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Issues in Curriculum and Instruction for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

Abstract: Teachers are being asked to educate a variety of students, including a growing number of students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds (Diaz-Rico, 2012. A course for teaching English learners. Upper Saddle River, NY: Pearson). Because students from diverse backgrounds are the fastest growing population in schools in the United States (Hoover, 2011. Response to intervention models: Curricular implications and interventions. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson), it is imperative that teachers begin recognizing how to effectively educate all students. Specific issues associated with the curriculum and instruction supporting CLD students, as well as ways to improve instructional delivery, will be examined. Strategies to improve instructional delivery are presented to better meet the needs of all students, regardless of background.

Keywords: diverse learners, English language learners, curriculum, instruction, cultural and linguistic diversity

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Educators today have a difficult task, meeting the needs of all students in their classroom. Due to the requirements of federal and state laws, inclusive settings have come to be a mainstay in education. Teachers are being asked to educate a variety of students, including the growing number of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Diaz-Rico, 2012). Several researchers state that students from diverse backgrounds are the fastest growing population in schools in the United States (Hoover, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2007).

The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCEL, 2013) reports there were an estimated
four and half million English language learners (ELLs) in U.S. K-12 schools during the 2009–2010 academic year. Cohn and Bahrampour (2006) note that there are approximately 45% of children under age five who are considered ethnic or racial minorities: (a) 22% Latino Americans, (b) 12% Asian American, and (c) 4% African American. Additionally, of the total pre-K school population, ELLs make up about 10.5% (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Bease & de Jong, 2008; Hoffman & Sable, 2006). Additionally, the United States Department of Education (USDE, 2003) found that the Latino American college-age population is projected to increase by 52%, Asian Americans by 62%, African Americans by 19%, and American Indian/Alaskan Natives by 15%.

With the growing number of diverse learners in our schools, it is imperative that we begin recognizing how to effectively educate all students. Research has noted the use of positive, proactive interventions as beneficial to students from culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds (Boneshefski & Runge, 2013; Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008). Specific issues associated with the curriculum and instruction used with CLD students, as well as ways to improve instructional delivery, will be examined throughout the remainder of this article. Our goal is to present information addressing the improvement of instructional delivery so as to better meet the needs of all students, regardless of their background.

**Issues related to curriculum and instruction**

Teachers have a responsibility to meet the needs of all students, including students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This includes using English language development techniques and adapting instruction to meet these students’ needs (Diaz-Rico, 2012). Children who are not fully fluent in English have difficulty learning concepts when instructed in English, indicating that instruction must be adapted. According to Gay (2002), “the more variance that there is between students’ cultural, racial, ethnic, and intellectual characteristics and the normative standards of schools, the greater are the changes their school achievement will be compromised by low or negative teacher expectations,” (p. 614). The first step in providing the appropriate curriculum and instruction to students from CLD backgrounds is to identify the issues regarding the current curriculum and instruction.

Another major challenge in meeting the needs of CLD students is providing adequate access to the general education curriculum (Friend & Bursuck, 2012; Jimenez, Graf, & Rose, 2007). When choosing a culturally appropriate curriculum, teachers must focus on those that reflect diversity. Curriculum for schools
needs to be of high-quality and geared toward CLD students who are college-bound (Diaz-Rico, 2012). When considering potential curriculum to use, Hoover (2011) suggests that we consider our (a) personal bias, (b) values, (c) society perceptions, (d) views on an acceptable school climate, (e) expectations of both teachers and students, and (f) preferences regarding the use of curricular materials and interventions. Hoover also identifies curricular issues that need to be addressed when facilitating effective and appropriate education for CLD learners. First, there are not enough opportunities to learn and reflect upon diverse cultures and languages. Teachers should utilize their students’ cultural and/or language backgrounds to provide educational opportunities. Second, Hoover notes an absence of practices that have been proven effective for CLD learners in the classroom. With the emphasis on evidence-based practices being used for instruction, ensuring that proven methods are in place for CLD learners is even more vital. Third, an incompatibility may exist between the way teachers teach and the way students learn. Hoover recognizes that not all teachers are culturally responsive, and intervention for teachers may be more necessary than intervention for CLD students.

Hoover’s (2011) conclusion regarding the lack of culturally responsive teachers is the next primary challenge in educating students from diverse backgrounds. The NCELA (2008) found only about 30% of current teachers have training to teach ELL students and less than 1/6 of colleges offer pre-service preparation in working with ELLs indicating that beginning teachers are likely at a disadvantage. Assaf and Dooley (2010) conducted a study that demonstrates that tension occurs for beginning teachers when they are exposed to instructional practices that contradict their ideologies. The study showed that to alleviate the tension, the beginning teachers modified their ideologies and understandings. The modification resulted in a reduction in internal conflict leading to a more culturally competent teaching. Asaaf and Dooley found that several specific factors proved to be difficult for beginning teachers: (a) their own cultural backgrounds and biases, (b) how cultural backgrounds can contribute to privilege and inequity, and (c) tension about colorblindness based on their own personal fears and past experiences. However, at the end of the study, the participants (a) were more open to exploring cultural differences, (b) examined how racism and prejudice might influence their perspectives, (c) questioned the idea of colorblindness, and (d) applied an understanding of culture to instruction. As a result of participating in this study, beginning teachers became more aware of the huge responsibility they bear when entering the classroom to create a productive educational environment for all learners. The study by Assaf and Dooley highlights the need regarding cultural responsiveness to train culturally competent teachers.
For CLD students to be educated effectively, it is vital that teachers are trained to be culturally responsive. Culturally responsive education entails valuing diversity and facilitating cultural competence, while ensuring sufficient and appropriate opportunities to learn, as well as realizing that cultural responsiveness will evolve over time (Gay, 2013; Hoover, 2011; Kareem, 2013). Teachers will need to examine how their own ideology affects perceptions and actions, especially when working with diverse students (Bartolomé, 2004; Heward, 2013). Teachers should confront their own belief systems and know themselves before reaching out to learn more about other cultures, hopefully resulting in questioning any discriminatory practices or beliefs (Assaf & Dooley, 2010). Additionally, teachers should become aware of their own culture and how it may affect their attitudes and behaviors toward other cultures, such as their values, communication styles, learning styles, and social problems (Gay, 2002; Heward, 2013).

Budd (2007) speculates that part of the issue facing many teacher education programs may lie in the assumption that colorblindness is a way to address racial or cultural diversity. However, creating this hypothetically colorblind educator only succeeds in pretending major differences do not exist and results in not addressing the issues. Pre-service teachers must be able to effectively deliver content instruction to a rapidly changing population where one-third of the people in the United States are of diverse races and cultural backgrounds (Bruner, 2008). Bruner contends that it is imperative that pre-service teachers receive the most current training to develop skills in instruction, delivery, and providing appropriate learning environments for changing and diverse students.

The increased likelihood of poor academic and behavior outcomes is the next issue regarding curriculum and instruction for CLD students (Cartledge et al., 2008). NCELA (2008) has found that students from households who speak a language other than English lag 20 points behind in high school completion rates. Nationally, CLD students are prone to high rates of school drop-out, failure in meeting state assessments, and are known to have the poorest outcomes all of students. Additionally, research states that students from CLD backgrounds are overrepresented or misplaced in special education (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Hoover, 2011; National Research Council, 2002; Wagner & Cameto, 2004). Many CLD learners enter school without the requisite readiness skills, and schools must then provide intensive interventions to remedy deficits (Cartledge et al., 2008; Musti-Rao & Cartledge, 2007). Academic difficulties for ELLs can be affected by poor teaching and/or poor learning environments (Ortiz, 2001). Additionally, socioeconomic status (SES), not having access to bilingual or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) instruction and having
learning difficulties may also affect CLD learners academically (Cartledge et al., 2008).

Cultural mismatch between student and teacher is the next issue facing teachers charged with educating diverse students. Cultural mismatch is a term used to describe the differences and potential problems associated with teachers who are mostly white, female (Au, 2006; Cartledge et al., 2008), and middle class (Cartledge et al., 2008). Approximately one-third of ethnically and linguistically diverse students live in poverty; however, the majority of teachers in and entering the field have been raised in monolingual, middle-class homes in rural and suburban areas (Assaf & Dooley, 2010; Children’s Defense Fund, 2005; NCES, 2007). The racial and economic difference between teacher and student leave room for both parties to misinterpret certain cultural and behavioral expectations.

Finally, Edyburn (2010) states that, “accommodations, while necessary and helpful, illustrate a mismatch between the curriculum and the needs of diverse students whose differences were not anticipated nor valued by the instructional designers” (p. 26). All of these issues represent barriers that prevent diverse students from accessing the standard curriculum or engaging in dynamic instruction. Teachers must find a way to make the curriculum and instruction accessible and stimulating for CLD students.

Effective curriculum and instruction for CLD learners

Scaffolding curriculum and instruction to create success for CLD learners and ELLs is a topic of much discussion and research. Culturally responsive teachers, who have been well-trained in providing appropriate and high-quality instruction, is one approach to support the success of CLD learners and ELLs. The second major approach is to provide instruction within culturally responsive classrooms. Both of these approaches interact to produce a climate that supports success for all learners, including diverse students.

Ortiz (2001) identifies several factors to ensure ELL students are successful. Providing school climates which foster success and empower students are essential. Additionally, the belief that all students can learn is important to the success of ELL students (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2012; Ortiz, 2001). Teachers must share a knowledge base along with the ability to recognize the importance of a students’ native language. They should develop collaborative relationships among school and community and provide academically rich
programs. Additional factors include ensuring that schools have strong administrative leadership, instilling high expectations for all students, providing challenging and appropriate curricula and instruction, utilizing data collection/analysis, and providing a safe and orderly environment.

Success for ELLs includes providing a well-organized classroom and effective teaching (Diaz-Rico, 2012). Preventing failure among ELLs can be accomplished by creating an educational environment that allows for success and utilizes research-based instruction strategies proven to be effective (Hallahan et al., 2012; Ortiz, 2001). Teachers need to become familiar with their students, plan instruction following state guidelines, use formative assessment when delivering instruction, give grades according to student progress, and reflect on lessons (Diaz-Rico, 2012). Cartledge and colleagues (2008) also note the importance of reducing chaotic environments by providing orderly classrooms, teaching social skills, and raising student expectations. At its core, a well-organized classroom needs to be culturally responsive (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008).

The development of a culturally responsive environment includes many factors (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008). Teachers need to nurture personal development while encouraging their students to be introspective. The principles of good instruction apply here as well. Providing high levels of pupil academic responding, appropriately paced instruction, and timely feedback will also build a culturally responsive environment. Teachers should also constantly monitor academic progress, build a community of learners and be fair and disciplined. Finally, Cartledge and Kourea state that teachers should utilize evidence-based, proactive systems and evidence-based social skills instruction.

Early interventions utilizing clear, complete, and measureable learning objectives will promote effective instruction within culturally responsible classrooms (Cartledge et al., 2008). In order to develop learning objectives, teachers should (a) screen and monitor student academic progress, (b) provide structured classroom activities, and (c) provide a communal learning environment (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008). Edyburn (2010) posits a deeper understanding of diverse students can lead to improved instructional design. Consideration should first be given to students who routinely demonstrate difficulty with printed instructional materials. Students who are exceptional learners and also diverse will need particular attention, especially in the planning of instructional materials. Specifically, focus should be given to (a) students with reading and/or learning difficulties, (b) students with sensory disabilities, (c) students with physical disabilities, (d) English Language Learners, and (e) students with gifts and talents or advanced learners who want more information. Next, educators should compare and contrast the attributes of two primary types of instructional
media, specifically printed textbooks and digital web pages. Edyburn (2010) suggests that text could be digital. Through a digital medium, textbooks could be tiered to accommodate different interests and reading abilities, as well as offering choices, which will improve motivation and engagement. Additionally, textbooks could be offered in other languages.

Appropriate core instruction provides effective programming to students from diverse backgrounds. According to Hoover (2011), there are several ways to provide effective core instruction. First, provide effective teaching and learning by connecting new content and skills to previous skills, using manipulatives and visual aids, and providing multi-leveled sources. Second, Hoover encourages teachers to accommodate for varying English language proficiency levels by allowing students to use both languages as needed, and using differentiated instruction and evidence-based interventions. Finally, consider diverse values and norms and find ways to represent and incorporate diversity into the core instruction. This can be accomplished by using (a) direct instruction, (b) scaffolded instruction, (c) explicit instruction, and/or (d) target language structures. Hoover concludes that providing an effective core instruction can also be achieved by providing multiple opportunities for success, incorporating both written and oral language in the class, including sufficient wait time, nurturing a safe environment, and utilizing multiple modalities.

Cooperative learning has also been found to be an effective way to reach students from CLD backgrounds (Diaz-Rico, 2012; Hoover, 2011). The benefits for using cooperative learning for students from diverse backgrounds include a rich discourse environment and multiple opportunities for face-to-face interactions. Cooperative learning can also provide an increased chance for the students to feel a part of the classroom culture (Diaz-Rico, 2012).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can be used for diverse learners to have access to the general education curriculum (Jimenez et al., 2007). In the UDL process, teachers design instruction to meet the needs of all learners in the classroom and then make adjustments accordingly. Much research has been conducted on UDL and is beyond the scope of this article. However, the principles of UDL can be very effective for CLD students.

One model used to effectively educate CLD learners is two-way immersion programs. In two-way immersion, ELL and English-speaking students are taught together in two languages (Echevarria & Graves, 2011). The students learn to communicate in more authentic, meaningful ways that result in dual-language acquisition for both groups of students. Two-way immersion programs also “replace the assimilationist view of minority language speakers’ languages and cultures with an additive approach that builds on students’ linguistic and
cultural skills” (p. 326). Two-way immersion programs are effective for teaching elementary ELLs and their English-speaking peers due to the fact that they avoid the segregation of most programs for ELLs (Bearse & de Jong, 2008). When teaching content, it may be necessary to utilize sheltered instruction techniques (i.e., reinforcing instruction in the native language).

A final method for use with CLD students is Specifically Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) (Diaz-Rico, 2012). First, SDAIE assists with learning grade-appropriate content while simultaneously mastering English vocabulary and grammar. Students learn academic English and develop strategies for learning how to learn. SDAIE is most useful when students are provided learning supports during academic content time. The Los Angeles Unified School District in California uses the SDAIE model, comprised of five components. The first component specifies that teacher attitudes must be open and they must be willing to learn from students. Second, content should include lessons that promote mastery of subject and language. To accomplish mastery, learning strategies must be carefully selected and adapted, and materials should be well organized. The third component stresses the importance of connecting the curriculum to the students’ backgrounds and experiences. Fourth, teachers should increase comprehensibility by providing strategies to aid understanding, modeling, contextualization, teacher speech adjustment, frequent comprehension checks, repetition, and paraphrase. The final component noted by Diaz-Rico emphasizes the interaction between teacher and student regarding lesson content, clarification of concepts in their home language, and learning through a variety of sources.

Conclusion

The issues regarding effective curriculum and instruction for diverse students are numerous. The principle strategy to effectively teach students from diverse backgrounds is for teachers to build culturally responsive classrooms and find ways to support and incorporate the different strengths of their students and their backgrounds leading to appropriate multicultural education. The goal of multicultural education is to help students “develop cross-cultural competence within the American national culture, with their own subculture and within and across different sub societies and cultures” (Banks, 1994, p.9). At its core, Banks states that multicultural education should (a) emphasize cultural contributions to society, (b) enhance the curriculum by utilizing cultural pieces of work, (c) provide different perspectives when referring to ethnic, cultural, and linguistic
injustices, and (d) initiate change by adding student research and/or action projects to the curriculum. Ultimately, however, multicultural curriculum is not sufficient; quality instruction is the basic element for all students’ success (Gay, 2002; Hallahan et al., 2012).

References


