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An Asset-Based Approach to Linguistic Diversity

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The lenses through which we view the world impact our understandings. As Scheurich (1997) puts it, "How I see shapes, frames, determines, and even creates what I see" (p. 29). As educators, how we see the diversity of students in our schools impacts how we craft the teaching and learning environment. This article argues that by conceptualizing linguistic diversity from an asset-based lens, teachers are better prepared to successfully engage linguistically diverse students and families.

Conceptualizing Linguistic Diversity

The population of students who are English language learners (ELL) is rapidly rising (Crawford, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Although many schools in the United States have a rich history of embracing students who are ELL, others have erected barriers (Olnek, 2004). A fundamental reason for these barriers is service delivery models that are deficit-oriented. Valencia (1997) explains that from a deficit-based perspective, "a student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies. Such deficits manifest, it is alleged, in limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn and immoral behavior" (p. 2).

Approached from a deficit perspective, students who are English language learners (ELL) are often defined as fundamentally lacking. By contrast, an asset-based perspective builds on the home language of students and recognizes this as a fundamental strength. Schools have a spectrum of options for providing educational services to students who are ELL, ranging from promoting monolingualism through English immersion strategies to promoting bilingualism through dual immersion strategies. All methods along this spectrum seek to teach English to students (Slavin & Cheung, 2005).

Approaches to developing this second language at the expense of the first language are sometimes referred to as "subtractive," and those that foster developing both the second and the native language are referred to as "additive" (Ovando, 2003). Putting it in Valencia's (1999) terms, English immersion approaches tend toward deficit-based perspectives, and bilingual approaches tend toward asset-based perspectives.

Raising the Capacity of Teachers To Serve Students Who Are ELL

A fundamental barrier to conceptualizing linguistic diversity from an asset-based perspective is the capacity of teachers to teach students who are ELL. Raising the capacity of all educators to approach students who are ELL from an asset-based perspective entails specialists with expertise in working with students who are ELL collaborating with general education teachers. These specialists, including bilingual teachers, ESL teachers, and bilingual resource specialists, are key resources to helping all educators better serve students who are ELL and their families.

To begin, all educators working with students who are ELL need strong literacy skills. Wong Fillmore and Snow (2000) make clear that "educators must know enough about language learning and language itself to evaluate the appropriateness of various methods, materials, and approaches for helping students make progress in learning English" (p. 25).

Educators must have knowledge of the basic units of language and of issues associated with these units. Educators must have an understanding of how a lexicon is acquired and structured, as well as a grasp of language behavior across cultures,

including vernacular dialects. Educators must recognize how oral and written language compare and contrast if they are to assist students in building proficiency in English. A core component of written language is narrative and expository writing. Wong Fillmore and Snow explain that students, especially those who are ELL, often come to school with culturally rooted text-structures that contrast with the school's text-structures. When educators understand how concepts are culturally rooted, they are less apt to mistakenly attribute "language or cognitive disorders to students who have transferred a native language rhetorical style to English" (p. 29).

A thread that is woven through these dimensions of oral and written language development is the concept of academic English. The American Educational Research Association (2004) reports that academic English is the competence "to speak with confidence and comprehension in the classroom on academic subjects . . . includ[ing] the ability to read, write, and engage in substantive conversations about math, science, history, and other school subjects" (p. 2), and that students only develop this competence over several years.

Integrate, Don't Segregate, Students Who Are ELL

To develop academic English, students who are ELL "must interact directly and frequently with people who know the language well enough to reveal how it works and how it can be used" (Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000, p. 24). When schools cluster students who are ELL to more efficiently provide support, they are artificially imposing barriers on these students. Instead, schools should ensure that these students are naturally distributed across classroom settings and are receiving targeted, direct instruction and support in English. As educators

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throughout the school understand oral and written language development along with academic English, they are better prepared to integrate students who are ELL into their classrooms. Service delivery models that reflect this approach will emphasize the integration, not the segregation, of students who are ELL (Scanlan, Frattura, & Capper, 2007).

Purposefully grouping students who are ELL within the context of heterogeneous classes can be an effective approach to educating them (Ovando, 2003). Heterogeneous groupings facilitate building bridges between students who are ELL and native English-speakers (Brisk, 1998). Such groupings should be targeted instructionally, based on criteria directly related to the instructional targets, and should be flexible (Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000).

Rothenberg and Fisher (2007) provide an overview of skills necessary to differentiate instruction for students who are ELL. They illustrate how providing language support across the curriculum will create a stronger learning environment for students who are ELL. Staff requires ongoing and targeted professional growth opportunities so that they are able to provide this language support comprehensively. A core place for this professional growth to start is in oral and written language acquisition and

in academic English. In short, raising the capacity of the staff in educational linguistics will promote the success of students who are ELL in heterogeneous groupings (Brisk, 1998).

Conclusion

In summary, best practices encourage schools to view students who are ELL from an asset-based perspective and to craft service delivery to these students in a comprehensive manner. By building the capacity of all teachers to teach all students, schools are better able to embrace linguistically diverse populations. This article has articulated specific strategies for schools to use to develop as-

set-based approaches to linguistic diversity by helping all educators understand how to better serve students who are ELL.

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