

Myths and Delusions

The State of ESL in Large Canadian School Boards

The limits of my language are the limits of my life.

L. Wittgenstein

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Misbegotten Myths and Dangerous Delusions: The State of ESL in Large Canadian School Boards

Introduction

Like the proverbial elephant in the middle of the living room, the state of ESL* is a looming, mishandled entity that nobody wants to deal with, but which is taking over the house. (*English as a Second Language/Language Provision to students learning English) All the while immigration to Canada has ensured a steady increase in the numbers of non-English speaking students entering our schools, language supports have been ravaged, leaving both ESL students and teachers high and dry. In the fall of 2002, a survey by advocacy group People For Education stated that ESL provision had been decimated in Toronto. Sixty percent of their ESL programs had been lost, and cutbacks in ESL leadership are in the works. Larry Bourne, professor of Urban Studies at the University of Toronto, was quoted in a recent article regarding changing ethnicity and language demographics in southern Ontario. "The scale of this change has been absolutely staggering . . . and everybody, especially the schools, are struggling to keep up." (December 14, 2002, *Census Patterns*, Toronto Star Newspaper)

Similar situations have occurred in several other multiethnic Canadian school boards, notably on the mainland area in and around Vancouver, B.C.. Thirty years ago Toronto and North York school boards were viewed with respect and esteem for their vision and leadership in developing some of the best school-aged ESL services in the world. The disparity between then and now is confounding. How in the name of common sense could school boards relegate language programs to such a low priority, while their student clientele is increasingly, and in some schools, overwhelmingly multi-linguistic? Why have successive Ministers of Education and public school board administrations behaved so errantly in the face of growing diversity and language challenges? Since there have been advocacy briefs from teacher organizations, and complaints from parents and ethnic associations, why have language problems not been rectified?

This article examines how two institutions, first, the provincial Ministry of Education and Training, as represented by the Minister of Education, and second, administrators and principals in multiethnic school boards, have chosen paths which led directly to the current problems with language provision and, concomitantly, to an unacceptably high percentage of student failures on report cards and standardized tests. The ideas presented here originate from a keynote speech delivered at the Edmonton TESL Conference in November of 2002. The conference title, 'Reaching Out' engendered optimism and confidence in our abilities to impact positively on ESL students. But, I hadn't felt good about the deterioration of ESL and the unmet needs of children for many years. The topic did, however, prompt me to identify decisions and actions which have had a negative impact on teachers and ESL students, and which have continued to plague teachers in their efforts to reach out and actually make a difference in lives of ESL students.

The Current State of ESL in Elementary and Secondary Schools

ESL as a Non-entity

The numbers of immigrant and refugee families in urban boards continue to climb every year, and yet corresponding funds allotted by the Ministry of Education to school boards for language programs, resources, training and qualified ESL staff have not kept pace with the needs. Not only that, but there is no fund specifically designated ESL, and there is no accountability built in to ensure that any funds accessed for ESL will be used for that purpose. Ministry decisions continually fail to reflect the crucial need for, and importance of ESL programs in certain schools. Let me be very clear about this point; ESL programs are not a frill, not an accessory, or a supplement; they are a necessity for students.

The recent literacy programs, 'Early Reading', and 'At-Risk' comprise the response of the provincial Ministry to poor scores on the required grade 3 and 10 literacy tests in certain school areas. The millions of dollars given to these schools for leadership, extra staff, and resources and training in literacy do not connect in any way to ESL. Language issues formed no part of this response, nor did any of the extras reach ESL programs; as though there were no correlation between language and literacy. It seems that ESL is a non-entity.

It is disconcerting too that the provincial Ministry of Education and many city school boards act as if traditional WASP ethos still represented current urban demographics. Even in schools with a majority of ESL students, schools do not require teachers to have ESL certification. With no training and negligible support teachers lack the skills to be effective language teachers for ESL students in their classrooms, let alone to recognize if or when a student's difficulties might be due to language deficiencies. Teachers in these schools struggle to teach a standardized grade curriculum to students with limited English, to upgrade student literacy skills, and to prepare these students for tests that lay beyond their current linguistic strengths.

Non-English speaking Kindergarten students don't receive specific support to build the foundations of language. Schools and teachers just assume that these young language learners will acquire basic language through osmosis. Most ESL students do develop day to day, superficial fluency in English, but they are not as ready as their English-speaking peers to succeed in reading and writing throughout the primary grades. They will have to struggle to keep up academically on an uneven playing field. Instead of ensuring that ESL students develop a full range of language skills in kindergartens, school emphasis is now on reading readiness skills to prepare students for the grade 3 standardized tests. It's sad to see students trying to complete a paper about first letter sounds when they don't even know what the English words are for the pictures. This constitutes another example of ESL as a non-entity; a systematic lack of respect for and attention to the basics of language as the precursor to developing academic skills in English.

Rhetoric versus Reality

No expense has been spared to put politically correct policies and guidelines on paper with respect to equity for linguistically disadvantaged students, racism and cultural sensitivity. However, the walk doesn't match the talk; so much so that the state of ESL in large, multiethnic school boards is abysmal, and in essence, a betrayal of public trust. Ministries of Education and school boards have the necessary, politically correct rhetoric in place, but in actuality, the enormity of ESL problems has been evaded, circumvented, manipulated, renamed, bypassed, ignored and neglected, despite claims of equality in education. Board leaders in English, Literacy, History, Science, Geography, et cetera, are not ESL specialists, and therefore offer little assistance to classroom teachers in adapting lessons for ESL students. The reality is ESL students are denied access to supports necessary for their academic success. Provincial curriculum, which could embed ESL methodologies for teachers, does not reflect ESL needs, (TESL Ontario Association) and the Ministry decision to implement standardized tests further exacerbates the learning repercussions for ESL students.

The Ontario Ministry mandated province-wide, standardized tests of student cognitive and academic competencies - in English, a rigged outcome for English language learners. Language is a prerequisite for literacy so, of course, many ESL children experience difficulty making the leap to reading and writing. In addition, many junior and senior high school students have been in Canada less than 5 years, and receive poor or failing marks despite their best efforts. They blame themselves of course; many eventually give up, and quit school. In October 2002, a Toronto newspaper reported that only 37% of ESL students had passed the provincially required grade 10 literacy test. Let's assume that the failing 63% will not get into colleges and universities. Liberal education critic, George Kennedy, calls them 'curriculum casualties'. Responding to the Government of Canada's Innovation Strategies, the Canadian School Board Association stated, " Student testing in a number of provinces shows that the achievement gap in ESL student performance in comparison to non-ESL students is increasing . . . Independent research shows a reduction in schools with ESL programs and an increased reliance on non-ESL trained staff to teach ESL students."

Interestingly enough, the Ontario Minister of Education has not responded to concerns about the appropriateness of standardized tests in schools no longer standardized with regards to language abilities, academic skills, culture or religion. At least in the greater Toronto area, standardized testing is an expensive charade, racist in effect and marginalizes ESL students further in schools. The lack of language provision in many elementary and secondary schools parallels neglect, and ESL children become scapegoats for the failures of our educational systems. This dilemma constitutes a moral imperative to acknowledge errors and inadequacies in language provision, and to rectify the injustices. Immeasurable damage has already been inflicted on the self-perception and academic careers of ESL students who came into our schools fearful and yet trusting in their parents counsel, and earnest in their innocence to acquire a new language and the requisite skills for a good education, and future. The following sections delineate the myths, related delusions and damning consequences of poor decisions made in the name of public education.

Issue 1 Integration Misinterpreted

Background

In the 1970's, multiethnic boards in Ontario and British Columbia sought input about effective strategies to improve student language facility. One of these strategies was integration. Perfidious myths quickly emerged from misinterpretations of integration. From being one of many strategies, integration emerged as an all-encompassing method with a capital I, imbuing it with powers and effects way beyond its intent and reach. School board officials jumped wholeheartedly on the 'Integration' bandwagon, construing it as a panacea for student language inadequacies, and espousing 'Integration' wholesale. 'Integration' was also an expedient way to address board concerns about the increasing funding and staffing requirements for so many ESL programs; Integration became 'the' main means of language support. ESL children would henceforth have the majority of their language needs met in the regular classroom. Successive provincial Tory governments continued to cut funds to school boards, exacerbating the problems of funding even basic level ESL programs.

Clarification

It is necessary to clarify Integration, in order to articulate how a misbegotten belief (the myth of Integration) led to presumptions (delusions) that proved to be deleterious to both ESL students and teachers, and to delineate how these decisions and actions have contributed to the current abysmal state of ESL in large Canadian school boards.

Integration is the practice of including students with exceptionalities in regular classroom programs. Successful integration occurs when teachers are comfortable with and capable of meeting the language and literacy needs of their ESL students and when those ESL students are meeting success in acquiring both language and literacy in that situation. Research indicated that not all ESL students would be ready for or equally successful with mainstream lessons. More importantly, integration was never meant to supplant necessary 'withdrawal programs' required for basic language instruction and literacy upgrading.

However, 'Integration' as a board-wide thrust became endowed with amazing powers; all teachers became ESL teachers, and ESL students were expected to participate in more and more regular class assignments and tests. Since 'Integration' was considered to be language provision, principals could reallocate monies meant for ESL teachers and language programs to other areas as they wished. ESL parents, ESL teachers and associations for both became alarmed. The Committee on Integration Issues formed in 1993 under the auspices of the Ontario Association of ESL Educators (TESL Ontario) reported serious and varied problems at the 1994 conference Symposium on Integration Issues.

"Although the pedagogical foundations of integration are sound, there are many concerns and misrepresentations regarding ESL integration, notably, the provision of leadership, advocacy, equity and teacher-training, and finally, the provision of support for students."

It was this misinterpretation of Integration, however, that became the foundation upon which future myths would rely for credence.

Issue 1 The Myth of Integration

Myths	Delusions	Reality	Abuses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integration is best for language learners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A teacher in a regular classroom will be able to meet ESL student needs in language. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students require high levels of English skills in order to integrate successfully. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is often an overwhelming, frustrating and unsuccessful situation for both students and staff.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools should implement Integration ASAP. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL students can integrate just as easily in all subject areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many teachers feel inadequate and incapable or meeting ESL needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL students receive less support in the basics of language and fluency.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integration is accomplished through in-class support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers will adjust easily and quickly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is less time to run ESL programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL programs and staff are reduced because Integration is equated with language provision.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An ESL teacher working with students in a class accomplishes integration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refugee students with special needs stress do not get adequate support i.e., literacy and post trauma. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL students become scapegoats by not having adequate skills.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funds generated for ESL teachers may be allocated to other areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whole school initiatives to support all classes and teachers are more effective in multi-lingual schools. 	

Problems

Over the years, the steady influx of immigrant students registering in large, urban schools meant that every class had ESL children, and that teachers would have to accommodate students with a wide range of English fluency levels, in addition to huge differences in literacy levels. Teachers who used a 'learner-oriented program', and integrated skills approach were better able to address such diversity of languages, skills, and cultures in any one class, but that too was to change; the Ministry of Education implemented a standardized curriculum across all grades forcing teachers to pigeon-hole their diverse little learners into a 'one-size-fits-all' mold. The Ministry also decided to initiate mandatory testing for grade 3, 6 and grade 10 students to gauge the effectiveness of our schools. The decision to include all English language learners with the exception of newcomers in the tests, was a mistake for ESL students, and skewed the results.

Classroom teachers expressed concerns about ESL students who spoke English, but still exhibited many difficulties with class interactions and literacy tasks. Teachers wondered if these students might have a learning disability. To ESL specialists, these concerns indicate that teachers lack knowledge about the length of time and complexity of skills required to reach full competency in English. Teachers are not taught to recognize or understand various language stages, and they don't understand the gap between a student's facility with spoken English and his/her abilities in literacy. Cummins research (attachment 1 of this report) explains why it takes so long for students to acquire English for academic success. The Klesmer study (attachment 2) explains how teacher perceptions of student abilities tend to be inaccurate. Overall, if a student appeared to speak and understand English fairly well, teachers no longer regarded that child to be an ESL student, which impacted on that child's learning opportunities, and the teacher's assessment and reporting of that child.

In fact, not only teachers but also most administrators are only in the early stages of learning the dynamics of language training alongside curriculum teaching, even though this knowledge is essential if ESL students are to be successfully integrated. Incorporating strategies that assist student comprehension of curriculum objectives is only the first step. In addition, teachers must be trained to recognize language gaps and to develop ways to address the needs of students at varying levels of language and literacy skills. Thousands of ESL students cannot meet the required Ministry objectives of graded curriculum. They aren't advancing in language skills while integrated in regular class instruction, and they don't excel on tests, due in large part to those linguistic and literacy deficiencies. Nevertheless, the majority of ESL students are assessed in the same manner, and on the same tests as native-English speakers. Ministry requirements state that unless an ESL student has an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) then that child **MUST** meet the same grade standards as their English-speaking peers. The vast majority of ESL students do not have an IEP. Integration with a capital I means that teachers and students both lose.

Issue 2 The Role of the ESL Teacher

Background

The role of the ESL teacher as language teacher had already expanded to include Orientation and Reception programs, initial assessments, and entry programs for newcomers, beginning literacy, upgrading programs, and Liaison Development worker to improve communications between the school and immigrant parents. ESL programs were also open to 'continuous intake', which meant that whenever newcomers arrived, the ESL teacher would have to accept them, even if the program was full. Many ESL teachers had only completed one or two of the courses required for an ESL Specialist certificate, and were still at various stages of incorporating all of the previous roles. When Integration became espoused, ESL teachers were asked to fulfill yet even more roles as resource, and teacher-trainer for classroom teachers and as in-class learning supports for ESL students.

Few ESL teachers had any expertise with leadership roles, and many problems ensued. Making time for in-class resource meant other areas of the program were cut back. Instead of working with six or ten ESL students building language and literacy basics, ESL teachers worked with one or two students at a time in different classes. Experienced teachers didn't always take well to younger, less experienced ESL staff telling them how to change strategies, and ESL teachers felt uncomfortable in this role too. ESL work in classes often meant time was not well used; some ESL teachers simply did what the class teacher said to do, or assisted the ESL child (ren) with a class task, which often was beyond their linguistic capabilities. School administrations expected classroom teachers to develop adequate programs and skills without additional guidance or training.

In large multi-linguistic schools, it is not realistic to expect the ESL staff to be solely responsible for crucial teacher professional development. The United Kingdom had long ago initiated policy regarding language provision and teacher preparation, including a focus on the 'whole-school' approach. Recently, a senator in Arkansas created a special fund for ESL training programs for teachers in multi-ethnic school areas of his state; including complete funding for travel, accommodations, and all program costs.

Issue 2 The Role of the ESL Teacher

Myths	Delusions	Reality	Abuses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL teachers must add this new in-class resource role to support both students and teachers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All teachers will interact collaboratively and effectively. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Essential programs for students at a basic level must be protected, particularly for refugee students who may require additional services i.e., post trauma stress, basic literacy and counseling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was expected that ESL staff would implement this new role despite a lack of P.D. or guidelines. Many ESL teachers were not specialists, having taken only one or two of the required 3 part ESL training program.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is the ESL teacher's responsibility to 'do integration'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This new role will improve services to ESL students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrated support may come from an individual teacher, but in schools with large numbers of ESL students it is more effective to implement a 'whole school approach' for language provision. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This new role often meant less time for other ESL services. 'Doing Integration' took time away students who required intensive literacy and upgrading.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL teachers should link their ESL withdrawal programs to the classroom program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL teachers know how to provide leadership and training for staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ESL teacher is not solely responsible for integration. It is not a case of 'my job', but of 'our job'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers with more experience had problems taking advice from a less experienced ESL teacher, and visa versa.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The priority focus of an ESL program should be the needs of newcomers in language and literacy. Basic programs for students take priority over 'connections' to class work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrators abdicated their own responsibility for insuring quality language and newcomer services. These were relegated to the ESL and classroom teachers.
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Timetabling for Integration was extremely problematic - which students to help, which staff, in which subjects?
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An ESL teacher's time was not always well used in classes.
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL staff cutbacks placed unrealistic expectations and responsibilities on ESL teachers.

Issue 3 Myth, All Teachers are ESL Teachers

Background

There is a recurring statement that every teacher knows; like a cult mantra it is heard over and over; and most principals and teachers unfortunately accept it as a truth. The results of this myth harm students and educators. That myth is - 'all teachers are ESL teachers'. I have all sorts of lights - all over my house. Does that make me an electrician? No! Ask teachers, 'Did you get instruction in ESL in the Faculty? The answer is, 'Well...no.' "Did your Faculty instructors teach you about adopting content for ESL?" "No, they didn't!" "Have you taken an ESL course?" "I've taken the special education course . . . the reading course, etc." Just as telling are answers to the following questions; "Are principals required to be ESL specialists?" "Must instructional leaders in English Language Arts, Science, History, Math, etc., have ESL certification?" No! Indeed! If all teachers should be ESL teachers, it follows, of course, that so too should administrators in school boards, Ministers of Education and educational policy makers, and instructors in the Faculties of Education.

Canadian immigration policy ensures a steady influx of ESL students into large, urban school boards; so English language learners now make up the majority of students in many classrooms? Haven't these students acquired sufficient English before they are integrated full time into mainstream classrooms? Why should regular teachers be ESL teachers? All ESL research informs us that it takes from 5-9 years to develop English skills comparable to native English speakers. This is particularly true for ESL students in the junior grades and high school where language demands in texts, lectures and assignments are rather pedantic. Newcomers do receive special time out for support (usually part of the day for one or two years), but all ESL students are integrated into regular classes, full-time after that, with no further, specialized language support. Therefore, regular classroom teachers do become the main source for further language support and literacy upgrading. It was a case of 'ready or not - here I am' for both ESL students and their teachers.

Faculties of Education do not prepare teachers for working with ESL students. Recently, Toronto Faculties have initiated several optional programs to introduce students to work in multicultural schools. OISE has funded research to make ESL methodologies available for both instructors and students. However, Faculty administrators say time constraints preclude instruction in all areas, and teachers, like doctors, are expected to take professional development courses throughout their careers.

Issue 3 Myth, All Teachers are ESL Teachers

Myths	Delusions	Reality	Abuses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All teachers are ESL teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any teacher can be an ESL teacher. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many ESL teachers were unable to guide class teachers in all the facets of language provision. The support tended to focus on multicultural awareness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers can't identify if an ESL student's difficulties are due to language gaps, a skill gap, or simply a need for remediation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers will know how to teach ESL, and teaching ESL is a simple matter, easily learned and implemented in classes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classroom programs will support ESL students in language learning, skills development and English fluency. It is only a matter of mutual accommodation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most administrators and most teachers have not had any ESL training. Their perceptions of ESL student abilities are inaccurate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers don't know how to adjust lessons or assignments, homework or tests for ESL students. Teachers do the best they can, but feel inadequate.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Class teachers will be able to identify and address the needs of ESL students functioning at various levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher will know how to make adjustments in the presentation methods of their lessons and develop alternate assessment techniques for ESL students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is little or no help or time for teachers to learn how to integrate ESL students effectively. Unrealistic demands are placed on classroom teachers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL students continue to lag in literacy. Refugee students with little if any prior education experience extreme difficulties with class work, and teachers can not meet their needs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL student needs will be met in regular classes even without the help of an ESL specialist. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment and reporting adjustments will be made. All ESL students will be identified by teachers and reporting procedures will reflect a student's language stages. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers recognize an ESL student if there are obvious fluency problems. If a student can cope with day-to-day English, teachers often do not recognize a language need. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students often comprehend only a fraction of a subject's content. Teachers of grade 5 to 12 don't differentiate the logistics of language lags and cognition.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers will take the three course certification for ESL teaching if they need help. Each course is \$900. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL staff and funds are diverted elsewhere and that means even less help is available for teachers. ESL materials are not on the Ministry approved list of resources for subjects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student homework can take hours longer due to translations and difficulty in comprehending the material, let alone the intent of the questions.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment of ESL students generally relies on the same criteria and methods as that used for native English speakers since they are not tracked or identified for teachers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Graded tests don't reflect an ESL student's true abilities. Only the ESL students with the most obvious and severe difficulties are on an Individual Educational Plan.

Problems

In a regular class, if an ESL student demonstrated severe literacy problems, the teacher would discuss the concerns with the appropriate professionals, and the child might be designated as an 'at risk' student. The term 'at risk' was commonly used, as well, to refer to refugee students who had missed years of schooling, and who therefore required continuous, intensive support. It is interesting to note that the Tory-appointed Minister of Education recently implemented a special fund for 'at risk' students; although there was no mention of ESL. But, ESL students do make up the majority of this 'at risk' group. This 'at risk' budget was the Ministry response to the failures of so many students on the required grade 10 literacy test; a test which students must pass or they will be prohibited from getting a high school diploma. That certainly has a jarring ring; blaming the students for systemic failures to ensure equal access to educational excellence.

Junior and high school teachers, on a rotary system, experience the greatest difficulty meeting ESL language needs because of limited time periods, a defined curriculum, and a dearth of professional guidance. Certain secondary schools, however, have initiated special 'sheltered English' classes in several subjects because so many of their ESL students are unable to cope with the language demands of a regular class program in history or science, et cetera. Sheltered classes, on the other hand, have specialists that teach both needed language skills and the requisite content objectives. Primary class teachers are in a better position to recognize ESL student needs because they are with the student for most of the day, and for most subjects.

The paradox is that both the Ministry and school boards claim their goal is excellence in education, yet both institutions are at fault for the awful state of ESL. School boards blame the provincial Ministry of Education for the deterioration of language programs because the funding formula is insufficient to cover the costs of meeting ESL needs. The Ministry blames the school boards who want no restrictions placed on the way these monies are used. It is a mystery why the Ministry has never established a separate budget designation for ESL programs, especially since ESL students form the majority of designated 'at risk' learners and 63% of ESL students failed the grade 10 tests. It's also unfathomable since the Ministry has recently allocated millions of public dollars to improve French language training, and to defray the costs for parents who send their children to private schools. Should we have a private school for ESL provision?

Toronto is the most multicultural city in the world, but it is in California where teachers are required to have ESL teaching credentials, or they cannot be hired. If Canadian school boards with vast numbers of ESL students initiated similar, then the College of Teachers, Faculties of Education, and the Ministry would very quickly find alternative ways to ensure adequate teacher-training and language provision for ESL students. Likewise, if even one parent initiated a court case seeking equal rights to education through language instruction for their child, that threat and the ensuing media storm would ascertain serious attention to remediate the inadequacies of language provision. Bi-lingual education laws were introduced in the United States in just this way. In the interim, the only constant that remains is the dedication and altruism that most teachers bring to the daily lives of the ESL children in their care.

“A monolingual system of schooling serving a multilingual society unjustly requires all children to possess the dominant language (for learning and tests) but fails to guarantee that children can acquire that language to an equal degree.”

David Corson Language, Minority Education and Gender: Linking Social Justice and Power

Issue 4 Learning Languages through Content Instruction

Background

Bear with me as I explore this idea with the following example. Say, for instance, that your job is to teach grade 7 history; the early exploration of Canada. Students are required to learn the reasons for colonization, expeditions undertaken, the defining interactions with native peoples and the consequences for Canada. You paraphrase the ideas as a story, and use a map and textbook to guide students through the facts and information. Everything goes according to plan until it becomes apparent that some ESL students don't understand these words; explore, explorer, exploration, conflict, examine, controversy, consequences, contributions, chronology, era, etc. Through questioning you observe that other ESL students exhibit varying degrees of comprehension. Yikes! Then you remember there's a video you can show to explain the ideas better.

The next day most of your ESL students had not completed the 40-minute reading and question assignment for homework. Jin-he said he hadn't translated the entire passage yet. Ala hadn't understood a 'prediction' question. Only students from English speaking homes completed the pro-con sheet correctly, so you stopped your planned lesson to review that concept. You rushed to complete the 4- week unit. Tests showed that many ESL students had a better idea of the topic, but their written work and tests were filled with all sorts of errors in spelling, grammar, and comprehension. You realize the guides and texts for your grade are not geared for ESL students. You feel that you have failed your students because you couldn't meet their needs and you become disenchanted with teaching.

With the proper training and guidance in ESL, you would have focused on teaching many language skills throughout that history unit. You could teach the key new vocabulary, the pronunciation, stress, root words, irregular plurals and multi-syllabic words. You'd explain cohesive devices and have students practise joining facts to form paragraphs, a language skill necessary for written assignments or debates. ESL students must focus on irregular past tenses of verbs as these are commonly used in history texts. The incorrect use of verb tense is immediately evident in oral and written work. You could guide students on note taking, webbing and using text headings, graphs, and maps as cues for comprehension and studying. You could plan seatwork so native English speakers partner with ESL students, and model correct language. Finally, you would incorporate 'talk' activities that assist ESL students to develop fluency by actually using the new words and ideas in speech.

Issue 4 Learning Languages through Content Instruction

Myths	Delusions	Reality	Abuses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language skills will be taught at the same time as subject content when ESL students are integrated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student language needs will be met in integrated settings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most ESL students do not have the requisite English language strengths for the linguistic demands of non-adapted programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL students are overwhelmed with the dual challenge of learning grade content and language skills. There is insufficient remediation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most ESL students will acquire English through osmosis, and acquire language skills regardless of content. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers will know exactly how to implement required changes to ensure student success with graded material. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most ESL students do not receive language instruction in class as integral to the lesson. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL students get poorer marks despite tremendous efforts. Often parents can not assist their children.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers will understand what teaching language through content entails. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum guides do not focus on 'language learning' for students, and so they do not help teachers with ESL. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL students take their failures personally and develop low self-esteem.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment will be adjusted to account for the language levels of ESL students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers feel a profound ambivalence between meeting student needs and curriculum requirements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers have insufficient time to address student needs in language.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ministry and board documents regarding language stages and how to teach language through content will suffice as the support teachers need. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A structured long-term board plan is required in multi-linguistic schools to assist staff with the necessary professional training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers are seeking more help because they know student needs are unmet. Purchasing more textbooks does not help address ESL needs.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purchasing more textbooks will help student learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funds for ESL staff and resources are diverted into literacy programs, which are considered to be the source of poor student achievement on tests. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL students are unable to acquire the necessary language and academic skills.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ministry guides and subject textbooks do not reflect the requirement that teachers connect language skills with curriculum objectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The stress to meet curricular objectives and timelines precludes teachers using methods that actually support language learning, such as active-learning, oracy, integrated skills, and process writing.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The emphasis on curricular objectives detracts from an emphasis on learner needs. Student writing abilities deteriorate. 	

Problems

Both the Ministry and urban school boards fail to confront accurately the causes and effects of student underachievement. The Ontario government initiated the 'Early Reading Strategy', a 100 million dollar plan to improve reading from JK-3, but made no connections to ESL. School boards using those funds did not require collaboration between literacy leaders and ESL specialists regarding the deployment of resources and leadership. There appears to be no institutionalized recognition that English deficiencies are a legitimate cause of literacy difficulties and lags. The focus in our multi-linguistic schools should be on language learning, as it is the very foundation of literacy skills in English.

Recipients of the 'Early Reading' initiatives and funds were chosen because of the school's poor showing in the grade 3 test results. The Ontario Ministry website suggests that socio-economic factors may have influenced poor test results, but again there was no reference to language issues. There can be little doubt however, that these schools have a large percentage of ESL students as well.

Issue 5 The Myth of Equity

According to school boards, equity is in place, and programs for the culturally diverse and 'linguistically disadvantaged' are ensured, in the main, by integrated programming and guidelines. Frontline teachers are profoundly affected, divided as they are by concern for the obvious needs of their ESL students; by their own professional inability to effectively meet those needs, and by the constraints they feel from their board and school to be loyal to the 'institutional party line'. School administrators and teachers always show their 'public faces', informing parents not to worry; the school and teachers are doing everything possible to look after the problem.

Placating statements demonstrate insensitivity to immigrant parents' concerns since there are usually no ESL teachers or funds to follow through on the solutions. Worse than that though, the myth of equity masks a systemic inability to provide adequate language and literacy supports that would ensure equal opportunities for ESL students. Parents are effectively disengaged from the decisions and solutions that affect their child's future.

Many parent groups and ethnic associations feel disaffected by a lack of serious consideration and action towards their concerns. Somali Canadians have 'chronic concerns', about their children's low literacy levels and lack of progress in Toronto area schools. See attachment 3. Many of these children come from circumstances that preclude prior education, and the school system has not adequately solved their extreme needs in literacy. Such children naturally show up academically lagging, years behind their classmates. They are considered 'at risk', and often tested for special education programs. Tragically, the children have become 're-victimized' by inadequacies in the system. It's actually a rather politically astute move by the Ministry - don't focus on ESL in decisions, or initiatives, and you won't have to deal with the repercussions. If you don't see the elephant, there isn't one.

There's nothing so unequal
as the equal treatment of unequals.
Thurgood Marshall

Issue 5 The Myth of Equity

Myths	Delusions	Reality	Abuses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equity is reflected in the decisions and practices of the board. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equity policy and guidelines have driven our decisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equity is not reflected in the provision or practices for linguistically disadvantaged students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Board priorities and practices do not reflect equity for ESL students. ESL students do not have equal access to learning.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equal access to a quality education is assured for ESL students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers are unable to provide for language learning, literacy and content learning in regular classrooms. Integration is failing ESL students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESL students are not having success in academic settings as it now stands, and disproportionate numbers of ESL students fail, or quit school.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents think that the school is providing adequate supports and services for their children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents do not realize the extent of difficulties facing their children, and they don't know how to confront administrative double-talk, or seek redress. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unacceptably high numbers of ESL students do poorly, or fail, on the Ministry standardized tests. A legacy of failure ensues.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers who speak out against the lack of supports for ESL students are disaffected. Morale is low. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents are disempowered regarding their own children's education.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The integrity of public education is called into question. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Systemic inertia occurs towards the redress of ESL inequalities.

Issue 6 The Myth of Responsibility: Public Faces, Ivory Towers

Smoke and Mirrors

Unlike Rapunzel who had no choice in the matter, successive Ontario Ministers of Education, Instructors in Faculties of Education and school board administrators operate from ivory towers; out of touch and out of step with the times; their decisions and practices ignore the reality of the critical needs of ESL students and their teachers in multi-linguistic schools. Like that elephant in the living room, these institutions just keep working around ESL issues - no matter how much space it is taking up. Consecutive Tory Ministers of Education refuse to call it like it is; hence 'a lack of adequate language supports in Kindergartens and primary grades' becomes the Ministry 'Early Reading' initiative, and the 63% failure rate of ESL students on the mandatory Grade 10 test prompts new 'At-risk Literacy Programs', not language provisions. They have a very different reality than the rest of us.

Many groups continuously advocate improving the state of ESL, but year after year the situation steadily worsens. Some boards not only have done away with ESL teachers but with ESL leadership. The recent Rozanski Report commissioned by the Ontario Ministry does suggest some improvements regarding ESL; first, by increasing funds through a 'Language Grant,' that allows schools to provide language programs for ESL students for up to 5 years (recommendation #10), and second, by developing a 'Local Priorities' fund, through which schools could apply for monies specific to ESL needs in that area (#18). However, ESL improvements were only a subsection at the tail end of many recommendations, which may or may not be acted upon at some future time. It's hard not to become cynical, not to blame career-bound individuals of banal self-interest, so common in bureaucratic institutions. Or, does the perception of ESL as a low priority even in multi-linguistic schools, simply indicate a lack of vision, altruism, leadership, and courage? No matter if the reason is the former or the latter, you still have to wonder, what kinds of people are in charge? Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy". (Strength To Love, 1963)

The Ministry of Education must be seen as having two masters, one is 'the public', and the other is the political party that chooses to position a like-minded Minister of Education. The Ministry 'smoke and mirrors' approach to ESL issues is, I believe, a result of this duality. The Ministry's feeble attempts to address ESL complaints and to pacify advocacy groups will only change in any meaningful ways through litigation. Similarly, school boards need to differentiate between funding problems and contravening equal right legislation in schools with a large percentage of ESL students.

Redirections at the School Level

Concerned parents must connect with Home and School Committees and ethnic organizations and have their schools answer the following questions. The answers will guide the solutions.

- How many ESL staff positions were generated in this school using the current Ministry funding formula?
- How many ESL teachers from that allocation were actually assigned to a specific ESL teaching role?
- Is there an expectation in that school that 'all teachers will be ESL teachers', and will address the needs of ESL students?
- What specific school-wide and long-term plans have been developed to assist teachers with ESL programming, training, and pertinent initiatives, such as additional literacy upgrading classes, ESL-specific resources, heritage classes, student counseling, translators, parent liaison, etc. ?
- What are the special accommodations in that school for related services such as counseling and guidance, extra upgrading, homework and after school programs, community relations?
- What additional monies have been assigned to your school for ESL training and the aforementioned initiatives?
- If the school was part of the 'Early Literacy' initiatives, to what extent, if any, was there collaboration between ESL staff and the literacy coordinator? What initiatives were made for ESL students? How did this collaboration improve existing language provision and related literacy difficulties?

Redirections at the Ministry Level

In the spring of 2003, an Ontario Ministry commercial on television reminded the public that it had initiated an Early Reading Program and an Early Math Program in response to grade 3 test results, to better prepare students for the required standardized tests. There was no mention of ESL or 'language acquisition'; it was noticeably absent from these public announcements. The Ministry concluded with the statement that an additional 250 million dollars would be spent on programs needed for Special Education, again long past due. But the advertisement had many people in the greater Toronto area shaking their heads in disbelief; the Ministry didn't even acknowledge ESL as having an affect on student learning and achievement. Take the blinders off! By not acknowledging responsibility for the state of ESL, the Ministry not only takes away services for ESL students, but it erodes supports for classroom teachers need as well. (TESL Ontario Association)

"We must distinguish between inconvenience and injustice."

Jonathan Kozol, 'Savage Inequalities: Children in American Schools'

Educational goals always state the desire for students to be successful in their learning, to stay in school, and to acquire the skills requisite for a good job. By not acknowledging their responsibility for the lack of board language services, and the effect of this on ESL student achievement, the Ministry fails to ensure those goals. In 'Ontario Promises', Mike Harris promised that all children would receive the tools they need to succeed. That is not true. Here then are broader-based questions to which parent and educator groups should seek answers from the Minister of Education.

- What is the rationale for the Ministry of Education requirement that all ESL students, excepting newcomers, take the standardized, graded tests?
- Why are test results for ESL students not reported separately from the results of native-English speakers?
- Why are school-aged ESL students reported on according to the same standards as native-English speakers, exclusive of their length of time in Canadian schools, or of a lack of prior schooling?
- Why doesn't the Minister of Education create a specific fund for ESL, separate from funds for special education, regular English programs, or 'special' funds?
- How many school boards in this province have a significant population of ESL students? What is the percentage of these school boards compared to boards with no ESL problems?
- What measures will be taken for students with extreme literacy needs due to missed schooling, teacher preparation programs, leadership and curriculum guides?

- When will the Ministry introduce mandatory tracking documents for ESL students? These documents would include an initial assessment, a 5-year monitoring system, and acknowledgement signatures by subject teachers.
- What measures will assist the participation of immigrant parents in schools?
- What percentage of ESL students finishes high school in different boards?
- What are the longitudinal, economic and social consequences of ESL failures?

Conclusion

When I originally had thoughts about a speech that focuses on 'reaching out' to ESL students and making a meaningful impact on their lives, I felt it was necessary to first solve the question of why ESL programs were deteriorating. I still believe that unless we can articulate mistakes that were made, and the abuses, we can never redirect practice, or redress injustices in any real way. The provision of language supports and assistance for teachers is a major concern in many urban school boards. Continuing to ignore these problems and responsibilities would not be simply a loss of our own integrity; it would be a renunciation of our children's futures. Tom Harper, an ethics journalist in Toronto once said, "The absence of deliberate intent does not detract from, or mitigate the gravity of the guilt." I have never forgotten those words. They come to mind automatically when considering the state of ESL in large Canadian school boards.

In truth, hundreds of remarkable ESL students have overcome tremendous academic hurdles and would astound us if we knew their personal strength, determination, and intelligence. But there are still thousands of ESL students who don't make it, who can't make it handicapped by language and literacy problems. They can't stand up for themselves; neither can refugee children suffering from trauma, family separation, and missed schooling. Redress is the only salvation for these children, and it has to come from you.

Attachments

1. Research of Jim Cummins, Modern Language Centre, OISE, from 'In Our Classrooms: A Guide to Helping English Language Learners with Curriculum, Mary Meyers, MainStreams Publications, Toronto 2001
2. Harold Klesmer, ESL Achievement Project, Executive Summary, North York Board of Education, 1993. Also in 'Assessment and Teacher Perceptions of ESL Student Achievement', English Quarterly, Vol.26, No. 3, Spring 1994
3. Somali Perspective on the Education of their Children

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