

Case Study: An Adolescent Boy from Poland



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Introducing “P”



P is a 13 year old 7th grade boy from Glogow, Poland. He came to the United States with his parents almost two years ago. They lived with a grandmother until last May when they moved to the northwest suburbs. When he and his mother came to our school to register for 7th grade, P (with his one year of English) translated and filled out the forms. At our middle school there are two teams; one serves the students still in ESL class and one serves the students who have totally transitioned out. At the beginning of this year, P was scheduled in all regular 7th grade classes on the 7th grade team that serves students in transition. Unfortunately, it took until mid-term for his teachers to recognize that he was misplaced. So in addition to being a “new kid,” P was in classes he could not understand; by this time he was a nervous wreck, in tears most days. Our 7th grade team serves the ESL students, and P was moved to our team. P’s transformation since he has been appropriately placed is notable. His true personality has shown through, he is more relaxed, and he feels like he belongs on our team.

I chose to interview P because he is the only student from Poland in our ESL program at this time. His group of Level II’s and III’s (the only three categories recognized in our program) is made up of all Spanish-speaking students from a variety of countries. While they are able to speak to each other in Spanish, P has no one in the ELL classroom with whom to speak Polish. We do have other Polish-speaking students on our team, some of whom have transitioned out of ELL and some of whom are American born, first language Polish speakers. These girls have taken P under their wings. They also helped me translate the permission letter for this case study, although my sister-in-law translated their translation. I also chose to interview a student from Poland because my husband’s family is from Poland. Knowing what I do about their culture, I thought I could better question P about his interpretation of the culture. Our interview took several sessions. P tried his best to answer my questions, but some of the concepts were beyond his English conceptual abilities. P’s comments will be found on the left; my reflections are on the right. I’ve tried to use P’s words whenever possible; they are in quotations.



“P” about “Over There”

When P talks about Poland, he says “over there.” His small town of Glogow is famous for a fierce battle in World War II. Although most of the destroyed downtown area has been rebuilt, one large building with a tower has been left as is. It is a monument of sorts to the war. When asked to compare his town “over there” and his neighborhood here, P had trouble finding the words. Finally, he said that thing there were more “nature,” but things here were more “CD.” When asked which he preferred, he said he liked both and a perfect world would have a little of both.

P’s town must be very different from the northwest suburbs. When asked to compare, he found it difficult except to say that things there were very old and everyone remembered the war a lot. P seems acclimated to his new town and a bit reluctant to talk about his old town. He expresses no homesickness, does not talk about old friends or family members still there, and seems almost uncomfortable with the subject. This reaction, combined with the mis-placement debacle, makes me wonder if P is uncomfortable with the socio-political status of his immigration.



“P” about his Family

P’s family is “his mom and dad and only him.” He and his parents arrived in America speaking no English. They have relatives who have been here about five or six years, most of whom speak only Polish. P has one uncle who speaks “very good English.” His father works as a mechanic at an all-Polish speaking shop; so he has no opportunity to learn English on the job, although he’s not opposed to learning. P’s mother didn’t work when they lived “over there,” but she now works as a babysitter. She is learning English slowly as the babies in her care learn to speak. She feels it is important for her to learn English so she can “talk to her kids.” P’s mother feels school is the most important thing, and she want him to be a doctor. She used to help him with his homework, but she can’t any more because of the language difference. Sometimes P will ask his parents a question about Social Studies (we’re studying colonial America), and they “laugh because they have no clue.” P’s uncle who speaks good English helps him with his math. P translates for his parents in stores. When asked if that makes him feel weird, he smiled and said no, that he “kind of likes it.”

Obviously, when they registered for our school, his ability to translate wasn’t adequate. P thinks that it was probably his fault that he was misplaced because “when they asked how much English he spoke, he said 50-50.” So, while P is willing to take the blame for something that wasn’t his fault, he is also enjoying being the translator. I think P misses his parents’ being able to help him; he commented again that “over there” they mostly learned about World War I and II, and his parents knew all about that. His English is improving rapidly, his mom’s English is improving slowly, and his dad isn’t acquiring English at all; the power in the family is shifting as P’s responsibilities show signs of “parentification.” The relationship between P and his mother has also changed; as she no longer is able to “coach” him with his homework, she has become more of a sidelines “cheerleader.” This, again, shifts power in the family.



“P” about Culture

Culture was a difficult topic for P. I’m not sure he understood my English explanation of what culture means. He also may not have had the English words to express his thoughts. However, it was apparent that any reference to culture, traditions, or celebrations had a religious connection for P. He talked about Easter (Easter Monday is a holiday and all the kids have water fights all day) and Christmas (Christmas Eve “Wigilia” dinner and opening presents at night) traditions. He said that they don’t celebrate Halloween (he likes Halloween here), but that in addition to Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, they celebrate Child’s Day! When asked about patriotic holidays, P couldn’t think of any. He said there was nothing like Thanksgiving or Independence Day. When asked what he would like his teachers to know about his culture, P mentioned the remaining bombed out building in his town again. He said he thinks it is important to have “stuff” like that to remember.

P’s cultural experiences are apparently tied to his Catholicism. I found it interesting that he could not identify even one patriotic holiday or celebration. I even asked him specifically about Polish Constitution Day (coincidentally, the parade was happening the day after we spoke about this topic) but he had never heard about it. Obviously, the remembrance of World War II is a strong cultural influence on P. I wonder is his town’s patriotic spirit was downplayed (or even lost) as a result of the Communistic rule that only recently was lifted from Poland. Perhaps this would explain P’s ambivalence about leaving his home town, friends, and family “over there,” and his preference for adopting the American culture.

“P” about School Here & There



When asked to talk about life “over there,” P first described his school. They had no lockers and carried their backpacks with everything in them all day. Each desk had a special hook for the backpack. He likes our lockers much better. He feels that the students behave pretty much the same but that the subjects are a much “higher level over there.” He said that the subjects were harder for him “over there” than they are here and that they were assigned a lot more homework “over there.” The best part about being a student here, according to P, is that there is not so much homework. “Over there,” they were graded strictly on participation; if he was called on and did not know the correct answer, he would get an “F” for the day. They also seemed to test the students orally. P. described being called to the teacher’s desk and asked the questions. He said he “couldn’t stand it.” The worst part about being a student here is the written tests, although P. feels he is doing much better here despite his being an English language learner. P. also feels that although the teachers there were “more strict, teachers both there and here show respect by giving lots of help.” He feels that teachers here give more extra chances and that it’s easier to ask questions of his teachers here. To P, school means ‘learning more things.’

P had much more to say about his school than about his home town which makes sense because to a child school is his/her world. I’m sure that an American student immigrated to another country would discuss his/her school more, as well. I would bet, however, that to an American student school would mean “a place to hang out with friends” rather than “learning more things.” P’s interpretation of Polish curriculum being at a “higher level” may be a result of our ESL program. P receives all instruction in English with the necessary modifications; he has no primary language foundation, nor does he attend Polish school on Saturday.

**P’s advice for teachers: “No homework.”

“P” about Friends Here and There



P seemed puzzled at first when asked what he did in his free time in Poland. After explaining that I meant what he did after school and on weekends when he was not doing homework, then he understood. He said they would play soccer in an empty area. They piled up stones to use as goals. He misses certain friends about “20-50%,” but says he doesn’t think about it much; he’s happy to be here. He thinks it’s better here because kids have more activities (clubs, teams) and more “stuff.” P feels that students (from various cultures) in our school respect kids from other cultures. He says he can tell because they act friendly and work well in groups. P doesn’t seem to take advantage of after school opportunities to make friends, however; he says he hasn’t been to anyone’s house and no one has been to his. In his free time here, P watches TV, plays on the computer, and goes places with his parents and their adult relatives and friends. He likes that because sometimes they play cards.

P seems to live comfortably in an adult world. The overall feeling I get from him is that he is just happy to be in this country. P sounds, perhaps, like a bit of a loner since he doesn’t seem to miss his old friends in Poland. When I asked him if they write or call or e-mail each other, he said no, that he doesn’t think about it much. P’s contact with peers at school seems comfortable for him. He gets along well with everyone, it seems, and is content with his school acquaintances. He does enjoy hanging around with his parents and their friends. I wonder if this is because it gives him a chance to communicate in his primary language. Considering the fact that our program is immersion for P, the only Polish-speaking student, he does have the chance to practice and develop his Polish language skills thanks to his contact with adults.

**P’s advice for students: Be happy you have lockers!



“P” about Bilingualism

P feels that it is “great” to be bilingual. (The only disadvantage, he says, is when you “mix up the words.”) He can’t seem to imagine a world in which you wouldn’t need to communicate in Polish! He is learning some Spanish from his classmates and feels that is a good thing, too. I asked P if the Polish alphabet was much different from the English alphabet. He said there were more letters in Polish and many letters make different sounds, but it “wasn’t hard to learn.” I asked if he had any foreign language classes in Poland. He said, yes, he had English, but not American. He finds the English he had “over there” to be very different from American “over here.” The words sound different, and in English you “call things different names” than in American. (P gave the example of the word “trousers.” “No one calls them ‘trousers’ here, you have to say pants.” In conclusion, P says you never know when you need to talk to somebody in another language, so it’s good to know more than one.

I’m not sure I can top P’s comments on this subject; I’m very monolingual! P has a great attitude toward languages and is not at all embarrassed about his primary language. (I wonder if the Polish language has more status in our community, thereby not presenting P with a conflict.) I was delighted to hear that he is learning Spanish from the other kids. (Obviously the status of the Spanish language is not a problem for P, either.) P seems to have a great propensity toward accumulating language, although he gets frustrated when he “code switches.” When thinking over my questions, P was never too shy or embarrassed to say he didn’t understand. He took as much time as he needed to process my answers; I could almost see the thought process on his face. He took his responsibility of helping me with my “homework” very seriously.

Conclusions about P



I had a wonderful experience interviewing P and appreciate having this assignment to nudge me to do that. I have no doubt that a similar interview with all English language learners would be beneficial to their teachers. P definitely returned to several themes during our talks together. He mentioned the importance of World Wars I and II (and the bombed out building) more than once. When we talked about the history of Glasgow, P was interested in discussing the Chicago fire. We discussed how many things in Poland are ancient and how things here are relatively new. He has no sense of Polish nationalism beyond (or before) the World Wars, however. During Cinco de Mayo this year, I learned it is a Mexican-American holiday not celebrated in Mexico. I wonder if this is true of some of the Polish national holiday celebrated here in the United States. Regarding school, P quite often mentioned the strictness of teachers and the difficulty of subject matter in Poland. (He also is quite taken with our lockers.) I’m concerned about the lack of friends his own age, however, and plan to follow up on this with our social worker just to be sure. P seems very content in our school, both with the people and his progress. At this time, P feels half Polish and half American and is just plain “happy to be here.”

