

ELA Vignette A – Mr. Lobos

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 powerful learning opportunities for their students. The curriculum used in the study differed from the curriculum that the teachers were already using in that it invited students to grapple with complex themes and analytic practices while collaborating with one another. It was centered around student interaction – a direct contrast to what the teachers in the study 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 in the study 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 of them stayed

alone working in their classrooms with no time to collaborate 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, 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,” she 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 in the ELA pilot.

The students the five teachers served were equally diverse. While many were classified as “Long-Term” English Learners, they were studying 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 had been born in the US and felt much more comfortable speaking English than the language of their families 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 of the 8th grade ELA teachers, Mr. Lobos, is in his fourth year of teaching; this is his first year at Frederick Douglass Middle School. Previously, Mr. Lobos taught for three years at a different middle school across the city, where he was one of two 8th grade ELA teachers, both new to the profession. When he was invited to participate in the study, he readily accepted, stating that he found the ELA materials that the department was currently using to be “dry and not very interesting to the students.” He was excited to try something new, and, after participating in the professional development sessions prior to implementing the curriculum, he felt that both he and his students would benefit from the experience.

After implementing the first unit—a unit on mythology that includes the myth of Arachne and the myth of Phaethon—Mr. Lobos was pleased that he saw his students able to engage. He was also surprised at his own realization regarding his previously unconscious desire to over-scaffold almost everything for his students, in an attempt to help them “get it” and “finish on time”.

While still in the first lesson of Unit 1, Mr. Lobos was struck by how much his students were willing and able to have conversations with each other. He acknowledged that typically, he only asked students to reflect on what they had read or what they were learning by having a whole-class discussion. He offered, “I was kind of surprised. The lesson gives kids a chance to talk

and to express their ideas in small groups. Some students don't want to share with the whole class; it was always the same students calling out the answers. But now I see they will all share something with a partner. They are using the formulaic expressions provided, and they are all engaged in the discussion with their teammates."

Observing that his students were capable of having meaningful and insightful discussions on their own was both a powerful and scary realization for him. During one coaching session, Mr. Lobos commented, "This is really new for me. Letting go. I tend to baby them a lot and really... it's hard to let go and let them struggle on their own." And while Mr. Lobos have a heightened awareness of his need to "let go," he continued to over-scaffold for his students throughout the first unit. During one classroom observation, Mr. Lobos asked students to identify and explain character traits of two main characters in one of the myths they were reading. But, deviating from the curriculum, which asked students to work first with a partner and then share their findings in a small group, Mr. Lobos displayed the graphic organizer on the smartboard and completed it himself, telling his students to write down everything he was adding.

Later, during a coaching session, Mr. Lobos was asked to reflect on his decision to essentially do the work for his students. He commented that he knew some of his colleagues had other ways of supporting students, but because they rarely met to plan and never met to observe each other teach, he was unsure what else to do. The curriculum helped, he acknowledged, but he found that it was difficult for him to break away from his tendency to "over-scaffold," as he called it. The coach asked him if he would like to watch him teach the class the next day, and Mr. Lobos could notice and take note on what was done and how students were supported. Mr. Lobos readily agreed.

Afterwards, reflecting on the experience, Mr. Lobos exclaimed, "I really wanted to jump in and help them during the lesson. The kids would look at me, expecting me to help. It was really hard; my heart was beating fast because I was struggling internally with wanting to help them. I sat in my chair taking notes, but it was hard." When asked what he noticed, he added, "They could do it! They worked together. Everything they are doing with the text and with each other, it helped me visualize what I can do in my own lessons with my own texts moving forward."

If the common planning time for the ELA 8th grade teachers had been used for teachers to plan, share, reflect, and support one another, Mr. Lobos could have received feedback and ideas from his colleagues long ago. In his three years at his previous school, and during his first year at Frederick Douglass, Mr. Lobos had never observed another teacher implement a lesson. To quote him, "Before participating in the study, I really didn't know there was another way to teach."