

## **Closing the Achievement Gap for English Language Learners: Addressing Linguistic, Cultural and Educational Needs in In-School and After-School Programs**

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One of our English as a Second Language (ESL) preservice teachers, who has just finished her student teaching, recently walked into our office with a very important incident to report to us. She was visibly shaken as she recalled the incident. She had completed her student teaching in two different grade levels and was very concerned about her seventh grade placement. Towards the end of her student teaching semester she discovered that a new Hispanic student had been recently enrolled and placed into her cooperating teacher's classroom. Upon entering the classroom she saw the new student sitting by herself at the back of the room. She approached and began to ask questions in order to elicit some information. The questions were simple, including name, age, and former school. They were designed to establish the student's identity. The student could not respond in English. Our student teacher was initially surprised. However, in her limited Spanish she began to ask the student more questions.

It was at this point that the cooperating teacher informed her that she should not worry about this particular student. The teacher indicated that the new student would merely be allowed to sit in the back of the

classroom by herself. Concerned, the ESL student teacher asked if she could adapt materials for the student. The teacher again told the student teacher not to worry. The immigrant student continued to sit in the back of the room without anyone attempting to instruct her while other students (including those who were Hispanic) made fun of her. There was no attempt by the teacher to correct this behavior. Our student teacher was completely shocked by what she had witnessed and reported the incident.

Unfortunately, the situation described is not an isolated incident. These types of situations are occurring in many of our classrooms across the country. In this particular case the student teacher reported the situation. She did so because of her preparation as a future teacher, her courage, and ultimately her strong commitment to educating English Language Learners (ELLs) (Midobuche, Benavides, & Díaz, 2006). Midobuche (1999, 2001a; 2001b) stresses that there exists a great need in education for all of our teachers to educate every student who comes through their doors. A teacher should not only respect students, but also be aware of cultural and linguistic differences (Midobuche, 1999).

In an ethnographic study conducted in a bilingual and dual language setting Díaz (2001) found that a lack of literature exists in the education of Mexican immigrant middle school students. After studying seven recent middle school immigrant students for two years and using a triangulation method of research analysis, she found that bilingual education teachers in her sample lacked:

- preparation in bilingual education;
- second language acquisition theory and cultural knowledge;
- knowledge of pedagogy;
- teacher to student communication strategies;
- knowledge of heritage language use;

- strategies for validating the students' heritage; and,
- strategies for parental communication and involvement.

In her conclusions Díaz reported that bilingual teachers did not get to know their immigrant students and although they spoke Spanish, they deferred to their English-speaking students to do the translating for the ELLs and did not provide adequate time for these translations. Díaz found that the bilingual education teachers in her study were making a 'conscious' decision not to validate the immigrant students' heritage language and culture. Díaz also found that immigrant parents were making great efforts to spend time with their children, and that they were concerned about their children not learning English. Parents frequently expressed the sentiment that they wanted to return to Mexico because of the challenges of transitioning into the United States. The students in this study often felt isolated even from other immigrant students who had lived in the United States for a longer period of time. The following short story is a prime example of the students in Díaz' study.

Pedro is a dedicated worker as he works long hours every weekend to help his parents with living expenses. He tells his sister, who is worried about many things—only one of which is family finances—that he will also help her financially when he grows up. He tells her to ask God to let him become an adult soon, in order for this to happen, for him to be able to give her money. One of his journal entries described this wish eloquently.

### *El Día del Lanto y Dolor*

*Ayer miré llorar a mi mamá y me dolió mucho porque ella ha sufrido mucho por mí y mi hermano. La abracé y le dije que le pida a Dios que crezca pronto para poder seguir adelante y*

*para que ella ya no se preocupara por nada.*

*Entonces recordé las Navidades con la familia que vivíamos porque no teníamos casa. Todos habrían regalos menos nosotros y nos sacaban para fuera. Y mi hermana se iba a una tienda a barrer para traernos algo de comer. Ayer le dije a ella que yo recordaba todo y muchas cosas más y que estaba orgulloso porque estamos ahora en Phoenix. Y yo sé que vamos a ser felices. Le di gracias por demostrarnos tanto amor y lloré mucho escondido porque ella no merece sufrir.*

### The Day of Weeping and Deep Pain

Yesterday I saw my mother crying and it hurt me very much because she has suffered very much for me and for my brother. I hugged her and I asked her to ask God to enable me to become an adult so I could accomplish my goals and so she wouldn't have to worry about anything. I remembered the Christmas times with the family we lived with. We didn't have our own house. Everyone would open their gifts except our family and they would ask us to leave. My sister would work cleaning a store, to give us money to eat. I told her that I remembered everything she has done for us and much more and that I was proud because we were now in Phoenix. I know we are going to be happy. I thanked her for demonstrating her love to us and I cried a lot because she doesn't deserve to suffer. I didn't let anyone see me cry (Díaz, 2001, pp. 101-102).

Pedro's seventh grade emotions and thought processes are captured here in a very uninhibited manner. His journal entries demonstrate mature and considered thinking beyond himself. In the classroom, Pedro's attempts at 'schooling' are stifled by seemingly uncaring teachers. In his efforts to better understand a science lesson, Pedro asked a question in Spanish and was told by his 'bilingual' science teacher, "Speak English please." And Pedro is not alone. All students in the same science class are often given

'choices' as to what grade they want to earn. The teacher gives each student a sheet, written only in English, describing which assignments will be required for each grade. The students have a grade choice between an "A," "B," or "C." However, the "C" category requires the most assignments, and requires students to earn the most points—all this in order to "earn" the lowest grade possible. However, what makes the "C" so attractive is the fact that one of the assignments in this category can be done "in a language other than English." Students like Pedro jump at the opportunity to demonstrate what they know in their own native language (Díaz, 2001).

Many factors will affect classroom performance of future teachers across the nation but none more critically than the presence of children whose first language is not English. High stakes testing, No Child Left Behind legislation, the challenges presented by a linguistically and culturally diverse population, and high numbers of English Language Learners have combined to make many teachers and schools take notice of how inadequately prepared they are to handle linguistic and cultural diversity in their classrooms. While bilingual education and English as a Second Language teachers should have the academic preparation necessary to teach in bilingual education and ESL classrooms across our nation, the number of bilingual and ESL teachers needed to keep up with the growing demand will probably never be realized.

According to Boe (1990), the shortage of bilingual educators has been well documented since the early 1980's. Boe noted at the time, that no national database of bilingual education teachers was available to support refined supply and demand research in this area. This shortage was referred to by Gold (1992), as "the single

greatest barrier to the improvement of instructional programs for LEP students" (p. 223). Furthermore, the lack of a bilingual teacher supply is supported in studies by Gándara (1986), Macías (1989), Quezada (1991), Torres-Guzman and Goodwin (1995), Crawford (1997), Menken and Holmes (2000), and Menken and Antunez (2001).

More recently, the difficulty in finding and attracting teachers for bilingual classrooms was pointed out by Abdelrahim (August, 2005). Abdelrahim noted that huge efforts need to be made in order to recruit more minority teachers, especially teachers prepared to work with students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In a second report, Abdelrahim (February, 2005), points out that schools will need to hire as many as two million new teachers in the coming decade. She notes that this great teacher shortage will be particularly crucial in the areas of bilingual and ESL education.

Moss and Puma (1995) stated that the inadequate supply of bilingual teachers had forced many districts to hire and therefore rely on uncertified aides, whose only qualification in many cases was the ability to speak another language. They also reported that in 1991-1992 nearly three out of five ELLs in high-poverty schools nationwide were taught English reading by these paraprofessionals, most of whom had no education beyond high school.

Abdelrahim (2005) suggested that hiring teachers from abroad might alleviate the critical teacher shortage in bilingual education. Barbe (2006) reports that because of a shortage of bilingual education teachers in the Jacksonville (Texas) Independent School District, administrators made a recruiting trip to Monterrey, Mexico to recruit Mexican teachers. They eventually brought



seven teachers from Mexico. This trip was funded by the Texas Education Agency and facilitated by the Region 4 Service Center.

In a related situation, the Associated Press (2006) reported that Dallas Independent School District officials wanted to work with other urban school systems to initiate changes in the current immigration laws in order to permit them to hire college-educated illegal immigrants to address the growing shortage of bilingual teachers in their district. This request is in conflict with current U.S. immigration law. However, due to the great need for these teachers, Dallas school officials are seeking a means to modify the law.

It is apparent to many educators that there is a shortage of bilingual and ESL teachers. Therefore, because of this shortage, many ELLs will eventually need to be placed in regular classrooms with mainstream teachers. The convergence of this shortage and other factors has created a need to carefully examine what bilingual education, ESL, and mainstream teachers need to know about meeting the needs of ELLs. These needs will affect how best practices are incorporated into everyday classrooms across our educational landscape.

According to Murdock (2002), the Texas population will become larger, older, and increasingly more diverse in the next few decades. In his 'fast-growth' scenario Murdock predicts that Texas will add 29.7 million people by the year 2040. Under this scenario the State's population would be 24.2% European American, 7.9% African American, 59.1% Hispanic, and 8.8% members of other racial/ethnic groups. What should be of concern to Texas educators is how the Texas education system will respond to this population shift. Recently Texas Hispanic schoolchildren became

the majority in Texas schools. According to the Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) Report for 2005, Hispanic children numbered 1,961,549 compared to 1,653,008 European American children.

Both of these reports should prompt all Texas educators to address the specific linguistic, cultural, and educational needs of Hispanic students. While Hispanic K-12 students, many of whom are ELLs, have already become the majority in Texas, the Texas Education Agency (2005) reports that the number of Hispanic teachers in Texas is only 19.5% of the teaching force. The Texas Education Agency also reports that the number of identified ELLs in Texas has grown to 684,007. While this number is 52,473 larger than the number of children identified as actually enrolled in Bilingual and ESL education, it still represents a large issue for educators because there are only 24,790 Bilingual and ESL teachers in the entire state—or only 8.4% of all teachers (Texas Education Agency, 2005). As the numbers of ELLs continue to grow, meeting their educational needs will become a greater issue for all Texas educators.

At the national level, the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) reports that during the 2003-2004 school year, there were 5,014,437 children who are English Language Learners in the United States. Although gathering accurate data on ELLs is often difficult, the national growth of this particular segment of the school-age population has been very rapid. However, many teachers are unprepared to teach these students in their classrooms. The U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2002), points out that while many teachers report having had ELLs in their



classrooms, the number of teachers who have had at least 8 or more hours of training in the past three years on how to teach these students was very low. For example, according to this NCES Report, 55.7 % of Texas teachers reported that they had ELLs in their classrooms, yet only 17.9% had at least the 8 hours of formal preparation. Other states reported a similar pattern. Selected examples from the National Center for Education Statistics Report (2002) are as follows:

State	% of Teachers Who Taught ELLs	% with 8 or more hours of formal preparation
Arizona	67.8%	23.2%
Colorado	53.2%	13.2%
Georgia	35.2%	6.2%
Illinois	37.1%	7.1%
Indiana	29.0%	1.9%
New Mexico	64.7%	33.2%
California	75.2%	49.2%
Nevada	67.5%	18.6%
Arkansas	29.9%	12.5%
Louisiana	16.4%	3.1%
Oklahoma	32.9%	5.2%

Institutions of higher education (IHEs) have not helped to solve the problem because they have not offered preservice teachers very much in terms of helping them prepare for teaching ELLs. According to Menken and Antunez (2001), only a small minority of colleges and universities offer a specialized program to prepare bilingual teachers and fewer than 1/6 of the institutions

studied required any preparation for mainstream teachers working with ELLs. Menken and Antunez also report that in a survey for the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE), 169 out of 417 institutions (41%) reported requiring coursework on issues regarding ELLs. However, since those institutions with bilingual education and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs were also included in this survey, it is likely that only a small number of these 169 institutions required that mainstream teachers also take coursework for meeting the educational needs of ELLs.

The National Center for English Language Acquisition (2002) also reported that just over 79% or 3,598,451 ELLs in the United States spoke Spanish as their heritage language while the next closest heritage language spoken was Vietnamese with 1.953% or 88,906 Vietnamese-speaking students. In classifying ELLs and their heritage languages, NCELA reported a total of 384 reported languages spoken by ELLs in U.S. schools. These students bring a different set of experiences and perspectives to the classroom. The likelihood that any teacher will one day be teaching ELLs in a classroom is high. Therefore, if teachers have not had experience with ELLs or linguistically diverse learners, it is imperative to understand these students in terms of their linguistic, cultural, and educational needs. Teaching from this perspective is what Villegas and Lucas (2002) refer to as culturally responsive teaching.

Bilingual Education and ESL teacher preparation programs in university Colleges of Education must address those areas that Díaz's study found lacking and emphasize the practices that helped our student teacher to recognize and become responsive to that immigrant student's linguistic, cultural and educational needs. We

must ensure that as a minimum, preservice teachers are exposed to and understand the individual state Bilingual Education and ESL standards and competencies. This would be in addition to the TESOL/NCATE Standards for P-12 Teacher Education Programs.

TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) (2003) recommends that preservice teachers understand the importance of language in the classroom and should be able to create a language-rich learning environment in order to foster heritage and target language development among ELLs. Also, preservice teachers need to be made aware that students come to the educational environment with previously developed language skills and whenever possible attempt to extend and use the students' heritage language for learning the target language and for learning in other areas.

TESOL also stresses culture. Preservice teachers should know that diversity is an asset and respond positively to it. Teachers need to know that all students can learn when cultural factors are recognized, respected, and accommodated. This could also be integrated into their teaching (TESOL, 2003). Preservice teachers can also plan for multi-level classrooms using standards-based ESL in content curriculum and that these classrooms should also be supportive in positive climates for language learners. Preservice teachers can also serve as professional resources, advocate for ELLs, and build partnerships with the students' families. These professional educators need to have preparation in order to be able to assess ELLs' content area achievement independently from their language ability and adapt materials at varying stages of language development (TESOL, 2003).

All standards for teaching are important. These are mentioned merely as examples. It is important to understand that many preservice teachers as well as other mainstream teachers have access to this type of preparation. It is at this critical stage that institutions of higher education must step in to ensure that all teachers receive the type of preparation that will include careful attention to standards and competencies that pinpoint the particular needs of English Language Learners. It is vital for the education community to come to the realization that much remains to be done in addressing the needs of ELLs.

Learning does not occur solely in the classroom. According to Gallego, Rueda, and Moll (2003), "schools may extract valuable lessons by attending to how learning occurs in places outside the traditional classroom" (p. 387). Therefore, there are other approaches that can be used to assist in the education of English Language Learners. Traditional classroom instruction can be supplemented by learning activities outside of the classroom. There are many approaches that can be utilized to add to what teachers are doing in the classroom. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (1993) states that "the time spent by a child outside school and away from parents may be greater than the time spent at school. These hours are too many and too precious to waste" (p. 1). Therefore, developing positive parental involvement is a goal that should be pursued in order to assist in the learning development of ELLs.

Tutoring programs can also be another means of addressing the educational needs of ELLs. In January 2005 the Office for Planning, Grants, and Evaluation from the Texas Education Agency conducted its first evaluation of the 21st Century

Community Learning Centers (CCLC) for projects funded for the 2003 - 2004 school year. Previous research on the effectiveness of after-school programs had been conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (2003), The Harvard Family Research Project (2002), and The National Institute on Out of School Time (2003) and has shown that these programs can have a positive impact on student classroom and out-of-school behavior, and on students' academic performance. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers program of the U.S. Department of Education was honored in 2002 for its partnership with the C.S. Mott Foundation in its efforts to help establish public schools as community learning centers and offer quality after-school programs for children (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The 21st CCLC Program is a key component of President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act. The focus of the program is to provide expanded academic enrichment for children who attend high-poverty schools, including activities designed to help students meet local and state standards.

In its first state evaluation report of the 21st CCLCs, the Texas Education Agency (2005) found that they focused most of their efforts on providing accelerated instruction and tutorials in basic academic skills--mathematics, reading, and social studies in addition to fine arts and sports activities. These activities were conducted in settings where the vast majority of the teaching staff was certified and where community involvement was present. The report also stated that the CCLCs were providing high-quality instruction with local flexibility and community involvement. Although over 33% of Texas participants in CCLCs are ELLs, more emphasis needs to be placed on addressing the linguistic needs of these particular students. An example of a program

addressing these needs is the Lubbock-Cooper 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC Program. This project encompasses five rural school districts in the Lubbock area. The project has a component directly linked to Texas Tech University's Bilingual Education and Diversity Studies Program in the College of Education. Graduate and undergraduate students specializing in bilingual education form a cadre of tutor-mentors who work with individual districts to assist in providing tutoring in mathematics, science and reading to ELLs in these districts. In addition to meeting the English language needs of the Spanish-speaking ELLs the project also has begun to address the linguistic and cultural needs of a German speaking ELL Mennonite community (Midobuche, Benavides, & Angulo, 2006).

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers Program is funded by the U.S. Department of Education to create or expand the role of community centers in providing academic enrichment activities to economically disadvantaged and other students in at-risk situations (TEA, 2005). One of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) provisions requires that school districts make supplemental educational opportunities available to economically disadvantaged and other students in at-risk situations outside the regular school day (Flynn, 2002). In the 2003-2004 school year the typical 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center program participant was economically disadvantaged, Hispanic, and enrolled in Kindergarten through Grade 5. Approximately one-third were classified as limited-English-proficient (LEP) and approximately 80 percent of the participants were classified as economically disadvantaged. It is important for Center and other tutoring personnel to know who the students are that they are serving. Often teachers and tutors are not prepared for the



challenges presented by the students in after-school tutoring programs, especially those who are limited in their English proficiency. These students are often at risk of being left behind. Tutoring programs should be aimed at helping students achieve the success that they often miss in traditional classrooms.

According to Resnick (1991), it is important to understand that simply replicating the classroom environment in a different setting will more than likely produce negative results. It is necessary then to provide students with appropriate tutoring opportunities that will result in positive experiences. However, it is equally important and necessary when working with ELLs to use approaches that are designed with them in mind. Gallego, Rueda, and Moll (2003) contend that non-school settings are appealing because of their suitability for addressing diversity without the usual constraints of school. After-school programs that develop dual language opportunities for students also offer the possibility of more success with English Language Learners.

Hernández (2003) maintains that ELLs can enhance their learning skills more readily by learning study skills. Pérez and Torres-Guzman (1996) found that study skills could help ELLs identify general learning goals associated with academic success. These goals can be as simple as setting aside a specific routine time for quiet work and study. Hernández (2003) also believes that children's academic success depends directly on their ability to listen. The skill of listening is important since much of the classroom learning depends on good listening skills.

Research has demonstrated that schools that implement dual language approaches in working with English Language Learners have higher success rates than with other types of programmatic

approaches (Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Calderón & Minaya-Rowe, 2003; Crawford, 2004). Dual language approaches, sometimes referred to as two-way bilingual "TWB" or two-way immersion "TWI," vary from community to community and at times from school to school. However, one of the highest performing programs is the 90-10 Model where approximately equal numbers of ELLs and native speakers of English are put into the same classes. These students typically begin their schooling experience by receiving 90% of their curriculum in the first language (for example Spanish), and 10% in English. The percentage of English is gradually increased so as to reach 50% by 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades (Lindholm-Leary, 2001).

There are other variations of this model such as the 50-50 Model and the Alicia Chacón Model in El Paso, Texas. As is implied by its title, the 50-50 Model integrates equal amounts of the two languages in its instructional delivery. The Alicia Chacón Model is described as a 'home-grown' model for teaching in three languages. It begins essentially as an 80-10-10 approach in kindergarten and eventually moves to a 45-45-10 program by 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades. While the decision as to which approach will be used usually resides with school board members and administrators, both models have produced positive results and surpassed other forms of transitional bilingual education. Both models promoted proficiency in two languages although the 90-10 Model developed higher levels of bilingualism and higher levels of Spanish proficiency than the 50-50 Model (Calderón & Minaya-Rowe, 2003).

It would be reasonable then to expect that in-school tutoring programs as well as after-school programs that allow for the use of

the native language in working with ELLs would also achieve a higher success rate. Bilingual education researchers have been able to establish that bilingual education programs work best at developing the academic use of both languages. Rolstad, Mahoney, and Glass (2005), state that bilingual education is superior to English-only approaches in increasing measures of students' academic achievement in English and in the native language. Although they point out that states such as California, Arizona, and Massachusetts have in recent years passed state laws by voter initiative, to either ban or severely discourage the use of native language instruction in their state school systems, teachers need to be knowledgeable of how to teach ELLs since their numbers are increasing despite the initiatives or bans. Also, research data by Cummins (1981), Ramírez (1992), and Collier (1987; 1992) suggest rather strongly that children in late-exit bilingual education programs seem to out-perform children in other types of programs, but especially English-only efforts. In light of the mounting evidence to support bilingual education, researchers conclude that teachers in bilingual education and ESL are needed now more than ever. For mainstream teachers, this means that the preparation for teaching ELLs is essential.

With the evidence in support of native language instruction for ELLs continues to be formidable, it is important to utilize this research in formulating in-school and after-school programs of the type aimed at improving achievement and closing the gap among ELLs. It is important to understand the student's language and cultural heritage in order to demonstrate a genuine interest in the student as well as allow the student to feel a sense of self-worth.

In summary, many factors affect the teaching of ELLs. These include the growing numbers of ELLs, the shortage of bilingual education and ESL teachers, the lack of preparation and professional development for preservice and inservice bilingual education, ESL, and mainstream teachers in linguistic, cultural, and content areas, promoting culturally responsive teachers, and the different types of programs available in dual language education. Since the typical participant in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers Program is economically disadvantaged, Hispanic, an English Language Learner, and enrolled at the K-5 level, the need to educate this large group of students is very apparent. The demographics of this group of students make it imperative that all of our teachers, schools, and community partners come together to ensure their success. In-school and after-school programs can serve to help close the existing achievement gap for these children.

Teachers and other school personnel working with ELLs must have knowledge of their students and language minority education in order to allow them to meet with success in the academic arena. Universities and particularly Colleges of Education must become more inclusive in order to attract more preservice teachers into the fields of bilingual and ESL education. Attracting a more diverse student body will allow these institutions of higher education to better prepare both preservice and inservice teachers who can serve as linguistic and cultural role models. This level of competence and understanding will help all teachers to meet the educational, language, and cultural needs of the ELLs in our schools. This will also assist in meeting the goal of producing more 'highly qualified' teachers. This type of academic preparation will ensure that

teachers are prepared to meet the educational needs of all students—including those for whom English is not a first language.

As the numbers of ELLs continue to grow and as we become more aware of their educational needs, educators can no longer consciously practice “a culture of convenience.” It is educationally and ethically wrong to expect ELLs to acquire a new language while not demonstrating value to the students’ own heritage language, thus allowing them to lose it. Yet when they become adults, society will expect them to be fully bilingual. This cycle of being deficient in both languages must be broken. We must place students in ‘win-win’ educational situations by ensuring that their cultural, linguistic, and educational needs are addressed by all educators, allowing them to be successful in both the English and heritage language communities (Midobuche & Benavides, 2002-2003). We cannot continue to have ELLs sitting at the back of classrooms being ignored. Today’s demographics should alert us to the immense need to change how we teach language minority children in order to avoid the mistakes of previous generations. Demographics should alert us to the immense need to change how we teach language minority children in order to avoid the mistakes of previous generations.

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