

Chapter 9

“I’m Not from the Dominant Culture!”

Instructional Practices for Teachers of Culturally Diverse Students

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ABSTRACT

The United States has experienced a large growth in the number of immigrant students who speak English as a non-native language. The results of a 2004 survey on the topic of English Learners (ELs) or English Language Learners (ELLs) showed the number of ELs had almost doubled to 5,119,561 in public schools across the nation (NCELA, 2008). These ELLs bring their cross-cultural expectations into dominant culture classrooms, and teachers must be prepared to meet the cross-cultural issues between student and teacher that might occur, where ultimately the student loses. Similarly, North Dakota has experienced enormous surges in its ELL populations in its previously culturally homogenous population; consequently, mainstream teachers struggle to learn how to interact with culturally diverse students. Instances of cultural dissonance negatively impact students’ performance and school culture. The awareness of culture and how it impacts content learning is thus a subject of critical importance, and developing cultural awareness as well as effective and culturally relevant instructional methods is a necessity for all classroom teachers. Therefore, this chapter describes multiple methods and strategies that are linguistically appropriate and culturally relevant for all teachers, but particularly for teachers of ELLs.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent demographic data regarding ELLs (NCELA, 2008) indicated that the number of ELL students has doubled from 2 million students in 1990 to over 5 million in 2008. The Center for Immigration Studies (2013) estimated that there are over 40 million immigrants living in the United States, and of these immigrants over 2.4 million are school age children. These immigrants come to the United States hoping for a better life and searching for work, but their children must enroll in a school system that is largely unprepared to serve them. Some families come to the United States under more extreme circumstances such as fleeing persecution or even death, and these political refugee students struggle to achieve in an environment alien to what they knew.

Despite a national increase in the overall graduation rate, the dropout rate for foreign-born refugee and immigrant students remains above 30 percent, three times that of U.S.-born white students, and twice as high as the dropout rate of native-born Latino students. Almost half (45%) of the nation’s children who are preschool age are racial or ethnic minorities (Cohn & Bahrapour, 2006), and that number continues to rise as well.

While states such as California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Illinois have the largest populations of ELs (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008), midwestern states like North Dakota and South Dakota have experienced surges in their EL populations as well (NCELA, 2008). These ELs come to North Dakota for a variety of reasons that run the gamut from the opportunity for a better quality of life to seeking refuge from persecution. Many of these students arrive literally with the clothes on their backs and a fractured history of formal education. Some have spent the majority of their lives in refugee camps and received very little grade-level education, and have limited experience with technology. Perhaps the most pervasive issue is that many of the new immigrant and refugee students lack literacy in their native languages (Flaitz, 2009).

Teachers are often lauded as the single most important factor in student achievement (Wright, Horn & Sanders, 1997) and never has this been more apparent with changing student demographics in the United States. Linguistically and culturally diverse children are part of the rich heritage of the United States, and their educational needs must be met. School culture and educational practice must reflect the changing demographics of their students as well as the middle-class dominant culture.

While much of the national debate surrounding educational practices for ELLs has centered on the language of instruction, the fact remains that the majority of the teachers in North Dakota are white, monolingual speakers of English, and were raised in the dominant middle class culture (Goldenberg, 2008; North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2013). Relatively few teachers in North Dakota have lived and worked in areas with culturally diverse populations where languages other than English are spoken or cultural practices that deviate from the mainstream are demonstrated. Since language and culture are inextricably interwoven a cultural divide exists between many pre-service and in-service teachers and their multicultural students. This is due in part to unfamiliarity with diverse students, and lack of teacher education preparation for future teachers and in-service teachers (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2013). A response to criticism at both the federal and state level was the mandatory addition of a multicultural education course to teacher education programs that included both a foundations course and a teaching practicum in the professional education core of study. The institutions of higher education that offer teacher education in North Dakota implemented this mandate generally by adding two classes to the overall teacher education program (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2013). None of the teacher education programs mandate coursework that includes language or sociocultural methods for teaching ELL students, or adaptive strategies in

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