

Educational Challenges Unique to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students: A Description and Suggestions for Pedagogical Models

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Introduction

As a result of a series of legal decisions over the last three decades, *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) being one of the most compelling, limited and non-English proficient students (LEP and NEP) are guaranteed, in theory at least, equal access to educational opportunities.* Despite such legal guarantees, however, it is clear that language minority students (LMS) face unique educational

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*In this paper, limited English proficient (LEP), language minority student (LMS), and linguistically different are used interchangeably.

challenges unlike those of majority language students and continue to be marginalized from the mainstream (Boyer, 1993; Carter & Segura, 1979; Crawford, 1991; Donato & Hernández, 1993; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Reyes, 1992; Valencia, 1991).

It is not within the scope of this paper to evaluate the relative effectiveness of different program designs for serving LMS. An exhaustive body of research on this issue already exists, and it has generated more controversy than consensus (Center on Evaluation, Development, Research, 1990). The purpose of this paper is to explore a construct of learning challenges faced uniquely by LMS. While much of the material contained in this manuscript has been disseminated previously in different forms, the synthesis of the three part construct is new. Moreover, a brief summary of recent research on the relationship between native language and self-concept, independent of specific program interventions, e.g., bilingual education, ESL, sheds empirical light on the significance of native language on students' self-image.

Unfortunately, even in programs designated for limited and non-English speakers, such students often must struggle with factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic, that mitigate against academic success. Extrinsic factors include program deficiencies such as curriculum, properly trained staff, and political support (Padilla, 1984). LMS must also struggle with factors intrinsic to their language, learning styles, and culture that conflict with an American learning context which traditionally fails to recognize or validate those differences (Boyer, 1993; Cummins, 1989; Diaz, 1989; Reyes, 1992). Such intrinsic differences can be termed *primary cultural differences* (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986). More damaging, however, may be *secondary cultural differences* which arise as a result of the subordination and exploitation by the dominant culture after two distinct cultures come together. Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi maintain that secondary differences,

are a part of boundary maintenance mechanisms or oppositional process between the minorities and the dominant group...secondary cultural differences lead to secondary cultural discontinuities in school, and the educational problems caused by the latter are often lingering. (p. 97)

Fitzgerald and Bloodworth (1993) suggest that as a result of such secondary differences, LMS "may have to adjust to cultural values, language, or teaching styles that are totally alien to them... They must also deal with... prejudice... [which] may be racial, cultural, social, or economic... both subtle and overt" (p. 8).

Amazingly, even in programs *designed* to serve LMS, the knowledge, skills, and language that these students bring to the learning environment are often

subordinated or even formally disallowed, particularly for "academic tasks" in the interest of quickly transitioning limited English speakers into mainstream, English-only classrooms (Cardenas, 1984; Cummins & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988; Cummins, 1989; Gonzalez, 1984; Pond, 1994a; Reyes, 1992).

While many factors comprise the impediments encountered by LMS, I believe these contemporary challenges can be expressed in a construct of three general categories of difficulties faced uniquely by linguistically and culturally diverse students. They are: (a) the highly politicized nature of programs that serve language minority students; (b) the devaluation of the language and culture LMS bring to the educational process; and (c) the cognitive, affective, and cultural bases of LMS' learning styles and beliefs compared to those of the mainstream.

These categories are explored below.

The Construct

The Political Debate

As if being LEP were not a great enough challenge in an educational context based on English proficiency and literacy, LMS must come to school in the center of a highly politicized debate about the programs that ostensibly serve them. Organized political movements, whose efforts would exclude entire populations from equal educational opportunities because of their minority status, represent a serious added challenge to both LMS and practitioners (Cardenas, 1984; Crawford, 1991; Cummins, 1989; Cummins & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988). As it relates to native language instruction, such efforts are quite ironic since bilingual education has existed in different forms since the Colonial era, and as recently as 1900, a time when immigrants were supposedly pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, more than 230,000 students in the Midwest were instructed in German (*Bilingual Education*, 1987). Since the late 1600s, immigrant groups have consistently striven to maintain their heritages and languages:

Wherever Europeans established schools in the New World, vernacular education was the rule, whether in English or another tongue. New arrivals naturally strived to preserve their heritage, and language loyalties were strong. Indeed, they were among the values that brought Pilgrims to America. (Crawford, 1991, p. 19)

On one end of this political debate are those, including some educators, who would prohibit school admission to students who do not speak proficient English and certainly to those who have not entered the U.S. legally. It is not

clear how English language skills, particularly cognitive and academic skills, would be acquired outside the classroom in the interim.

On the other end are those who advocate education for all students despite language proficiency or legal status and support specific interventions such as English as a second language, bilingual education, sheltered content instruction, or other program models that strive to improve access to educational opportunities. The second, decidedly more liberal position, is supported by law (see Rossell & Baker, 1988).

I contend that efforts to accommodate LMS in academic and related needs may be valid on two other counts as well. First, having an educated, empowered populace is intrinsically valuable. Second, regardless of what conservative persons feel about the propriety of spending time and money educating non or limited English speaking students, the vast majority of those people who are here now are not leaving, and more are sure to come (Heller & Leone, 1995; Kuhlman & Vidal, 1993; Pond, 1994b; Valentin, 1993). It is impractical and may be ultimately foolish to consciously disfranchise large parts of the population from the very educational opportunities that could alleviate many of the difficulties, e.g., illiteracy, inability to speak English, unemployment, underemployment, and others, for which the language minority population is often cited by opponents.

At a macro-policy level, the political nature of the debate affects LMS because funding and program design decisions are often made based on political rather than pedagogical issues (Cardenas, 1984; Crawford, 1987, 1991; Cummins, 1989; Donato & Hernández, 1993; Halcón & Reyes, 1991). Cardenas contends that despite overwhelming pedagogical data in support of the efficacy of bilingual education, for example, arguments against it continue unabated. He states that, "So much criticism of bilingual education comes from emotional responses, misinformation, and racist attitudes, that one must make a conscious effort to look at criticism objectively" (p. 7).

Crawford (1991) suggests that the Department of Education under Ronald Reagan was motivated by a political agenda, noting that William Bennett, the Secretary of Education, arbitrarily narrowed the DOE's definition of "limited English proficient" in 1986 thereby instantly reducing by half the number of LEP students in the nation's schools and increasing by two thirds the percentage being served. Not only were pedagogically important issues ignored, but the Department of Education used six year old census figures in its population formula. Additionally, Crawford (1991) notes that research commissioned by

the Department of Education at the time found that students in both "early exit" and "late exit" bilingual programs "significantly outperformed immersion students in all subjects, including English reading" (p. 78). Yet, the Department proceeded with plans to revise Title VII funding guidelines, allocating more money to an approach (immersion) that clearly was not supported by the research in terms of effectiveness.

Obviously, such battles, waged on political or emotional rather than pedagogical grounds, potentially endanger learning outcomes for LMS since decisions about funding and program interventions ultimately shape the education they receive.

As James Lyons of the National Association of Bilingual Education remarks,

The political controversy over funding [formulas] has grown to a point where it overshadows virtually all other issues associated with the education of limited-English proficient Americans. (cited in Crawford, 1991, p. 83)

Halcón and Reyes (1991) contend that the education reform movement spawned by *A Nation at Risk*, for example, simply ignores linguistically different students altogether. It follows a politically popular but pedagogically unsound path that essentially advocates quantitatively more of the same curriculum; one that LMS continue to struggle to gain access to as it is. Donato and Hernández (1993) state that qualitative reform efforts have also excluded linguistically different students under "the rationale that... LMS were not ready for higher-order thinking skills" (p. 20).

Cummins (1989) argues that a more pervasive, if not subversive, manifestation of political forces on LMS issues is the political power relations between ethnic groups. Unfortunately for LMS, the dominant culture tends to set education policy according to its particular agenda from the U.S. Department of Education all the way to the local school board.

It is not necessarily the point of this paper to advocate one program over another, e.g. bilingual education over sheltered content instruction, for example, but rather to suggest that highly politicized and emotional debates about pedagogical issues negatively affect LMS at all policy levels from the federal government to the classroom. Not only are pedagogical decisions often made on political grounds, but LMS must frequently endure the controversy themselves as it swirls around them. The present turmoil, including demonstrations and illegal enforcement, surrounding Proposition 187 in California, demonstrates how profound the distraction can be (Heller & Leone, 1995). Such a reality represents a learning challenge to LMS above and beyond those innate to the cognitive processes of learning.

The Devaluation of Native Culture and Language and Resulting Cultural Conflicts

One of the tragedies of the status quo endured by many LMS is that repeated conflicting messages about their culture and heritage often result in confusion and a sense of displacement. Cummins (1989) asserts that many LMS suffer "bicultural ambivalence" as a result of these messages. They feel compelled to reject their native culture, but are not yet functional or accepted in the mainstream culture. Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi (1986) contend that such a status quo "result[s] in the co-existence of two opposing cultural frames of reference or two opposing cultural ideals" (p. 95), neither of which is fully accepted or validated by the other. Martinez (1980) suggests that the negative messages Mexican American youth receive are perpetuated by the "presence of mostly Anglo teachers, principals, heroes in textbooks,... families,... and so forth" (p. 8). Baral (1977) adds that,

The conflicting demands of home and school environments give rise to severe identity crises in Mexican-American students. These...crises are often exacerbated by school practices which degrade the Spanish language and Mexican Heritage. (p. 24)

Research on student perceptions of the learning environment by Engstrom (1981) supports this notion. In explaining his findings, he states,

The failure of minority students in school is seen as the result of the incompatibility between the minority students' cultural background and a school system reflecting only the middle class, Anglo-Saxon culture. (p. 8) He adds that his data support a significant relationship between students' perceived teacher affect, i.e., concern, enthusiasm, and other factors, and the attendance of those students. Overall he found that "climate appears to have a substantial effect [on success]" (p. 77).

In exploring the relationship between acculturation and achievement, Gonzalez (1985) found some empirical support in the variables of isolation and self-estrangement for the contention,

that the Chicano youngster is caught in a social and emotional bind between a home culture in which he is rooted and a school culture based on middle-class Anglo culture....This leads to the child feeling alienation from the school... and its goals. This leads to Chicanos achieving academically at a lower level than its (sic) potential. (p. v.)

In his research on the relationship between acculturation factors and achievement, Baral (1977) synthesized findings relating to the "cultural bind" in which Chicano students often find themselves. Referring to the Mexican-

of the language of instruction and production. Second, that LMS must often prematurely demonstrate cognitive skills in the second language, even in bilingual programs, requires that they use language and schemata that are inherently less representative of their true knowledge and capabilities. LMS must endure both the cultural bind many Chicano students find themselves in and manifestations of that conflict found in behavior, achievement, and self-concept. Regardless of the specific outcomes, there is almost universal consensus that cultural conflicts are a distinct and problematic reality for Mexican American students.

Language and Self-Concept

Just as language is a manifestation of culture on a collective level, language is a manifestation of identity for individuals. In effect, our language connects us to our experience. The profound role of language on students' self-image and self-realization has been identified in the literature for over thirty years. Speaking to the relationship between self-concept and language, Trevino (1969) states that "A child's language is part of himself; it is the essence of his being and mental processes. To suppress his means of communication is to close the door to mutual understanding" (p. 25). Davison (1966) adds,

We cannot deny a child his language without denying him confidence and pride in his heritage as well.... A language is the vehicle of the values of its culture, and to deny the merit of the language...overtly...or covertly is a denial of the culture and the individual. (p. 31)

It is precisely such overt denial, e.g., "sink or swim" programs or prohibitions of the native language and covert denials, e.g., apathy or ignorance on the part of educators, that many LMS must endure as integral elements of their education on a daily basis. The result, according to Leonetti (1973), "is to destroy and uproot those self-perceptions which are most crucial and conducive to a healthy personality" (p. 63). He adds, "Quite often the results are failure, frustration, and confusion, which hamper the educational process for these children, a process that tends to make them ashamed of their own language and cultural heritage" (p. 62).

On the contrary, when a child's language is honored in the learning context, it is likely to have a liberating effect.

Recent research into the relationship between native language and self-concept in native Spanish speaking students in elementary school supports this contention (Pond, 1994a). Specifically, the research found that native Spanish

speaking students whose teachers also spoke Spanish manifested higher general, intellectual, and social self-concepts than their peers in classes where teachers spoke only English. This finding is particularly significant because all of the subjects were in mainstream English classrooms. Only the teachers were bilingual. Moreover, the data suggest that teachers need not be native Spanish speakers, nor must they possess more than conversational fluency in order to engender relatively higher self-concept in their Latino LEP students.

Learning Styles

The third challenge in the construct faced by linguistically different students concerns learning styles and cultural assumptions about learning and teaching that LMS bring to the classroom.

Wlodkowsky (1989) notes that learners bring certain attitudes and needs to any learning experience. The manner in which instructors or facilitators acknowledge and address those attitudes, and the degree to which they perceive and meet learner needs, determines to a great extent the motivation with which learners engage the learning process. LMS bring attitudes and expectations of their own to the learning context, but they may vary profoundly from those expressed by the majority (Carter, 1970; Hofstede, 1986; Ramirez & Casteneda, 1974; Reyes, 1992). The learning styles with which students engage problem solving are a product of their culture and socialization.

Socialization styles, teaching approaches, the nature of rewards, and the characteristics of the relationship between teacher and learner... differ from culture to culture. Values and socialization patterns determine or affect development of cognitive style in children. (Ramirez & Casteneda, 1974, p. 60)

Hofstede (1986), commenting on teacher-student relationships, asserts that each party has specific expectations of the other. When those expectations conflict, learning outcomes are compromised. Reyes (1992) notes that Hispanic learners, for example, tend to see teachers as omniscient directors of learning rather than facilitators. They expect teachers to take a formal, corrective role, and less structured environments are often disconcerting. Moreover, some research indicates that Hispanic students also tend to be more field sensitive and thus find themselves out of place in typical American classrooms which foster independent work, few environmental cues, and a competitive spirit (Diaz, 1989). While the extensive literature review by Hernández and Descamps (1986) mentioned earlier did not find strong evidence of field sensitivity in

Mexican American students, the authors did find an association between academic achievement and variables including cooperative learning opportunities and the affective climate in the classroom. They also found that competitive environments can be detrimental to achievement for Chicano students.

In a more cognitive context, in many ESL and transitional mainstream programs, and certainly in sink or swim situations, one of the greatest obstacles to LMS's learning outcomes is access to "comprehensible input" (Krashen, 1982, 1983; Krashen & Terrel, 1983) and context (Krashen, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978). Limited and non-English speakers face the obvious challenge of decoding instruction and content in a second language but also must face the added challenge of functioning within curricula that assume both English language facility and English language literacy on the part of the learner. As a result of this assumption, the necessity of providing context clues in addition to the obvious verbal messages (written or spoken) in lessons is rarely addressed by curriculum designers or practitioners. As such, comprehensible input for LMS is often even less than one might imagine. This is particularly so at the secondary level, where curricula become less hands on, more verbal, and more abstract.

In essence, LMS face the additional challenge of learning in an environment that is based on pedagogical assumptions that are often at odds with their learning styles, linguistic orientation, and belief systems.

Reyes (1992) argues that this is so because,

In classrooms and schools, as in larger social structures, educators and policy makers are conditioned to ignore differences or to treat them as deficiencies. They continue to adhere to the misguided assumption that benefits from programs designed for the dominant group will automatically "trickle-down" to minorities. (p. 437)

Language minority students enter the educational process with more than a different language and culture. The very nature of their learning styles, interactions with other students and teachers, and values and beliefs about education create a different context for learning and teaching. The linguistic, cultural, and social mores that LMS bring to the learning context often conflict with the most basic assumptions of the status quo. The difficulties language minority learners often encounter in such an environment are not always, therefore, "language problems."

Additionally, Mexican American students, contrary to the typically held Anglo value, may not see education as a means to personal ends, thus placing them at odds with the dominant culture. Such students may have learned that academic success does not in fact lead to success for them in other mainstream contexts such as employment and social status.

Suggestions for Pedagogical Models

Politics and Program Design

As has been noted, policy decisions are often made at all levels based on emotional concerns, political concerns, or both, rather than pedagogical ones. As a result, LMS are frequently served by inferior interventions or not served at all. It is incumbent upon policy makers at all levels to commit themselves to decisions based on the best research available (basic research over evaluative research [Hakuta, cited in *Bilingual Education: The Research Debate*, 1987]), and to match program design carefully with program objectives. Moreover, it is incumbent upon practitioners to advocate for their linguistically different students. It is not enough simply to provide services. Educators must actively solicit resources and publicly avow the rich diversity that LMS bring to the educational context as an asset to be cherished, rather than a liability to be shunned.

Minority Language and Culture

If we truly want positive, superior learning outcomes for linguistically different students, we must value their language and culture as valid media for expression and learning. We must allow LMS to produce socially and academically in their native language while they make the transition to English, whether or not they are in bilingual programs. The apparent relationship I found between native language and self-concept is justification enough for encouraging the use of native language in the classroom regardless of potential academic outcomes. In other words, it is intrinsically preferable to have students with relatively high self-concept, and native language in the classroom may facilitate that end.

Moreover, we must make multicultural representations in the classroom that are accurate and affirming—that do not objectify facets of culture but explore them in meaningful contexts (see Yokota, 1993). Moreover, it is important that majority language students have the opportunity to engage in activities that use and affirm minority culture and language. In short, it is critical that LMS see their heritage acknowledged via media and forums that by definition demonstrate them as valid and worthwhile. Only then will both minority and majority language students be able to approach learning objectives on equal sociolinguistic footing.

Learning Styles and Belief Systems

Language minority students bring learning styles and values to the classroom that reflect their culture and socialization. It is pedagogically unsound to ignore

such differences in instructional design, yet that is often the case. Policy makers and practitioners alike must abandon the commonly held "one size fits all" (Reyes, 1992, p. 435) approach to process education and adapt strategies appropriate to the needs of individual learners. Diaz (1989) suggests "humanizing the curriculum" (p. 3) so that students feel a personal connectedness to learning objectives. If students are culturally field sensitive learners, for example, practitioners should provide opportunities for collaborative learning, more directive teaching, and other methods appropriate for such students (see Ramirez and Casteneda, 1974). Most important, educators must provide comprehensible lessons to linguistically different learners (Krashen, 1983; Krashen & Terrell, 1983). As obvious as this sounds, it merits special emphasis in light of the large number of LMS who receive no special interventions or who are enrolled in programs that serve them in name only (see Olson, 1986; Miramontes, 1993). Strategies such as preteaching, visual cues, repetition, native language instruction, multimedia presentation, exaggerated body language, or any other means of enhancing comprehension, i.e., ESL methods, must be central to any instructional effort (see Cummins, 1989; Krashen, 1982; Language Acquisition, 1987; Pond, 1994a). This is critical since without meaningful information the basis of cognition and learning which is accessing and building on existing schemata, is severely compromised (Piaget, 1954; Hirsch, 1987; Caine & Caine, 1991).

Conclusion

All three elements of the construct described in this paper are interconnected and interdependent. If we hope to make significant strides in improving educational outcomes for language minority students, they must be addressed collectively. We must first depoliticize what should be a purely pedagogical debate. Second, it is imperative that we find ways to integrate and thus validate the language, culture, and skills that LMS already possess when they enter the classroom. Finally, the design and implementation of instruction must recognize and address the disparate learning styles and expectations that linguistically different learners bring to the learning context. Addressing all three areas collectively as a construct will help to level the playing field for LMS and make equal access to educational opportunities closer to reality.

Endnote

'While readers may believe that such draconian measures as the prohibition of minority languages in the classroom are relics of past practice, I encountered "no Spanish" rules in classrooms and schools as recently as May, 1994 and February, 1995.

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American child, Baral states,

The school tells him that he cannot succeed unless he rejects his cultural heritage, while his family warns that he will become a traitor to his own people if he becomes Americanized. The psychological results of this process are confusion, frustration, insecurity, alienation, and perhaps, deviant behavior. (p. 24)

This is clearly the case if one considers dropping out of school to be "deviant."

Veliz (1984) suggests that a source of poor achievement among Chicano students may simply be the incompatibility between the home culture and the dominant culture described above. For example, while Anglo culture tends to reward students who excel, "Mexican-American... youth are typically taught to be noncompetitive and nonaggressive.... A Chicano student who conspicuously outshines his school mates in academic endeavors is mocked or shunned" (p. 17-18). Such a cultural value may be misinterpreted by Anglo educators as a lack of commitment or goal-directed behavior toward education. Moreover, Veliz contends that negative teacher attitudes toward Mexican-American students may manifest themselves in "self-fulfilling prophecies" (p. 20), along the lines of *Pygmalion of the Classroom* (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1963). Carter and Segura (1979) concur, arguing that poor achievement among Mexican American students is not the result of innate poor self-concept, but rather the assumption by educators that Chicano students have internalized the negative images thrust upon them by the dominant culture. In other words, teachers expect them to do poorly so they do.

When negative attitudes are reflected in the deprecation of the language Mexican-American students bring to school, the educational challenge to some students becomes insurmountable. The point is well articulated by Gonzalez (1984) who says,

The disdain the schools (and Anglo society) have shown for the youngster who speaks Spanish (such as rules forbidding Spanish)¹ ...not only forces a barrier to the youngster educationally and socially, but hits at his concept of self and forces him abruptly into new conceptual patterns. (p. 122)

He cites our apparent fascination and approval in school of French and German as evidence of a double standard that is not missed by Chicano students. Even more ironically, Anglo students are often encouraged to study Spanish while their Spanish speaking peers are scorned for already possessing the skill.

The devaluation of native language and culture, then, whether overt or by default, creates additional learning challenges for LEP students on at least two levels. First, the resulting sense of inferiority discussed by Cummins (1989) potentially disempowers them and compromises academic success irrespective