

ELA Vignette B – Ms. Wong

As you read the following vignette, consider the following questions and reflect on the factors that influence the teacher and his ability to develop his expertise in supporting English Learners.

Focus Questions:

- Which systems (or parts of systems) in the ecological framework discussed in our days together most influence the teacher and their teaching?
- Which ones hinder the teacher from developing expertise as an educator?
- How could the systems be leveraged to foster teacher growth in supporting both students and colleagues?

At Frederick Douglass middle school, a team of eighth grade ELA teachers was excited to be involved in a research project that offered them a curriculum designed to support their students classified as “Long-Term” English Learners and an opportunity for the team to build their capacity in designing such lessons and learning opportunities for their students. This curriculum differed from the curriculum that the teachers were already using in that it invited students to grapple with deep themes and analytic practices while collaborating with one another. It was centered around student interaction – a direct contrast to what they were teaching in other classes which was designed with the teacher at the center facilitating all activity. This group of 5 teachers signed up to participate and received educative materials to implement in their classrooms accompanied with 4 days of professional development and ongoing coaching from the writers and designers of the curriculum. When their principal, Ms. Klein, first heard about the opportunity she was quick to sign her school up and was very hopeful to see a change both in student outcomes and teacher expertise.

The five teachers, however, were at different points in their careers both in terms of years of teaching and level of expertise in working with English Learners. Most of them had fewer than 5 years of experience in teaching and had taught only at Douglass. They got along together as a group but rarely had time to work as a department or team. Although they were given fourth period off as a time to “plan together,” most of that time was taken up with administrative duties of attendance, test prep, parent phone calls etc., and most days each teacher stayed alone working in their classrooms with no time spent collaborating in preparing lessons

or supporting one another. They had the “full support” of their principal, whose idea it had been to participate in the study in the first place, but apart from ensuring they each shared the same planning period, she had not really structured the time to ensure it would be used for developing their capacity as teachers and mutual support. Eager to “help them grow,” the principal had also started numerous other initiatives on campus that the teachers were involved in; some with approaches to teaching and learning that were in direct opposition to the curriculum they were tasked with implementing.

The students the school served were equally diverse. While many were classified as “Long-Term” English Learners, they were in classes alongside native speakers and other English Learners. The majority of students came from families that spoke languages other than English at home with Arabic being the most spoken followed by Spanish and Vietnamese. At the same time, most of the students were born in the US and felt much more comfortable speaking English than the language of their parents while some could no longer speak any language other than English. Of course, just as in any 8th grade class, the students were also at varying levels of content knowledge and experience with challenging, rigorous work and brought with them a host of differing backgrounds, life experiences, and knowledge of the world.

One teacher in particular, Ms. Wong, was very eager to participate in the study and from the beginning expressed a desire to learn more about challenging her students to work more collaboratively. With six years of experience, she was one of the more “veteran” teachers in the group and many of the newer teachers looked to her for advice, especially in terms of classroom management. She participated fully in the professional development sessions and was very open when discussing classroom observations during coaching sessions.

During these sessions, while reflecting with her coach, she talked about the parts of the curriculum she seemed to more quickly appropriate and other aspects that were harder for her to incorporate into her teaching. “I really like how the kids talk to each other,” she reflected. “I’m constantly surprised with the ideas they come up with together.” However, she went on to say that many times she had to stop conversations due to students being off task or not taking their work seriously. She had strict rules for behavior and became very nervous when students deviated from them in the slightest. So, while she knew that student interaction was critical to her students learning, many times she slipped back into her old ways of delivering information from the front of the room to ensure that she had control of her classroom.

She also reflected on how difficult it was for her to trust students who had misbehaved previously in class. For example, she was hesitant to try some of the more collaborative tasks in the curriculum such as groups creating posters together or acting out scenes from

a narrative because she assumed that students would misbehave and not take it seriously. However, when her coach observed students in class, what she saw was normal 8th grade behavior.

Ms. Wong also found that she ran out of time to adequately plan for such collaborative activities. In one coaching session, she reflected, “I know that for an activity to really work, you have to plan it well and make sure the kids know all the steps and what to do. I just find that with all the other stuff going on, I don’t have the time to really plan stuff out like that. I need to get better at that.” Many times, she would simply fall back on what she did with other curriculum and once again take the lead by reading through the instructions step by step thus allowing herself to become familiar with the steps at the same time as her students. She admitted she was nervous that they “weren’t doing it right” and would therefore stop students at each step to make sure they were “all on the same page.”

State assessments were also constantly weighing on Ms. Wong’s mind. She felt forced to take time away from some of the interactive activities in the curriculum to allow students more time to practice writing individually because “that’s what they have to do on the tests.” As an 8th grade ELA teacher, she knew that her students were responsible for taking both the state ELA assessment and the language proficiency assessment. She was worried that if her “Long-Term” English Learners did not do well on those two tests and reclassify, they would go to high school and be locked out of many elective courses or even honors programs. The risk was simply too high to not have them practice constantly for the tests.

Of course, the other teachers down the hall were experiencing the same constraints and supports that Ms. Wong was experiencing; however, each of them responded in different ways. Unfortunately, though, as mentioned before, the time they were given was never structured for them to truly support one another in developing as teachers, and so they were forced to use what little time they had to help each other in quick and easy ways. For example, they shared slides of the instructions for the different activities, gave each other quick tips for how to pick which students to call on, or shared color-coding systems for students to use in annotating texts. The work of understanding the pedagogy behind the curriculum and thinking deeply on important ideas of teaching such as how to ensure that all students collaborate or how to push students towards more autonomy can simply not be done in 10 or 15 minutes so they had to be sacrificed. Ms. Klein also had very little time to visit them during fourth period and was therefore unable to support in meaningful ways.