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A couple of weeks ago I had the opportunity to attend the University of Illinois Center for Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment (CREA) Conference. This was the first conference I ever attended where the respect and celebration of cultures was so intricately interlaced with the agenda. For example, the meeting opened with a welcome ceremony by Native Veterans who honored the land with traditional greetings and gifts for the conference hosts. This example of cultural celebration was one of many woven into and displayed throughout the entire event. It makes me wonder how, as educators, we truly embed cultural practices in our teaching and, more importantly, in the design of our educational system.

The keynote speaker, Dr. Manulani Aluli-Meyer from the University of Hawaii at West Oahu, spoke about “cultivating capacity” as one of many ways to transform practices. As I sat there, I was captivated by those two words, “cultivating capacity.” I repeated those words to myself several times; I wrote them down; I pondered them; I fixated on them—“cultivating capacity.” I considered the difference between teaching and cultivating capacity and teaching invoked a more negative connotation. Cultivating capacity felt more like working with the student rather than doing something to the student. The more I reflected on the phrase, the more I began to realize that as educators we should be cultivating the capacity for all of our students to learn. This implies a shift from sit and get teaching to the facilitation of learning through growing our students ability and desire to learn and explore.

As you read the articles in this edition of Curriculum in Context, ponder your own cultural competency and how you might “cultivate capacity” in your local arena. The theme of this edition is Supporting Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners, and we are proud to include articles from Open Doors for Multicultural Families, Whitworth University, and local educators.

The theme of our next journal will focus on the intersection of literacy and education and the many new terms and definitions of literacy within the educational field. Knowing how to incorporate cultures into instruction has been recently renamed Cultural Literacy. We encourage you to submit articles and book reviews discussing what it means to be Culturally Literate in the 21st century.
If high student achievement is our goal as educators, we need to have knowledge of our clients. Jacobs (n.d.) describes supporting students by saying, as educators, we are only effective if we know our students.

Each day as I work in education, I see the increasing number of students who come to us from diverse backgrounds. We are entrusted with their care and their well-being, and it is our job to teach and support all of them. We do not get to self-select who receives good instruction. Every classroom teacher who implements good instruction has become an ELL or ESL teacher. We are changing as our client demographics change. The U.S. Department of Education uses the term Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) to identify students who are either non-English proficient or limited English proficient in their communication. The term is also used to recognize students who come from diverse social, cultural, and economic backgrounds and often from homes and communities where English is not their primary language. Students who identify in these arenas are in all our classrooms, and we must have knowledge of them.

We need to recognize, respect and value our students and their backgrounds. In Educating Everybody’s Children: Diverse Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learners, Marietta Saravia-Shore (Cole, 2008) offers a multitude of research-based teaching strategies shown to be effective in supporting students from racially, ethnically, culturally, socioeconomically, and linguistically diverse families and communities. Although the strategies are intended for CLD learners, I see value in applying them to every student.

As I read her chapter, several of her strategies stood out, and I grouped them in my mind under the umbrella of gaining knowledge about our students:

- We need to have knowledge of and maintain high standards for all students. Students achieve more when they are held to high expectations.
- We need to have knowledge of all students, their individual needs and strengths, and share their concerns, hopes, and dreams. Students do better when they develop a relationship with their teacher.
- We need to have knowledge of and understand students’ cultures to comprehend behavior in and out of the classroom. If we recognize cultural roles and expectations of families and students, we can support the learner.
- We need to have knowledge of learning strategies and environments that work best for our students. When norms or interaction and communication are different from what students are accustomed to, they may feel anxious or confused. If teachers understand cultural norms and expectations, they can help students participate in effective learning activities.
- We need to have knowledge of students’ areas of strength outside of the classroom. Visual arts, music, sports, dance, and technology are some areas that may help discover and understand their interests and strengths. These programs may bridge learning and become opportunities for students to express themselves.

These are just a few suggested strategies which can be implemented in every school at this moment without any expensive curriculum or packaged program. Relationships and knowledge of our students are paramount as we move towards achieving excellence. Each student is a piece of our mosaic; they contribute experiences, ideas, culture, language, and heritage. Get to know them, make the connections, and gain the knowledge! Celebrate this opportunity to grow with your learners- NOW!

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Open Doors for Multicultural Families

With approximately 14% of Washington State’s total population being foreign-born immigrants (American Immigration Council, 2015), there is no doubt that schools within Washington State are becoming more diverse. Students from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) backgrounds comprise 43% of the student population (OSPI, 2015a) and are filling more classrooms every year. This is the case not only in general education but particularly in special education classrooms where CLD students comprise 46% of the population (OSPI, 2015b). Exploring more culturally responsive and effective ways to support one of the most underserved minority populations may be an ideology that is upheld by many educators and professionals; however, putting these ideologies into practice is the challenge that so many professionals continue to face.

To address the needs of CLD students and families, especially those who come from diverse immigrant or refugee backgrounds, requires educators to have more knowledge in ways to effectively support them. Thus, to equip educators with the needed tools and skills, it is essential, to understand the topic of cultural competency and cultural responsiveness when supporting CLD students from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. To accomplish this vision of achieving inclusive quality education for all students, educators must build a stronger awareness and understanding of CLD students and their families, understand the existing gaps between the ideals and realities of culturally competent practices in the current system, and explore ways to transform educational systems and practices to fully address the support needed for CLD students.

In this article, I hope to share the values, principles, and practices I continue to learn through my education and professional work at Open Doors for Multicultural Families (hereafter Open Doors), a community-based organization supporting CLD students with disabilities and their families. As an immigrant myself and a professional working directly with CLD families, I know there are still many avenues to explore regarding supporting special education teachers and professionals. Their challenge is to provide the best education possible for their students—a free and appropriate public education regardless of race, gender, national origin, abilities, resources, and support.

Cultural competency in education—ideal and reality

For many professionals, the term cultural competency may be familiar. For those who are not well-versed with the concept, cultural competency is often defined as the capacity to (a) value diversity, (b) assess and reflect on one’s values, principles, attitudes, behaviors, and organizational policies, (c) manage the dynamics of differences, (d) learn and share cultural knowledge, and (e) adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of the communities they serve (National Center for Cultural Competence, n.d.). For the CLD population, linguistic competence is also needed.

It is the capacity to communicate effectively, and convey information in a manner that is easily understood by diverse audiences, including persons with limited English proficiency, those who have low literacy skills or are not literate, individuals with disabilities, and those who are deaf or hard of hearing. (Goode & Jones, 2009, para. 2)

This awareness is an important starting point to help address the issues of power dynamics created by racial and cultural differences between educators and CLD students and families. When power among mainstream professionals remains unchallenged, educators contribute to the opportunity gap for CLD populations even when there are no intentions for harm (Johnson, 2006; Pon, 2009).

Understanding CLD students, their families, and their experiences

CLD students and families share different backgrounds including race, ethnicity, nationality and/or indigenous heritages, and socio-economic status (SES). They may also hold different religious beliefs, cultural values, and practices. Some educators hesitate to name these differences at first, especially if they have had limited experience working with CLD families. However, not acknowledging these differences makes it impossible to build cultural capital and sensitivity needed to support CLD families in ways that ultimately benefit the students. Because the majority of teachers often come from different cultural and racial backgrounds than the CLD families, it is crucial for them to understand how CLD students and their families are impacted in very specific ways. These may include systemic issues such as (a) the lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate resources; (b) their multi-layered minority status as a person of color, an immigrant or refugee, or someone with limited English; (c) limited resources for support; and (d) a person or family member with disabilities; and low socio-economic status.

Even within a community where families share a common language, there is strong cultural diversity. Parents and children with disabilities may encounter very diverse experiences. For example, there is a monthly parent support group for Latino families of children with disabilities at Open Doors. Around 6 pm, the meeting room starts to fill with the chatter of Spanish-speaking parents, many of whom just finished work or were planning to leave for work after the support group. At first glance, it becomes obvious that all parents
and even their children speak Spanish. However, immediately after the introductions, the cultural diversity within this Latino parent support group becomes clear with families representing different nationalities, dialects, values, and cultural backgrounds (e.g., Mexico, Honduras, Colombia, El Salvador, Argentina, and Peru, just to name a few). Some families have lived in the United States for quite some time while others recently arrived. Even the circumstances of their immigration process and their citizenship status vary influencing how these families advocate for their children’s services in the United States. Although everyone speaks Spanish, it is clear that not all Spanish-speaking families have similar experiences or need the same types of support for their students.

Even for an ethnic-based group like the Open Doors Somali parent-support group where families share a common language, culture, religion, and practices, the support needs of families varies significantly. Among the Somali parents in this support group, young parents who grew up mostly in the United States and are proficient in English expressed that they initially had no understanding of their child’s disability and support needs, or where to get information and resources. However, once they understood their child’s disability by attending parent education workshops on disabilities, IDEA laws, special education systems, and available resources, many began to advocate more effectively for their children. In contrast, Somali families who just settled in the United States require additional support in many areas. Outside of school, there may be an urgency to stabilize the family’s life circumstances with housing, employment, health care, and finances to make caring for their children easier. Some families have more than five children in a single-parent household and multiple children with disabilities. These parents may not have sufficient knowledge to prepare their children’s transition into school life or to navigate special education and disability resource systems. In most cases, many of them do not know it is their right as parents to request an interpreter for any communication with teachers. Instead, many believe they must use their relatives or their children as interpreters.

Even if a CLD family speaks English and fully knows what it takes to advocate, the parents may still encounter challenges working with teachers and resolving disagreements at school. It sounds natural for parents to stand up for their children, especially when their child with disabilities is not placed in the least restrictive environment, has not made progress with their IEP goals, or has been suspended from school without the appropriate evaluations and behavioral interventions. CLD students are more likely to be placed in inappropriate educational programs (Klinger et al., 2005) or suspended (US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2014). In Washington state, CLD students receiving special educational services are more likely to drop out (27.7% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 24.2% Alaskan Indian/Native American, 23.7% Hispanic/Latino, 22.8% Black/African American,) compared to their Caucasian/White peers (19.5%) (Center for Change in Transition Services, 2016).

However, this data does not fully capture the wide range of experiences of CLD students, especially those who may be perceived as “well-off” from the educators’ perspectives. Demographically, white students may also belong to ethnic minority backgrounds (e.g., students from Eastern Europe or the Middle East). Even for Asian students receiving special education, a student sub-group with the lowest dropout rates (12.3%), there are unique challenges and struggles beneath the “easy to work with” perceptions of educators and professionals. It is important for educators to acknowledge and understand the many differences and unique challenges faced by CLD students. Awareness becomes the key principle when exploring implications for culturally responsive practices within classrooms, school districts, and policies.

**Assuming competence as a key principle for inclusive education**

Educators and professionals work hard to comply with constantly changing educational standards and responsibilities. However, when they consider mainstream standards and practices as the norm, differences in the understanding of this norm may result in deficit views of CLD students and families, thus causing marginalization (Harry, 2008). The intent here is not to discourage educators, but to emphasize the importance of their understanding and exploration of the best practices to fulfill their responsibilities in the classroom and educational systems.

Dr. Jorgensen (2005) suggested that the least dangerous assumption for parents, educators, and professionals are a presumption of competence in students with disabilities. Such assumptions have the least dangerous effect on students as standardized testing and teaching practices constructed by able-bodied professionals may not fully capture the true capacity of the student with different abilities and strengths. This principle should be applicable to CLD students with disabilities. All educators should believe that students have capacities to learn and grow when they are given proper supports and opportunities, regardless of what is often considered barriers due to cultural, linguistic, or learning style differences.

At Open Doors, parents, staff members, and collaborating partners have witnessed CLD students and their parents demonstrate notable growth in knowledge and advocacy skills when given the proper supports and opportunities to learn and engage. It is hard to believe that among 20 students from Somali, Chinese, Vietnamese & Latino backgrounds who participated in the first Open Doors’ summer Youth Job Readiness program in 2012, were unaware of their own disabilities and how to communicate their support needs. Many were timid and hesitant to interact with friends and staff in the beginning. Four years later, these students actively participate in different community events and Open Doors’ workshops as volunteers. These students advocate and lead their own IEP meetings and pursue their own career goals in college. The majority of them get ready for employment through transition programs at school, and many who have already graduated now have paid jobs. I have heard many times that parents did not share the vision that their children are capable or able to be more independent. But through the opportunities for both students and parents to learn on their terms, they were able to succeed beyond their own expectations. All CLD families, like any other family, have a vested interest in their child’s education and will work collaboratively with educators to support their child’s needs, if the proper supports are in place.

**Standards to transform educational practices and systems**

To transform educational practices and systems to be culturally responsive and equitable, professionals need to be culturally appropriate and sensitive to the CLD students and their families. Family needs include accommodations such as language support by trained bilingual staff or interpreters, transportation stipends for low-income students and families to attend training or
workshops, and childcare and meals at parent training workshops. These considerations may seem like additional efforts and costs for many educators, but what may seem additional or non-priority to educators and professionals may be some of the most commonly expressed necessities with significant implications for CLD families. For that reason, it is important that school districts include a budget for interpreters, childcare, food, or any other critical stipends when applying for funding.

At both classroom and school district levels, Problem-Posing Education can also become a key for transforming the current educational system. While it can be challenging to facilitate conversations around topics of discrimination, Christina and Iddings (2009) argue that it often empowers students, families, teachers, and professionals. All can begin to question and take actions against oppressive elements of reality, address issues like bullying or disciplinary actions against minority students, or secure a budget to provide adequate support for CLD students and families. Such approaches within education would help develop the skills and knowledge needed for future educators or diverse school staff. Bilingual and/or culturally responsive staff can bridge the diversity gap between CLD families and schools. However, it is important to develop clear roles and responsibilities for bilingual staff and invest in their professional development. It is easy to overburden them with countless responsibilities forgetting to take into account proper compensation or professional development opportunities critical for their role as cultural brokers.

To bring about sustainable change for increased equity and access, it truly takes a village; therefore, it is crucial to hear the voices and needs of CLD students and families in school policies and practices. Change requires commitment and support from educators and school districts. Professionals with decision-making powers and responsibilities must ensure that the voices of underserved students and families are fully heard when discussing issues. All educators can learn from individual students and their families.

It may be intimidating for some educators to engage with CLD families, but misunderstandings and conflicts are inevitable when cultural and language differences exist. It is necessary for educators to become vulnerable and learn from mistakes made through lack of knowledge. At Open Doors, we continue to learn from both positive and negative experiences. What matters the most is action and effort to show that we genuinely care about the common goals we all have in education. Language or cultural barriers may become opportunities for educators to work with and learn from differences, finding the best practices for our individual educational roles.

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Miho Onaka is a project coordinator at Open Doors for Multicultural Families for the Multicultural Parent Training and Information Center Project. She received her MSW from the University of Washington and has focused mainly on creating more accessible information and resources for families of diverse cultural and language backgrounds with youth with disabilities. She has also worked collaboratively with Center for Change in Transition Services to highlight issues on working more effectively with diverse youth with disabilities and their families.

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Reflections on Race to Reach Students

Recently, one of my university students wrote, “I don’t think that much about my race. It just kind of is what it is.” This was written after I assigned a prompt from the book What It Means to be White by Robin DiAngelo. I asked students to reflect on race, consider how it has shaped their lives, and what it means to them as emerging educators. The importance of helping new teachers come to terms with their beliefs about race and relationship to equity pedagogy is difficult to understake. One reason is that students across K-12 schools in Washington are becoming increasingly diverse, both with respect to culture and language.

If educators are to successfully reach and teach students, they must analyze their own assumptions and experience with race to identify the best teaching strategies. This necessity of coming to terms with one’s assumptions and experiences is especially important for new teachers.

Two books that powerfully inform these issues include Dreamkeepers by Gloria Ladson-Billings and Other People’s Children by Lisa Delpit. Both were first published in the mid-1990s, but the quality of their content means that they have persisted as seminal works. They were updated in 2006 and 2009 respectively. These books offer critical analysis of race in the classroom and give examples of teachers who are effectively working to challenge stereotypes, expose racism, and engage students in learning, so as to achieve a greater measure of social justice.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) profiles eight distinguished teachers from both diverse and non-diverse backgrounds. One of the intriguing features of these effective teachers is they have different teaching and management styles, but they are all successful at teaching culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. One of the most encouraging and refreshing points from the book is that successful teachers exhibit various kinds of personality traits. Some additional points worth considering from Ladson-Billings include the following:

1. “When students are treated as competent, they are likely to demonstrate competence. Culturally relevant teaching methods do not suggest to students that they are incapable of learning. These teachers provide intellectual challenges by teaching to the highest standards and not to the lowest common denominator.

2. When teachers provide instructional scaffolding, students can move from what they know to what they need to know. Students are allowed (and encouraged) to build upon their own experiences, knowledge, and skills to move into the more difficult knowledge and skills which they bring to the classroom as a foundation for learning.

3. The focus of the classroom must be instructional. Although a classroom is a complex and dynamic place, the primary enterprise must be to teach. In culturally relevant classrooms, instruction is foremost.

4. Real education is about extending students’ thinking and abilities. It makes student learning a more contextualized, meaningful experience.

5. Effective teaching involves in-depth knowledge of both the students and the subject matter” (p. 134-135).

Lisa Delpit (2006) also contributes significant thinking on the topic of educating culturally and linguistically diverse students through a collection of essays. A particularly eloquent quote that summarizes Delpit’s thinking follows:

“If we are to successfully educate all of our children, we must work to remove the blinders built of stereotypes, mono-cultural instructional methodologies, ignorance, social distance, biased research and racism. We must work to destroy those blinders so that it is possible to really see, to really know the student we must teach. Yes, if we are to be successful at educating diverse children, we must do more than to teach the highest standards. We must accomplish the Herculean feat of developing this clear-sightedness, for in the words of a wonderful native Alaskan educator: ‘In order to teach you, I must know you.’ I pray for all of us the strength to teach our children what they must learn, and the humility and wisdom to learn from them so that we might better teach” (p. 183).

Through revisiting these two classic books by Ladson-Billings and Delpit, educators have a powerful opportunity to leave behind their comfort zones and assumptions and consider how they can effectively support culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

References


Emily Huff is on clinical faculty and serves as a university supervisor for student teachers at Seattle Pacific University. She specializes in equipping students with classroom management and conflict resolution skills as well as strategies for supporting and guiding diverse learners. Prior to teaching at SPU, she was on faculty in the Urban Multicultural Department at the University of Tennessee and was also a supervisor to student teachers at Vanderbilt University. She is a National Board Certified Teacher and has taught in the Tukwila School District at Thorndyke Elementary, at Zion Prep Academy, and at Seattle Urban Academy.
Preparing Teachers to be More Inclusive: The First Step in Addressing the Opportunity Gap

Forty-four Master’s in Teaching (MIT) candidates return to campus for the fall session. They just began their internship experience and now are eager to embark on the heaviest load of the program—11 courses and four internship credits. I teach one of these many fall classes: Culturally Competent Teachers (CCT). Our syllabus walk-through on day one is followed by a brief introduction which includes a reading from Julie Landsman’s 2009 book, A White Teacher Talks About Race. I then make a promise to ground our journey this semester in rich experiences with relevance and safety as top priorities. I hope to facilitate a semester of awakening in these future teachers that helps them become aware of the systemic exclusivity that takes place daily in K-12 classrooms. Teachers need to be aware of this exclusivity and lack of access so they can help close the overwhelming gap in opportunity. As our first hour turns to our second, we sit in a large circle sharing diversity issues and cultural awareness shortcomings we have already witnessed during these first few weeks back in school.

The Overwhelming Challenge

One candidate, Ethan, who is seeking a K-12 performing arts endorsement, relays a fumble that took place during Open House. A freshman student in his band class whose name is hard to pronounce has beautiful long, straight black hair. When the freshman and parent approach Ethan and his mentor teacher, the teacher refers to the student with a female pronoun, saying she is a quick learner, a quiet study. The father politely corrects the teacher, noting that his son is a proud Colville Indian and that he likes to keep his hair in the long tradition of his tribe.

In another incident, a secondary math candidate, Kassidy, describes how surprised she is that her mentor teacher spends more time discussing student home lives and siblings than geometry. Kassidy is also quick to relate that the sea of white poverty at her urban high school internship site is palpable. In her words, students wear the same, unlaundered clothing every day, always take advantage of the free, hot breakfast before school, and smell bad because of lack of proper hygiene.

Theresa, an elementary teacher candidate, recounts how surprised she is that she met lesbian parents of one of the most articulate girls in her second-grade class. Theresa makes it a point to say she is “not against that or anything.” She just “has never seen or met a lesbian couple before, other than on television.”

Alex’s voice shakes ever so slightly when he tells about how sad it is to observe a student in his fifth-grade class who is from the Marshall Islands. While the other students in the class feverishly compose stories about their summer vacation, the Marshallese boy sits silently staring in quiet embarrassment at the English words on the whiteboard that he does not understand.

Finally, Anna, a secondary math candidate, relates how she cannot veil her confusion during a teacher discussion regarding a transgender student. The mentor is trying to navigate how he will be able to abide by the student and their parent’s request to refer to them always using the plural gender-neutral pronoun.

These future teachers, all graduate students, stare at me in a daze. They too try to envision how they will properly navigate these inevitable student encounters.

“How will we ever get all of this right?”
“How will we not screw up?”
“What will happen when we do make mistakes?”

While I let them know they will make mistakes once they are in the classroom regardless of their preparation, I ask them to consider these next 13 weeks as a gift wherein we will become more knowledgeable and ready together. They are most worried about not knowing their students’ stories or their students’ needs well enough. They are equally concerned about what resources exist to support their efforts to help ALL students succeed. And finally, if they are able to get to know their students and access assistance, how will they find the time among the myriad other duties the teaching profession demands?

The Course

Culturally Competent Teachers (CCT) is a two-credit course taken by MIT candidates at Whitworth University during the fall of their yearlong internship. The course utilizes a text by Gollnick and Chinn (2013) and readings from Allen (2010), Samuels (2014), Gay (2001), and Gorski (2013) among others. The course is experiential in nature and pulls from candidates’ self-discovery, an examination of the literature, dialogue discussions, and course experiences that propel learning and growth.

The First Step to a Solution

Drawing on the research that says we must first reflect on our own cultural backgrounds and identify our own biases in order to become more inclusive (Allen, 2010; Gay, 2001; Gollnick & Chinn,
by looking inward. We do this through our first major assignment: the self-awareness paper/digital story. Candidates are asked to compose an autobiographical paper or digital story examining their own culture and biases. This models the importance of discovering our own and each other’s stories. Candidates are able to choose the product they most prefer, but the prompt that leads them through this work is the same: “Describe how your own cultural background, experiences, and/or faith tradition influence your perceptions, values, biases, and practices.”

We employ a safe-sharing protocol adapted from Allen’s (2010) guidelines for safe interactions and spend one entire class session presenting every story. Inevitably, candidates recognize similar themes; however, we also celebrate our differences. I encourage candidates to envision how they will create a similar learning activity in their future classes and create a safe space for their students to explore and publish their own stories.

Next we turn our focus to the cultural responsive/equity pedagogy/inclusivity literature, reading scholars throughout the remainder of the course. We explore beliefs in our American culture such as meritocracy, and talk about how this “equal opportunity for success” myth, in fact, leads to the exclusion and dismissal of those who are viewed as not helping themselves to succeed. We challenge the idea that one’s culture is only about race, ethnicity, language and/or the location of a homeland. We examine the concept of culture as intersectional in nature (Allen, 2010; Samuels, 2014). We look at our own race, gender, sexuality, religion, socio-economic status, (dis)ability, and language and consider those of our students. This concept of culture and focus on the individual story leads to different ways of thinking. Comments from one candidate underscore the significant growth that took place for her: “I am grateful for the expanded societal view this class has allowed me to develop. Too often, I believed being culturally responsive only applied to race and ethnicity. Becoming aware of my ignorance has helped me understand why these topics are so sensitive to the masses—we all are ignorant, to some degree, when we lack knowledge beyond our experiences. Having the opportunity to listen to others’ experiences has deepened my respect for others and the struggles they may have experienced.”

Additionally, we use the literature, our journals, and class discussions as a springboard to explore how the exclusivity of many students from non-dominant groups in our school system promotes a gap of opportunity. The course readings prepare candidates for several experiences throughout the semester. For example, we read from Gorski’s new book, Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty the week before we host students choosing to leave their traditional high schools because their needs were not met. Many of these students come from backgrounds of poverty. Candidates hear individual stories and begin to understand what skills and gifts these students can offer in the classroom. They also hear firsthand what particular needs these students may have. In addition to this special class session, we attend evening lectures focused on diversity and inclusivity issues; we participate in a privilege walk; we partake in a refugee simulation; and we debrief each experience as we go.

The Strategies

The culminating writing event for this course asks students to briefly describe their culture, relate how their culture feeds their perceptions and biases, and then articulate what culturally responsive teaching strategies they will employ in their classrooms to ensure every student has equitable opportunities. Candidates rely on the course readings and experiences. The top five strategies represented in their writings and in much of the literature include:

1. Hold high expectations for all students.
2. Use criterion-referenced or standards-based grading systems instead of norm-referenced ones.
3. Make sure all students can see themselves in the curriculum.
4. Make time and space to get to know every student’s whole story; create time and space for students to know each other’s stories.
5. Do not default to simply being colorblind.

My goal is to help future teachers become more aware of their own culture, their personal biases, and the subtle acts of exclusion that happen in K-12 classrooms. Most of these incidents occur by well-meaning teachers like them, but hopefully, they will recognize the opportunity gaps that exist. Armed with a new awareness, I hope they can and will become the first step in helping to ameliorate this gap, even if it means changing one classroom at a time.

References


Doreen Keller, Ed.D., is an assistant professor and the secondary coordinator of the Master in Teaching program at Whitworth University. After teaching in the Mead School District for eleven years as a secondary English Language Arts instructor, AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) teacher and site coordinator, and journalism advisor, she began teaching courses in higher education. She joined the Whitworth faculty in 2013. Her areas of specialization include best practices in teacher education, especially classroom management and cultural responsive teaching. Her research interests include place-based education and teacher-candidate edTPA preparedness.
The Potential of Project Based Learning and English Language Learners

Project Based Learning (PBL) has gained traction in many classrooms around the globe, from singular classes in traditional schools to entire districts adopting it as an instructional method. Teachers recognize it as a way to not only engage their students, but also to have them learn important content and success skills. There is a risk though that a project may not be rigorous enough and may not meet the needs of all students, including English Language Learners (ELL). The problem may be a lack of authenticity or a lack of intentional scaffolds. However, when designed well, PBL cannot only increase engagement, but also the literacy skills of students (Guthrie, 2004). Students who engage in PBL units retain their knowledge and show a deeper understanding of the content knowledge and skills (Penuel & Means, 2000). They also show improvement in the content area literacies critical to learning (Halvorsen et al., 2012). Teachers who use Project Based Learning see higher rates of attendance and more evidence of student engagement (Thomas, 2000). Clearly, there is a promise for PBL, especially for students who need support in language acquisition.

For a project to be effective, it must be the main course and not the dessert (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010). Instead of a project occurring at the end of the instructional unit, it is critical that it be reframed as the instructional unit itself. The project will drive the learning, and the teacher will teach the content and skills necessary to master it. PBL projects build relevance for the learning and situate the learning in a meaningful challenge, scenario, or investigation. An effective PBL project has a demanding problem that is expressed through a driving question which helps to motivate sustained inquiry (Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss 2015). The challenge and question is open-ended, complex, and requires higher-order thinking. Students receive on-going assessments, critiques, and feedback while they create a product to demonstrate their learning. Students are allowed to choose their product and its design. This product is the student’s answer to the driving question and they make it public to showcase not only their learning of content, but also their critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. It is crucial that ELL students get the opportunity to work at this higher level of thinking and use the academic language and skills needed for an authentic purpose. As Persida Himmele says,

Too many times in today’s classroom, ELLs do not get the same opportunities to develop those higher-order thinking skills as do the native English speakers. Teachers might have had initial experiences where the ELL or struggling student did not answer those comprehension questions well, and the student became anxious and unable to participate. ELLs need the same opportunities to develop higher-order thinking skills as native English speakers. (Allen, 2009)

In a PBL project, all students, including ELLs, are required to meet a high level of rigor as they investigate and learn. Student learning needs to connect to an authentic and relevant situation and the same must be said about English Language learning. Instead of simply teaching skills disconnected from content, the skills must be taught in a relevant and engaging context like Project Based Learning. One myth about PBL is that explicit instruction disappears and students find their information through pure experience. In fact, the contrary is true. Effective ELL instruction demands that students are explicitly taught functional language skills, and these skills are taught in the authentic context of the project (Echevarria et al., 2013). An effective project should promote social interaction in meaningful activities where students apply their language, knowledge, and skills. One teacher found success from a project she designed to teach not only content, but also language skills for her ELL population.

One Teacher’s Story

Ms. Trowbridge teaches 2nd grade at a Title 1 elementary school in San Jose, California with 87% students on free and reduced lunch. There are students of many ethnicities including Filipino, Hispanic/ Latino, and Vietnamese, and 67% of all students are English Language Learners. Ms. Trowbridge must constantly plan activities with her English Language Learners in mind, and ensure they will be successful in learning both the content and language necessary. She created a project called Digging for Dinosaurs which focused on standards and outcomes from science, English, and math. Students worked to answer the question, “What happened to the dinosaurs?” They wrote opinion pieces, created storybooks, made a dinosaur mock fossil, and modeled mathematical representations of a dinosaur’s height. Students presented their work to families and an expert paleontologist. To launch the project, Ms. Trowbridge set up an activity where students worked in the garden and discovered fossils she had planted. Students brainstormed questions of whom they might belong to and where they came from. They developed good questions that Ms. Trowbridge used to start the inquiry process.

Ms. Trowbridge knew she needed to build background knowledge before students could get started. She first gave

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intentional vocabulary instruction, and had them create dictionaries where students made a prediction of the word’s meaning, wrote the actual definition, and then drew a picture to depict that definition. In addition, she used sentence and paragraph frames to scaffold their writing pieces, as well as graphic organizers to help them establish their ideas and facts on their favorite dinosaur. She embedded her already existing curriculum using Daily 5 strategies (Work on Writing, Listen to Reading, Read to Someone, Read to Self, and Word Work). She scaffolded reading of short articles and storybooks in her literacy block and used various writing and math activities throughout the day. All these strategies allowed students to learn the content in different ways and to use their language skills in a variety of opportunities. Ms. Trowbridge reported that students were very successful in the project. There was growth in not only student writing, but students were able to answer questions around the content and verbally explain their reasoning. Students spoke with confidence during their final presentations and there was sustained engagement. Ms. Trowbridge’s project was notable not only because it was engaging, but also because she gave her ELL students the tools they needed to be successful.

**Strategies for Implementation**

**Create Meaningful Projects**

Teachers should focus on creating a challenge that will engage students. They should consider powerful action verbs in the driving question like stop, solve, raise awareness, and protect. These will help ensure students are not only learning the content, but producing work that is relevant and has the potential to make changes. A project can be personally authentic and connect to students’ interests or passions, or it can focus on a real-life problem or scenario (Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss, 2015). A project can also have students use genuine, real-life strategies that adults use, such as the scientific method or current technology. Background knowledge and experience are important ways to engage all students, including English Language Learners. When students see the learning as relevant, they are more likely to engage in acquiring vocabulary skills, language, and content needed to be successful in the project. An engaging launch, such as a letter, video, or simulation is critical to spark their inquiry and engagement.

**Unpack Academic Vocabulary and Structures Required for the Project**

PBL projects are planned to ensure a clear link to standards and learning outcomes. These learning outcomes are ripe with language as teachers design a project and identify specific standards and outcomes. They need to determine specific vocabulary, syntax, and language functions needed for the content to be accessible. This pre-planning can identify language errors that may occur in the project and address them not only before the project begins but within the project itself. The Digging for Dinos plan focused on several standards including:

- Next Gen Science Standard: 2-ESS1-1 Use information from several sources to provide evidence that Earth events can occur quickly or slowly.
- CCSS Standards: W 2.1 Write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic or book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply reasons that support the opinion, use linking words (e.g., because, and, also) to connect opinion and reasons, and provide a concluding statement or section.
- 2.MD.3 Estimate lengths using units of inches, feet, centimeters, and meters.

Ms. Trowbridge addressed these standards and planned for key vocabulary such as estimate, because, also, inches, feet, and centimeters. She knew she would need to model how to make a claim and support it with evidence. In addition, she realized students would need to justify ideas in writing and estimate measurements. Unpacking the standards ensures that instruction and scaffolding are planned to support students while they are learning language.

**Plan Daily Language Purposes**

In addition to content learning purposes, teachers need to plan daily language skill-building for students. These daily strategies can be anticipated as teachers unpack their project idea, but they should focus on daily learning. Language purposes center on academic vocabulary, including specialized and technical words (Fisher & Frey 2011). They also include language structure such as grammar and syntax, sentence frames, and signal words. Lastly, language purposes involve language function such as summarizing, questioning, or justifying, to name a few. As we examine the Digging for Dinosaurs project, we can predict these purpose statements. The question “Guess how tall a dinosaur is?” uses the words estimate and height. The language purpose connected to defending claims could include the sentence frame “In my opinion . . .” or “One piece of evidence is . . .” A language function statement directs students to “Justify in a paragraph how the dinosaurs became extinct using two pieces of evidence.” Here language goals are established intentionally within the project, and these purposes are scaffolded and assessed to ensure student success.

**Structured Discussions and Collaboration**

Collaboration is a critical component of Project Based Learning. Students are not only producing team products to show their learning, but also giving critiques and feedback to improve their products and ideas. In addition, students are more likely to learn and retain the content and skills for the project when they work in small teams (Dean et al., 2012). If teachers are assessing specific standards that address collaboration and communication, this is an opportune time for students to use academic vocabulary, language structures, and language functions in a meaningful discussion. As teachers set language purposes, they need to select collaborative activities and idea exchanges to scaffold this learning. Students should learn the language purposes set out for them, so classroom time must be dedicated for students to use the language. Activities such as collaborative presentations, discussion roundtables, and jigsaws within a project can ensure interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual and group accountability, and group processing (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Teachers need to build in specific time for collaboration in order to foster students’ learning of language. In the Digging for Dinosaurs project, students engaged in a Critical Friends protocol to critique their products using “I like” and “I wonder” phrases to build collaboration and speaking skills. Ms. Trowbridge designed an activity where the dinosaur bones in the classroom disappeared and clues were used to figure out who took them. In reality, the Principal took them, and he left clues like his walkie-talkie, his tie, and other
needs of English Language Learners. Through careful planning of daily lessons of the project, teachers should find creative ways to engage students in daily instruction that holds them accountable. These activities might include asking students to get up and move to a corner, think in pairs, write something quickly, or practice True/Not True Hold Ups (Himmele & Himmele, 2011). Not only are these activities engaging, but they are effective ways to check if students are learning both the content and language needed. In the Digging for Dinosaurs project, Ms. Trowbridge used notetaking forms in the form of digital blogs. She had students do quick writes/draws during think-alouds and readings, and anticipated what they already knew and wanted to know about dinosaurs.

Leverage Total Participation Techniques

Total Participation Techniques (TPT) are not only engaging, but they are evidence that students are learning and using the language connected to the project (Allen, 2009). When designing the calendar and daily lessons of the project, teachers should find creative ways to engage students in daily instruction that holds them accountable. These activities might include asking students to get up and move to a corner, think in pairs, write something quickly, or practice True/Not True Hold Ups (Himmele & Himmele, 2011). Not only are these activities engaging, but they are effective ways to check if students are learning both the content and language needed. In the Digging for Dinosaurs project, Ms. Trowbridge used notetaking forms in the form of digital blogs. She had students do quick writes/draws during think-alouds and readings, and anticipated what they already knew and wanted to know about dinosaurs.

Assess for Content and Language

Students need to produce products that will assess content and language outcomes. Teachers can create rubrics and other assessment tools to ensure that specific vocabulary terms, language structures, and functions are demonstrated in the final product whether it be a presentation, a brochure, or other choice. Of course, teachers need to be particular with student choices as the products should appropriately assess both content and language objectives. Similarly, there must be ongoing formative assessments to check for student understanding of both content and language. As mentioned above, Total Participation Techniques are one way to gauge student understanding along the way, but they might also include formal drafts, outlines, journals, and exit slips that demonstrate vocabulary knowledge, use of language function, or structure. Throughout the project, Ms. Trowbridge assessed her students’ language skills. For example, to evaluate their ability to support claims with evidence, she used exit tickets after lessons, readings where they highlighted claims, evidence with different colors, and sentence frames that students filled in with their answers. To assess for specific math and dinosaur content vocabulary, she examined graphic organizers and their storybooks, as well as the vocabulary journals. In the summative products, Ms. Trowbridge evaluated specific sentence frames she had scaffolded for students, as well as the use of signal words. Ms. Trowbridge intentionally used assessment tools to identify both content objectives and language objectives for all students.

Project Based Learning is not only a powerful learning method for all students, but with careful attention, can specifically meet the needs of English Language Learners. Through careful planning of meaningful projects, teachers are able to scaffold and plan for the needs of English Language Learners. Furthermore, ELLs will engage in learning these skills because the project is meaningful, rigorous, and authentic to their lives. Project Based Learning for ELL students combines promising practices for student engagement and literacy. It helps to form a cohesive model that empowers ELL students to achieve. Our English Language Learners deserve the opportunity to engage in Project Based Learning.

NOTE: Here is a link to the project.

References


Andrew Miller is currently a faculty member for ASCD and the Buck Institute for Education, and has worked with educators in the United States, Canada, Australia, Kuwait, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, China and India. He writes for ASCD and Edutopia regularly. Soon he will be an Instructional Coach at the Shanghai American School specializing in Assessment Project Based Learning.
On behalf of the Washington State ASCD Board of Directors, I want to say thank you to all the schools that have moved from a vision of educating the whole child to sustainable, collaborative action. One such school is Jason Lee Middle School from Tacoma, which was selected as the International ASCD Vision in Action winner for 2016. Washington State ASCD is proud of Principal Christine Brandt and her staff who were celebrated at a general session at the ASCD Annual Conference and Exhibit Show in Atlanta on April 3rd. Jason Lee was recognized for its work related to all five tenets of the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative (TWCI). A summary of Jason Lee’s work and the tenets follows:

- **Tenet: Healthy** - Jason Lee Middle School builds, develops, and implements the TWCI by focusing on methods which support students socially, emotionally, and academically. These systems address the health and well-being of both students and staff within the school. Jason Lee integrates activities, professional development, curriculum, and frameworks as well as continued assessments through the School-wide Evaluation Tool (SET) and the Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI). Both are used to monitor growth related to the implementation of the TWCI.

- **Tenet: Safe** – Jason Lee has developed four pillars related to respect, responsibility, compassion, and safety. These supports allow for an environment that is physically, emotionally, academically, and socially safe and student-centered. They extend school-wide and in the classroom, so students feel valued, respected, and cared for, thus motivated and ready to learn.

- **Tenet: Engaged** – Jason Lee implements Raising Student Voice and Participation (RSVP), a program through the National Association of Student Council and PRIME TIME, a student-to-student mentoring program. Throughout the year, quarterly RSVP summits are held where students lead and share their voices of appreciation, concern, and suggested changes with regard to the direction of the school.

- **Tenet: Supported** – Jason Lee has two fulltime, in-house counselors and a psychologist as well as access to mental health services on-site through Comprehensive Life Resources. Teachers and students implement school-wide positive behavior supports (SWPBS), an evidence-based framework. Social, emotional, and behavioral curricula are taught through advisory lesson plans in conjunction with AVID strategies.

- **Tenet: Challenged** - Jason Lee academically challenges and prepares students through the implementation and use of the Center for Educational Leadership 5 dimensions of teaching and learning framework. Through the focus and vision of the strategic goals of the Tacoma School District, the staff consistently uses student data to drive decisions and action plans, inform instruction, and support student academic, social, and emotional growth.

Jason Lee Middle School’s implementation of a whole child approach has experienced long-term success because its academic evaluation tools are grounded in the five dimensions of teaching and learning: student engagement, curriculum and pedagogy, assessment for student learning, classroom environment and culture, and professional collaboration and communication. In addition, the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative and the behavioral evaluations are created through school-wide, positive behavior supports with established tiered interventions. These are grounded in student data to drive decisions and action planning, a sustainable approach for the success of students, the staff, and the school in general. Collaboration with partners such as Peace Community Center, the YMCA, and Comprehensive Life Resources is key in order to meet specific goals for students. Distributive leadership and common agreements among the teaching staff ensure progress. Established professional development and meetings focused on data to drive decisions identify needs for instructional changes and supports, thus increasing the students’ academic growth. Professional development includes AVID, RTI, cultural competency, the implementation of Common Core State Standards and standards-based instruction. The Site Centered Decision-Making (SCDM) team determines common agreements such as bi-monthly meetings which establish SMART goals to support student academic, social, and emotional growth.

Thank You, Washington State ASCD Board of Directors

Supporting our affiliate’s work related to the ASCD Whole Child Initiative is our committed Board of Directors. They contribute countless hours of conference calls and meetings...
and provide a critical level of insight into issues that guide our Association forward. I would like to thank the following members of the 2015-16 Board of Directors for their perseverance and involvement in so many crucial decisions.

They will be completing their terms of service in June

- **Past President**: Dr. Ismael Vivanco, Superintendent, Entiat and Palisades School Districts
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- **ESD 121 North Representative**: Mr. Brad Brown, School Improvement Officer Academics and Innovation, Kent School District

The contributions of Ismael, Anastasia, David, and Brad, as well as our entire Board of Directors, have centered on supporting you, as educators, so you can best serve the children of our state. In these challenging times, remember that each of you counts! As you go about your daily life as an educator, remember that the work you do with children and your community does make a difference. On behalf of WSASCD, thank you for your caring, your strength, and your belief in children.

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Redefining Literacy in Education

A quick search of the internet reveals a plethora of literacy terminology. No longer does literacy refer solely to reading and writing, but instead to a vast array of 21st century skills. A few examples appearing in the research are listed:

- Biliteracy
- Computer Literacy
- Cultural Literacy
- Data Literacy
- Digital Literacy
- Emotional Literacy
- Functional Literacy
- Global Literacy
- Health Literacy
- Information Literacy
- Media Literacy
- Multicultural Literacy
- Physical Literacy
- Political Literacy
- Poverty Literacy
- Social Literacy
- Technology Literacy
- Visual Literacy

The next issue of *Curriculum in Context* will address the intersection of education and literacy. As an educator, how do you define literacy? What are the critical elements of literacy for the 21st century? What does it mean to be literate? How can schools help students to become literate? What process have local districts used to define a literacy curriculum? *Curriculum in Context* is accepting articles that address literacy in the broadest sense. These are just some of the questions that you might consider when submitting an article or book review for consideration.

The editorial staff invites you to submit a manuscript on this topic to Lisa Laurier, Ed.D. (llaurier@whitworth.edu) by September 15th. Potential articles submitted for the Learn section should be a current book review between 500 and 750 words and should include the APA reference for the book. Manuscripts for the new Teach and Lead sections should be between 850 and 2500 words, focus on either the classroom (i.e., teacher) perspective or the leadership perspective, and include citations written in APA format.

**SUBMISSION DEADLINE**

September 15, 2016