

# *Diversity: Language, Race, Culture Among English Language Learners*

## *Questions to Enid Lee—Mining the Gold*

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### *California Standard for the Teaching Profession Standard Three*

#### *Understanding and Organizing Subject Matter For Student Learning*

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**Teacher's Question: What do you mean when you say "teaching beyond the standards"?**

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"Let us read our definition of writing." This is an invitation from the teacher of a group of first graders who, as the teacher points to the words on the flip chart, reads the following enthusiastically: To use letters or characters to express our thoughts and feelings or to share information "

The teacher then ensures that writing as a human activity takes on meaning for the class by asking about the way in which writing helps them keep in touch with a former classmate who has moved to another city. The students identify the advantages writing offers in this case over phone calls and plane rides because of the cost. There is general agreement that writing definitely makes it easy for them to share their thoughts, feelings and other kinds of information with their friend.

In a subsequent question, which has the effect of including all the students in the classroom, the teacher probes their understanding of the second half of the definition. She asks, "what you need beside letters for writing?" A student responds that you also need characters. The teacher refers to the languages of two students; one whose first language is

Korean and another whose first language is Amharic. Both students seem pleased that their languages are being recognized and the rest of the class recalls that they had talked about the different languages that are spoken and written in the homes of first graders. at the beginning of the year. The students continue a lively conversation about writing and then begin to do some writing themselves.

The above is a brief example of the way in which a teacher of very young students takes one aspect of literacy; introduces it with academic vocabulary using words like "definition" and engages the students in talking about writing and its relevance to their lives. In the process she reminds them that writing takes place in languages other than English and validates the cultures, languages and communities of everyone in the room. She has more than met the standard. of supporting students in beginning to become good writers of classroom English. She has worked towards another important social and pedagogical goal by alluding to the equality of all languages and their users. This is an important allusion at a time when so much discrimination continues on the basis of language and the skin

color of those language users. In part she has is able to accomplish these goals because she has both understood and organized subject matter for deep learning.

This California Standard for the Teaching Profession” Understand and organize subject matter for student learning “ requires us to make subject matter meaningful. There are two aspects to this standard: to understand and to organize. For the second to be successful, we must pay attention to the first. We have to tease out the significance of or the big ideas in what we are teaching and find strategies to assist students make meaning from the subject matter. In short we must ask ourselves

“ How can we organize the topic so that it becomes something worth learning about for all students?.

“How can we bring our students, their languages and their communities into our classrooms or take our classrooms out to their communities in the process of supporting them in English language development?”

To do this we must constantly examine the cultures, languages and histories in

our rooms as rich resources for instruction. We will not only meet the stated standards but also exceed them as we pull together the various components that make for successful and empowering teaching and for the creation of space for everyone in our room

In writing about schools where the gaps are closing, Dr. Belinda Williams connects the components of standards, subject matter and students in the following analysis:

What must be understood is that across all of these programs teachers have to be aware of the same knowledge, the same expectation, a way to make connections and a way to establish relationships. These are the characteristics in schools where gaps are closing

Central to that perspective is a focus on knowing the learner and knowing what needs to be understood to make both cognitive and affective connections between what is taught, what is in the standards and what the learner knows, brings, cares about and/ or can do. (my emphasis)

Reference: Williams, Belinda. “Closing The Achievement Gap” in California Curriculum News Report. vol 28, no 5, April 2003

Note:" The teacher in this account is Sekani Moyenda. She teaches at Rosa Parks Elementary School in San Francisco. Ms. Moyenda is the co-author of Taking It Personally: Racism In The Classroom From Kindergarten To College "