Interviews at Tusculum Elementary School

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On October 25th, I went on a fieldtrip to Tusculum Elementary School with my classmates to learn about the school via interviews and a class observation. In this paper, I will first briefly introduce Tusculum Elementary School. Based on the interview with the school principals and key players, I will then describe the specialized language and academic services for ELLs at Tusculum and challenges the school faces. Finally, I will conclude what I have learned from this fieldtrip and raise new questions.

Tusculum Elementary School serves 649 students from very diverse backgrounds. They come from countries such as Nepal, Burma, Mexico, Iraq, and Iran and speak more than 25 different languages including Spanish, Kurdish, Burmese, Somali, Uzbek and Vietnamese (D. Gill, personal communication, October 25, 2013).

According to the 2011-2012 data of MNPS, in Tusculum, 96.8% of the students participated in the Free/Reduced Price Lunch Program, which indicates that most of the students are from poor families (2012-2013 School Improvement, 2012; García & Kleifgen, 2010). As to the ethnic composition, over 40% of the students have a Hispanic background, and 22% of the student population is white. Asians consist 19.9% of the population and Blacks, 15.7% (2012-2013 School Improvement, 2012). In Tusculum, more than 60% of the students are considered Limited English Proficient (LEP) and 54% of the total population receives English Learner (EL) instruction at school (2012-2013 School Improvement, 2012). According to the latest data, over 80% of the students at Tusculum are ELLs. To satisfy the needs of the school's high ELL population, all the teachers (33) except one or two are ELL certified (D. Gill & K. DeNamur, personal communication, October 25, 2013).

During the fieldtrip, my classmates and I interviewed the Assistant Principal Ms. Donna Gill, the Instructional Coach Dr. Susan McGinnis and a newcomer class teacher Ms. Casaundra Ivey. Our group (Lulu, Carol and I) also interviewed our classroom teacher Ms. DeNamur for specific information about her 4th grade class.

According to Ms. Gill, based on the school's high population of ELLs, Tusculum Elementary School offers two types of classes: newcomer classes and integrated classes. There are two newcomer classes for students who are new to the country and have received no instruction in their home country. They technically receive ELL instruction in the newcomer classroom for one year and then will be sent to an appropriate level in an integrated class, but their length of stay also depends on how quickly they acquire their English language (personal communication, October 25, 2013). Integrated classes are mixed with ELLs and non-ELLs. Because almost every teacher at Tusculum is ELL certified, the students in the classrooms receive ELL support all day long (D. Gill & C. Ivey, personal communication, October 25, 2013). All the teachers are self-contained, which means they teach students in all subject areas. For ELLs, teachers will teach them reading by swopping them out into a reading block, in which ELLs receive English reading instruction for one to two hours every week. Furthermore, the district provides translators for the school on a daily basis to assist ELL students in individual oral groups, homework, and parent meetings.

Tusculum creates a warm and welcoming environment for students' native language, culture and their family, and the teachers value and support them. As Ms. Ivey said, although there is no class that provides instruction in any student's native language, they allow the students to use their native language in the classroom (personal communication, October 25, 2013). For example, when some students encounter difficulty in understanding the teacher, "they will tell each other back and forth in their native language" (K. DeNamur, personal communication, October 25, 2013). "We encourage them to learn their native language and

English because that will just help them later in life," said Ms. Ivey (personal communication, October 25, 2013). As de Jong (2011) mentioned, Multilingualism brings about educational, cognitive, and linguistic, as well as economic and political benefits, since it "leads to market competitiveness and can facilitate communication across cultures". The teachers at Tusculum have a sense of responsibility for students' overall development in the long run. They see "language as a resource" rather than "language as a problem", believing that bilingualism and multilingualism can bring benefits for the students' future (Ruiz, 1984).

To validate students' native cultures, Tusculum offers a variety of cultural fieldtrips and projects every one or two weeks. On Community Culture Night and "Coffee and Culture", parents are invited to give presentations in the school and bring their own food and costumes. The school also has an "All About Me" project, where students from different countries design and display their posters about their countries and cultures. As Ms. Ivey said, "We don't want them to forget where they come from: we want them to remember it." In my opinion, Tusculum strives to "respect, preserve, and validate the identities, language and culture" of their students and "all those who participate" (Allen, 2007).

Tusculum is very supportive of parent and family involvement. Moll et al. mentioned households as "containing ample cultural and cognitive resources with great, potential utility for classroom instruction" (Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Moll et al., 1990). The teachers believe that regardless of their education level, parents value their children's education and can make contributions to their children's success (K. DeNamur, personal communication, October 25, 2013). Besides the aforementioned cultural events that include parents in the school, Tusculum supports students and parents in many aspects. The school has a family resource center where parents can receive ESL instruction, have group conversations with each other, and have access to resources such as money management, job seeking and health care (Tusculum Elementary, n.d.). Translation services are also available for parents: There is one full-time Spanish translator due to the majority of the ELL students and their families speaking Spanish; other translators come if needed on occasions like parent-school meetings. In addition, teachers also build personal contacts with parents. For example, Ms. DeNamur establishes a lot of personal contacts with her students and their parents through parent meetings or phone calls to children's home. If she, as a monolingual teacher, encounters language barriers, she will ask a bilingual staff member to call the parents on her behalf (K. DeNamur, personal communication, October 25, 2013). Ms. DeNamur's establishment of conversations between home and school can not only help the students attain academic success, but also "keep alive their families' pride in and ownership of their culture and community" (Allen, 2007). According to Ms. Ivey, in order to facilitate students' learning with parent involvement, kindergarten classes have a "Kindergarten Literacy Night" where teachers send CDs to the children's home and let the children and their parents practice letters and sounds. This led to a delightful result: Parents were excited that they could help their children in this way and the progress was faster when parents were able to help. To me, Ms. Ivey and Ms. DeNamur are "culturally relevant teachers" because they build "close relationships not only with their students, but also with the students' families and communities" (Allen, 2007).

However, due to the high population of ELLs at Tusculum, the school faces numerous challenges concerning ELLs. The biggest challenge for Tusculum teachers and students are the state and local assessments (D. Gill, personal communication, October 25, 2013). Research indicates that it takes English learners 3 to 5 years to acquire oral language and 4 to 7 years to acquire academic language proficiency (Hakuta et al., 2000). Since local and state assessments are designed for native English speakers, they become "a language test for ELLs rather than reliable and valid measures of academic learning" (de Jong, 2011). Due to ELLs' limited English proficiency, it is difficult to "get them to the benchmarks the district has set"

(D. Gill, personal communication, October 25, 2013). Although the teachers at Tusculum make sure that students are learning and making growth, their assessment results still cannot match those of English native speakers. Teachers are held accountable for the assessment results, so teachers are under the pressure of state and local assessment. If the students do not meet the standard or make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), teachers are responsible for that. Thus, the state and local assessments have led to another challenge: It is hard to keep the teachers motivated (D. Gill, personal communication, October 25, 2013).

Moreover, teachers find it hard to use students' native language. On the one hand, the state of Tennessee adopts an English-only policy, which means the language of instruction must be English and no instruction in students' native language is allowed. On the other hand, there are, as mentioned above, more than 25 different languages spoken at Tusculum and there are 4 to 5 dialects even within one language. Ms. Ivey reported that there are 7 different languages and dialects spoken by the students in her newcomer class, and it is almost impossible for her to learn all the 7 languages (personal communication, October 25, 2013). Therefore, it is challenging to exploit students' native language in the classroom, or even to organize class activities by grouping the students of the same language. As the teachers have claimed, the only way to help students maintain their native language is to let them communicate with each other if they have peers who speak the same language to clarify with each other (K. DeNamur & C. Ivey, personal communication, October 25, 2013).

Other challenges include the poor condition of school facilities such as small, poorly equipped classrooms, which, in my opinion, argues for more funding from the district and state (D. Gill, personal communication, October 25, 2013).

Overall, Tusculum Elementary is a welcoming school for students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The school sets a good example of how schools should accommodate ELLs, value their culture, engage families, and create dialogues with parents. The cultural events, family engagement services and teacher resources work together to best serve the ELL population in this school. Also, the activities, according to Ms. Ivey, brought about positive results: Parents are cooperative and thankful, and excited to help their kids with schoolwork, and teachers see their students make adequate growth.

Nevertheless, the school is at a loss in some ways. Even if the teachers try hard and they see huge progress from their ELL students, their assessment results still cannot catch up with that of schools with more English native speakers. Also, due to the English-only policy and more than 25 languages that students speak in their families, teachers don't know how to combine the instruction together with students' home language, which makes it hard to maintain students' native language.

There are also questions that need further clarification about this school. First, the principals and teachers all claimed that their students are receiving ELL support everyday because almost all teachers are ELL-certified. However, an ELL-certified teacher cannot guarantee that the students receive adequate ELL support. How much ELL support also depends on teachers' attitudes towards ELL students, expectations for them, and they way teachers teach in the classroom i.e. applying culturally relevant teaching, using family funds of knowledge. Second, according to the principals, there is one full-time Spanish translator. However, from the statistics I have seen, I reckon there are at least 200 Hispanic students in Tusculum. It leads me to wonder whether only one full-time Spanish translator is enough, considering the Hispanic population in the school and variables like their and their parents' English proficiency. Finally, the school does well in welcoming and validating students' native culture, but whether and how teachers incorporate and make connections to students' native culture into classroom instruction varies from classroom to classroom. The school should do more investigation to ensure that culturally relevant teaching happens in every classroom.

Reflections on the Classroom Observation at Tusculum

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"¡Gracias! Por Traer A Su Hijo A La Escuela A Tiempo!" "Thanks! For Getting Your Child To School On Time!" As I stepped into the main building at Tusculum Elementary School, I saw these bilingual signs in front of the gate. The bilingual signs colored my first impression of this school, because they were sending a message of the school's gratitude and welcoming attitude. They were also conveying the idea of involving parents, especially those who speak a language other than English. As I walked through the hallway all the way to the classroom my group was assigned to, various kinds of visual displays came into sight. The earth, the map of the world and kids of different skin colors all convey the idea of affirming identity and diversity (Nieto, 2008; de Jong, 2011).

This was only the tip of the iceberg I saw in Tusculum. To gain an understanding of what a real EL classroom was like in Nashville, our group (Lulu, Carol and I) did a classroom observation. The following parts of the paper give detailed descriptions about the physical arrangement of the classroom, what the teacher and students did in the class, how the teacher taught English and made the content material accessible, and things about the teaching that I think need improvement.

Our group was assigned to a 4th grader integrated class. Ms. Kristin DeNamur was teaching a history lesson. The classroom was relatively spacious, with all four walls covered with a variety of informative English language learning resources. The resources included the map of Tennessee with a star at the location of Tusculum with the words "so glad you are here", the 26 English letters both in capital and lower case, some basic concepts and explanations of knowledge in different subjects like language arts, math, social studies and science, and some portraits of famous personalities and books for 4th graders. I also noticed that there was a whiteboard of "Learning Objectives" with points like "I can spell grade level words by identifying patterns and decoding rules". The "Learning Objectives" make clear to both students and teachers what to accomplish in the classroom, and the phrase "I can", from my perspective, makes students proud of the skills they acquire from the teacher.

There were approximately 20 students in the classroom. The students were seated toward the screen around a square with four of them in the center. This sitting arrangement allows students to interact face-to-face with each other, communicating their questions and ideas. As Ms. DeNamur was giving instruction, she walked around the circle, asking students questions and checking if they knew what to do.

In the classroom, Ms. DeNamur was showing her students how to make a folder in their "Tennessee Notebook" about Hernando de Soto and reviewing their knowledge about the Spanish explorer who was the first European that travelled to Tennessee. Each student had a piece of yellow cardboard (to be made a folder), glue, a scissor, and several sheets of paper on which the biography and information of de Soto were printed. Ms. DeNamur was teaching and showing step by step how to sort the information, cut the paper and glue it onto the yellow cardboard. During the classroom observation, I found that the 4th graders in the classroom already possessed a good grasp of English as no one appeared to be puzzled at what the teacher was saying and all the students interacted with each other well. According to Ms. DeNamur, the majority of the students were born in the United States, but speak another language at home with their parents. Most of them are Hispanic, and there's also a refugee student (personal communication, October 25, 2013).

When I was analyzing the way Ms. DeNamur taught skill-level content material and at the same time taught English in the classroom, I found several features of Ms. DeNamur's teaching that were beneficial to the learning of ELLs and I will also apply these methods to

my future teaching. First, since it was a review lesson, students already had a knowledge about the Spanish explorer de Soto. Ms. DeNamur, while showing them how to do make the folder, also asked questions built on students' prior knowledge. "Did he discover gold?" "Look at the map, what's so big about him?" and "He was the first what? To come to where? Where did he travel to?" were questions she asked to bring up students' prior knowledge about de Soto, trying to elicit students' answer from what they already knew about the explorer. Also, while explaining the meaning of "European" in the sentence "de Soto was the first European that travelled to Tennessee", Ms. DeNamur said: "Spain is part of Europe, so when we're saying European, it's kind of like saying American" (personal communication, October 25, 2013). By doing this, Ms. DN was building upon students' prior knowledge about the word "American" so that the students could understand the meaning of "European" by relating it to the word "American". In terms of my future teaching, I will draw on my students' prior knowledge whenever possible, trying to make connections between what is to be learned and what has been learned.

Second, Ms. DeNamur made content material accessible to the students though visual display. On a poster she hung on the wall, she wrote two words – "explorer" and "explore" in the center, and the characteristics of an explorer around these two words such as "going outside" "don't stay at home" and "finding new and special things". With the help of the diagram, students gained an idea of what an explorer was like and came to a better understanding of the historical figure Hernando de Soto. This not only made content material clear to the students, but again, also bring up students' prior knowledge to help them learn new vocabulary and acquire conceptual knowledge.

Furthermore, in the "Game Time" that was "awarded" to the students due to their good performance, Ms. DeNamur allowed the students to communicate in their native language. She said that although she was monolingual and there was no chance to use students' native language, she encouraged them to become fluent in English as well as in their first language because she thought it was important to maintain diversity (personal communication, October 25, 2013). Also, from the interview with Ms. DeNamur, our group was glad and a little surprised to hear that in occasions like parent meeting and phone calls with parents, Ms. DN will let her students translate for her and their parents. She said she put all her trust in the children and she thought it was amazing that the children could translate. As far as I am concerned, the translating job has many academic benefits. Language brokering plays an important role in second language acquisition (McQuillan & Tse, 1995). In the translating process, many bilingual skills are naturalized and meta-linguistic awareness is developed (Martínez et al.). Also, when translating, students advance their knowledge of linguistic elements in both languages (Risko & Dahlhouse, 2012, cited from Kenner, 2004; Lantolf, 2000). Thus, I highly value Ms. DeNamur's action and will employ the translation job in my future teaching.

However, I also found several parts demonstrated in Ms. DeNamur's teaching that need further improvement. First of all, it seemed to me that Ms. DN did not delve very deeply into students' native culture and make much use of it. During the class, culturally relevant teaching seldom occurred. I noticed that when a Hispanic student was surprised at the fact that de Soto was from Spain and asked with curiosity: "He's from Spain?" I thought the student might have more to say about his family origin. But Ms. DeNamur just answered: "Yes, he's from Spain" without making connections to this student and other Hispanic students. In this point, I suggest Ms. DeNamur encourage students to say more about their culture and learn the children's family cultures "through ongoing, meaningful involvement in their communities" by using the resources of the family resource center and from various cultural events held by the school to legitimize students' culture and make connections between content material and students' native culture in the classroom (Allen, 2007). I

believe if she had developed a relevant curriculum by viewing "students' background as a valuable resource on which to build" and discovering students' "fund of knowledge", students would have been more motivated and interested in learning content material (L. Pray, personal communication, October 16, 2013; Moll, 1992).

Another shortcoming demonstrated in the class was that Ms. DeNamur left too little space for group work and peer interaction among the students. Regardless of the sitting arrangement of the students which was facilitative for the interaction among the students, she stuck on the word "I", continually talked by herself and seldom asked the students to discuss with each other. According to de Jong (2011), "Student integration through small group work can contribute to the development of positive intergroup relationships between language minority students and language majority students" (Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Slavin, 1985). Since this classroom was an integrated classroom mixed with ELLs and English native speakers, the teacher should take advantage of the class type and foster interaction between ELLs and non-ELLs to scaffold ELLs' English learning, "break down stereotypes and develop positive attitudes among the students" (Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Slavin, 1985). One good example was when I was doing another class observation at Paragon Mills Elementary School, the 4th grade math teacher frequently asked her students to "talk to your buddy"; students had ample interaction and they were enthusiastic about talking to each other. However, the scarce interaction and group work might have been due to the nature of this class because it was a reviewing lesson. It would have been better for me to make a final comment if I could have observed this class a few more times.

In addition, I believe Ms. DeNamur could make content material accessible through more tonal variation, facial expression and body language. Although Ms. DeNamur was speaking very clearly and loudly, she was talking without much change in her tone, and her facial expression and body language was limited. Therefore, some students in the classroom were distracted or didn't show much interest in the class. I think the class atmosphere would have been better if Ms. DeNamur had blended her own emotions and feelings with facial expression and body language into her teaching content and changed her tone occasionally.

In conclusion, I appreciate the physical arrangement at the school as well as in the classroom. It creates a warm and welcoming environment for students from diverse backgrounds and aids students in their learning. Reflecting on the strong points and things that need improvement in Ms. DeNamur's class, I learned how ELL teachers should make content material accessible and at the same time teach students English knowledge. ELL teachers, especially at elementary level, should use various methods such as visual aids and body language to make the classroom more vivid and trigger or increase students' interest in learning. Teachers also should draw on students' prior knowledge to help them acquire new knowledge, apply culturally responsive teaching and foster student interaction and integration.

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