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CASE STUDY 9.2

Caring as a Form of Advocacy for Literacy-Emergent Newcomers With Special Education Needs

The Community-Building Pedagogical Approach in the U.S.

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This case study provides an example of teacher advocacy in the form of designing and incorporating a targeted intervention using the community-building pedagogical approach to help English learners (ELs) succeed in our learning environment. This case study is also an example of student advocacy, as it shows how ELs become active participants in the classroom, and their actions of supporting each other become the foundation of a respectful and inclusive learning environment.

The Setting

Clover High School (pseudonym) is a public secondary school located in an economically booming suburban area in a northeastern state of the United States of America. Clover High is considered a medium-size school serving approximately 2,100 students and employing more than 130 teachers. The school is racially and culturally diverse, as students' families come from many parts of the world, primarily Africa, Central America, and the Caribbean English-speaking islands. Over 15 languages are spoken as a first language by students and staff at this school.

The setting where this case study primarily takes place is in the only English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) newcomer classroom. The other three ESOL classes in the school teach more advanced English levels: beginners, intermediate, and advanced. This classroom is located on the first floor of the high school's main building. The classroom is set up as a Socratic-style learning environment where all the chairs are placed in a U-shape and a big blackboard covers one of the four walls. The other three walls of the classroom are decorated with students' art projects, family pictures, and flags from their native countries.

Description of English Language Learners

This case study primarily focuses on two of the most vulnerable ELs in our classroom, Elizabeth and Oscar (pseudonyms). Elizabeth is a 17-year-old newcomer from Honduras. She arrived at school last year toward the end of the 2017–2018 school year. When she arrived, she was visibly scared and would cry when teachers talked to her in English or during period changes because the number of students walking in the

hallways frightened her. For Elizabeth, formal schooling was a new experience. She lived in a rural area of Honduras and was never afforded the opportunity to attend school. According to her mother, because Elizabeth has developmental delays – cognitive, speech, and language skills, as well as fine and gross motor skills – and is hard of hearing, schools in Honduras were not able to accommodate her needs. As a result, Elizabeth did not learn to read or write and speaks Spanish, her native language, with difficulty.

Oscar is a 16-year-old newcomer from El Salvador. He arrived at school in the beginning of the 2018–2019 academic year. Oscar has acute developmental delays – cognitive, speech and language skills, social and emotional skills, and fine and gross motor skills. According to his mother, he went to school up to second grade in El Salvador; however, Oscar cannot read or write. Oscar's fingers are often curled, making it difficult for him to practice writing. In addition, Oscar has bursts of energy that prompt him to stand up, walk around the class, and sing, yell, or talk uncontrollably. At the time of this case study, neither Elizabeth nor Oscar had been offered special education services at the school.

Pedagogical Application and Innovation

When Elizabeth arrived to our school during the 2017–2018 academic year with visible developmental delays, I asked our special education team to evaluate her to see if she would qualify to receive special education services. However, because she was an EL, special educators insisted that she just needed to learn English. The same situation took place with Oscar when I requested for him to be evaluated for special education services. Elizabeth and Oscar's under-identification as special education students is, sadly, not uncommon among ELs. As Zacarian (2011) notes, the fear some schools have of wrongfully referring ELs to special education evaluations (overrepresentation) has resulted in stalling the process "for such a long period of time that when the referral and identification process finally occur, it is too late to provide the types of interventions that would have helped the student the most effectively, if at all" (p. 131).

For this reason, after learning that my students were not going to receive appropriate support in a timely manner, I decided to engage in research that could further expand my knowledge to incorporate meaningful learning routines to help them. Also, my vision was to improve my approach to teaching so I could advocate for them inside our classroom and help them make meaningful social connections while building resilience. As a result, I developed the community-building pedagogical approach – a practice I found to be impactful. I observed this approach to help Elizabeth and Oscar feel more comfortable inside our classroom and gradually learn to cope with and navigate the daily routines and social interactions with their classmates.

The Community-Building Pedagogical Approach

The *community-building pedagogical approach* is a daily practice that has shaped my pedagogy as an ESOL educator. It focuses on creating a communal living environment within the classroom where students actively engage in activities that resemble the Japanese educational concept known as "group living" (Le Tendre, 1999). For group living to be effective, teachers are expected to take a social role in the lives of students; that is, role modeling and active participation in students' activities during and after school is necessary. Thus, teachers become trusted moral authorities who promote collective participation and compassionate social interactions within the learning environment.

The three main components of the *community-building pedagogical approach* are: (1) leadership, (2) sense of community, and (3) egalitarian participation. In our classroom, leadership is understood as students' ability to successfully complete individual tasks and responsibilities, be accountable for one another, and come to a consensus on how to complete class activities and projects. Sense of community is defined as having a voice and engaging in routines that promote group responsibility, reflection, and social and emotional bonds. Further, egalitarian participation is viewed as a communal process where equity and mental, psychological, and physical well-being for everyone is of utmost importance.

Incorporating thoughtful and caring routines that promote these three components are essential for this form of advocacy. The examples reflect how the components of leadership, sense of community, and egalitarian participation work in our classroom.

Leadership: Engaging in Peer Monitoring

Peer monitoring occurs when individuals notice and respond to their peers' behavior, performance (Loughry & Tosi, 2008), and feelings. In our classroom, peer monitoring takes the form of classroom routines where students encourage each other to perform well, help one another, and deter inappropriate behavior with the vision of maintaining a learning environment of mutual support as they learn English and navigate through the experience of being a newcomer. Peer monitoring gives students the opportunity to demonstrate their leadership skills as individuals and members of a group. In the beginning of the school year, discussing this topic in detail in English with my students was not possible because they were all newcomers with emergent English skills. As such, I would incorporate group and pair activities and explain to each group in their first language (in this case, Spanish, as all students were Spanish speakers at the time) what collaborative learning was and how they could learn and support one another. After a couple of months, students felt comfortable with collaborative learning and had the opportunity to interact with all of their classmates. It was only then that we started to devote time to classroom activities that slowly introduced the concept of peer monitoring.

The first activity we included to introduce peer monitoring focused on using correct forms of the present progressive (verb to be + ing). I incorporated a whole-class speaking activity where each student had to take out a sentence strip from a bag while covering their eyes. Then they had to read and act the sentence to the class. An example was "John is singing in class." Then I would ask students, "Is that ok (with my thumb up) or not (with my thumb down)?" and usually students would reply with "no" or "no good" and I would take that opportunity to show how it could be corrected: "John, please don't sing in class," and then I would ask the rest of the class to repeat after me. After a month and a half of incorporating similar activities, we talked about desired and undesired behaviors in our learning environment and, after writing acceptable behaviors down on a big poster, we all agreed to follow these behaviors by going through all of them individually and asking students to give a "thumbs up" for yes or "thumbs down" for no. In the beginning, creating a culture of peer monitoring was a challenge because students were not familiar with the concept. Nonetheless, incorporating daily activities that immersed the entire class in real-life moral situations where they could correct or praise one another proved important and helpful.

When we were first learning about collaborative work and peer monitoring, I began to pair Elizabet and Oscar with other classmates and asked those students to teach Elizabeth and Oscar how to write their names, the alphabet, and colors in English and Spanish. I explicitly showed the students how to teach Elizabeth and Oscar to accomplish small tasks one at a time. For example, Oscar needed to learn how to correctly hold a pencil before he could learn how to write. The method for involving Elizabeth and Oscar was to first show them how things were done (I or their classmates would demonstrate), then ask Elizabeth and Oscar to repeat what we were doing. Importantly, when asking Elizabeth and Oscar to repeat our actions, we would provide support as needed. For example, sometimes I would hold Oscar's hand while he traced the letters with the goal that he would develop muscle memory. After that, we would ask Elizabeth and Oscar if they could do it by themselves. Elizabeth was a fast learner and was usually able to work independently after repeating the process a couple of times. However, Oscar needed additional peer support learning to trace numbers and letters. At the time of this case study, Elizabeth was able to write by herself the alphabet with minimal support from classmates and could correctly identify the colors in English and Spanish. Oscar, on the other hand, still needed support from his classmates to trace his full name and numbers.

For Elizabeth and Oscar, peer monitoring improved their school experience and they continued to work collaboratively with their classmates. Elizabeth found her voice in our classroom community and started to often correct students who deviated from behaviors she found unacceptable. For example, when a boy pulled a girl's hair, she shouted "*¡no eso!*" (don't [do] that!) in front of the class. I believe that Elizabeth was comfortable to express her voice in our classroom because she knew all of her classmates and because she felt safe. Although some teachers might find Elizabeth's behavior disruptive, I see her confidence to speak up as a positive outcome of her experience in our classroom. It indicates that she felt part of our learning community and, in this sense of belonging, she found resilience to share her voice and provide feedback to her classmates.

Sense of Community: Infusing Components of Restorative Practices

The infusion of restorative practices in our weekly routines has proven healing and unifying. Restorative practices, sometimes addressed as restorative discipline, is defined as a "philosophy or framework that can guide [educators and advocates] as we design programs and make decisions within our particular settings"

(Amstutz & Mullet, 2015, p. 4). Because restorative practices is a flexible framework, we used it to learn English while building a sense of community. Once a week we came together in a circle to talk about different topics of particular interest to my students. These topics ranged from school fighting to personal life experiences. In our circles, we incorporated English to reinforce language learning and stay faithful to the guidelines previously accepted by a consensus.

When I first introduced the practice of restorative circles into our learning environment, I explained to my students the concept in Spanish to ensure full understanding. At the same time, I brought with me a list of guidelines that we needed to understand and went around the class asking students to verbally agree to them saying "I accept" or "I don't accept." I explained that the purpose was for us to use Spanish as needed but the ultimate goal was to use as much English as possible. We had a metal cookie tin full of different topics chosen by students. They were free to add a piece of paper with a topic anytime they wanted and could just walk up to the tin and throw in a piece of paper. When we came together in a circle, I would open the cookie tin and randomly grab a piece of paper with a topic and devote our circle to that topic alone. To keep English inside our circle, I would bring a few props such as sentence starters (i.e., I feel, I like, etc.) and cards that paired different adjectives with visuals (i.e., the word *sad* with a sad face). In addition, on the easel pad, I would write questions in English and Spanish to ask my students in the circle.

Recently, Oscar experienced a breakthrough in one of our circles. Before we circled up that day, Oscar and his classmates were working on colors using English and Spanish, and Oscar was coloring the flags of the United States and El Salvador. Because he tended to forget names and things, I checked on his progress and reminded him that he was coloring the flags of El Salvador and the United States. After the coloring activity, we circled up and conducted our circle as usual. However, during the check-out activity (last activity in the circle), I asked students to say the name of a color that reflected how they felt after the circle, to which Oscar shouted "¡blue, *como la bandera de El Salvador*!" (blue, like the flag of El Salvador!). This was the first time in class that Oscar ever said a color in English and it was the first time he ever made a connection between a color and an object. This was a huge accomplishment! Everyone at the circle applauded Oscar and were laughing with him. This type of meaningful interaction among students shows that, in the circle, we are all one big community. Oscar was very proud of that event and repeated several times what he had accomplished in the circle. It was a great day for him.

Egalitarian Participation: Encourage Group Living and Commitments to One Another

Egalitarian participation is a daily routine in our classroom where we practice resolution of conflict by discussion and empathy for one another, a commitment to the group, and willingness to make individual accomplishments a group success (Le Tendre, 1999). Accomplishing egalitarian participation has not been an easy feat, in part because it is a new concept for many of the learners. Conflict does arise in our classroom among students, but it is rarely addressed in front of the class. Instead, I diffuse conflict by asking the students involved to step outside the classroom and discuss the situation with me. My guide for resolving conflicts is to always emphasize that we want to ensure our classroom remains an environment where we all feel safe and have the opportunity to learn without feeling worried about anything else. This message of peace and inclusion resonates with my students because many of them have experienced hardship in their lives and want to leave those experiences behind and focus on learning English to become successful in the United States.

In our classroom, no one is left behind. Students are trusted with a wide range of choices and autonomy. For this reason, we incorporate activities that focus on building group identity and empathy toward one another. At the same time, these activities also focus on developing an understanding that obstacles can be overcome when working together. In one of our restorative circles, one of the students made a comment about social media and it quickly became a topic of interest. Students asked if we could learn the meaning of some words, memes, hashtags, and phrases used in social media and text messages. We agreed that we could devote a class to those topics and the students were tasked with bringing the information they wanted to learn in class. Some students brought acronyms used in text messages (i.e., lol, ttyl), others brought hashtags (i.e., #influencer, #blacklivesmatter), and a few brought memes. As a class, we went through the list and talked about them, including those containing obscene language because I wanted my students to learn, in a judgment-free space, the content they are exposed to on social media.

Conclusion

In the English language teaching world, advocacy can take many forms and can include community outreach and services (Pentón Herrera, 2019), school and/or county reforms (Staehr Fenner, 2014), and political engagement (Pentón Herrera & Obregón, 2018), to name a few. I believe that classroom advocacy should remain a primary concern for ESOL educators. Specifically, when advocating for the incorporation of classroom practices that support vulnerable ELs like Elizabeth and Oscar. It is my hope that this case study sheds light on the importance of caring as an essential form of advocacy for newcomers with no prior formal education, literacy-emergent academic skills, and cognitive and physical special needs. Furthermore, this case study highlights the impact of community-building routines inside learning environments for special education newcomers as they build resilience, find a voice, and safely learn literacy and English at their own pace.

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