

Welcoming New Americans: Leading Our Schools Forward

BY BILL PREBLE AND CARLTON FITZGERALD



School leaders have two choices when it comes to responding to the growing racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in their schools. They can choose to treat these new Americans with dignity, respect, curiosity, and compassion and, in doing so, open up new worlds and possibilities for everyone concerned, or they can label, isolate, and marginalize these racially, linguistically, socially, geographically, and culturally “different” students and attempt to push them to the back of the bus.

Since the publication of our article in *Educational Leadership* (Preble & Fitzgerald, 2011), we have heard from many educators who’ve shared their experiences about how their English language learners (ELL) and other students who may be viewed as being “different” are treated in their schools. In some cases, these stories have been hopeful and uplifting, showing us that many schools are doing wonderful things to welcome and assimilate new Americans into their schools and communities. But others have shared with us dark, angry stories containing troubling depictions of their schools and school leaders, whose racist, xenophobic practices are deliberately driving minority, immigrant, and so-called “unintelligent” students away from getting an education.

In this article, we offer an abbreviated version of the aforementioned article and some additional stories we’ve heard about the treatment of new Americans in New Hampshire schools. We hope that these stories will show readers what some outstanding educators are doing to welcome new Americans into their schools.

Learning from New Americans

The faces of America are changing. According to some expert demographers, by the middle of the 21st century there will be more nonwhites than whites in the United States (Johnson & Lichter, 2010). The challenge of addressing this demographic shift with respect, knowledge, skill, and care increasingly falls on the shoulders of teachers and school leaders. In our teacher education program at New England College in Henniker, NH, we asked the question, how can we best prepare teachers to lead students, schools, and communities through this demographic transition?

One College's Approach

Most of the students in our teacher education program are white and either middle or upper class. Because New Hampshire has an extremely small minority population; they have limited exposure to people of color, let alone exposure to children from other countries and cultures.

We want our pre-service teachers to be aware of their limited knowledge of diversity. We want them to explore their prejudices and to question stereotypes. We want them to aspire to better understand their English language learners—or what many now refer to as *new American students*—appreciating their unique talents, strengths, and needs.

To enhance our students' cultural literacy and understanding of diverse groups, we've developed a core curriculum that's designed to teach critical thinking, empathy, and self-reflection. We require our students to take courses in world geography, multicultural education, and international politics and literature. Although we believe these academic approaches are useful, we felt we needed to do more.

The Dignity of Expertise

Bill Cumming, executive director of the Boothby Institute in Maine (theboothbyinstitute.org), has spent his life helping other teachers discover the power they have to make a difference in their students' lives. Bill taught us an important pedagogical strategy, or maybe it's a way of being, that he refers to as "the dignity of expertise": our students, and not us, are the true experts on their own experiences and needs and on approaches that will work for them.

There's a certain kind of dignity in being viewed as an expert. When we at New England College tapped into the dignity of expertise, we started a chain reaction that has changed lives.

I Cannot Say My Heart

Anna-Marie DiPasquale works for Lutheran Social Services as a social worker at one of our large local schools, Concord High School (CHS). She works closely with new American students—from Nepal, Bhutan, the Congo, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Russia—who are at great risk of dropping out of the high school. To encourage these students to stay in school, she recently arranged for them to visit New England College.

When we learned of DiPasquale's goals for this visit, we hatched a different plan. Instead of having the students visit our college simply to sample the postsecondary experience, we decided they should also come to *teach*. They could tell our pre-service teachers what they believed every teacher should know to successfully teach new American students like themselves.

On the day of their visit, with deer-in-the-headlights looks on their faces, 14 students walked into our classroom of 32 teacher education students. They began tentatively. Kumar was the first to speak. He was from Bhutan and had lived in Nepal for many years. He quietly said, "New teacher will know I feel frustrated. I speak three language, but not understood. English not good. In my school, I cannot say my heart. I frustrated because I cannot find the word. I am sad."

After a round of applause, Narapati from Nepal went next. He said that teachers need to give language learners extra time when they ask students a question in class. He explained, "I hear a question in English, translate my language, come up with answer my language, translate into English inside my mind, and get English words out." DiPasquale shared research showing that this process takes about 25 seconds. By then, the teacher typically has moved on and left language learners in the dust. Narapati repeated solemnly, "I need teacher to wait extra time for my answer."

A dark-eyed girl from Afghanistan in a white head scarf spoke next. She said, "I want all new teacher to say to new student, 'Stay after class and talk.' This is most helpful; makes you see teacher care about you and want you to do well. Meet with the teacher after class is very good."

A confident young woman from Somalia spoke next. Najma wanted teachers to introduce new students to the class so these newcomers could connect with peers more easily. She spoke of coming to school for the first time, walking into the classroom, and taking her seat. She said it was difficult to get to know other students. "Some teachers say work in a group. No one picks me.

I like teacher to put me with partner. I can learn and know this student well. This is very good for teacher to do.”

Ram and Damanta from Nepal explained that they wanted teachers and classmates to have more empathy for new American students. Another Nepalese, Shiva, agreed and said that “people laugh at me when I try speak English and hurt how I feel.”

Finally, a tall young man from Congo added, “I think teacher must say to me when speaking not good.” He clearly struggled to be understood and added emphatically, “I want teacher to make correct me. I want to learn. Not just teacher say nothing.” He looked a bit angry and DiPasquale gently questioned him, trying to clarify his meaning. “Are you saying that when you make a mistake in English, you like it when the teacher takes the time to correct you?” “Yes!” he said with a big smile.

DiPasquale’s students ended their lesson by having two students give the class a set of academic instructions in Nepalese. The Nepalese students spoke quickly and confidently and laughed out loud when they realized that no one had a clue what they were talking about. The pre-service teachers instantly saw just how challenging school can be for a student when everything is taught, spoken, and written in a different language. It was a moment of “intellectual humility and empathy” (Paul & Elder, 2009) that we hope will stay with our students throughout their teaching careers.

What the Future Teachers Learned

After all the new Americans had spoken, the pre-service teachers thanked them by identifying one important lesson they had learned. One future teacher pointed out how important it is to remember that new American students often speak several languages beside English. She said, “It’s really wrong to call this English as a second language when it’s more like English as a fourth language. When you know that, it gives you a whole different impression of and respect for these people!”

And What They Need to Learn

Shortly after the students’ departure, the pre-service teachers were asked, “How many of you can locate the countries that these students came from on a map?” Almost no hands went up. They were then asked, “How many of you know *why* these students had to leave their countries to come to the United States?” Again, almost no hands went up.

Teachers can show respect for new American students by learning the geography of their region of origin and understanding the politics and current events behind the immigration of these

groups to the United States. Showing new Americans that you’re familiar with their personal stories, that you know something about their native countries and why they might have emigrated, is one of the best ways to show you care.

Students Teaching Students

As a result of their teaching experience at New England College, many of the new American students gained confidence and spoke up more in class. They were eager to take advantage of their newly discovered voices. DiPasquale approached several social studies teachers at the high school and asked whether they would be willing to have her students make presentations in their classes. Many teachers readily agreed.

Creating Empathy

During their visits to social studies classes, the new American students shared their personal experiences with and their perspectives on such topics as religious differences, cultural differences, and immigration.

DiPasquale asked the class to imagine President Obama kicking people out of the United States because they ate different foods, dressed differently, and spoke a different dialect. How would they feel about that? The mainstream students in the class were shocked. They couldn’t believe that people were forced to leave their country as a result of others’ intolerance toward cultures different from their own. And slowly, many students began to realize that they or their friends may have behaved in similarly intolerant ways toward these new American students.

The classroom sessions ended with a YouTube video of Gandhi’s life, titled “Be the Change,” by hip-hop artist MC Yogi. The new American students challenged their peers to join them and act as change agents in their school and community to fight intolerance, prejudice, and stereotyping of others.

Providing Food for Thought

Students DiPasquale works with also created small-group lunches, during which students get to hear one another’s stories. Now, every Monday, approximately 15 new American students and 10–20 mainstream students sit together at lunch and talk. Different students volunteer to come each week, and different adults take turns sitting with the students. The lunch group began with no real agenda. The students’ initial awkwardness and reticence to speak gradually dissolved into conversation, laughter, and amazement.

As word has spread about how interesting these small-group lunches are, more students are signing up. As a result of these

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lunches, Ashtar from Iraq said, “I never had any American friends, but now I have a lot of friends in school, even Facebook friends.” Padam said, “I have many more American friends now, and I feel more comfortable starting conversations.” Najma added, “Students are friendlier in the hallway and even smile at me.”

Mainstream students appreciate having the opportunity to learn about kids from different backgrounds. One mainstream student exclaimed, “This is fantastic! I never get a chance to get to know someone from the other side of the world!”

Learning the Ropes

The high school is also implementing a peer-to-peer mentoring program. The newest students will be paired by language, with an advanced-level new American student to ease the newcomers’ transition into the school and community. Mentors will receive formal training this fall.

Sharing Expertise

Finding their voices, reaching out and connecting to those around them, and helping others be successful have inspired the participating students to do even more. These new American students have started a speakers bureau. They speak to social studies classes to provide expertise on their home countries. They share their experience and expertise on such topics as current events in the Middle East and Africa, religion, culture, dress, food, and the issue of arranged marriages.

Expanding the Lesson

Several weeks into summer vacation, DiPasquale and several new American students took another trip to New England College. This time it was to speak to a group of veteran teachers from across New England at the college’s annual summer institute for teachers. Her students asked the veteran teachers to consider inviting their new American students to have some of the same opportunities we’ve written about here.

Who knows what will happen in these schools? Maybe these teachers will find new ways to give voice to and invite input from their new American students. Maybe they’ll offer them incredible new opportunities to fit in with their peers. Maybe they’ll enable mainstream students to expand their global and cultural awareness and deepen their empathy and understanding of others who may at first seem unlike themselves. Maybe they’ll broaden all students’ knowledge of geography, international politics, languages, and culture.

Don’t you just love the dignity of expertise?

Tap the Expertise

- **Ask new American students** to work with social studies teachers as visiting presenters and experts on such issues as geography, history, immigration, and cultural similarities and differences.
- **Invite new Americans** to visit foreign language classes and discuss their experiences learning and using a new language.
- **Work with the principal** to make presentations for teachers on teaching and reaching new Americans.
- **Enlist peer tutors** to help new American students with English and academics.
- **Learn about the strengths** of your new American students. Find out what they know and what they know how to do.
- **Invite students to work** with the principal and teachers of English as a second language to advise them how they might better meet the needs of *all* learners.
- **Form cooperative groups** to assist students in learning about and from one another.

Afterword

Since the publication of the *Educational Leadership* article in the fall of 2011, we’ve heard from a number of New Hampshire teachers, school leaders, and ELL experts who were moved to contact us and tell their own stories of new Americans. We share a few of these stories below in hopes of adding a few new ideas for school leaders who want to do more to welcome new Americans into their school, as Concord High School is attempting to do. We will also show how that school has continued to sustain and expand its efforts on behalf of welcoming new Americans.

Which Road Will It Be for NH School Leaders?

Our country recently celebrated the Statue of Liberty’s birthday. It is a good occasion to reread her inscription:

... give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

—Emma Lazarus

While the spirit of this passage is unmistakable, the reality is that our nation and our leaders seem determined to extinguish Lady Liberty’s beacon to the “huddled masses” of the world. Anyone who has watched the recent debates on immigration in the US or heard the vicious talk-radio diatribes that demonize immigrants (made much worse since 9/11) can see how far we’ve

strayed as a nation since Lady Liberty's light first shone from the shores of Ellis Island 125 years ago.

Our Deep-Seated Systems of Intolerance and Oppression Need to Change

Over the past few months, we heard from a NH teacher who responded to the *Educational Leadership* article by sharing the following story about how his own school treats new Americans. According to this teacher, some at his school see these kids as a “problem.” He says that they are addressing their “immigrant problem” in the following way:

Our school has always had different tracks for students of different abilities. It has been that way as long as anyone can remember. So when these new American kids come to our school, they automatically get put into Level 4, the lowest track, the track for problem kids. Everyone knows that Level 4 is where all the poorest, dumbest, and non-whitest kids go. This year, my principal actually apologized to me when he told me I was scheduled to teach a Level 4 class. I thought to myself, what's with that? Why would he *apologize* unless he thought that there was something wrong with these kids? Unfortunately, there are actually a lot of teachers at my school that refuse to teach Level 4 kids.

Later, in my Level 1 classes, I asked my kids to tell me what they thought about these tracks. They basically said that they loved them and that Level 4 kids were lowlife losers. One girl asked if we could start doing “leveled lunches” so she and her friends wouldn't ever have to deal with the Level 4 kids. I was appalled at how arrogant she was and how easily she spoke in public about her hatred of these “lowlife” kids, so many of who[m] were minorities.

When I talked to my Level 4 students, they told me that they totally know how everyone looks at them. They all said they *hate* this school because they are treated like dirt by fellow students, teachers, and the administration. If they protest or try to fight back, they are punished for being disrespectful, told they are a threat to the school, and are often kicked out. Many of these kids are really angry because they see no way the situation will ever get any better.

Lastly, this teacher remarked,

I've heard school leaders and teachers here say “good riddance” when one of these kids drops out. It's really unfair.

I think we need to get rid of these levels. We need to give these kids more respect. We need to give them a chance for success and support. I just don't see how these attitudes and programs will ever change.

This teacher saw the *Educational Leadership* article's description of what CHS is beginning to do with new Americans as something completely foreign to his own experience. But he told me that reading it really got him to open his eyes and look differently at the practices in his school that he has been a part of for many years.

We hope that sharing his powerful story here will allow many other schools in New Hampshire that may practice these hard-to-defend approaches to face up to their own responsibilities, reject these systemic practices of oppression, and move toward a new, more defensible approach to dealing with their students.

Our Stories in Pictures and Words as Told by Immigrant and Refugee Children

We heard from a longtime friend and colleague, Beth Olshansky (personal communication, September, 2011) of the Center for the Advancement of Art-Based Literacy at UNH, who has worked on literacy development using the arts for many years. She shared with us her Image-Making Within the Writing Process program, a program she developed and has been using with K–12 ELL students for the past five years. (Check out a video of the exciting program on her website, picturingwriting.org.) Olshansky helps students from around the world who move to New Hampshire use a combination of beautiful, hand-painted images and writing to construct their life stories. She said, “The students' stories are very moving and bring profound awareness for us comfortable, longtime Americans.”

Olshansky also uses the same arts and writing life stories process with American-born students who research their first ancestors who came to America. (We are sure that if those mean Level 1 high schools students we spoke of earlier had experienced this activity in elementary school, they may have had more empathy and compassion for their new American peers!)

Concord High School Continues to Move Forward

Professional development. Of course, one important tool for changing the ways schools address and welcome new Americans is through effective professional development. This fall, 14 new American students participated in the Professional Development Panel at Concord High School, entitled “What Teachers Need to Know about ELL Students.” DiPasquale and her ELL students

did a presentation for their own teachers similar to the presentation they did for new teachers at New England College described above.

In another professional development setting, a three-hour seminar called “Learning from New Americans” was provided for CHS teachers. The Lutheran Social Services social worker, middle school ELL coordinator, and a student panel consisting of 14 new American students, representing the countries of Nepal, Rwanda, Congo, Iraq, Tanzania, Liberia, Sudan, and Burundi, explored such issues as cultural schemata and evidence-based ELL teaching strategies and challenged the school to shift from a deficit-based model to a strength-based model for working with all students. Teachers experienced a role reversal with new American students as the teachers experimented with a second language. Teachers came away with practical suggestions on tailoring assignments for ELL students and have begun to use these new lesson ideas in their classrooms.

At a district-wide professional development day for all Concord faculty, another student panel discussion was scheduled by Concord school leaders. One ELL student shared a poem, and another talked about the differences between school in their refugee camp and CHS. Concord community TV filmed the event and plans to broadcast it to the entire community. School leaders also asked every Concord teacher to read the *Educational Leadership* article and challenged everyone to do more to include ELL students in classes, as mentors, and as guest speakers.

These numerous attempts to help teachers better understand their ELL students and develop new strategies and skills to address their needs and tap their strengths serves as a model for other school leaders in our state and nation.

The CHS Be the Change Club (BTCC) keeps rolling. Student leaders also remain actively engaged in Concord. The CHS BTCC was re-formed this year. The club serves as an umbrella organization for other projects related to integrating new American students and native-born American students. BTCC lunches begun last year have been offered again this year, and these mix-it-up lunches continue to provide opportunities for small-group peer discussions that enable all students to get to know each other better.

Finally, this year more than 50 students attended the BTCC Youth Leadership Summit. CHS principal Gene Connely said of the day’s events, “I was humbled by the level of commitment by these students—new Americans as well as native-born Americans—to make our school and community free from misunder-

standing and fear. I was proud to be the principal of a school with such wonderful students who are willing to get up early on a day off from school to publicly commit to such an important goal.”

Summing Up Our Hopes for the Road Ahead

We know that some of New Hampshire’s largest and most diverse schools, as well as its smaller, less diverse schools, continue to struggle with their growing “immigrant student problem.” CHS school leaders and teachers are continuing to work to expand and improve the quality of their programs and practices to ensure that every child has a fair chance for a good education. Simple strategies like those used effectively with young children that incorporate children’s strengths and the arts and tap into native-born students’ immigrant heritages can offer great practices that can be effective for students of all ages.

We hope that this article will bring some hope and new ideas to school leaders who believe in the promise of America as a beacon for those who seek freedom, dignity, and respect. We hope that the obvious choice of New Hampshire school leaders will be to commit to putting a halt to the marginalization and isolation of new American students and *all* students who may be viewed as somehow “different.” We hope that the stories of educational leadership and schools that are striving to do the right thing by all of their students will serve as models, resources, and inspiration for those seeking a better road forward when it comes to doing our best for new American students and all of our students.

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