

The Key Role of the Administrator in the Success of the ESL Programme

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A successful spring 2002 ESLMT conference points to the need on the part of many international schools for strong backup and support from administrators, as one of the organizers reports.

At a recent conference on the subject of ESL and Mother Tongue teaching, colleagues from over forty European international schools talked about just how difficult it is to get administrators to acknowledge and listen to their problems, let alone act on them. The problems that ESL teachers face everyday are many, but a good solution is often out of their hands, and those who could solve them - usually the school's Head - are not informed about research on second language acquisition and bilingualism; in fact, the latter is still a 'dirty word' in many international schools. 'We are not a bilingual school but an international one', is an explanation one hears from time to time. Surely these two terms are not mutually exclusive, but rather part and parcel of the same thing.

The research to support this contention has been in the public domain for more than thirty years and is confirmed and reconfirmed on a regular basis. According to Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas, whose monumental five-year study is simply the latest of these, bilingually schooled children outperform their monolingual peers in academic achievement in all subject areas after four to seven years of dual language schooling, if the programme is well implemented, not segregated and sustained long enough to close the achievement gap between English language learners and native language speakers. And, while it is true that many international schools could not run a bilingual programme in the usual sense of that phrase, the inclusion or enhancement of Mother Tongue programmes can go a long way to bridging the chasm between the classic bilingual programme and what is happening in international schools. They are feasible: several international schools have impressive Mother Tongue programmes - one includes as many as eighteen mother tongue language classes in its regular primary school schedule! Not all administrators, however, are aware of the benefits that would accrue to their young children if such a programme were implemented.

In order to close this information gap, the Committee sent out a letter inviting administrators to attend the latest ECIS ESLMT conference in Leysin in the spring of 2002. The biggest names in the field were present. Only one international school administrator attended. Similarly, at the ECIS November conference some months later, Dr. Deborah Short led a session aimed at administrators and policymakers based on the relevance of the Collier/Thomas research. There were only four administrators present. ESL is an integral part of every strand and subject in an international curriculum - this can be said of no other subject area - so it is difficult to understand why administrators have not availed themselves of these opportunities. ESL teachers must not be discouraged, however, and should continue to make such in-service opportunities available to administrators.

If we are to have programmes that are effective, international schools must, of course, allocate sufficient funds for them, but the practice of having parents pay for their children's ESL lessons over and above tuition fees is another embarrassment to ESL professionals because, many feel, it flies in the face of their commitment to internationalism and to the children in their charge. A certain helplessness, too, is frequently felt toward the way in which the programme is structured. Normally an ESL teacher joins an international school after the programme has been set up. Then, from time to time, new research points the way forward and change is needed. But the ESL teacher frequently has no say in the way, or even if, the programme can change. Furthermore, in order to monitor the progress of ESL pupils and teachers, it is necessary to know the circumstances in which second language acquisition can flourish. It is difficult to know how administrators can properly monitor and support a programme when they are not familiar with the basic conditions for its success.

ESL professionals know that an effective programme needs the following elements:

- Informed leaders;
- Mainstream teachers who are trained in second language acquisition;
- A mother tongue programme;
- A parent body informed of the advantages of additive bilingualism;
- A whole-school language policy;
- A whole-school ESL coordinator;
- A well staffed ESL department;
- Liaison time to develop good home links with ESL parents;
- Planning time for ESL specialists and mainstream teachers;
- Class sizes that accommodate ESL learners;
- ESL classes that are taught at grade level;
- Parallel ESL classes in English and History;
- Bilingual emphasis (a Mother Tongue programme) especially in the early years.

So much of the success of an ESL programme depends on the administrator's awareness. As readers can see from the above list, their support is fundamental to the success of any ESL programme. To have an administrator who understands what is needed and is prepared to do right by all the school's children, irrespective of their proficiency in English, is a goal that many international schools have already reached. But it is a sorry fact, according to many of those who attended the ESLMT conference, that there are many more who have not.

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