

Our changing classrooms

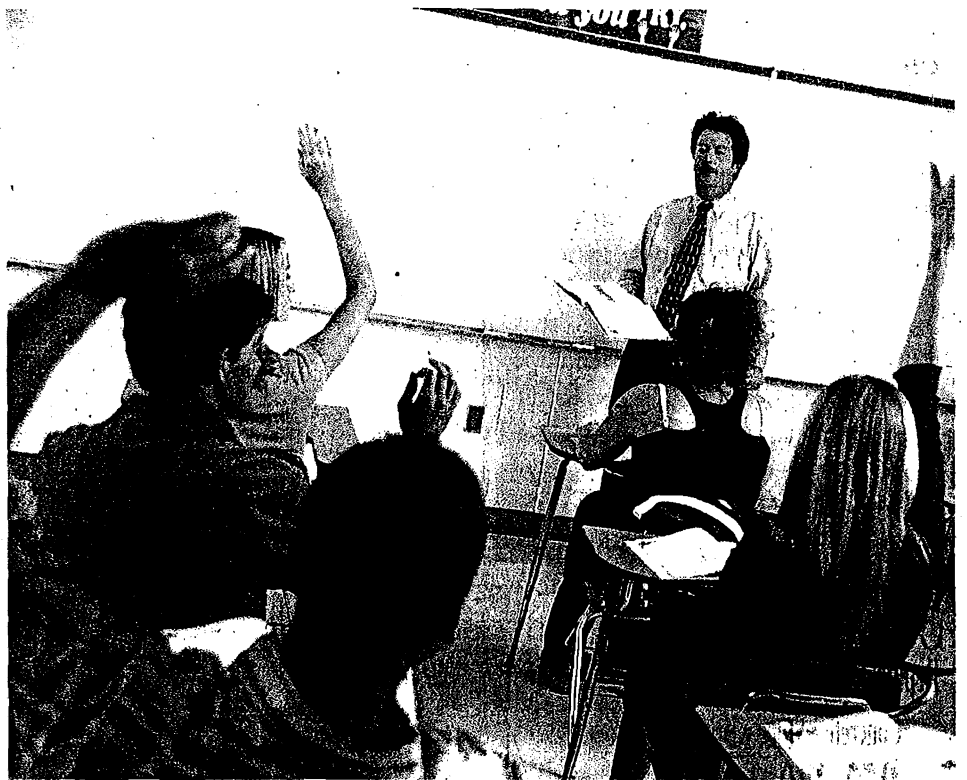
Parents may worry about the rising numbers of non-native English speakers in schools, but evidence shows that their inclusion benefits all students

BY LISA M. BOLT SIMONS

A friend whose children are approaching school age worried aloud about sending them to public schools. She told me that many of the students in her school district are not native English speakers. Because these kids are mainstreamed in the classroom, she seemed to think her English-speaking children might be left behind.

As an elementary-school teacher of English as a second language (ESL), I practice inclusion. This means I collaborate with the mainstream teachers in their own classes, instead of pulling out the English Language Learners (ELLs) for isolated language instruction. This model can be practiced in many ways, all of which have the ELLs learning the same content as their classmates, but at a different pace. Teaching strategies vary but always have language objectives as the main focus.

According to a February 2006 State Demographic Center report, 11,708 documented immigrants came to Minnesota in 2004, "the second highest in the past 25 years." In October 2005, the Minnesota Department of Education classified more than 57,000 children in Minnesota schools as ELLs. With the student makeup changing, parents of native English speakers might wonder, like my friend, whether their own children's needs will be met in the classroom and what effect the presence of ESL students will have on the school's environment and test scores.



About 57,000 of the 800,000 students in Minnesota schools are English language learners.

So many students are now bilingual and trilingual, and that language power they experience is with their friends and peers.

— VALERIA SILVA, ELL DIRECTOR FOR THE ST. PAUL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

First, most teachers are qualified to vary their teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of all their students. And, in a model like the one I use, with a mainstream and ESL teacher in one room, kids benefit from more direct contact with the two teachers. Karen Duke, an ELL resource teacher in the St. Paul Public Schools, adds that "the kinds of activities they're doing in the classroom

are going to be richer. There's usually a lot more language use and a lot more hands-on experiences than in a monolingual classroom."

Ann Mabbott, director of the Center for Second Language Teaching and Learning at Hamline University, emphasizes that students learning a second language "are just as bright as other children. The only difference is that >

they are becoming bilingual, which is an asset, not a deficit. Immigrant children can be a tremendous help in our goal of preparing English-speaking children to be global citizens, both linguistically and culturally.”

Ann Rummel, a 1st grade teacher at Centennial Elementary in Richfield, stresses that “the exposure to the diversity is such a positive thing for kids and for the awareness of what the real world is like. We have all of these cultures and people right within our classroom to learn about and to become comfortable with at a young age.”

“So many students are now bilingual and trilingual,” says Valeria Silva, ELL director for the St. Paul Public Schools, “and that language power they experience is with their friends and peers. By having the students integrated, they have more realistic views of the world.”

The 2005 data from St. Paul Public Schools on the Basic Skills Test shows that two-thirds of native English speaking 8th graders passed on the first try, as did two-thirds of students who qualify for ESL services, disproving the idea that that ELLs will pull down a district’s average.

The bottom line is that mainstreaming

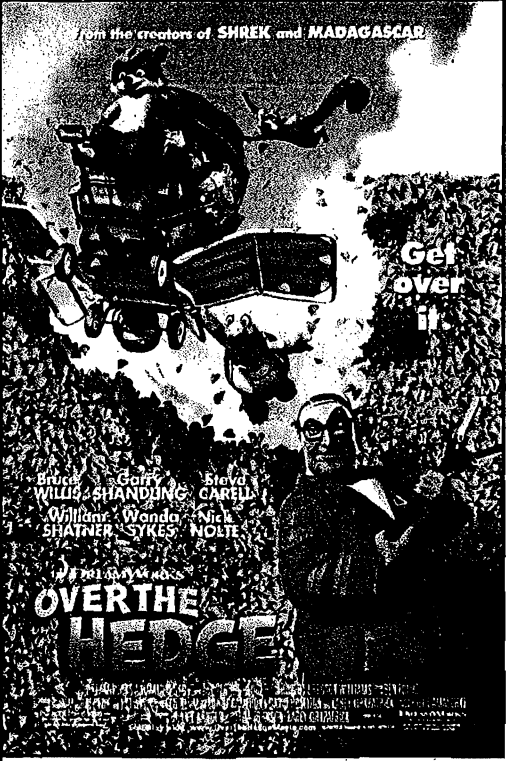
students who do not speak English as their first language in an inclusive classroom, when done collaboratively and following best-practice guidelines, is actually beneficial for all students. As Silva says, “We live in such a global society. Even President Bush said that whatever happens in the world happens to everybody. The students are not just from the neighborhood or other states anymore. Schools are surrounded by the world.”

Lisa M. Bolt Simons is an ESL teacher in the Faribault School District, a freelance writer in her not-so-spare time, and a mom of twin 2nd graders. ★

Two-thirds of native English-speaking 8th graders in St. Paul passed the Basic Skills Test on the first try; as did two-thirds of students who qualify for ESL services.

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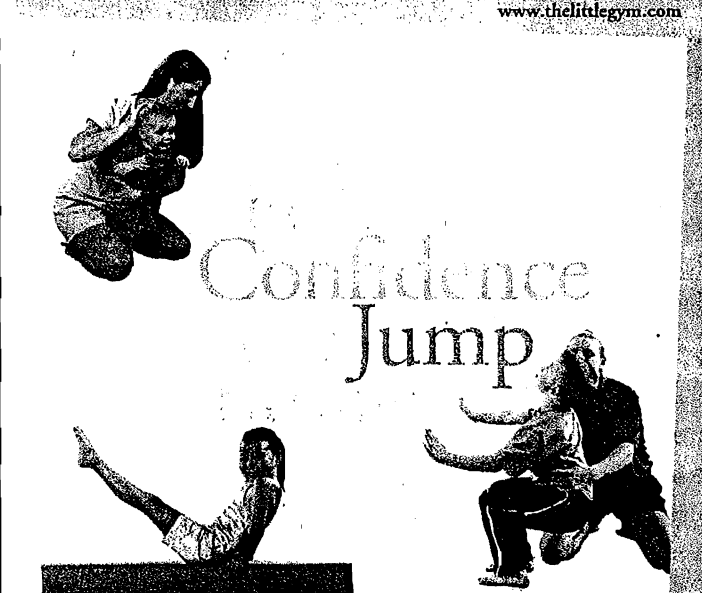
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