

Chalk Talk: A teacher's voice

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Imagine that you are a 14-year-old girl leaving your mother for the first time to leave your country and all that you know behind you. You arrive in Amherst on a cold day in March, and realize how different it is from your warm island country with palm trees and sunlight around you. You are now living with your father, though you had never lived with him before. You are happy to be reunited with your half-siblings, but there is a hole in your heart because your mom is not with you.

A few days after your arrival, you have another first — your first time seeing snow. You start school but when everyone around you speaks, you don't understand a thing. There is so much you want to express to your new teachers and classmates, but you can't. In your country, you had many friends and were very social, but here you are silent. You can have some conversation with your Spanish-speaking teachers because you can understand them and they can understand when you speak Portuguese. However, your first language is Cape Verdean Creole, and none of your teachers speak it.

You try to get extra help after school but are frustrated because the person helping you cannot understand you. You have always loved math and have been a great math student, but math is really difficult suddenly; it's not just numbers, but words, lots of words, all in English. Finally, you have an interpreter who can work with you, at least in math and science. In addition to all the new sights, sounds and feelings, you must now learn to swim in your physical education class.

I can only imagine what this student was feeling when she arrived in late winter from her country, Cape Verde (an archipelago off the coast of Senegal). She was already bilingual in Portuguese and Crioulo, but had very limited English. However, she made her goals clear from the start: she wanted to do well in school, learn English, and perhaps become a flight attendant one day.

About two years ago I made a switch in my teaching career, after teaching world languages (French and Spanish) for 17 years to teaching English Learner Education (ELL.) This is also called ESL, English as a Second Language. Though I also loved teaching world languages, I have found a special place in teaching ELL students.

From the Daily Hampshire Gazette, Northampton, Mass. Used by permission.

ELL students in Amherst are a diverse group. Just in the last two years my students have come from Nepal, Korea, Japan, Cape Verde, Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, Haiti, Pakistan and Italy. Contrary to what many people believe, ELL teachers do not have to speak all the languages their students do; in fact in our town, this would be virtually impossible. Our school system has incredibly dedicated and gifted interpreters for our recently arrived students; if it weren't for them I can't imagine what that first year of American schooling would be like for our students.

Back to my student from Cape Verde. Her sacrifice to come to the United States in search of better opportunities, her resilience, and her family's support provoked awe in me. Separated from half of her family, this student still knew that it was so important for her to learn English and study in order to achieve her goals. On the day she tried to get extra help after school, and a well-meaning volunteer told her that he couldn't understand her, she came back to my classroom and sat silently. When I asked her what was wrong, she told me as tears spilled from her eyes, and we sat and cried together for a few minutes. She ended up getting the help she needed (thanks to other after-school volunteers) soon after this. The student ended the school year with A's and in the three short months she was here, she learned to swim, she read her first whole books in English. She is still getting A's in her first year of high school, and joined the soccer and basketball teams.

About a month after she arrived, my student's father appeared outside of my classroom in the middle of class. He waited politely for me to go to the classroom door. Concerned that something was wrong, I went quickly. He asked me how his daughter was doing, and told me that he was showing up at the school of each of his five kids to check on their progress. Though it may not be how we are accustomed to parental involvement, this parent was clearly interested in participating in the education of his children. I told him about the wonderful progress she was making, and after he made sure she was behaving respectfully in class (she was), he went on his way to another school.

My student did not forget about the people who had helped her when she first arrived, including me. One day at the dismissal bell, I noticed a note she left me on the whiteboard. It said "Dear Ms. Lopez: Thanks for you help me." While the English wasn't perfect, the sentiment was. I took a picture of the note and put it up near my desk.

This year I have another group of amazing students. Every day I look at the picture of my student's note and continue to be inspired by her simple words, which keep me going on the most challenging days. I would like to say to my former student, "Thank YOU for helping me."

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