IN YASIR'S SHOES

A PRINCIPAL GAINS INSIGHT BY SHADOWING AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER STUDENT

By Shari Farris

As principal of Roosevelt Elementary School in Spokane, Wash., I started my Tuesday morning like many others — on the playground, where, as always, I greeted parents and students waiting for the morning bell to ring. That day, I was somewhat preoccupied by the task ahead of me. To gain deeper insight and solve problems related to the increase of discipline referrals for some of the immigrant students at Roosevelt, combined with stagnant or declining state and classroom assessment scores for English language learners, I had planned to spend most of my day shadowing Yasir.

Yasir and his family moved to the U.S. from Afghanistan. Like many of the 43 immigrant students at Roosevelt, he and his family arrived in this country with few personal belongings but rich with anticipation of a better life. I had many opportunities to interact with Yasir's father. In addition to the phone calls and office visits to discuss Yasir's behavior, his father volunteers three hours a week in the front office at Roosevelt, making copies, preparing materials for teachers, and cutting art materials. The same

day he registered his sons for school at Roosevelt, Yasir's father filled out volunteer paperwork, explaining that he would like to work on his English skills while helping at the school. From interacting with Yasir's father, I learned that education is highly valued in his family, and they consider it an honor to attend an American school.

I wondered if there was more to Yasir's behavior issues and poor school performance than simply a lack of effort, classroom disruptions, and arguments on the playground. I had worked with teachers in the school on intervention efforts such as tutoring and detention for disruptive behavior. Having read about shadowing students as a way to gain insight into their school experiences, I decided to immerse myself in his routines, interactions, and relationships throughout a schoolday.

SETTING UP THE EXPERIENCE

My first step was to think through how to be a good learner as Yasir's shadow. As the morning bell rang, I quickly made my way to Yasir's 3rd-grade classroom. I carried a small notebook to write down thoughts and observations. At the top of the first page, I wrote my purpose and goals for this shadowing experience. In planning this experience, I had sought the advice of Yasir's teacher, Anne Bergman. Bergman readily agreed to my visit and shared her perspectives on the best strategies to make the visit meaningful but not intrusive. Because the students at Roosevelt were used to me walking through and visiting their classrooms, neither of us anticipated significant disruptions.

Before shadowing, I also interacted with Yasir, mostly at lunch recess, as well as when he landed in my office for being too aggressive in gym and spending too much time out of his seat in his general education classroom. I also called his father to explain what I was doing.

THE EXPERIENCE BEGINS

At 8 a.m., students entered the classroom, found their seats, and prepared for the entry task directions that were projected on a screen. I noticed that Yasir had a different folder of tasks to complete because he could not read the entry task on the screen. Yasir took out his folder and spent the next 15 minutes sharpening a pencil, tying his shoe, looking in his desk, peeling the paper off of crayons, and trying to talk to the student next to him. The teacher redirected him four times in that 15-minute period. While the teacher went over the entry task with the class, Yasir appeared to be completely disengaged.

Next, students were directed to transition into guided reading groups. They each had a plastic bag with books and a journal in them. Most students had typical 3rd-grade titles in their bag. A few students, however, had picture books in their bag. The teacher told Yasir to focus on his folder, which had one book inside. I left my seat at the back of the room to interact with Yasir and noticed that his folder contained a small picture book with words next to the pictures. I got the book out and pointed to the pictures. He was able to say the words with fluency; however, he quickly put the book away after I left his seat.

At 10, the ELL instructor arrived at the door for pullout time. As his shadow, I followed Yasir upstairs to another room. Yasir immediately sat on the carpet in front of the counting chart with four children from other classrooms, including Yasir's 6th-grade brother. Students spent most of this period repeating back what the teacher said or choral counting. I learned that this was their math time.

During the next activity, Yasir had to be redirected twice. The students took turns holding the pointer and standing up front. The English teacher then took items out of a box and had the students repeat what they saw: "hat," "scarf," "pants." The rest of the time, students worked on books about themselves. I sat next to Yasir as he colored pictures he drew of his family. On the page entitled "Home," he drew two buildings. The teacher asked Yasir to share his pictures with the class. He explained the top picture was Afghanistan and the bottom one was the U.S. I then sat with some other students, while watching Yasir. Clearly distracted, he continuously poked his pencil at the boy sitting next to him.

At 11, it was time to return to the classroom, where the students were heading to gym class. The students entered the gym and ran a lap around the perimeter. Afterwards, the gym teacher instructed students to sit in a circle, and then led the students though the nutrition charts, asking each what they had for breakfast that day. Yasir did not respond, and he was not asked about his breakfast. Next, students received directions for the fitness stations that they would do that day. Yasir seemed to like the rope climb the best and responded with a big smile when the teacher clapped as he reached halfway and then came down. After 30 minutes, the students returned to the classroom.

Back in Bergman's class, students were directed to get out their writing journals and finish a story they had begun. Yasir was directed to get out the same folder from the morning entry time. He spent the next 45 minutes drawing on his folder, talking with others, sharpening his pencil,

Roosevelt Elementary School

Spokane, Wash.

Grades: **K-6**

Enrollment: **440**

Staff: **80**

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	**71.4%**
Black:	**5.7%**
Hispanic:	**7.9%**
Asian/Pacific Islander:	**10.9%**
Native American:	**3.4%**
Other:	**NA**

Limited English proficient: **8.4%**

Free/reduced lunch: **60.9%**

Special education: **23.8%**

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and coloring on his papers. The teacher asked all students to join her at the carpet for a read-a-loud before lunch. Yasir sat on the outer edge and spent most of the time trying to attract the attention of other students. I observed that Yasir was not engaged with the story and was redirected twice by his teacher.

At lunch, I sat at the same table with Yasir, who talked and laughed with peers, then headed outside for recess. He spent all of his time in the four-square game and on several occasions became agitated when he was out and had to go to the end of the line and wait his turn again. It appeared that he did not understand the rules of the game. I could clearly see the look of frustration and anger on his face, and I felt frustrated, too. How was Yasir supposed to enjoy recess like other students if he spends the entire time frustrated and angry? From my years as a 3rd-grade teacher, I remembered that the rules for four square are often made up by the students and can change from day to day.

My shadowing experience concluded at the end of recess. I returned to my office and filled in my notes to keep track of what I wanted to remember.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

I had several insights from shadowing Yasir, which I intended to further investigate for accuracy and to help develop the school's professional development focus. I wanted to understand the implications of my experience on my leadership practice, overall delivery of services for students, and the motivational conditions for learning for Yasir and other students receiving language services.

First, it seemed clear to me that there was not enough being done to engage and motivate Yasir. I probed this assumption through reflection and discussion with other principals and teacher leaders. Allowing Yasir to disengage and receive perimeter instruction in his general education classroom seemed to exacerbate the problems he was having in school. I thought that Yasir's lack of achievement and engagement might not be related to his ability to learn, rather to inadequate opportunities to use his strengths, skills, and experiences, and to show success in unique ways.

A second point of concern as I reflected on conversations with Yasir's father was that in Afghanistan, Yasir was a good student. Although his lack of understanding English is clearly an obstacle, this may be exacerbated by limited positive opportunities for interaction with his peers and the teacher. When the gym teacher was asking students about their breakfast as part of the lesson on nutrition, Yasir was not asked, and he was allowed to disengage. Recalling information from a class on instructional renewal, I recalled that people who feel unsafe, unconnected, and disrespected are unlikely to be motivated to learn (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009, p. 2).

Thinking about Yasir's experiences on the playground, I wondered if he may need structured and supported play, some-

MAKE SHADOWING A PURPOSEFUL AND PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE FOR LEADERS

Often, principals and other school leaders would like to use shadowing as a strategy for solving problems of student learning but are unsure how to fit this practice into schedules that are already filled with observations, walk-throughs, and other classroom visit protocols. The key to successful and purposeful shadowing experiences begins first with establishing a clear purpose for the experience. What do you hope to learn by shadowing? How will you use what you have learned? The following tips may be useful:

- Research how others have used shadowing. Read articles about establishing the foundational trust with families that is necessary to implement shadowing experiences while remaining sensitive to any cultural implications (Baeder, 2010).

- Share your purpose, goals, and intentions with the teaching and support staff in your school. It is essential that they know that you are entering their classrooms for shadowing experiences as a learner, not an evaluator.

- Think about your evidence-gathering tool(s). Will you carry paper for note taking? Will you record your experience? How will you capture the verbal and nonverbal exchanges without intruding on the learning environment?

- Communicate with staff that this should be uninterrupted time. Principals are often called out of observations and meetings for various reasons. Be clear and enlist others in the logistics of the experience. The shadowing experience is best done in the normal flow of a student's day rather than broken up into chunks over several days.

- Partner with families to set up your experience. Seek permission from families, and clearly define your purpose and goals for the experience. Finally, close the loop with families regarding your visit. Debrief by offering all of the strengths you see with their daughter or son in the classroom setting, and allow them to ask questions (Ginsberg, in press).

- Share your experience with colleagues. It was not until I heard about the benefits of shadowing from another leader that I even considered the experience.

- Open this experience to teachers or support staff. Although the logistics may look different, the same outcomes (a deeper understanding of motivation and engagement) will result.

one to explain American games, and an opportunity for Yasir to teach peers Afghan children's games. To follow up, I suggested forming a playgroup with the counselor and carving out time in gym class so that he has an opportunity to learn American games, thinking this might decrease the likelihood of frustration on the playground.

From a professional learning stance, it seemed clear that classroom teachers need more opportunities to learn about ways to engage and motivate students who are learning English. Yasir's teachers, while concerned about his progress, had no observable framework that could guide their instructional repertoires. When instruction was ineffective, it was easy to resort to blaming students rather than probing their instructional decisions. With teachers as co-planners, I believe that professional learning will help teachers see for themselves how to adjust reading materials for more levels of challenge both in a learner's first language and in English. There are many students like Yasir who can read, even when they are not yet able to read in English. I would like to help teachers understand why it is important to strengthen students' first language while providing support for developing their English (Valdes, 1998). Providing students like Yasir with only a simple picture book will not engage, challenge, or help him sustain an interest in reading.

I made a note to seek out teachers to work with me on developing, with support from the ELL staff, ways to facilitate adult learning so that teachers can experience — through their own learning — the kind of learning they'll need to create for students. Ultimately, I hope that they will conduct their own research. For example, some clusters of teachers may want to collaborate on ways to understand how text in first languages can engage and empower students toward literacy achievement. Others may want to investigate the potential and design of playgroups that teach one traditional American playground game along with one traditional game from a student's first home. I also realized that teachers may also appreciate the opportunity to conduct their own shadowing experiences.

RETHINKING INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

This shadowing process taught me much about the experiences that students receiving ELL services have during their day at Roosevelt. As a principal, I had spent many hours observing teachers' instruction, examining curriculum and disaggregating data to try to make sense of assessment scores. However, shadowing offered an entirely new lens on learning. I found it to be more powerful than any other observational approach for understanding struggling learners. I learned things I could not have otherwise learned if I hadn't spent time as a learner in the seat of a student receiving ELL services. I now believe that as a leader, I can help teachers strengthen their instruction in new ways.

Finally, and especially important in an era where fiscal resources are limited, I believe that the lack of resources is not the primary problem. While sharing my experience with colleagues, I pointed out my need to get smarter about 1) how I structure students' days; 2) paying attention to students' interactions with teachers, peers, and the instructional materials; and 3) asking questions about students' levels of engagement. Initially, my instinct was to proceed with urgent caution. I realized from experience that a different instructional focus has positive implications for all ELL students but presents a shift in philosophy. One next step will be to discuss with colleagues how to engage central office staff that work with or within ELL departments in shadowing.

RECIPROCAL LEARNING AND LEADING THROUGH SHADOWING

When seeking to understand how best to support and engage ELL students in general education classrooms, teachers and school leaders need to step outside of the confines of the data conversation. Shadowing a student gives great insight into engaging, motivating, and sustaining learners toward academic success and meaningful relationships. This idea is clearly communicated in *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* by Lois Brown Easton. She describes shadowing as "experiential and, in the best of experiential learning, it is both cognitive and emotional" (p.197).

Shadowing students can have far-reaching implications for leaders beyond providing evidence to grapple with problems of practice and declining test scores. Additionally, the lens used in these experiences can serve as a catalyst for educators and leaders to consider how they can further use this strategy to examine the culture and climate of their schools and classrooms. As I did, other educators who have shadowed express how much students have taught them about the sense of belonging, engagement, and knowing that exists in their learning communities. Most children fail in school not because they lack the necessary cognitive skills, but because they feel detached, alienated, and isolated from others and from the educational process (Beck & Malley, 2003). Educators can gather evidence of the ways in which students are connected and feel a sense of belonging through shadowing events. Empirical data falls short when trying to capture evidence of student disengagement, isolation, boredom, sadness, and frustration.

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RETURNING TO MY EXPERIENCE

One week after my shadowing experience, I found a few precious moments to sit alone in my office. In addition to what I learned from Yasir, I thought about my relationship with Yasir's father. I am grateful that I have a chance to interact with

meeting, but many teams also use these spaces to stay connected in between face-to-face meetings.

ELEMENT 3:
LEARNING ABOUT TECHNOLOGY SHOULD BE EMBEDDED IN SOUND INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES.

Too often, districts purchase additional equipment and bring it into classrooms — and that's all; there's no sustained support or learning. Many assume that the presence of more computers or an interactive whiteboard will lead to smarter children and better teaching. This couldn't be further from the case. To ensure that this doesn't occur, we've framed the second year around a teacher research process that requires teachers to approach their classrooms as inquirers seeking out the impact of technology on student instruction. Guiding questions for this work include:

- Are the technologies and practices we are exploring making a difference?
- What does that look like?
- How do we know?

Throughout the second year, teachers look at their classrooms with critical eyes, exploring the impact of their technology with their students as partners. As one team leader recently described, the impact of this teacher research work is that our teachers are re-examining their teaching practice and making adjustments as they work to be more thoughtful about their lessons and activities. The technology use is secondary to this examination — the critical stance helps us all to be better teachers. And, as we require that all participants "publish" their discoveries, their learning impacts the rest of our school district, as well as beyond.

Our final guiding assumption involves the quotation marks around the word "publishing." Although traditional, print-based journals are still the most common genre that comes to mind when educators hear the word publishing, teacher researchers in general, and the Digital Learning Collaborative in particular, take a more expansive view. In fact, more common genres include conference workshops, district meetings, and digital genres like blogs, tweets, and posts on other social networks.

Too often, teachers are given professional knowledge to consume and make sense of rather than draw from their own practice to generate and contribute to professional conversations about teaching and learning. In the Digital Learning Collaborative, we are hoping to change this through practices that foster professional learning and support other district learning processes.

In a learning organization, everyone should be learning. The Digital Learning Collaborative supports thoughtful and intentional learning for students and staff.

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In Yasir's shoes

him each week during his volunteer time, and I am going to continue to think about a comment he made when I shared my experience with him. Jokingly, he asked, "Perhaps Yasir can shadow you now?" My response: "I believe that is a great idea."

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