

Diversity: Language, Race, Culture Among English Language Learners

Questions to Enid Lee—Mining the Gold

This is first in a monthly series based on questions frequently asked by teachers of English Language Learners. I have arranged the questions under the six California Standards for the Teaching Profession. Questions of language, culture, race, class and power are matters which are all part of the process of a day's work whether or not we are intentional about it.

Teacher's Question: "Why is cultural understanding so important?"

California Standard for the Teaching Profession Standard One: Engaging and supporting all students in learning

Culture is important in the teaching and learning process for all students as a student's culture if it is known and valued is a rich source of prior knowledge and experience which teachers can mine for nurturing strong identities among students as learners and for extending their learning in all subject areas. In the hands of a competent and caring teacher students' culture can be turned into academic gold. According to Professor Asa Hilliard, "It is a people's culture, their shared creativities and struggles as they have evolved over time and space that defines their essence. Culture is the 'tie that binds.'" (Hilliard 1995) As we are reminded in the quotation, "If you don't respect the children's culture, you negate their very essence." (Secret 1998) For students who are English Language Learners their culture is sometimes not known and/or valued in the classrooms in which they learn.

Historic patterns of institutional racism as opposed to malicious intent on the part of teachers contribute to the low status of student's cultures of some English Language learners. It is an ongoing challenge to elevate these cultures to their rightful places in our classrooms for as Cummins reminds us "considerable research data suggests that, for dominated minorities, the extent

to which students' language and culture are incorporated into the school program constitutes a significant predictor of academic success." Cummins 1986.

Access "to the common set of beliefs and practices" that each student shares with the group or groups to which they belong can provide us with insights into our students' untapped potential for problem solving, critical thinking and language learning for useful and

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— Carrie Secret

satisfying purposes. If we remember that every language learner who enters our classroom has at least one language and one culture, then we would realize how much our students are bringing to the learning process.

A teacher's knowledge of and appreciation for the student's language and culture are essential for tapping into student's "prior knowledge," "life experience," "interests," "problem-solving," "critical thinking" activities—all of which are factors considered important in the California Standard for the Teaching Profession focused on "engaging

and supporting all students in learning".

For example as we teach students to "compare and contrast sounds in words," "understand vocabulary words and opposites," or "tell a story in sequence," knowledge of the words that a student already knows in her language, or her problem-solving strategies and stories she has told and has been told in her cultural context can help in developing vocabulary and build skills in English. Recognition of language and culture in this case could take the following form in a classroom: "Can you think of a word in your first language that sounds like this one?" "Does this word remind you of any words you already know?" "What stories have you told or been told in your community?" These questions not only facilitate English language learning among our students but they also serve to reinforce the image of English Language Learners as learners with histories and skills and as members of communities that are resources of wisdom and places of knowledge. This tapping into cultural knowledge is a way of challenging the deficit images that often abound when we hear conversations about English language learners and students of color. It serves as a direct challenge to racist stereotypes.

Writing: A Powerful Tool for English Learners in the Classroom

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word about what they're going to work on that day, or I invite the children to discuss their ideas in a Think-Pair-Share format. When I use this structure, first children turn to someone sitting nearby and talk about their writing ideas with that person. After a few moments of "buzz", I gather the class' attention and ask children to report on their partners' writing topics. This encourages children to really listen to each other's ideas, which can be as stimulating to writing as sharing their own ideas.

A final strategy that helps children get started is beginning the Writers' Workshop by "checking in". We keep everybody's name on a pocket chart, and move the names from one writing stage to another as children progress through the writing process

with their projects (i.e. rough draft to revising to editing to final draft, etc.). Before going off to write, each child reports where s/he is in the process, and what s/he hopes to accomplish that day. For example, María might reveal that she's currently illustrating her published book, and would like to complete three illustrations before the end of Writers' Workshop. Goal-setting can be very powerful, especially if each writer shares what s/he accomplished with the group at the end of writing time.

Beginning writers—and their teachers—should always remember that getting started is TOUGH. Ritual, conversation, goals, and above all practice can be key to initiating young writers into the challenges and joys of writing.