

Chapter 7

Somali High School English Language Learners in Difference Blindness: Implications for Intercultural Responsiveness

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how five Somali high school immigrant students who were English language learners at a predominantly white high school perceived the mainstream teachers' teaching. The findings reveal that the participants were not accommodated, not given support, and rejected by the mainstream teachers who lacked appropriate training in second language acquisition theories and ESL pedagogy and who endorsed difference blindness. The teachers also ignored and sanctioned any differences the participants brought to school. The teachers' practices ironically resulted in emphasizing differences instead of minimizing, and ultimately caused the participants to feel stigmatized, racialized, and marginalized.

INTRODUCTION

English language learners (ELLs) represent the fastest growing segment of the school age population in the U.S. (García, Jensen, & Scribner, 2009). Projections indicate that ELLs will comprise 40 percent of public school students by 2030 (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Among these ELLs, Short and Boyson (2012) claim that adolescent students who are newly arrived immigrants are the most vulnerable subgroups. Adolescent immigrant ELLs struggle to succeed in school, particularly on content area achievement measures (Short & Boyson, 2012). On the National Assessment for Educational Progress Grade 8 exams for reading and mathematics, ELLs performed poorly: 74% and 72% performed below basic in reading and math respectively, compared with only 22% and 25% of non-ELLs respectively (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

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The content mastery presents obstacles for the secondary level ELLs in particular. These students need to learn English and develop academic literacy much faster than the elementary level ELLs because they have fewer years to master the English language than do students who enter at elementary grades (Short & Boyson, 2012). Short and Boyson (2012) further added another obstacle: the secondary level ELLs enroll at an age beyond which literacy instruction is usually provided to students and most teachers are not prepared to teach initial components of literacy, like phonics and fluency. Alliance for Excellent Education (2011) argued that ELLs at high school suffer from weak academic literacy skills and that they are underprepared for high school-level work and textbooks. Catching up on subject area knowledge presents another obstacle. Entering the foreign education system in advanced grades, the secondary level ELLs have missed earlier courses “whose content is often studied again more in depth in later grades” (Duff, 2001, p. 109). The fact that the content knowledge level is far more difficult, complex, and abstract than that of the elementary level aggravates this obstacle.

Because ELLs are also held to the same accountability standards as native English speakers before they master the language of instruction (Short & Boyson, 2004), it is crucial that mainstream teachers provide them with effective content instructions and opportunities to acquire academic language along with opportunities to develop the English language proficiency. However, only 29.5 percent of those teachers have had opportunities for professional development in working with ELLs, according to Ballantyne, Sanderman, and Levy (2008), and most mainstream teachers are largely untrained to work with ELLs (Reeves, 2006). Therefore, it is most likely that ELLs at the secondary level learn content areas in mainstream classes with little accommodation from untrained teachers along with native speakers of English (Dellicarpini, 2009). Furthermore, the majority of teachers are white monolingual speakers of English (Feistritzer, 2011) who have never seriously experienced learning a second language. This fact negatively affects their ability to teach ELLs.

Teachers’ lack of training in ESL pedagogy (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008; Reeves, 2006) and lack of learning of foreign languages (Feistritzer, 2011) suggested that these teachers may not be able to teach content effectively to secondary level immigrant ELLs. As a result, secondary level ELLs may experience significant challenges in content learning. Because classroom learning involves mutual participation from both teachers and students, one might wonder how the students themselves perceive these challenges. The purpose of this study is to explore how the students view these challenges in relation to teachers in mainstream classes through the voices of Somali immigrant ELLs at high school. The chapter asks the following questions:

1. How do Somali immigrant ELLs at high school perceive mainstream teachers’ teaching?
2. How do they want mainstream teachers to teach in order for them to learn content better?

By listening to Somali high school immigrants’ voices, this chapter will address the contradictions between the current trend for inclusivity, diversity, and intercultural responsiveness and the realities adolescent immigrant ELLs face. The examination of these contradictions will help us understand what needs to be done in order for school to be interculturally responsive to adolescent immigrant ELLs’ academic, linguistic, affective, and social needs.

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