

Welcoming New Canadians to the Classroom

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There are many issues regarding new Canadians in the elementary school classroom that need to be considered. During my schooling, I did not encounter new Canadians or English as a Second Language (ESL) learners until university. However, in Vancouver, new Canadians are common in the school system, from elementary through high school. In fact, “Vancouver and the urban areas that surround it, receive the highest numbers of such ‘new Canadians’ in Canada (Wild 1). There are many problems facing this group of students and while there are many things that teachers can do to alleviate them, it is not always easy when teachers have thirty students with different needs. As a student teacher, there are many ideas that I believe would be effective and helpful, and that I hope to use in the classroom.

I grew up in an area where there were few immigrants. As I was in French Immersion during elementary school, I do not remember having encountered new Canadians until much later. My high school was predominantly Caucasian with a few First Nations students, so I didn’t meet any new Canadians or ESL learners at that point either. I can only remember meeting five Asian students during my time there, and they were all Canadian born. I remember thinking it was strange when people would ask two of them if they were brother and sister, just because their last name was “Lau”. UBC was the first place I encountered new Canadians and ESL learners. For me, it was not a huge adjustment adapting to a multicultural environment, as my mom has always raised us in a non-prejudiced home. I think that for others, growing up in a smaller “Caucasian” town, or in rural areas, it may be hard to adapt to a diverse city and make friends with people from different backgrounds and cultures. This may involve changing their attitude, or adjusting stereotypes that they may have had of other cultures. However, more important

than how Canadians adapt to new Canadians, is how they are welcomed into Canadian society and into the classroom.

In addition to adapting to a new culture, there are many problems facing new Canadians in the classroom. There are four main types of ESL learners, although I will mainly be addressing the first two: immigrants, refugees, speakers of a different dialect and Canadian born (BCTF ESL). It is important to understand that refugees are sometimes not able to learn yet when they arrive in a classroom, as they must deal with culture shock, past trauma and missing family members (Wild 11). The Ministry of Education states that: “While individual circumstances and personal responses will vary enormously, students who have newly arrived in Canada typically experience some form of culture shock”. There are usually four stages of adjustment that new Canadians go through: the honeymoon stage – when they first arrive and are safe, hostility – miss home country and dislike Canada, humour – begin to accept new home and make friends, and home – accept that they are here to stay. Many students may never reach the final stage, or it may take years to achieve a sense of “home” in Canada (Ministry of Education).

One of the primary concerns of teachers is that of funding. The funding cap for additional funding is set for five years, when research has shown that it can take many more years to learn a language (Wild 1, 3). There is a wide range of learning abilities and rates, as some refugees may have never gone to school (Wild 4). This means that these students must learn the basics, such as holding a pencil and writing, before they can begin learning subjects. School districts are not required to show how ESL funds are spent and they can be redirected to other programs; the funding level has not changed since the start of this policy (Wild 3). Unfortunately, funding levels are assessed at the beginning of the

school year, so teachers are left short as new Canadians arrive throughout the year (Wild 5). Due to these problems, and more, it is up to the teacher to help the new Canadians adjust to the new setting as much as possible.

There are many ways in which a teacher can make new Canadians feel welcome in the classroom and school. Teachers must realize that their role is to supplement and not supplant the home language. ESL students have much in common with French Immersion students, since both are learning an official language of Canada and at the same time, learning the provincial curriculum (BCTF ESL). They must also understand that, because students need help with speaking English or adapting to new situations, it does not mean that they have a learning problem (Helmer & Eddy 14). Teachers must be patient with new Canadians and understand that they may react in different ways than natives.

There are many ways to welcome new Canadians to the classroom. Elizabeth Coelho suggests that when new Canadians arrive at a school with their parents, it is important to set up a meeting with the family. If they do not speak English well, an interpreter should attend so that there is no miscommunication. It is necessary for the teacher, or welcoming person, to provide basic information on the school system, such as the structure of the day, what to bring to class and holidays. Teachers also need to gather information on the student's background in schooling, needs and medical conditions (Coelho, 1998, 58). If the student is a refugee, it may be helpful to set up a clothing exchange with other schools, in order to ensure that they have proper clothes to wear to class (Coelho, 1998, 59). The BC Teachers' Federation has produced a brochure for parents of ESL students which is available in fourteen languages; this brochure provides

information on learning a new language, what to expect in BC schools and how to help your child (BCTF Brochure). Parents need to be involved in their child's learning, so it is important to make them feel welcome to the country and school as well.

Students can be made to feel welcome if there are visual displays in the classroom and hallways which reflect different cultural perspectives. Signs and notices in different languages help to communicate important messages and teachers can also involve parents in the sign making (Coelho, 1998, 95). To ensure that all students understand important announcements, they can be communicated over the PA or in assemblies in the major languages of the school (Coelho, 1998, 97). In regards to holidays and extra-curricular activities, it is important to ensure that the food served meets the cultural and religious dietary needs of all students, encouraging participation and inclusion of all the students. It is also recommended to hold food activities outside of periods of fasting, such as Ramadan (Coelho, 1998, 99), so that students are not left out, made to feel uncomfortable or "different" during such times.

In the classroom, Coelho believed in cooperative learning groups where ESL learners are placed in a group with fluent speakers; this provides a highly supportive learning environment (Coelho, 1994, 33). I believe that this is a good idea, but it can also lead to frustration with fluent speakers who may feel they have to "teach" the other students. They may help the new students, but could also feel frustrated with being held back and made to explain things. It would be important for the teacher to encourage support, while ensuring that the fluent speakers also got the challenges necessary to their education. There are many resources available to teachers to give ideas on how to

welcome new Canadians and, while all suggestions are helpful, they might not always be the ones that will be effective in your classroom.

After researching these ideas, I talked to Penny Tonge, a retired teacher of 35 years, and discovered that she took a practical approach to welcoming new Canadians. I liked many of her suggestions and found that I would use the same approach when welcoming new students. Penny said that the first thing she did when she knew a new Canadian would be entering the class, was to tell her other students and educate them about the country of origin, what language they spoke, and to let them know that the new student would probably not speak much English. I believe that this is very important as it prepares the other students for the new arrival and would help to prevent unwelcome questions or comments. I would also research the culture of the new student so as not to make any mistakes when welcoming them, or to explain how classroom and other procedures are different in Canada. When meeting the student for the first time, I would ask how to properly pronounce their name so they don't feel uncomfortable. I would never ask them to choose an "English" name which may be easier to pronounce. I believe this is a horrible practice, especially since students who are new to the country already feel overwhelmed by the differences; asking them to change their name is like asking them to change who they are. Penny also said that the first thing she did was to ask another student, preferably one who spoke the same language, to show the new student where the washroom is and to explain that they can go whenever they need to. In my opinion, this is extremely important since many new Canadians may not know how to ask or maybe be too shy. Penny said that she always used their name when talking to them, so that they knew you were talking to them. She said that since it is intimidating to be in a

classroom in a new language, that she emphasized how well they did in math, PE and art so that they always got positive, reinforcing feedback. To encourage talking, Penny recommended that the parents enrol their children in extra-curricular activities where they would get to interact in everyday situations. Another important focus of hers was to spend time with them daily, usually during silent reading, to read small repetitive books which focused on vocabulary. She would say the word and ask the students to repeat them after her. Penny indicated that it was important to let the librarian know that you had a new Canadian student to ensure that they did not dissuade the student from choosing level-appropriate books, or by commenting on how it was a book for younger students. She said that on field trips, she always sat with the new student and pointed out all the vocabulary, such as on the transit system. I believe that these are all things that I would be able to do as a teacher, and that all teachers should do, to welcome new Canadians.

To ensure success in an area where there are few new Canadians, I would work with the other teachers to provide a successful welcoming experience. I would follow the ideas mentioned above to help other teachers welcome students, to educate them about the needs of ESL learners and where to look for tips and advice. I believe it would be easier to work in an environment where there are fewer new Canadians, as I would get more one on one time with them, instead of having to share myself with several students. However, there are the disadvantages of less support from the Resource Teachers or ESL specialists. It would be important to ask for volunteers from the community to come several times a week, or daily, to help the new Canadians with their studies. It is crucial to create a welcoming atmosphere, whether you have few or many new Canadians.

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