an unequal access to resources available to parents and students and to information beneficial for development of school-parent relationships. In the short term, it is unreasonable to realize 25 language versions of flyers in the "Resource" corner, as which consumes a large amount of money and labor. That is why federal Title III funding needs to be increased so that in the long run more multilingual translators can be accessible to all minority students enrolled in Tusculum and their families. But in the short term, Tusculum could ask for help from more volunteers. Yet

a concern arises when I saw students with LEP scored lower than their peers in TCAP

Achievement Reading/Language and Math or EOC Algebra from 2008 to 2012 (school data,

2012), though in general they are improving annually. As we all know, under No Child Left

Behind policy, students' underachievement in standardized tests will leave Tusculum in a

disadvantaged position to receive federal and local funding in support of a great many ELL

students.

       At school level, Tusculum does cherish building meaningful relationships with parents

through cultural activities outside of classroom, but actually they can do better in engaging

parents inside of classroom. During the interview, a teacher described some parents as

cooperative and easy to deal with, but some are not. She said, " Some families cannot help. If

parents can, children grow faster." Ethnically diverse families living in poor socioeconomic

conditions often face sustained isolation, leading miscommunication between parents and

teachers. (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991) Therefore, teachers need to pay regular home visits, understand

parents' backgrounds and struggles, and inform them of the school's expectations and how

school program operates for their children. One way that teachers can do to connect homes and

classrooms is by capitalizing on household and community resources in teaching practices, such

as collecting transnational literacies (Jiménez, Smith and Teague, 2009) and studying household

knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). Teachers could involve parents in these activities as they have

more understandings of their own communities and then use resources in meaningful literacy

development. In this way, the classroom is not isolated any more. A child is seen more as a

"whole" person than merely a "student", as he or she is put in a cultural context where they know

the multiple spheres if activity within which the child is enmeshed (Moll et al., 1992). Tusculum,

however, usually has more than 5 languages in a classroom. It may not be easy to relate the

nature of cultural to classroom instructions, but I suggest designing a culture-exchange project as mentioned the above in classroom settings each semester, which can be an ideal practice to empower parent involvement, enhance teachers' understandings about minority students and their families, and create a culturally caring environment to make class practices meaningful to them.

English Learners Programs in Tusculum

In Tusculum, teachers are all ELL certified and everything taught in classroom is in English. Before getting admitted to integrated classes, students who have been in the States less than one year are placed in a multi-graded newcomer EL program. After they exit, students still have access to ELL service, such as tutoring service sponsored by Catholic Charity and summer program to ensure students listen to English during school holiday (personal communication, November 7, 2013).

There are only two newcomer classrooms in Tusculum, respectively in the charge of Casaundra Ivey (K-1st grade) and another teacher (2nd -4th grade). As Casaundra pointed out, "The class size is too large.10 to 12 would be perfect; 14 is the upper limit. But now I have 17 in my class. Next year the number is estimated to increase even higher. " It is challenging and energy-consuming to meet each student's needs if the class is too big. In the near future, Tusculum is estimated to have more English Language Learners. In that case, classes and qualified teachers need to be increased accordingly.

Technically, a newcomer class is a self-contained classroom where minority students spend a whole day exposing themselves to English. Yet the EL program in Tusculum cannot be defined as a pullout ESL program as its educational aim is not acquire English to be monolingual or be assimilated into mainstream culture. "Research says it takes three years for ELs to acquire

social language, but five to seven years to acquire academic language", said Donna Gill (personal communication, October 25, 2013) While interviewing different key plays in Tusculum, whether administrators or teachers, I noticed that they value research results a lot and attempt to build their programs based on these beliefs. They understand a rapid acquisition of English is impractical for ELs only by putting them in one or two-year English programs to help them achieve grade-level proficiency. Therefore, their main goal for ELLs is to acquire social language and vocabulary, and accommodate to American schools in the newcomer EL program.

However, this does not mean that what teachers are teaching is all "social language" in class. Still, the class practices center on listening, speaking, reading and writing. For example in reading class, when students learn *pumpkin*, the teacher first introduces background knowledge and cultural traditions concerning *pumpkin*, like Halloween and then shows students pictures of pumpkins. Visual learning is highly stressed in Tusculum EL program. "It is hard to use students' native languages. We have too many ELLs", said Casaundra (personal communication, October 25, 2013). In Tusculum, I see school personnel keep talking about the importance of maintaining students' native languages and their culture. They believe language as a resource and affirm its relevance for children's cognitive development, but the problem is they do not know how to use it in their context. With a storm of immigrants and refugee students, multilingual classroom settings are becoming more and more common. Implementation of two-way bilingual immersion program or using students' native languages in instructions is not feasible when teachers can speak only one or two languages while students speak a variety of languages. Despite of that, additive bilingualism still can be realized by seeking opportunities to make multilingualism visible in the curriculum and extending children's multilingual repertories without the benefit of the presence of a bilingual program (De Jong, 2011). In Tusculum multilingual settings, teachers

could design literacy activities that need to drawn on students' native languages and cultural resources. They could acquire native language reading materials for class, but this will be a tough task when there are 5 or more languages in one classroom. Obviously, teachers alone cannot act well. They need support from professionals and translators in order to make sure every minority group has equal access to bilingual education.

With regard to assessments in Tusculum EL program, students in K-2 grades are judged by portfolios while those in 3-4 grades, standardized tests. But in general, teachers' judgments speak louder than traditionally, tests. "We spend every day with these kids. No one knows them better than us", said Casaundra, "When I feel it's the time, I'll move them to an integrated class. If they can't make it, they will go back here until they're prepared." (personal communication, November 7, 2013) The criteria of "being prepared", according to Casaundra, is that EL learners can communicate their needs, have social vocabulary, understand basic class instructions and act confidently. Personally, I favor teachers' assessment in newcomer EL program. Considering the goal of this program, tests would be no use when students do not have adequate academic English competency that they can better attain in an integrated classroom. However, as every student is on Common Core State Standards (CCSS) now in Tennessee, I suppose the goal and assessments of EL program might undergo a tremendous change in the near future. As the EL program is designed for students to prepare for learning academic English, it's likely the newcomer class is going to share some accountability. The CCSS tells teachers what students should know without giving them curriculum or text materials, leaving the choice to teachers on how to reach the common core standard. This can be either terrifying or exciting. Under the pressure of it, schools and teachers have to develop programs that will help teachers implement

CCSS within ELLs. This is no easy work, considering the efforts to achieve culturally responsive teaching and to improve students' performance on standardized tests simultaneously.

During three field trips, I find it interesting how teachers group students on the basis of different standards. In Nashville State Community College, each student sits at his or her own table. In Glencliff High school, students are grouped to some extent if they speak the same language. In Casaundra's class, she groups her kids by how they do work. "Some students are independent workers. Some know better, some know less." (personal communication, November 7, 2013) When the class is doing discussions, students are grouped based on their English Proficiency, higher paired with lower ones. Casaundra's strategy of grouping students reflects a must quality of an ELL teacher, as I believe, flexibility. In her class, most of students are too young to have literacy in their native language and far from cognitive development. However, Casaundra notices their learning styles and further takes advantage of it, which is a well-grounded proof of her caring and professionalism in ELL teaching.

Observation in a 2nd Grade Classroom

Jocelyn Taylor teaches a 2nd grade class of twenty students, ELLs and native speakers integrated. The classroom looks cozy and comfortable. On the blackboard, it says the objectives of reading and math, respectively, "I can add –er and –est to compare; I can identify adjectives; I can tell and write the time." Pictures and words are posted on the wall. In one picture, different colors of people, holding hand-by-hand, surround the global to celebrate. This is a rather explicit message that Mrs. Taylor's class does value students' identity and advocate for their diverse cultural repertories. There are five rules, such as to follow directions quickly, clearly stated in pictures. Other posts reflect what kind of skills and knowledge are pursued for students. For example, in one post it declares big words such as *magical, cheerful, delighted* but crosses easy

words like *happy* and *glad*. Another introduces structures of writings such as cause-effect, analogies, and whole-part relationship and under the headline, there're patterns and figures attached to improve understandings. Along a line, students' writings are put up and each of them is well written and grammatically right. In all, the class physical arrangements and designs convey an important message, that is, the class is working towards to the common core standards which values reading, writing and math skills.

When I walked in, Mrs. Taylor was reading the story *The Three Little Pigs* to students at the carpet. Mrs. Taylor played the wolf and pigs in a dramatic voice. Under her influence, all the students were staring at the book, attentively. The goal of the class I observed is to develop students' vocabulary, mainly adjectives. On the board, an image of the wolf was in the center and different adjectives were written down around it. With the development of the story, the teacher would ask students what word could describe the wolf in a certain situation. Through my observation, I summarized three ways of Mrs. Taylor's to enhance students' vocabulary richness. First, seek synonyms. The teacher wanted students to give synonyms of *scary*. After she gave a hint "How about *frightening*? ", some gave even more difficult words, such as *intimidating* and *terrifying*. Second, construct the lesson from what students know. Having learned the word *hungry*, students were asked, "Can you give me a second-grade word?" One said *hungrier* and he was praised for applying what he had learned before, though that was not what the teacher wanted. Another said *starving* and then some even provided *famished*. Third, utilize word definitions. When the teacher wanted students to elicit words *persistent* and *creative*, she respectively asked, "What we call *never give up*/ *when you figure out a solution*? " Throughout the whole activity, Mrs. Taylor continually emphasized the necessity to think of other adjectives

to describe the wolf and to give her a complete sentence. Besides, regarding the usage of adjectives in a sentence, she used Spanish to make comparisons with that in English.

The width and depth of students' vocabulary impressed me considerably. To a large extent, the teacher could claim credits for students' accomplishment in vocabulary building. However, evaluating the classroom from a larger picture, I find interactions are confined and follow what Gutierrez, Larson and Kreuter (1995) calls "a scripted pact" between teachers and students. When the teacher asked questions on adjectives, students got a chance to speak in class but most of time they have to observe basic classroom procedure and social order. According to my observation, the class follows a regular pattern, think-whisper-share-repeat. When the teacher gives a specific direction, even if some students raise their hands, they are asked to put their hands down and "just think". Then students will whisper the word to people next to him or her. After that, students are required to share with the whole class. That's when the teacher-student interaction begins; yet students only produce a word, without the possibility to elaborate on discourses. At last, the students will repeat after the teacher, practicing the word and the sentence "He is a __ wolf." Through a rigorous, inflexible and confining pattern of class procedure, "the teacher script is primarily monologic and restricts the possibility for dialogue" (Gutierrez et al., 1995).

Evaluations of An In-service Teacher's Reflections on ELL Teaching

One class observation cannot objectively reveal a teacher's philosophy of ELL teaching. After the class, I interviewed Mrs. Taylor and had a close look at her teaching methods and expectations. According to her words, she has high expectations for all students and the goal is to meet their needs and to make sure everyone grows. "I encourage their home languages. The native language is a part of who they are." (personal communication, October 25, 2013)

She admits students from different cultural backgrounds produce challenges for her teaching, but sometimes create rich conversations among students. One time when they talked about ocean, she had to bring extra videos and pictures when she found many students did not have an opportunity to see seas. "Building background knowledge takes time." (Mrs. Taylor, personal communication, October 25, 2013) When the topic came to governments and democracy, however, students from Iraq had strong opinions as their election systems do not work out very well. A multicultural lens adds more color to other students when different understandings that draw on native culture are brought into classrooms. It inspires me to ponder that multicultural classroom settings could work like the United Nations. Each culture can have their own voice and further, activities and practices can be built upon this "multicultural effect".

In spite of her high expectations for every student, she actually has individualized plans for different-level students. For example, in writing assignments, students with low English proficiency are given cloze exercises while native speakers write short stories. In the previous class I observed, she explained she chose easy words to ask ELLs, hard words to mainstream students. I think there are many teachers who teach like Mrs. Taylor, believing they are caring for ELLs but in fact, they are not. From the perspective of core principles for language policy in education, she observes the principle of affirming identities while unintentionally violating the principle of striving for educational equity. According to what she said in the interview, she respects students' linguistic and cultural identities and truly validates students' cultural experiences in school policies and classroom practices (De Jong, 2011), but her differentiated choices of language tasks pigeonholes ELLs and thereby fails to engage them in practices that reflect fairness for all students. The root cause that can account for teachers' poor task choice is that they acknowledge students' limit in English but subconsciously they think if ELLs cannot

finish assignments in academic English, then the best way is to find some easy work for them. So this is a paradox that deserves teachers and educators to treat seriously if a specialized ELL program achieves fairness between majority and minority students when it is in the name of educational equity.

Conclusions

Tusculum shows its determination and strong belief in affirming school diversity and students' identity. By involving parents in school activities and cooperating with community organizations, it builds meaningful relationships with them. However, too many languages in the school do require more financial support to help Tusculum function efficiently.

On the other hand, we all believe that it is desirable to put principles of affirming identities, of promoting additive bi/multilingualism, of structuring for integration and of striving for educational equity together. But when a school like Tusculum has more than 25 languages, how to maximize the effect and make a balance of them still has a long way to explore. While administrators and teachers realize the importance of cultural responsive teaching, in essence they are not making use of students' funds of knowledge to develop students' literacy. It is basically shallow culture engagement and what the background and culture teachers mention they provide to students are reliant on mainstream culture. Now under the CCSS, Mrs. Taylor and Tusculum have to figure out ways to provide "comprehensible instruction alongside access to a challenging and grade-level-appropriate curriculum" (Jiménez and Rose, 2010) by capitalizing on students' own experiences.

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