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Scoring English Language Learners’ Papers more Accurately

Policy discussions surrounding the education of English language learners (ELL) have always been fraught with controversy that is often irrelevant to the educational needs of these students. This controversy is focused on the language that schools should use to instruct second language learners. Advocates and educators of ELL students believe that while the student is learning English the home language should be used to learn content matter.¹ Others believe that while some support might be provided in the home language students should be quickly immersed in English language instruction. While the issue of the language of instruction may not be easily resolved in the near future, there seems to be an emerging consensus among educators, educational researchers, and policy makers on both sides of the debate regarding the importance of holding high expectations for all students, including those for whom English is a second language.

Applying the same standards to ELL learners presents a number of challenges to states and local districts, particularly in the area of assessment. In order to know whether all students are moving toward higher levels of academic achievement, schools need to assess the knowledge and skills that students possess in various content domains. Consequently, all students must participate in a state and districtwide assessment program.

Knowing what ELLs know in the content area has been problematic because these students are generally excluded from statewide assessment programs until the students have been instructed in English for two to three years. In a survey of state education agency officials (Lara & August, 1996) researchers found that 36 states were excluding ELLs from statewide assessments. A similar pattern is evident at the local district level. The result is that ELLs are outside of the states’ accountability system during the first two to three years of second language development. Although these students are receiving instruction, no information

is available at the state or local level on what students know and are able to do in the content areas (mathematics, science, social studies).

With the advent of standards-based educational reform at both the state and federal levels, there has been a shift in thinking regarding issues of inclusion of special needs students in state and national assessment programs. State systemic reform initiatives and federal education legislation have explicitly called for the development of challenging content standards and an assessment system that measure whether *all* students have attained the expected levels of performance. In particular, the new federal provisions of Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 (IASA) Title I prohibit states and school districts from excluding ELL students from state assessments.² Specifically, the statute notes that:

...such assessments must provide for...the inclusion of limited English proficient students who shall be assessed, to the extent practicable, in the language and form most likely to yield accurate and reliable information on what such students know and can do to determine such mastery of skills in subjects other than English.

As a consequence, state officials are motivated to design (or develop) strategies for assessing content knowledge of ELL students. Because these students have been historically excluded from statewide assessment programs, there has been limited effort and resources devoted to the development of assessment measures that are appropriate

¹ The terms *English language learners* (ELL) and *limited English proficient* (LEP) students will be used interchangeably in this paper. Both refer to the same group of students.

² In many states, decisions regarding the inclusion of ELL students are made at the district level.

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for ELL students. Accommodating second language learners would enable the states to increase the numbers of students who take part in the assessment program. Since it would be inappropriate to administer the same test to ELLs that is administered to non-ELL students, the assessment instrument or process needs to be modified to accommodate these students. Accommodations involve a range of strategies, including changes in the assessment instrument, the conditions under which the test is administered, or the scoring process. In a recent (1997) report published by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the authors reported that fewer accommodations and alternative assessments are provided to ELL students than is the case for students with disabilities. Specifically, state assessment directors were asked whether any testing accommodations were allowed at the state level for students for IEPs and for LEP students. Forty-three states allow some form of accommodation for students with IEP, while 30 states have accommodations for LEP students. Thus, there is a considerable amount of research and development work that needs to be conducted in the area of LEP student assessment.

The Council's Project

In an attempt to assist states in meeting their obligations under Title I and their own statewide school improvement efforts, the CCSSO has been working with a group of states to develop procedures and materials for a more appropriate assessment of ELLs. These states come together as members of the SCASS LEP Consortia to find solutions to the many problems surrounding ELL student assessment. Among the many projects of interest to the states was the notion of developing a training manual aimed at the readers (or scorers) of LEP student responses to open-ended mathematics and science performance tasks. The objective is to enhance the accuracy of the scoring by providing readers with training that will increase their understanding of the second language development process.

It is typical for performance-based, "on-demand" assessments to require written responses from students. When responding to these types of "constructed response" mathematics or science items, the second language learner is asked to demonstrate not only math skills, but reading and writing skills in a language that they have not yet fully acquired. This response poses a

challenge to both the student and the individual who scores the tasks. For the student the challenge is to express ideas in a language that he/she does not yet fully understand. For the scorer the challenge is to accurately evaluate the student's knowledge of math despite the barriers of second language interference.

The CCSSO *LEP Assessment Training Indicator's Manual* was developed by a group of mathematics teachers from several states—Connecticut, Delaware, California, Texas, Florida—under the direction of state education agency assessment consultants. "This development committee identified linguistic features in the mathematics responses of LEP students that can be confusing to evaluators. They included code switching, transposition of words, phonetic spelling based on a student's first language, etc.; cultural influences such as different symbols and systems used in other countries; and stylistic writing issues, including non-standard formats used more often in other cultures. The linguistic features included in the training manual were those that teachers saw most frequently in their students' papers. Therefore, not all linguistic features that might be found in the written responses of ELL students are reflected in the manual.

For example, below are students' responses to a mathematics item. The example shows the students use of English phonetic spelling based on their best estimate of English language sounds:

The boys can say to there (their) nabor (neighbor) that they did it there selv (themselves) and the nabor (neighbor) can give gust (just) the to (two) boys.

The two boys can split it up in to (into) thirty dolars (dollars) ech (each).

To determine whether the training of readers would make a difference in the accuracy of the scoring, a study was conducted in the fall and winter of 1996-97 in Iowa City, Iowa³. In this paper we describe the result of

³ Since the project was using National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) science items which are scored in Iowa City, the study was conducted at the site where the scoring takes place. National Computer Service (NCS) is the company that coordinates the scoring of NAEP items for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

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this study. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of training readers of open-ended science items to be able to more accurately score responses from LEP students.

Study Questions

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of providing training about LEP responses to readers who are mostly monolingual, an experimental/control group research design of English-only speakers was used. This approach was supplemented by data from interviews and observations. The key questions asked in this study follow: 1) Did the training make a difference in the scores, and did the readers think it was useful in helping them evaluate the responses? 2) What information was gleaned that would be helpful in future item and rubric (scoring guide) construction as well as provide direction for opportunity-to-learn issues in science for LEP students? 3) If found to be useful, how might this type of training be best provided to future readers?

The Study Groups

Three groups of readers were identified for this study. Papers from the 1996 administration of the NAEP science test were initially scored in the summer of 1996 by NCS readers. The readers who scored the papers during the summer of 1996 became the NCS control group. The experimental group was composed of NCS readers from the Iowa City area. These 12 NCS readers had not scored the 1996 NAEP science test. The background characteristics of the NCS control group and the NCS experimental group were similar. While these two groups were not content area specialists, they had some background in science.

The second control group was made up of 10 bilingual educators, who for the most part, had backgrounds in science. These educators were selected by CCSSO staff and were from California, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Washington, DC. The function of this group was to serve as participant evaluators of the training process. Secondly, the bilingual group provided feedback about LEP student responses, the items, and rubrics. The NCS experimental group and the bilingual group received training in Iowa City.

Training

The LEP training was integrated into the regular training all readers receive in preparation for scoring responses to the open-ended science NAEP items. Scoring takes place in a large-volume situation. Large-volume scoring occurs when tests with open-ended items are administered to large numbers of students, and large numbers of the responses are scored, by hand, at one time. It is not unusual for readers to evaluate items at the rate of one per minute for up to eight hours a day. In these situations, readers must be trained to make accurate judgments about diverse student work very quickly.

The training was conducted by the NCS staff and CCSSO consultants. NCS staff focuses its NAEP scorer training at the item level. That is, the training for scoring items is specific to each item. It involves a detailed discussion of the rubrics connected with each item and the extensive notes and examples associated with each score point. As part of the training, readers also train on practice sets of papers and subsequently discuss the scores they gave.

Additional LEP training was provided in three ways. First, approximately one hour of introductory material was presented. It identified and explained key linguistic features that affect the responses of LEP students and that have been found to be confusing and/or misleading to readers in high volume situations. Second, this general training was augmented by specific item responses from LEP students that illustrate the linguistic feature. Third, the bilingual readers sat at tables with the NCS readers and participated in discussions that occurred as all items were scored. Some of these discussions included clarification about student work associated with the key points raised in the LEP training.

Study Materials

In addition to the material used by NCS to train readers, this study used materials written previously or developed specifically for this project. The Training Indicators Supplement for mathematics and science was written to augment the regular training of assessment readers. The manual was expanded with numerous LEP student examples of each of the points raised in the training sessions. Some examples of student work were compiled from a wide variety of sources, and from

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students from many backgrounds. Others were examples of LEP responses from some items used in this study. Interview protocols were developed for this study that asked detailed questions of the trained NCS readers, the bilingual readers, and the NCS and LEP trainers.

Items and student work

The items scored during the three full days of scoring consisted of 12 NAEP open-ended items that were selected to be part of this study. Some 2089 student booklets containing these items were pulled, including booklets from all LEP students nationally surveyed on the 12 items ($n = 929$). In addition, 1160 non-LEP booklets were randomly selected. A total of 4100 item responses were evaluated over the 12 items (several booklets contained more than one item).

Procedures

In fall 1996, the designs for this study were finalized, items selected, papers pulled, and readers identified. LEP and non-LEP responses were mixed, by item, and LEP training and scoring took place in January 1997, in Iowa City. Participants were interviewed after the scoring, and tape recordings were transcribed and reviewed. Subsequently, the scores from the non-LEP-trained control group were compiled, along with the score results from the trained groups. Data were analyzed.

Results

Score Results

Approximately 20% of the responses were scored twice by different readers in each group to ensure consistency in scores. For both the trained NCS readers and the bilingual readers, reliability correlations were high (.92 and .85, respectively), as was the percentage of time that different readers gave papers the same scores (88% and 80%, respectively). Differences in group correlations and percentages were generally thought to be a function of experience. NCS readers had scored these types of assessment items for five years on average, whereas the bilingual readers were novices.

Differences in scores given to the papers by the three groups of readers were analyzed by comparing group means. The mean for the trained NCS group was 1.85, for the bilingual group it was 1.90, and for the control

NCS group it was 1.77. Results from the ANOVA test suggest that the means were significantly different ($F=20.26$), with further analyses indicating significant differences between each group pair. Of importance is that the difference between the NCS trained, NCS untrained groups ($t=10.37$), and the NCS untrained, bilingual groups ($t=10.19$) is larger than the two groups (bilingual, NCS trained) who received the linguistic training ($t=4.2$). This seems to indicate a training effect.

Interviews

Training Participants and trainers from both groups felt that this type of training was important and should be formally incorporated into large-scale scorer training programs. They also agreed that it would be important to include the special training elements into all item-specific training, including integrating examples and key linguistic points into the notes, and LEP-type student responses into the practice sets. (This study integrated only verbal training and LEP examples into the item-specific training, and it did so in only 3 of the 12 items.) The readers and trainers said that this type of training reminded them to attend more carefully to diverse student responses.

The NCS readers and trainers said that they had learned most of what was presented

in the previous training—through informal means—through earlier scoring experiences where these types of issues were discussed with NCS staff and other readers during the actual scoring of student responses. However, they felt it would be important to have this type of training formally integrated into the regular training for novice readers. They also felt that they, or other experienced readers, would also benefit from this integration because it reminded them to attend to these issues on an item-by-item basis. Further, integrating the points and examples into the notes and practice sets would provide tangible as well as verbal references, which they felt would be helpful.

NCS participants also emphasized that this type of training is useful not only for scoring LEP papers but other non-standard responses. They cited examples from Black English and from students they suspected were learning disabled. Even in this study, they found the training useful in scoring responses from students they thought were probably not LEP.

They had two specific recommendations. First, the more examples, with interpretation, the better. Discussion would occur during general training and in all item-specific training. Second, they wanted more guidance on what words are and are not exchangeable. That is, when is it acceptable for a student to substitute words or phrases to get his/her idea across, and when is it not permissible? (For instance, when should students know and/or have to use specific science vocabulary?)

The bilingual readers and the LEP trainer raised several points regarding training. They felt they played a significant role in clarifying the formal portion of the training at their tables during scoring. Therefore, they felt it would be important to have at least one bilingual reader at each table so he/she could be part of the ongoing discussion during scoring. In addition, they all felt strongly that a separate training session should occur for the table leaders (those who oversee the scoring, by table, and make final decisions). Agreement among scorers needs to be constantly negotiated. Having a decision maker who is knowledgeable about these issues is crucial, they said.

Understandably, these readers and the trainer were also concerned about how to score responses from items and rubrics that have some confounding problems for LEPs and that were not caught during the item/rubric development process. Item problems include unclear words and phrases that mean something different when translated from a first language. Rubric problems often result from not anticipating some answers that are relatively common from students coming from different cultures or from not permitting certain ways of expressing knowledge. They pointed to several examples of problems from the 12 items and their rubrics. These participants requested that some kind of overriding or appeal process be set up to deal with these problems. The current process did not appear sufficient.

Other Issues Two major issues were discussed during the interviews. One had to do with augmenting the item and rubric development process so problems can be more likely caught at the beginning of the assessment process in the design phase. The other was the opportunity to learn issues. The first was addressed primarily by the bilingual readers and the LEP trainer, the second was discussed by all participants.

Bilingual educators found a number of problems in the items and rubrics that confused the scoring of LEP responses. They suggested that a better development process be established to minimize the changes that it will occur in the future. This includes affecting item and rubric development as well as the assembly of the detailed notes, examples, and training sets that occur after test administration. Lack of opportunity to learn is certainly not just an LEP issue. However, it was obvious to many of the readers, NCS and bilingual, that the LEP students did not have access to the types of curriculum that NAEP items are supposed to measure, such as problem-solving and hands-on science experiences.

Discussion and Implications

So what do the scoring results show? It appears that training makes a difference, but does this mean that the readers are scoring more accurately, or is it more of a halo effect, that is, are they simply scoring more liberally? Future studies need to be done to determine if the scores are really more accurate representations of what students know and can do. Perhaps researchers can use concurrent qualitative inquiry into what the student is trying to express when the student responds they way they do. This can be done using think aloud and/or stimulated recall approaches. Other work can also be collected to independently determine the level of student knowledge and skills.

Of no small consequence to the study's results was the fact that the readers thought they were scoring more accurately. There was quite a bit of discussion about the impartial manner in which the scoring was conducted. Readers did not want to, and did not think, they were reading into the responses answers which were not there. Both groups were concerned about simply being more liberal, and they consciously guarded against it. The specific notes and examples associated with each item helped constrain guesswork. While all the readers wanted more examples and guidance in the notes regarding how to deal with non-standard responses, none of them wanted to ignore the notes, or even expected more license from them.

Several good points were raised concerning how to refine the training. There was an unanimous request from participants that this type of training be integrated into

not only the verbal training of all the scoring of all items, but also into the notes and practice sets. The researchers agree, and the challenge will be to integrate the training in such a way that is not terribly time-consuming for scoring contractors who have deadlines. By providing information, by item, more guidance can also be given regarding exchangeability in the specific contexts.

The researchers have noted that many of the points addressed in the training are not only specific to LEP but might also be useful for scoring other populations. Kopriva (in progress) has found some similar types of response concerns while working with special education students and students who have significant strengths in some of Howard Gardner's "intelligences," other than linguistic. Work needs to be done to ensure coverage for other populations and to possibly develop a diverse needs training. What is important, of course, is to retain the integrity of training for each of the non-standard populations while still developing consolidated training that is as useful for as many populations as possible.

Training table leaders may have an effect on bilingual readers' concerns about a better appeal process. It may also offset a need to have as many educators who work with non-standard populations at each scoring table. It appears to be a good idea worth further exploration.

The issue of better development practices for items and rubrics is very important. It was clear that several of these items and rubrics had problems that could have been circumvented with a better process of item/rubric development or assembly of notes. Unfortunately, this problem is not unique to NAEP, but to large-scale construction in general. Kopriva, in a handbook commissioned by CCSSO (in progress), is outlining a number of intervention points in the development process that will affect the quality of items and rubrics and make them more valid for all students, including LEPs. It will also provide guidance in pulling student work for practice and training sets and for developing a more thorough set of rubric notes.

Lack of appropriate opportunity to learn remains the center and core of many problems in assessment reform. How do we know if we are measuring a student's lack of knowledge or his/her lack of opportunity to be taught to challenging standards? Assessment reform needs to work at accurately asking the right questions, in ways in which we know we are getting data about important

student knowledge and skills. This will be for naught, however, if students are not taught the important knowledge and skills to begin with. It will only wrongfully suggest lack of ability, whereas lack of access is the real issue. Work needs to continue to be done to leverage ways to assess which issue we are measuring.

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Theme 1: Focus on the Academic Success of Every Student

These schools did not merely have mission statements; their sense of mission was articulated in every aspect of their planning, organization, and use of resources. Similar to schools studied by Reyes and Scribner (1996), almost every decision about the selection of instructional materials or strategies; the adoption of staff development strategies; the use of fiscal resources; the scheduling of the school calendar; the assignment and use of staff; the use of classroom, playground, and building space; or the use of any other resources was guided by a focus on the mission of ensuring high levels of academic success of every student.

The focus on the academic success of every student was evident in individual teachers' planning, just as it was evident in whole school planning activities. Teachers planned lessons with a focus on getting each and every student to succeed academically. Teachers were attuned to the special ways in which individual students learned best. They exploited this knowledge to create learning environments that allowed many students to attain challenging academic skills.

In almost all of the 26 schools, teachers were supported in their planning through extensive school and/or district efforts to align curriculum, staff development, and technology purchases with the objectives of the TAAS. Almost all school decisions about the use of important resources were tied to a consideration of "What's best for the students?" For example, teacher guides were used as tools for accomplishing instructional objectives rather than as scripts to be followed. Teachers knew what objective they were teaching and why a particular instructional approach was most likely to work with their students. Formative assessments allowed teachers to accurately determine areas of strength and need, and then to participate accordingly in the planning and delivery of professional development. Teachers contributed to the decision-making process regarding the use of other resources.

Teachers consistently reported that they were actively supported by their principals as they attempted to focus on the academic success of every student. "She'll get us whatever we need" was articulated by many teachers in many schools as they spoke of their principals. Teachers

felt supported with adequate instructional materials and relevant staff development. Similarly, principals often indicated that they felt supported by their superintendents and central office colleagues. In addition, there was often strong support from the community through volunteer activities and school-business partnerships. As such, the mission seemed to be shared by everyone, including teachers, support staff, parents, central office staff, and community leaders.

Theme 2: No Excuses

Educators at these schools tended to believe that they could succeed with any student, regardless of the nature of the home situation, regardless of the student's previous performance or diagnosis, regardless of resource difficulties, and regardless of whatever other constraints might confront the school. Ultimately, there were no excuses for low student performance. Ouchi (1981, p. 40) referred to such an attitude as a "collective sense of responsibility."

In spite of the difficult living situations endured by some students, teachers persisted in believing that they could create learning environments that would allow those students to be highly successful. Teachers would do whatever was necessary to counterbalance the effects of poverty, whether by calling home to provide a wake-up call on mornings when the mother worked the night shift, modeling to a mother how to read a story to her preschool child, or taking children on a field trip to experience an elevator ride.

A lack of resources was not accepted as an excuse for providing any less than an excellent academic program. When funds were needed for professional development activities, instructional technology, or other instructional materials, educators demonstrated both persistence and creativity in finding the needed resources. Some schools sought new funding from state, federal, or private grant sources. Others developed new business partnerships. In many cases, schools carefully assigned priorities to the use of their discretionary resources, including their Title I dollars. They made tough choices and eliminated less effective expenditures, so they could afford items that would more likely result in greater student achievement.

Rules sometimes impede a school's ability to respond to the unique situations of students. While some

schools might accept such barriers as legitimate excuses for failure, many of the 26 schools took a different approach. In essence, these educators assumed that rules must be negotiable if they impaired the school's ability to meet the needs of students. Principals were willing to debate with the food services director, the city fire marshall, the transportation director, or whoever seemed to be imposing a rule that did not serve students well. Often, their persuasiveness and persistence were rewarded with compromises, waivers, or other efforts to relax requirements.

In schools where the motivation to achieve was so strong, one might have expected to see more blaming when results did not meet expectations. However, educators at the 26 schools did not blame their students, parents, outside forces, or each other. Instead, they reflected upon their own efforts to find opportunities to improve.

Theme 3: Experimentation

In these schools, careful experimentation was encouraged. Educators felt a strong responsibility for ensuring the academic success of students, so they eagerly sought ways to improve teaching and learning. If an approach was not working with one student or any group of students, teachers were allowed, encouraged, and even expected to try different approaches. Thus, experimentation flourished as individual teachers, grade-level teams, and entire school staffs considered new ways to stimulate the achievement of students. In Henry Levin's Accelerated School Model, this is referred to as the inquiry process (Hopfenberg et al., 1993, pp. 95-137).

Educators were very careful in their choice of experiments. They evidenced a great sense of responsibility for selecting courses of action that had a high likelihood of leading to improved student performance. Nonetheless, when experiments did not lead to the desired result, there were no reprisals. Instead, educators were expected to use the failure experience as part of the improvement process. Teachers and other school staff had the opportunity to make a good try, fail, learn from the experience, and make modifications or refinements that led to improved results.

Experimentation was evident at many levels. Schools often engaged in pilot tests of materials or strategies before considering adoptions by the entire school.

Schools experimented with the organization of the school day, the acquisition and use of technology, the use of intersessions, and the assignment of support staff. Teachers often shared and cooperated in each other's experiments and discussed their findings. They learned from each other's successes and failures.

Theme 4: Inclusivity

In the 26 schools studied, job titles (or lack thereof) did not matter as much as one's potential to contribute. Thus, teachers at all grade levels in both regular and special programs, professional support personnel such as nurses and counselors, bus drivers, campus administrators, custodians, school office staff, cafeteria workers, instructional aides, librarians, parent volunteers, part-time personnel, community leaders, and students were often enlisted to be a part of the team that would lead a student to success at school. As such, everyone who worked at the school, attended the school, or sent children to attend the school had a strong sense of ownership.

Beyond their traditional designated roles, school personnel had broader roles as members of the school team. It was not unusual to see secretaries listening to students read, special education teachers problem-solving instructional strategies with grade-level teams of general classroom teachers, or librarians supporting parental involvement initiatives. The broadly defined roles allowed many individuals to assume leadership roles.

Some studies of effective Title I schools have emphasized the importance of parental involvement (Schenck & Beckstrom, 1993). At these schools, personnel did not wait passively for parents to become involved in various aspects of the school. In almost all of the schools there was a multifaceted outreach to families that constantly encouraged and supported parents in ways that nurtured greater involvement in their children's education. Educators made special efforts to make parents feel welcome. Open-door policies and open-door attitudes were common. School personnel assumed responsibility for creating an environment in which parents wanted to become involved.

Often in these schools, students were utilized as important resources for improving their own and each other's academic achievement. Students had important roles in directing their learning experiences and had

input into a variety of decisions that influenced their school experience. In addition, students often were involved in cooperative learning or peer tutoring strategies in which they worked together to facilitate their learning.

Theme 5: Sense of Family

Overwhelmingly, the most common metaphor observed in these schools was the school as a family. Statements such as “We’re a family here,” or “These are all my children,” were heard frequently. Moreover, the actions of teachers, principals, students, parents, and other members of the school community frequently reflected the concern, dedication, involvement, respect, and love that one would expect to find in the healthiest of families. The school personnel saw the school less as an institution and more as a family. This view is consistent with the findings of Scheurich (1997) as he examined similar (including some of the same) schools.

Students were treated with respect and concern. Teachers were concerned with the child’s total development, not simply with student test performance. As such, attention was focused beyond traditional academics and included music, art, and physical education. Similarly, attention was given to the social and emotional needs of students. Counselors, nurses, social workers, and family liaisons often took leadership roles in ensuring that students’ basic needs were met. Traditional school roles were often blurred because educators were willing to do whatever was needed to ensure that their students were doing well physically, emotionally, and socially.

In many ways, the schools strove to communicate to students that they were valued individually and collectively. School activities, bulletin boards, and curriculum materials reflected and celebrated the cultural and linguistic diversity of the students. Similarly, hallways, classrooms, doors, and ceilings were often used to display student work. School personnel often created opportunities to recognize the academic and non-academic accomplishments of students.

Like family, the school provided a safe place for students to grow and learn responsibility. School personnel were able to empathize with students and relate to their personal experiences. In many of the schools, teachers and other staff grew up in the same

neighborhoods and had similar backgrounds. Adults at the schools acted in ways that showed they were happy that the students were there. When disciplinary issues arose, they were handled consistently, quickly, fairly, and in a manner that demonstrated respect for the individual student.

Just as students were treated as valued members of the school family, so were their parents. In many of the schools, parents were provided a special place to help make them comfortable when they came to school. To help make sure that parents felt at home, office staff, principals, teachers, and other school personnel greeted parents warmly, usually by name. Parents at these schools knew they were welcome; they knew that they belonged as part of the school family.

It is hard to feel like a family member if you cannot understand the language. Therefore, school personnel made many efforts to accommodate parents who did not speak English. Bilingual office staff, interpreters, bilingual signs and banners throughout the school, and bilingual newsletters were among the strategies used to help parents feel comfortable at school, even when they did not speak English well. Similarly, the tone and words used to communicate with parents reflected respect for the parents’ language, dialect, and background. Teachers did not expect parents to understand educational jargon nor did they talk to parents in ways that were condescending.

Even when parents were having difficulty assuming traditional parenting roles, school personnel responded in ways that demonstrated respect for the challenging situations confronting parents, empathized with the difficulties faced by parents, and supported parents as they worked to improve their involvement in their child’s academic life. School personnel focused more on seeking solutions than on blaming parents for the academic or social difficulties that students encountered.

The sense of family extended beyond students and parents to all members of the school staff. All school personnel, regardless of position or tenure, were perceived as important members of the school family. New teachers were valued for their fresh ideas and perspectives. Veteran teachers were valued for their experience and expertise. The importance of each staff member was based in part on his or her contribution to

the mission of the school; moreover, their importance was based on their worth as individuals. Staff members cared about each other's lives beyond the school, in addition to caring about their performance at the school.

Often principals found a variety of ways to let staff know they were appreciated and respected. School personnel were acknowledged for their accomplishments, their expertise, and just for their membership as part of the school family. The schools found ways to utilize both the personal and professional strengths of staff members, often beyond their traditional job descriptions.

Theme 6: Collaboration and Trust

Openness, honesty, and trust characterized most of the interactions among school personnel. School personnel openly shared concerns and successes with each other. They provided assistance to each other and learned from each other. Teachers seemed to prefer working in teams and did so frequently. Team teaching arrangements were used often. Thus, when problems arose, school staff generally did not need to respond alone. They had colleagues who discussed issues and provided ideas, feedback, and encouragement.

Although there was cooperation, there was also disagreement. Teachers and other school staff reported that they felt free to express their concerns about ideas or actions. Staff members could disagree and work out their disagreements in constructive manners. Although the schools typically acted as teams, they still respected each individual's right to disagree.

Cooperation at these schools extended beyond their grade-span groupings. Frequently, teachers worked with those who taught subsequent grade levels to improve their understanding of each other's curricula and expectations. Even when the next grade level was at a different school, teachers often assumed responsibility for reaching out and establishing the collaborative relationships that would allow them to better ensure their students' future success.

Administrators at these schools made sure that teachers and other school personnel had many opportunities to meet, collaborate, plan, and work together. There were many formal and informal forums that provided school personnel with opportunities to

openly discuss programs, policies, and programs. School personnel were encouraged to express their concerns freely. Often school personnel credited administrators for setting the tone that helped the school become a place where staff worked well together toward common goals. The importance of collaboration was emphasized in other studies of effective Title I schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

Theme 7: Passion for Learning and Growing

Although many lofty goals had been set and attained, these schools refused to rest. They were not complacent with their current ways of teaching, organizing, or leading. Although schools clearly took time to celebrate their successes, they continued to challenge and push themselves toward the attainment of higher goals. Teachers sometimes expressed concerns about ceiling effects and similar measurement phenomena, but the "no excuses" attitude generally prevailed.

Experimentation did not stop when desired results were attained. Instead, school staff focused on how they could improve upon strategies or identify new strategies that would allow them to succeed with even more students or that would allow them to take students to even higher levels of success. There was a continuous seeking of new horizons, new opportunities, new ways of operating. The process of such discovery and learning on the part of all participants was considered the central business of the school.

Professional development was not an event at these schools: it was part of the culture, part of the way of life. School personnel were frequently engaged in extensive efforts to bring new information into the school. Federal, state, and local resources were used to send staff to attend conferences, to visit highly effective schools, and to critically observe promising programs. At the same time, teachers and other personnel shared journal articles and discussed educational literature that enriched their discussions about how to improve.

These schools can truly be characterized as communities of learners. As school personnel learned and grew, so did parents, and so did students. Learning, growing, and improving were the focus of thousands of interactions among students, parents, and school personnel. Nonetheless, these schools did not fail to

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remember that every participant in the community of learners was first an individual, an important and valued member of the school family. This constant reaffirmation, support, and validation was probably responsible for individuals finding the strength to confront daunting barriers, overcome those barriers, achieve impressive goals, and then re-focus their sights on even higher goals for student performance.

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