



BORDER KIDS

English language learners are coming across the border in record numbers, bringing with them challenges for schools—and hopes for a better life.

Susan Zimmerman-Orozco

When 8-year-old Nelson Rivera arrived at Mills-Parole Elementary School in Annapolis, Maryland, this fall, he spent the first day of class crying. Later in the year, at ease and among friends in the classroom, Nelson was able to explain the story behind his tears:

I was crying because of the color of the school, the walls; it's the same color as the cell where I was in jail. I was afraid they were going to lock me up again and never let me out.



in the Home of the Brave



© SANDY HUFFAKER/CORBIS

because of gang violence, war, and poverty in their homelands, they often arrive with little formal education.

Known in the literature as *Students with Interrupted Formal Education* (SIFEs), these students come to school with substantial gaps in their education that seriously hinder their ability to catch up with their grade-level peers. Some did not attend school for years at a time in their home country; some attended schools of poor quality. A growing number of teenage arrivals have never attended school at all. Few U.S. school districts have the background or resources to address the needs of students with such enormous academic, social, and emotional challenges.

As a consultant working with schools to meet the needs of these students, I have seen a variety of school districts whose previously adequate ELL resources have suddenly been challenged with the influx of students from Central America. One such district is Anne Arundel County Public Schools, a largely suburban district in Maryland with about 75,000 students.

Even though the district's English Language Acquisition office is small (the central-office staff consists of a coordinator and two instructional specialists), the district was successful in exiting more than 850 of 3,084 students from ELL status to English-proficient status in the spring of 2014, almost twice the state department of education target. But when a wave of almost 1,000 new ELLs rolled in over the summer, it seriously strained the

district's resources. As the school year wore on, the students continued to come.

As I talked to the educators and students of Anne Arundel County schools as well as other Maryland districts feeling the impact of the wave of unaccompanied minors last fall, it became clear that both teachers and pupils have responded to their new,

The stories these children tell of their experiences in their home countries or en route to the United States have an emotional impact on all who work with them.

often-overwhelming circumstances with a positive, can-do attitude. Teachers are willing to do what it takes to develop and share best practices to support these students. And students are willing to take the risk of walking into a new school not knowing the language, the culture, or a friendly face. Both groups are clear on what is important to secure the academic future of these vulnerable youngsters.

More and more educators have been scrambling to educate the wave of unaccompanied minors like Nelson who have flowed across the United States' southwest border. Many of these "border kids" are being resettled in areas as far-flung as New Hampshire and South Carolina, where services for English language learners (ELLs) may be minimal or new. In addition to speaking little or no English, these children have often been traumatized by their immigration journeys; and



© LYNNE SLADKY/APCORBIS

the Rio Bravo on a raft in the darkness and made his way across the desert hills, immigration police seized him and his companions. He described passing nine days in a classroom-size cell with many other detained children, the tedious hours unbroken by games or TV, with only apples and water as meals, until suddenly in the middle of one night he was whisked away on the first of many flights to join his mother in Maryland.

The stories these children tell of their experiences in their home countries or en route to the United States have an emotional impact on all who work with them. “I don’t know how many more stories I can take,”

wrote one teacher on my

blog. “I wonder how much I need to know about my kids to be able to teach them better.”

Welcoming Nelson

Luckily for Nelson, the 8-year-old who had been locked up in “jail,” Mills-Parole Elementary School principal Susan Myers had instituted a coteaching model that assigned one English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) teacher to each grade level. Nelson spent his first days sitting beside his bilingual ESOL teacher, Rebecca Guzman, as she patiently comforted him and helped him navigate his new school. His 3rd grade classroom teacher, Jessica Goldie, had received extensive professional development and had previous experience teaching English language learners.

Goldie says that she uses the little Spanish she knows to communicate with children like Nelson in the beginning to help them adjust. She relies on the help of her bilingual coteacher to explain directions and class rules. She feels that having texts and other classroom resources available in both English and the

child’s native language is useful. Being able to participate in the class and complete assignments like their classmates gives students confidence.

Goldie also takes on the unofficial role of advocate for her English language learners. She has had to come to their defense in the schools where she has worked:

In both schools, I’ve seen staff members yell at newcomers for “not following directions.” I explain that the student knows little or no English, but sometimes staff members will respond with comments like, “Well, he should know better anyway.”

Thanks to the efforts and sensitivity of his school community, by late September, Nelson was a cheerful and outgoing student, willing and even eager to share the difficult particulars of his journey to the United States with a “coyote,” an unknown man his mother had paid to bring him through Mexico and across the U.S. border. Matter-of-factly, he related the moment when, after he crossed

Upping the Ante: Middle School

Elementary school children like Nelson, although clearly affected emotionally and academically by their pasts, have fewer hurdles to overcome than do older students with interrupted formal education who enter U.S. schools. Here, the expectations for prior content knowledge are already set in stone by annual high-stakes assessments and state graduation requirements. Further, these students usually lack not only academic knowledge, but also the basic understanding of how to “do school.”

Because the burgeoning ELL population in Anne Arundel County is a recent phenomenon, students are frequently enrolled in mainstream classes. As a result, a 13-year-old student whose highest level of education is 3rd grade may find him- or herself sitting in a mainstream 8th

10 Ideas (Plus 1) For Teaching Students with Interrupted Formal Education

1. Activate prior knowledge. Students with interrupted schooling have life experiences that they can link to new information. Help them make the connections through activities that lead them in the right direction: word associations, KWL charts, and anticipation guides.

2. Provide a print-rich environment. Students with limited formal education come from homes and schools where books and printed materials are at a premium. Show them how reading gives them ownership over their own learning. Provide abundant visuals that correspond to text (maps, charts, signs, posters with motivational phrases, and so on). Use high-interest, low-reading-level books; native-language materials; and bilingual glossaries.

3. Engage students in hands-on learning to give them a way to learn the content while engaged in social and physical activities they can excel at—creating their own books, doing interactive activities on an interactive whiteboard, using manipulatives, and even connecting to social media like Twitter and blogging sites.

4. Control the amount of new vocabulary students need to understand the content. When using new vocabulary or explaining new concepts, you may need to rephrase, define in context, and simplify your explanation.

5. Check frequently for understanding. Try to avoid yes-or-no answers. Instead, ask students to summarize what they understood. Have them do think-pair-shares and other interactive activities that give them a chance to clarify their thinking before speaking in class. Increase your wait time; students will need extra time to process your question and find the answer in English.

6. When assessing understanding, be open-minded. Provide multiple opportunities to demonstrate understanding, such as having students tell you what they know rather than write it. Emphasize formative work, individualizing what you ask students to do.

7. Allow students to work in cooperative groups. This will not only help them develop English, but also give them needed practice with school skills, such as taking turns and encouraging one another.

8. Build in native-language content and literacy instruction. Older students with interrupted formal education have the same needs for foundational reading skills that primary school students do. Be sure to provide support before, during, and after reading and use visual and organizational tools, such as graphic organizers, to increase their comprehension.

9. Use teaching strategies that weave together language and content instruction, such as the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP). Be sure to include explicit instruction in the academic language structures and vocabulary that students will need to understand and produce the content.

10. Keep your expectations realistic at the beginning of the year. Students with interrupted formal education come to school full of hope and the expectation of a better future. The rigorous demands of today's curriculum, combined with learning to negotiate an alien school culture, often crush that spirit by the close of the first month. Give students doable goals as the year begins, building their confidence.

And perhaps most important—

11. Provide opportunities for students to interact. Encourage them to form friendships. The business of school for most of these students is not just academics, but adjusting to the culture and language of their new country. Be sensitive to their need to socialize and build relationships, not only with other students but also with you. Ultimately, few kids look forward to coming to school to learn a new algebra fact. It's all about sharing their stories and their lives with the people who care about them most—who, for many of these students, sadly, are their friends and teachers.



grade science class, trying to make sense of both the English and the content. Jolyn Davis, who was principal of Corkran Middle School from 2010 to 2014, addressed this problem by clustering her ELL students in classrooms and allocating ESOL teachers to coteach content classes in which they model strategies for general education teachers and help generate the culture of acceptance and safety that these students need.

Middle school also presents particular behavior challenges. The typical adolescent instinct to conform and avoid drawing attention to oneself often causes ELLs to hide in the back of the room in mainstream classes, smiling and nodding agreeably when teachers check in with them. The further students withdraw from classroom interactions and content, the less likely they are to succeed academically.

Karen Doerrler, a science teacher, uses a variety of strategies to keep these students engaged:

I try not to let them all sit together all the time. Their buddies won't understand the content either, so I use various groupings for different activities and include at least one Spanish speaker to help them with the content. That way they can interact with all their peers.

In contrast to those who are compliant and quiet, some early adolescent students with interrupted formal education demonstrate disruptive behavior that challenges the classroom management skills of the best teachers. Maira, a 6th grader who arrived in January with no previous schooling, became belligerent and noncompliant with her family at home and with classmates and teachers at school. Discovering that Maira had made her way to the United States riding on top of the infamous high-speed train “La Bestia” (the Beast) helped her teachers understand the history behind her behavior and gave them clues for strategizing how to address



© ERIC GAY/APCORBIS

it. Heather Holcomb, a Montgomery County teacher, says that the secret is to “genuinely like these students unconditionally”:

They are more difficult than average ESOL kids; their background history is so hard because they've seen so much more than the average middle school student. They just don't know how to behave in school. They will behave so much better if they know you truly care for them.

And teacher Emilia Roberts explains, “I realized that sometimes they just need time to heal from the horrendous things they have experienced in their country or on their way here.”

New Perspectives: High School

High school-age students with interrupted formal education are often more committed and disciplined in managing the business of school than their younger counterparts are. Yet they present their own challenges. Kelly Reider, Anne Arundel County's English language acquisition coordinator, reports that having a sudden influx of students who are beginning their academic careers so late requires

staff and counselors to prioritize instructional choices on the basis of their students' background and age:

For those who are unlikely to graduate due to not having enough credits and aging out of the system, we immerse them in classes that strengthen their language, literacy, math, and employment skills. Others, who have the possibility of graduating, are immersed in integrated curriculum content to build language and background for future academic classes.

One key to working with these older students is to recognize that even though they may not have formal schooling, they have other valuable life experiences they can build on. Lois Wions, retired ESOL supervisor for Montgomery County Public Schools, remembers,

One important thing I always tried to keep in mind with these students is that although they may lack the foundation in literacy, they have so many stories to share. Oral native language is where they have thrived. To build confidence and create resilience for learning, I would have students tell each other and record stories that we would then write in Spanish. In the end we had created a classroom community together, beginning from students' strengths.

In spite of the obstacles, high school-age students have an advantage over younger ones in that most have acquired the metacognitive skills and emotional persistence to figure out how to learn. Celestina Velazquez was a 9th grader with only a 2nd grade education in her home country. Although she is often overwhelmed by the quantity of language and new information coming at her, she had developed enviable coping skills after only five weeks in school. “I look on the board and look for examples and pictures, and for models, and try to figure it out by myself,” she says. “Or I ask a friend.”

With a Little Help from My Friends

It turns out that friends play a key role in helping these students adjust and commit to learning. When asked, “What helps you learn best in school?” every one of the 10 Anne Arundel students I interviewed for this article expressed the same theme: “I was nervous and scared, but then I made a friend who helped me.”

Even Nelson, the 8-year-old who cried inconsolably on his first day, had the unfailing support of his friend Ricardo, who stuck by his side the entire day, although likewise sobbing. “He was crying because he was worried about me,” says Nelson. “He wanted to be with me and help me.”

Even with all that we know about the research and best practices that support students with interrupted formal education and other ELLs, I was surprised to discover that the real reason most of the students I interviewed came to school, survived the first few months, and stayed had less to do with the strategies the teachers were masterfully implementing than with the students’ instinct to reach out and make friends. As educators, we often look to pedagogy to give us tools to support our students; yet in their naiveté, the stu-

dents themselves had discovered a key to academic success.

“I came here when I was 13 and started to work,” reports German, a 17-year-old from Guatemala now on track for graduation, “but a friend asked me why I wasn’t in school. He brought me here and showed me how to enroll. He showed me I had to learn more English, to be better than that. Now I want to go to college. I want to be a success.”

One key to working with older students is to recognize that they have valuable life experiences they can build on.


Carlos, an unaccompanied 17-year-old from Honduras who came to the Anne Arundel County international student office last summer to register, pointed to his friend Edgar, sitting nearby. “I’m here because he brought me here. Right away when I got here, he told me to come for school.”

Edgar himself had arrived in the Annapolis area four years ago as an unaccompanied minor with little formal education. This year, he will graduate from high school. He supports himself by working after school and speaks fluent, nearly accent-free English. “Education is the most important thing,” he said. “I told him it will be hard, but not to give up.” He looked across the room at his friend puzzling over his math placement test and smiled, “If I can do it, so can he.” And something about the set of his jaw lets you know that he will make sure Carlos won’t give up.

What They Have Going for Them

Many border children come to our schools hindered by academic deficiencies and scarred by trauma, their illusions of a movie-star life in the United States shattered by the realities of new family structures and poverty.

What they have going for them, however, is something they can’t get from outside: courage. The determination and spirit of children who would leave their homeland—whether Central America or any other of the hundreds of countries across the world torn by violence and poverty—and make their arduous way to the United States are precisely those strengths they will require to persevere through difficult times ahead.

In the fall of 2014, as I was interviewing students for this article, there was an undertone of hostility among media reports about “those children” who were massing at our borders and apparently demanding to be taken in, fed, clothed, and educated. The older students I interviewed were keenly aware of that sentiment, sensitive to it, and eager to prove their desire to become productive citizens. I found myself repeating to each of them that we in the United States are lucky to have them here. Any young person with the character and determination to set off across thousands of unknown miles, whatever the consequences, would be a great asset to any nation. I explained that the closing words of the U.S. national anthem proclaim that we are “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” Surely their courage and yearning to be free are the embodiment of these fundamental American values. 

Susan Zimmerman-Orozco (sazimmerman@supportingells.com) is a consultant specializing in helping schools meet the needs of students with interrupted formal education (SIFE). She blogs at <http://supportingells.edublogs.org>.

Copyright of Educational Leadership is the property of Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.