Appendix C: Factors to Consider When ELLs are Struggling

The following bank of questions may be used to drive discussion with staff and parents/guardians. The school-based team should choose questions that best suit the learner’s individual needs.

In obtaining sensitive information, reassure parents that the information collected will be used to plan programs to support their child’s learning while respecting the family’s privacy and honouring its culture and traditions (Supporting ELLs with Limited Prior Schooling, p 26).

Personal and Physical Factors

- Has this student’s vision and hearing been checked? Date?
- Did this student reach normal developmental milestones (e.g., age of walking, age of speaking in first language)?
- How long has this student been in an English environment? (Note: It takes 1-2 years to develop basic conversational skills and 5-7 years to develop academic language proficiency.)
- Is the student going through the “silent period” of language acquisition? (Note: this may last several weeks or months.)
- How willing is this student to take risks in experimenting with English? Is he/she waiting to speak/write until it is perfect?
- Is this student tired? (Behaviour may present as a short attention span, difficulty concentrating, or trouble understanding what is being said.)
- Does this student have access to adequate nutrition and health care?
- What does the student do after school and on weekends?
- With whom does the student play/socialize when at home?

First Language Literacy

- Have the student’s literacy skills in all of his/her languages been considered?
- Have writing samples from all of the student’s languages been considered as evidence of literacy?
- In which language does the student express wants, needs, and feelings best?
- Which language does the student use when speaking to other children?
- How smoothly does the student communicate with elders using his/her first language?
- Did the previous school(s) and/or parents suspect a learning disability or special need? At what age was this noticed?
The Learning Environment

- (Directed to the child) Do you like school?
- What is the staff’s understanding of the second language acquisition process?
- How much support, accommodation, and time have been provided to develop the student’s English language proficiency?
- Does this student have opportunities to interact with proficient English speakers?
- How interactive is the classroom environment?
- Describe the student’s relationship with his/her teacher(s).
- Does the student have friends?
- Do staff and peers value ELLs as a positive influence to the learning environment?
- Does the student understand classroom routines?
- Does the student know his/her way around the school?
- Does the learning environment reflect the diversity of the learners so that the students can see themselves represented in the classroom?
- How do teachers treat 2nd language acquisition errors such as word choice, spelling and grammar (Note: constantly correcting the ELL may actually limit his or her development, increase anxiety, and discourage participation)?
- Can the student read cursive script?
- How well does the student understand the teacher? Does the teacher use a lot of idiomatic language or adjust his/her speech to increase ELL understanding?

The Immigration Experience

- Might this student be experiencing trauma (e.g., fled a war-torn country, or is known to have a history of trauma)?
- Might this student be experiencing culture shock? They may act out these feelings in class.
- Has there been a significant separation of family members?
- Does this student’s family have a support system in Canada?
- Is this student (and/or the family) experiencing stigma, stereotypes, segregation, or bullying by other students or the community?
- How has the move to Canada been for the family?
- Is the student misbehaving in the hope that his/her parents will consider moving back to their home country?
Family and Home Factors

- Describe the child’s behaviour at home with family and friends.
- What responsibilities, chores and/or obligations does this child have in the home? Does this student work part-time?
- Is there information about the parents’ level of formal schooling and attitude towards education?
- What are the parents’ occupations? Do both parents work outside of the home? Do the parents work shift work?
- What are the parents’ expectations for the student’s education?
- How involved are the parents in the school community? Have parents been encouraged to participate? Have barriers to their participation (e.g., language, time constraints, their own acculturation process) been addressed?

Cross-Cultural Factors

- Has consideration been given to culturally-distinct communication styles and concepts when addressing behavioural observations (e.g., no direct eye contact, not shaking hands, not speaking unless spoken to, personal space and physical contact, the concept of time, comfort with male/female interaction, the concept of competition vs. cooperation, verbosity, non-verbal communication)?
- How does this student’s culture view learning exceptionalities and mental health issues, including accessing help or sharing concerns?
- What is known about the student’s previous learning environment?
  - Do males and females go to school together?
  - Is the teacher the same gender as the students?
  - What type of instructional strategies are used (e.g., rote learning, play-based learning, cooperative learning)?
  - Are students encouraged to ask questions?
  - Were uniforms worn?

Sources:
- Thames Valley DSB Program Services. *English Language Learners – Special Education Protocol* (Sept 2009), especially for their work on Psychosocial Factors to Consider
- Ann Tierney, *Possible Reasons ELLs May Experience Difficulty Learning*