

# **The Case of Alicia and Kids Like Her**

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## **Introduction**

This story takes place in a low income urban area school which opened in 1995. The socio-economic factors and diverse student population of the elementary school allow students opportunities for multiple services as immigrants and English Language Learners in the school. The school has a population of approximately 700 students in grades K–5, and houses programs such as Head Start for pre-school age students. There are both monolingual and bilingual classrooms as well as one class of self-contained English Speakers of Other Languages at the fourth grade level.

## **Oh, Those Teacher Work Days**

It was the day before the kids would start school and teachers had already been back to work now for three days. At Lincoln Elementary School, the teachers have attended two mornings of staff training and meetings on new practices and procedures already. Today though, would prove to be one of the more lengthy teacher work days, as teachers would collaboratively analyze data on students' results from the previous year and look for common elements while discussing the students. They strived to close the achievement gap. The staff at Lincoln had worked hard to raise the achievement of a highly diverse population of students many of whom were English Language Learners (ELL) now over the last three years.

Tom Daily, the principal, who has been an administrator for ten years now, tried hard to stay positive as he delivered his opening message to his staff. He knew how hard they had worked the previous year to raise students' test scores in reading. The school district used the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) to measure the students' reading comprehension levels and the state reading test to measure what standards students showed mastery in. On paper, Lincoln's data show that their students in many grades were reading well below grade level. The school's scores were just not making the grade and Tom had taken on the burden of answering "why" to his

administrators in the district office by continuing to share with his superiors the many interventions in place at Lincoln for the diverse population. Tom opened the meeting by discussing the concepts behind No Child Left Behind and how the staff had an obligation to meet the criteria for reading set forth by NCLB.

*Tom Daily: "Well, good morning everyone, today we will revisit the criteria set forth by the state and national standards that our students are to meet in reading. We have our work cut out for us as we work together to analyze last year's test data and discuss how we will implement interventions that will help our students be more successful. Unfortunately, as in previous years, we have fallen short of making the cut-off for yearly progress at the state and national level for reading and math. This means that our school is on what they call 'The Watch List'.*

*Teacher 1: "Tom, what else can we do? We are holding before school remediation reading instruction and even giving up our lunch time to read with kids!"*

*Tom Daily: "We need to continue to try to find innovative ways to teach the kids until they do meet grade level reading expectations. They need to meet the standards all their peers do and we can't set our standard for them lower than that or make any exceptions."*

*Teacher 2: "Is that really fair considering they don't speak English as their first language?"*

*Tom Daily: "Yes, it is fair. We can't set our standards differently for different children. As educators we have a duty to make sure ALL kids meet high standards."*

Tom believed that high expectations for students was a must and knew the emphasis he offered should help convey this concept to parents and students.

*Tom Daily: "ELL learners must show mastery of all skills and we need to make sure that students pass the state standards testing this year and meet the DRA criterion. No child is exempt from testing anymore and that includes all ELL students."*

Tom thought to himself that if the school did not meet the criteria set forth by the district on students' reading levels that he and his teachers could possibly be removed and relocated to other schools.

### **The Night Before School Begins**

It was the night before school would start and Alicia Rodriguez was entering the fourth grade. She had spent her summer attending every summer school program offered for English Language Learners. With school starting tomorrow, she was excited, but also a little apprehensive, because she knew she did not pass her state standard reading test last year. What does not passing the test mean? Will she ever pass the tests like the English speaking kids? What will her teacher think of her for not passing her test? Will she even know? Alicia knew she was smart, but the state standard reading test said she was a failure and last year her DRA reading scores were lower than the other kids.

Alicia went to sleep with butterflies in her stomach anticipating the first day of school. She had many fears about the new school year and one was being labeled "dumb" for not passing the state reading test.

Alicia's mother had just peeked in on Alicia. She had made sure Alicia's clothes were laid out for the morning, packed her lunch of a simple peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and was now thinking about how she wanted her daughter to continue to love learning and be successful. Alicia could be the first person in their family to graduate from high school and have the chance to go to college. Mrs. Rodriguez was a single parent who worked as a cleaning lady at a local hotel. She had encouraged Alicia, despite having failed every state standardized test, to seize every opportunity to learn. She took Alicia to the public library when she was not working double shifts at the hotel. Over the past three years, she had signed every paper sent home for Alicia to attend programs to give her additional help such as before and after school help sessions and summer school. Sometimes though, it was hard for her to stay positive when she could see her child working so hard and never seeing the words "pass proficient" on test

results every year. Yes, she had this pit in her stomach every year, but she had hope for Alicia knowing the promise of what an education could bring her child.

Meanwhile across town in her small yet affordable one bedroom apartment, Jenny Collins, Alicia's fourth grade elementary school teacher, had butterflies in *her* stomach. She had completed three days of staff meetings with other teachers poring over data and statistics on their students' state standardized tests results. Spreadsheet after spreadsheet teachers analyzed all the scores of their students from the previous year, discussing what to do to help them be more successful learners this year. Their school had been a "failing school" for a number of years and had yet to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the ELL subgroup. Jenny who had only been teaching a few years had volunteered to be the Comprehensive School Reform Coordinator in addition to being a classroom teacher. She would have to stay upbeat despite the recent information conveyed about poor scores as she worked with staff to help narrow the achievement gap. For Jenny this was sometimes hard, because unlike some staff members and the school principal, she felt that the DRA was not a good measure for her ELL students' reading comprehension levels or their individual growth in reading.

Jenny, like most teachers at her school was inundated with data and exhausted from these three teacher work days. The meetings over those three days left her with little time to do all the things she had intended to do to prepare for the week and the children. The data weighed heavily on her heart and the media's pessimistic perspective about school districts not making the grade in her area also plagued her. Nowhere did the media ever cite that having a diverse population is what makes teaching a challenging profession today, nor did it say the tests on which the statistics are based, were written for the native English speaker. How does the public perceive this data which really did not reflect the good quality of teachers that really existed at their school?

### **Not Just a Teacher Any Longer**

Despite this, Jenny continued to be positive. She was not only a classroom teacher, but over the last few years has participated in a teacher research group at her

school. She had taken on leadership roles in her school, because she believed that she could make a difference for kids. She has been studying the dilemma of ELL students not passing the state standardized reading test and looking closely at the required DRA test students must take to show they are reading on grade level. She felt that, because they are designed *by* native English speakers *for* native English speaking students, the DRA tests did not show her students' success. She was one of six teachers participating in the teacher research group at her school, in hopes that their studies would be published to help others see how to create educational reform for diverse students.

### The First Day of Fourth Grade

The bell rings on the first day of school and all the fourth graders are seated in their chairs. Their teacher, Ms. Collins, has a reputation for being nice and working with all students to help them to be their best. Ms. Collins' smile makes Alicia feel relaxed right away. All the nervous feelings she had last night and those butterflies seemed to have melted away. Maybe Ms. Collins doesn't know that she failed her third grade state reading test. However, despite the butterflies in her stomach having gone, Alicia still has a look of worry on her face as Ms. Collins tells the children all the things they will be learning about in fourth grade this year. As the children prepare to go to lunch, Alicia is stopped by Ms. Collins.

*"Alicia, you looked worried this morning. Is something wrong? You should be smiling. It is the first day of school!"*

*"Mmm, well, Ms. Collins. I don't want you to think I am stupid or anything, but do you know I didn't pass my state reading test last year?"*

*"Oh Alicia, I would never think such a thing. Remember those tests are very difficult for all students and especially if English is not your first language. It just means that we will work together this year to make sure you keep making progress and our goal will be for you to pass the test this year. More important though is that you know you are a good reader despite what any test says."*

As Alicia went into the cafeteria, Jenny Collins, who has been studying the data on testing for ELL students, realized she had neglected to see one key effect test results have on children's self-esteem. She quickly takes the sticky pad she is holding, and with the pen clipped onto her lanyard and writes these words... *ELL-standardized testing- success in reading-self-esteem*. She was even more determined now to make things happen for kids like Alicia. Jenny began to ponder all the ways she was going to try and make reading more successful for her ELL students like Alicia. She decided to make the following question her focus for her research this year.

*How does explicit vocabulary instruction, instruction that is teacher-directed, sustained, and implemented daily, impact the reading comprehension of English Language Learners?*

### Three Months into the School Year

It is three months into the school year and Jenny Collins has already met with other teachers in her building conducting school-based teacher research. By now she has refined her question for her research on the ELL learners and vocabulary for reading. She found the meetings with the other teacher researchers to be supportive as she implemented new things into her instruction and a great help as she analyzed what data she has collected on her students. She wished that she could say the same of her last conversation with the school principal with whom she has always had a good relationship. It did not go as well as she would have liked when they discussed how their school could close the achievement gap and prove student mastery.

*"Tom, don't you think that we should be looking at some other measures of assessment other than the DRA and the state standard tests to measure the ELL students' growth in reading?"*

*"Well, Jenny, like it or not all the kids are held to the same standard and the bottom line is that the ELL kids will be measured the same way as all other students. They all will take the test. We need to continue to set the standards high for all our kids whether they are ELL students or native English speakers."*

*“But, Tom, it appears that they are always failing.”*

*“Jenny, I applaud all your innovative teaching methods and how you always believe in showing the positive aspects in student learning, but they all need to show reading mastery and pass that test in the spring. According to the district and state’s standards they are failing. We are measuring their progress the same as the other students and must set the same goals for all students!”*

As he walked out of the room, Jenny began to think about how she could possibly use her research findings on raising ELL learners reading comprehension to show how successful the ELL learner really was. How could the public really see the gains these children made if it wasn’t reflected in the standardized test scores made public?

*“Okay, boys and girls, we are going to do something new today. We have a collection of words in this special “Word Can”. Every day we will pick new words out that we will focus on and look at their meaning. These words are words you will see in many things you read for the rest of your lives. They will also be words that you will see in questions and directions on your state reading test.”*

The children were very excited about picking the words out of the can daily and in fact, it quickly became something everyone wanted to have a turn to do daily. Jenny kept the lesson focus for the words 20 minutes long, so that the children would stay focused. Her hope was that exposure to 50 words of high frequency, concentrated 20 minute instruction, and continually using them would increase students’ reading and decoding skills on the common reading assessment.

Alicia was one of the students who enjoyed the chance to draw the word from the “Word Can” and seemed to have found her place in the room now three months into the school year. Her apprehension to read aloud voluntarily had disappeared. Having a creative and enthusiastic teacher like Ms. Collins made a big difference for her progress in reading. For the first time in a large class situation with thirty-one other kids, Alicia saw herself as a kid who could read and be successful. She enjoyed coming to school

this year and showing her mama how she can read every night at home. This message is conveyed in a conference held between Jenny and Alicia's mother with the assistance of a translator. As Jenny holds her quarterly conferences with the children's parents and the assistance of a Spanish translator, she is excited to speak to all the parents about their children's success thus far. As the conference progresses, the translator speaking first to Alicia's mother in Spanish then to Jenny in English conveys the thoughts of Alicia's mother to Jenny.

**Translator:**

*"Alicia's mother wants to let you know that her daughter has never been so excited about reading before. She thinks it is all because of you. Alicia comes home every day and reads to her mother in English. She then explains what it means to her mama in Spanish."*

**Jenny then asks the translator to say this in Spanish:**

*"Well thank you, but hasn't she enjoyed reading and school before?"*

**Translator:**

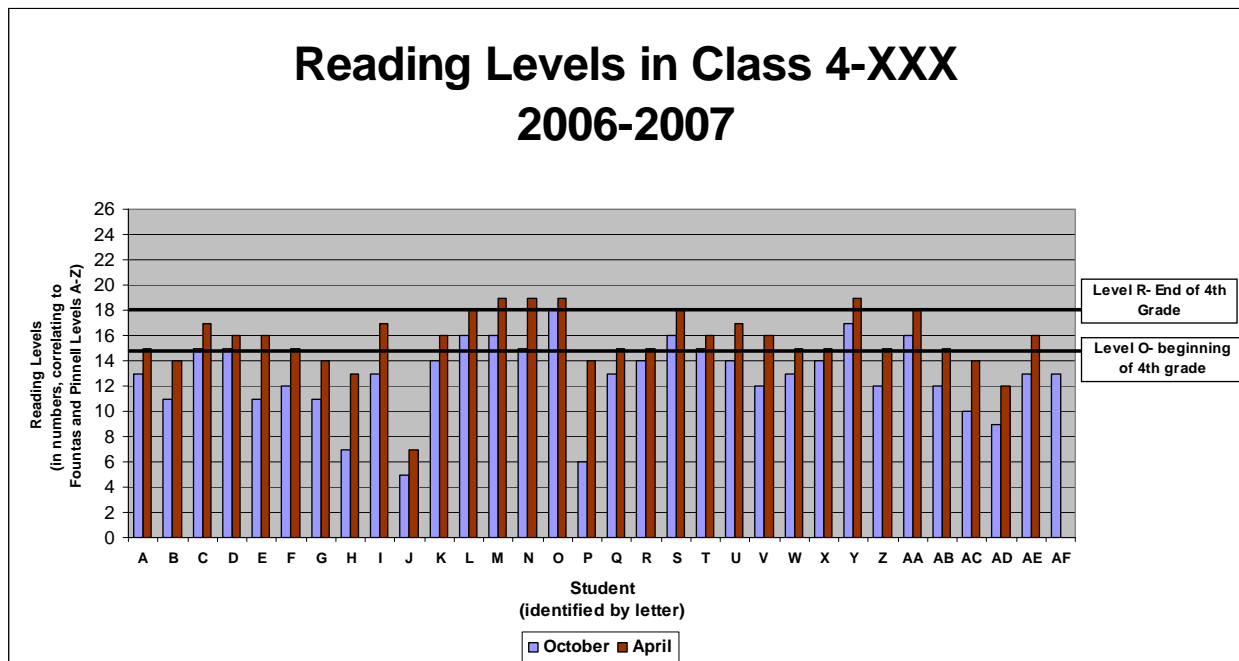
*"She says some years, but Alicia has felt very lost with no additional assistance to help her and the large class size made it difficult for her to ask for help or understand how to become a better reader. She was very worried that this year was going to be the same. Especially when she saw Alicia had failed her state reading test. It seems like Alicia just works so hard and never passes."*

Jenny was pleased with her conferences with all her students' parents. With the assistance of a translator, she was able to show the children's parents how they could help their children despite not being fluent in English. She knew that even though conferences with translators took twice as long as the average conference with an English speaking parent it was well worth the time. Jenny felt that communication with all parents was essential to their progress academically and that this was a key piece for making her ELL students become successful readers.

## Time for the Assessments

Jenny continued to use high frequency word vocabulary lessons throughout the year. In addition she had been able to get the kids to identify the same fifty key words in things they read and in isolation. By May, she felt good about the progress she saw in her individual running records on all thirty-two of her ELL learners. The telling factor, however would be how they did on their DRA test.

When Jenny finished assessing her student for the DRA she made a graph to see their progress so that she could use this data to help her make some last minute adjustments in instruction just prior to the state reading test. Here is what Jenny found.



Her data showed that many of her students had grown in reading level using the method of repeated key vocabulary and the twenty minute lessons daily focusing on this vocabulary. However, there were some students who were not reading on grade level and this troubled Jenny knowing that they too would have to take the state standardized fourth grade reading test.

## State Testing Day

It was state testing day in Jenny Collin's fourth grade classroom. The pencils were sharpened, the test booklets laid out, and the desks were separated. It was now

up to the kids to do the best that they could. Jenny knew there would be some who had no problems with the test based on their progress made over the year, but she also knew that there would be some who would struggle with the test. She had her tissues prepared for the child who may start to cry during the test and her “positive outlook hat” on for the child who decided they just didn’t want to finish the test.

Students took the test in the time designated. Even Alicia shot her a smile every now and then during the test. Jenny was glad it was over. She had feelings of excitement about seeing how they did when she returned in August to work, but also felt apprehensive knowing there might be those who did not pass.

### The Last Day of Fourth Grade

It was the last day of fourth grade and the children were packing up their items getting ready to go home for the summer. Looking back on the year Jenny had seen them grow so much socially, emotionally, and academically. They had grown together throughout the year. She had learned so much from them about why reading was difficult for them in the past and how just being supportive and communicating with their parents made all the difference in their progress. More importantly, she felt that providing that key vocabulary focus with high frequency words was an element to making them feel and be successful as readers.

As the kids were waiting to be dismissed Alicia came up to Jenny.

*“Ms. Collins.”*

*“Yes, Alicia”*

*“I am so sad to leave you and well, I will miss you.”*

*“Oh, Alicia, I will miss you too.”*

After the last student had left, Jenny sat down for the first time all day and decided to open a note left on her desk. It was sealed in an envelope with beautiful butterfly stickers on it. The note read...

*Dear Ms. Collins,*

*You made me smile this year and helped me to read. Because of you I love to read **everything** now and I am no longer afraid to make mistakes. Even if I don't pass the state reading test I know I am... **A GOOD READER**. You helped me to spread my wings... like a butterfly.*

*I love you!*

*Alicia Rodriguez*

### Discussion Questions

- 1) How can public education continue to set high national standards with a diverse population without losing the significance of individual subgroups' success?
- 2) Should ELL learners be measured with the same assessments as native English learners? Is this an appropriate measurement for success for ELL learners?
- 3) Who should be responsible for setting the standards for testing and how should these standards determined?
- 4) What provides more validity for measuring ELL students' levels of success on-going teacher assessment or standardized testing?
- 5) What role can ELL parents play in their children's success?

### End Notes

According to an article by Mary Ellen Flannery, "Born in the U.S.A. and Other Things You Might Not Know About Today's English Language Learner," in *NEA Magazine's* January/February 2009 issue, today's English Second Language Learners are students born in America. Contrary to what the public thinks they are not illegal immigrants who have crossed the border nor are they here for asylum as their parents may have been. This generation of English Language Learners could hold in it a future president of the United States. Yet, despite being native born Americans, they hold many of the same academic struggles as their first-generation immigrants parents. Recent research does show, however, that they are more likely to be successful with

the right support, differentiated instruction, and proper interpretation of their individual success in the classroom. (*NEA Today*, January/February 2009. pp. 24-29) As we consider current statistics like those recently reported, we need to keep in mind that teacher research helps to further the success of all students.

The teacher research used as the basis for this case details how one teacher's involvement in inquiry-based teacher research helped her to create a climate of learning to show the ELL students success in reading. She takes the key element of vocabulary and the way with which it is used in instruction to provide the opportunity for ELL students to be successful in reading. In Anokhi Saraiya's research, "The Power of Word Knowledge: The Impact of Explicit Vocabulary Instruction on Reading Comprehension," a close look is given to present assessments used to measure the level of success for the ELL learner and the impact of vocabulary. She looks at the continual fail rate of the ELL student and asks how she can change this.

### Resources

Flannery, Mary Ellen. "Born in the U.S.A. and Other Things You Might Not Know About Today's English Language Learners." *NEA Today* January/February 2009: 24-29.

Meyers, Ellen. Paul, Peter, Rust, Francis. The Missing Link Connecting Teacher Research Practice and Policy to Improve Student Learning. Spencer Foundation Grant Funded, 2007.

Saraiya, Anokhi. *"The Power of Word Knowledge: The Impact of Explicit Vocabulary Instruction on Reading Comprehension"*. Teachers Network Leadership Institute 2006/2007.

U.S. Department of Education. *"Federal Law and English Language Learners: Some Legal Precedents"*. or U.S. Department of Education Kansas City Office: Office for Civil Rights, 10220 North Executive Hills Blvd., 8<sup>th</sup> Floor, Kansas City, MO 64153-1367.

Or <http://www3.ksde.org/sfp/esol/federallawandenglishlanguagelearners.htm>