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Beyond the Test in Making the Case!

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Beyond the Test

By: Elizabeth Gil, MetLife Fellow, TNLI New York City (NY)

"Oh, Jacinda's in your class this year. She's a sweet girl," Mrs. Anita Harris, PS 1000's English as a Second Language coordinator commented as she passed Ms. Gina Neilson in the hallway. "She was in Ms. Menolos' bilingual class last year in third grade when she came from the Dominican Republic. She's still an English Language Learner based on her English as a Second Language State exam. Her parents agreed to put her in the monolingual class to help her progress from the advanced level to proficiency in English."

Gina replied, "I know, but her writing isn't at the fourth grade level, and she has trouble following what I do in class sometimes. Her parents don't help so much either. Her mom seems nice when I try to speak with her, but I don't think Jacinda gets too much academic support at home. I can see us not making the adequate yearly progress (AYP)¹ targets, and I'll be hearing it from Principal Grey. He's always all about AYP and getting all those level 3s and 4s. Jacinda and all my students like her are supposed to be able to write at the same level as my other students who've been here since pre-K? She's only been here a year—a year and three or four months when she sits for the test in January. How do I make that happen? I don't have a background working with students whose second language is English."

Washington Heights and PS 1000-The New Language School

PS 1000-The New Language School was located in a residential neighborhood in Washington Heights, an immigrant section of Manhattan. Ninety-five percent of the school's students were eligible for free lunch. Due to overcrowding, the building was shared by three schools. Two hundred of the students were English Language Learners (ELLs),² many of whom were newcomers to the school or to the city itself, with little formal education in their native countries. The majority of these students hailed from Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, with some students coming from other Caribbean countries, Latin America and East Africa. 80% of the students were neighborhood children while the other 20% of students came from various other sections of the city. While the school met its adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets in the fourth grade overall, the school's special education and English Language Learner (ELL) subgroups³ had not met their AYPs in the previous school year.

This case was written by Elizabeth Gil, MetLife Fellow in the Teachers Network Leadership Institute. Materials for this case were taken extensively from *Understanding the American writing process* conducted by Margie Rogasner, MetLife Fellow, Teachers Network Leadership Institute, June 2005. To protect individuals and organizations, the case has been disguised. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective practice.

¹ Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is a system to measure whether a district and/or school is making satisfactory progress toward meeting the NCLB goal of all students in achieving a proficiency in English language arts, mathematics, and science by the 2013-2014 school year.

² An English Language Learner (ELL) is determined based on the Language Assessment Battery-Revised (LAB-R) upon entry to the New York City school system. Subsequently, ELL status is determined by students' scores on the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT) through which students are identified as Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced, or Proficient in the English language.

³ No Child Left Behind defines 10 student groups: All Students, 5 ethnic groups (American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, Black, and White), Limited English Proficient (ELL), Special Education, Migrant Status and Free and Reduced Priced Lunch. Subgroup sizes vary from state to state. In New York, it is 30 students.

English Language Learners and English Language Arts Assessments

Ms. Neilson looked at her class roster again—seven English language learners who would be in an English-only class for the first time this year. This year would be crucial as the children transitioned from a bilingual to a monolingual setting, she thought to herself. Of the 25 students in her class, most were from Latin backgrounds, but she would also be teaching Isaac, who was Ghanaian, and Jezin, who was Albanian. Of the other English Language Learners (ELLs) in the class, she also had Jacinda, from Mexico, and Sandra, from the Dominican Republic. Ms. Neilson thought about the English Language Arts (ELA) assessment policy change, the change she worried most about this school year.

Gina knew the research that stated that students acquire academic language proficiency within five to seven years.⁴ But she also realized that her ELL students would have to take the assessment in less than four months, less than two years after coming to this country. She knew that academic language used for writing would be a challenge.

Gina let out a sigh of frustration, as Anita Harris passed by the room and heard her. “Gina, they’ve got you talking to yourself now,” Anita said. “You’re not supposed to sound like that for another month or two,” Anita smiled.

Ms. Neilson looked at the data that was distributed at the faculty meeting, and said, “Look here. English Language Learners’ performance improved between 2004 and 2005, but they’re still not meeting standards the way our English proficient students are. 48.7% of English proficient students met their grade-level standard, but only 13.6% of ELLs did. 13.6%! Nowhere near the AYP target, not near it at all. Anita, there’s got to be something to help improve the numbers.”

Category	2004				2005			
	Number Tested	Percent of Tested Students Scoring at Levels			Number Tested	Percent of Tested Students Scoring at Levels		
		1	2	3+4		1	2	3+4
English Proficiency Status								
ELLs	62	58.1	38.7	3.2	66	43.9	42.4	13.6
English Proficient	327	19.9	41.3	38.8	310	9.4	41.9	48.7

Later on, Ms. Neilson had an idea and shared it with Anita. “Jacinda, Jezin, basically all of my English language learners—I think we need to bridge the gap with their parents, to help them really understand the school system’s expectations in New York. Maybe to target writing. That seems to be where our students have the most trouble. What if we focused on writing with the parents, too?”

“Whoah!” Anita responded. “Sounds like a big job, but why not? Feel free to bounce ideas off of me. I don’t have time to work with you much, but feedback I can do. Good luck!” As she walked toward the elevator, Mrs. Harris winked as she added, “Oh, and Gina, here’s a tip. When you pitch it to Mr. Grey, remember to talk about meeting the adequate yearly progress targets. That will make his ears perk up. AYP! AYP! AY...” Her voice faded away as the elevator door closed.

A few days later, Gina appeared at Principal Grey’s, knocking and peeking into the office. “Good morning, Mr. Grey. I was wondering if you’d had a chance to read my proposal?”

“What? Your proposal?” Mr. Grey was distracted by 10 pages of e-mails he’d printed out, just a small portion of the contents of his e-mail inbox for the morning. “Oh, Gina, sorry. Yes, the idea about the series of writing workshops for mothers. Why the mothers, again?”

⁴ Cummins, J. (1994) *The acquisition of english as a second language*.

“Uh, well, based on what I’ve researched, family involvement at home seems to protect children as they progress through our complex education system. The more families support their children’s learning...”⁵

“Yes, I understand all that Gina, but the mother angle?” Mr. Grey glanced at his office clock, and Gina knew her time with the principal was ticking away.

She continued, “Well, see, in my class the moms are the ones who are in charge of education in the family. It’s the mothers who are the main contact. These workshops would provide a basic home-school connection, explain teachers’ roles with parents, develop classroom community, present methods for teaching literacy, then positively affect student achievement.”

Quickly, she added, “And of course, positively affecting the AYP targets. I know we want to see growth and progress on the adequate yearly progress targets.” She looked intently at Mr. Grey, in search of a clue. Did the AYP angle help? She wondered.

“Hmm.” Mr. Grey was still shuffling the printed e-mails. Ms. Neilson didn’t know whether the conversation was over or if she should stay. “Okay, Gina, you can have your workshops, but remember, I want to see it on the test scores. We’re spending the school’s financial resources on incentives for parents and child care, and paying for planning and workshop time.”

Ms. Neilson wasn’t sure she heard right, but then realized that all of what he said translated to a “Yes.” Excited, but also concerned and still cautious, Ms. Neilson smiled widely.

“Thank you, Mr. Grey. I appreciate this opportunity. Have a great day!” There was a little skip in her step as she walked out.

“Oh, Gina.” He looked serious, but then allowed a smile to peek out.

“Yes, Mr. Grey?”

“Thank you for your effort.”

Wow! That sounded like a compliment, Gina thought to herself. Mr. Grey didn’t give those out too often. Why *were* compliments so few and far between? Too much stress? Didn’t he realize that his staff was dedicated and hard working?

Still, she felt so excited. It was going to be a lot of work, but the most important thing was that she was going to get to do it. She couldn’t help but beam all the way to her classroom.

Anita and Gina, while moving their timecards the morning before the first workshop, engaged in a brief conversation.

“You know, Gina,” Anita observed, “the numbers don’t say anything about a student’s growth. Remember Augusto? He didn’t even know his alphabet in Spanish a year-and-a-half ago? He came SUCH a long way, but the numbers don’t reflect that do they?”

Gina nodded and frowned, “Yeah, it seems that they only say, ‘Oh, your ELL population isn’t meeting the standard. You’re a failing school.’”

Mrs. Harris continued, “Remember last year, those letters that went to parents—with the option to send their kids to other schools. Our school didn’t even know about the letters until parents started asking questions! Our scores were second highest in the region and many of the schools that were listed as options had lower achievement levels on the English Language Assessment (ELA) than we did! I’d love for these people who make these decisions to take a Spanish Language Arts (SLA). . . You take the test in Spanish after being somewhere for a year and a day and tell me if you are rated ‘proficient’! Busy day today, right? Two workshops—

⁵ Henderson, A., Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

afternoon and evening? If I don't see you before you have your workshops, Good luck!" She turned to leave the timecard room.

Ms. Neilson smiled at Mrs. Harris, but then turned serious again, returning to the earlier conversation.

"I'll walk with you. You know, they really don't care if we connect with parents, or the kids, or do anything else, do they? Just get scores on the test. That's all that really matters. Last year, I had a student who could barely read and 'lo and behold, he managed a 3 on the ELA test. Maybe he guessed correctly a lot. Now he is in fifth grade, and he's not getting academic intervention services, but he needs more support. So, what does a 3 really tell us, huh?"

"Hey, Gina," Anita responded, "you're preaching to the choir. I'd like to think that the people who think this stuff up had a good reason. I mean they can't purposely be trying to make teachers miserable, can they?"

Later in the week, Gina approached Anita with a big grin.

"Hey, Anita! Eight moms at the workshop this week—five in the afternoon and three in the evening. I am psyched. It felt good, but I was nervous. None of those moms went to school here, and some didn't even finish grammar or high school in their home countries. We can't take anything for granted. If they connect with each other, they'll be more likely to keep coming—maybe become a network of their own. Imagine the possibilities, Anita!"

Anita smiled wistfully, "Ah, cue the mystical, fantasy music. I hope you're right, and I'm glad you're feeling energized. I hope that Grey feels the same way."

Two weeks later, Ms. Neilson and Mrs. Harris checked in with each other over lunch.

"So, Gina, how are those moms of yours?"

"They're okay. I think we're all learning something, and the kids seem really excited that their moms are 'in school,' too," Gina replied.

With an impish look toward her friend, Anita asks, "That's great Gi, but will it make you a 'no level 1s' classroom?"

"Look," Gina responded a little hurt, "Of the moms who've been to all three workshops so far, three of the kids have been making some really nice progress, and their moms have even started to do things at home with them. Two are moving along little by little, but still moving. And the conversations we've had—that the mothers have with each other—about reading, writing, their personal situations, I mean wow! It's more than the straight academics."

Her friend replied, "Maybe with what you're doing, there will be more of it next year, that connection you're talking about, and kids really making strides."

As Gina placed some pages in the photocopy bin, Mr. Grey asked, "Ms. Neilson, can you come in please?"

"Sure, Mr. Grey."

Looking across his desk, he asked, "How are those workshops going? What have you seen?" Knowing that he was referring to performance, Gina tried to respond with enthusiasm, "The group is beginning to come together, and students are making progress."

"This sounds," Mr. Grey paused, "good, Gina. Do you think it will make a dent in the children's scores? The parents aren't graded, but the kids are, and so we will be too. I want these opportunities for parents and for you teachers to implement your ideas, but I also need to meet these realities. You understand, don't you?"

Gina felt her face flush, "Mr. Grey, with all due respect, I hope you can see that I am becoming a better teacher through this. This is making a difference, for me, for those families, for my kids. Believe me. I don't forget the AYP and the scores and the pressure. It's all around

us. I am making a difference. You might not see it this year, but we'll see the benefits. I have to believe that or else I shouldn't even be here.”

Hearing the door close quietly behind her, Ms. Neilson hoped that her response wouldn't be considered insubordinate.

It was now almost June, and the test results were to be posted within the next week.

For the last few months, she'd been on pins and needles, not knowing how the test results would look. She knew she shouldn't feel this way, but she did. Despite the success she felt with the workshops, she also felt that she'd made herself a poster-child for “reforms and initiatives that might not work and will never be attempted again.” With all the stress, she wasn't sure if in the end, going that extra mile was worth it.

Mr. Grey looked at the thank-you letter written by the mothers who attended the writing workshops coordinated by Ms. Neilson. They must have worked really hard on it, he thought.

He was anxious that the funding he set aside for these workshops should have gone into straight test prep, test sophistication materials, expanding extended day for test prep. Then he shook away that thought and asked himself: Is that really what I wanted for my school, though?

He wished he had the test results. At least that would partially answer his question. But he still wouldn't know for a few more days.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the way NCLB identifies schools as successful or failing cause tensions between administration and teachers and impact the overall environment in schools?
2. How should schools interact with parents, especially those whose children fall into special populations, such as English Language Learners or special education? What kind of supports should schools provide?
3. What is the value of setting foundations in a school (community connections, parental understanding, students' deeper/process/critical thinking learning experiences) and keeping them despite not reaching 100% success in terms of adequate yearly progress (AYP)? Should schooling be geared mainly toward short-term outcomes in the form of test results, or on longer-term outcomes that might not be measured by standardized tests?
4. How does a school maintain the balance between the numbers and quantitative measures, and the qualitative aspects of teaching?

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