



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper *Culturally Competent Literacy Instruction*

Of the many issues facing our society, global warming has the attention of most high profile change agents and millions of ordinary citizens. Why? Many people in the country now understand how dramatic the climate is changing and the impact that change has on life style choices and even the future existence of the earth. Therefore, the responsibility to secure the future is shared by most for the personal benefit of all. This is the context that should be used to incorporate the needed change to embrace cultural competence for improved literacy instruction. Few will dispute that cultural competence is becoming more important to practice as the enrollment of school aged children who are culturally and linguistically different increases. These students are categorized as different from the U. S. mainstream because of their ethnic origin, the language spoken at home, and the social class background experiences (Au & Raphael, 2000). This change in student profiles provides the reason to transform classroom curricula and to help develop culturally competent teachers who can meet the literacy needs of all children. Simply put, without hard work towards educational transformation in our society, we can grow apart. If growing apart is unappealing, then why not explore ways in which we can grow together as a nation? This paper addresses ways educational transformation can occur through a most influential person in the field of education—the literacy teacher.

Eighty-five percent or the vast majority of teachers in the United States are white, middle-class, and monolingual English speakers (Kunjufu, 2002; Nieto, 1996). In most cases, their lives differ profoundly from the lives of their students. Although information gathering techniques are uncomplicated to develop, it is more challenging for teachers to learn how to interpret these findings and use them to positively impact students' literacy achievement.

To make productive use of the gathered information, Derman-Sparks reports that teachers should avoid the “Pygmalion effect” to help them become culturally competent literacy instructors (as cited in Payne, 1991). The Pygmalion effect involves the teacher's expectations. Often these expectations are communicated in verbal and nonverbal ways and many times without the teacher's knowledge or ill intent. Unfortunately in some instances, these actions can influence children's behavior and performance. In effect, children mirror the teacher's expectations. When those expectations are negative, the response of students is also negative. Derman-Sparks also finds that racism or sexism in the classroom “affects kids' ability to be successful because some of the energy they could use for learning, gets drained as they defend themselves emotionally” (p. 18).

When teachers treat all students as competent, however, the students are likely to demonstrate competence (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1996). Teachers who teach to the highest standards provide academic challenges for their students and encourage all students to achieve. When teachers build on students' prior knowledge or schemata and then provide appropriate scaffolding, students can move more easily from what they know to what they need to know. Building students' prior knowledge and experiences provides opportunities for authentic learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Floden, 1991) and also improves student engagement (Miron & Lauria, 1998; Nieto, 1994). This teaching practice requires that teachers have an in-depth knowledge not only of the subject matter, but also of their students. To be effective, educators must invest time developing their understanding of literacy instruction as well as their awareness of their students' cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. This comprehensive level of understanding is referred to as cultural competence and it indicates a willingness to accept alternative perspectives about what things mean (Lynch &

Hanson, 1992). A growing body of research describes the knowledge bases needed for being culturally competent teachers in a diverse classroom. In addition, more specific knowledge bases in the area of literacy have been determined. Abt-Perkins and Rosen (2000) describe several knowledge bases for Language Arts and English teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Their list includes self-knowledge, cultural knowledge, linguistic knowledge, and methods for multicultural literacy education. In addition, Jackson (1998) emphasizes knowledge of home-school relationships in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Before teachers can address the cultural and literacy needs of their students, they must first become aware of the influence of their own culture. Abt-Perkins and Rosen (2000) suggest that self-knowledge can be gained through “inquiry into cultural consciousness so that teachers discover their own assumptions and stereotypes that can hinder culturally responsive teaching” (p. 254). Further they suggest the need for teachers to “critique their own values pertaining to languages and dialects other than standard English, what counts as good literature, and the role they can play as English/language arts teachers in the success of students from diverse cultures in the schooling process” (p. 254). A teacher’s culture, language, social interests, goals, cognitions, and values—especially if different from the students’—could conceivably create a barrier to understanding what is best for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Orange & Horowitz, 1999). Teachers can break through this barrier by reflecting on their self-knowledge and by learning to acknowledge and respect their students’ language, literacy, literature, and cultural ways of knowing. The following questions, developed by the first author and Howard (1999), may assist teachers in being aware of their self-knowledge and further reflecting on their backgrounds and dispositions so that they can more effectively work with students from diverse cultures.

1. What are my race, class, language, religion, and other important identities?
2. What are some of the traditions, objects, or foods that symbolize my family?

3. What are my earliest memories of racial differences?
4. When have I felt afraid or uneasy about a person or group of people?
5. When have I felt that I was a target of discrimination?
6. When do I feel that I know more than a person from a different culture?
7. Do I feel a sense of responsibility to reach out to a person from another culture?
8. Is color the first thing that I see in another and the last thing I want to talk about?
9. What community events have I attended of people from another culture?

CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

Cultural knowledge is an understanding of the importance of culture in affecting students’ perceptions, self-esteem, values, classroom behavior, and learning. According to Abt-Perkins and Rosen, “Research in culturally relevant and responsible instruction clearly shows that knowledge of students’ family, community and socioethnic cultures—their languages, literacy practices, and values—can help teachers address the interests and build on the skills of their students” (2000, p. 254).

Celebrating the cultural similarities among diverse cultural groups has been promoted by some educators as a way of uniting all cultural groups in the United States. However, it is not the similarities among the various groups that challenge people’s thinking, behavior, and beliefs; it is the cultural differences. Learning to acknowledge and understand cultural differences should be an ongoing process in a diverse society. The use of ethnographic inquiry enables teachers to learn about cultural differences from the point of view of their students and the communities in which they live. It also can help teachers develop an understanding and appreciation of diverse backgrounds and lifestyles (Spradley, 1979).

LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE

To effectively reach all students, educators need to understand how students’ patterns of communication and various dialects affect their classroom learning. They also need to know how second-language learning affects literacy acquisition. Although standard academic English is

the language of instruction in most public schools, it is not always the language of the children in the classroom. Many second-language learners from a wide array of languages have difficulty meeting the academic standards of the classroom, understanding the instruction, and engaging in active learning when the language of instruction is only English. In addition, when children speak varieties of English other than standard academic English, they too may encounter misunderstandings and miscommunications. Acceptance of the home language of students and identification of a process to help students move to a more standard form of English is an important part of literacy development. Delpit (1993) recommends that while educators should recognize and validate students' home language, its use should not limit students' potential. Au adds, "With regard to school literacy learning, proficiency in standard American English should be seen as a goal, not as a prerequisite to becoming literate" (1993, p. 129).

KNOWLEDGE OF MULTICULTURAL MATERIALS AND LITERACY METHODS

The use of multicultural children's literature is one of the most powerful ways for schools to honor students' culture and foster cross-cultural understanding. Teachers also can use multicultural literature depicting children's worlds as a means to bridge home and school cultures. The work of Spears-Bunton (1992) and Willis and Johnson (2000) emphasizes the use of multicultural literature to improve student self-esteem, involvement and engagement, and academic performance in literacy. In each of these studies, the level of involvement and engagement of African-American and Latino students increased when culturally relevant literature and instruction were used in classrooms during English lessons. In addition, the power relations in the class shifted as African-American and Latino students, once reticent to respond, became vocal leaders of discussion.

KNOWLEDGE OF HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

Another important aspect of teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students is knowledge of home and school relationships. Educators need to include parents and caregivers in their children's literacy development. They also need to examine any preconceived notion they may have regarding home

literacy. For example, Auerbach's review of ethnographic studies of family literacy reveals that educators often hold untrue assumptions about family literacy situations. Further, she reports multiple studies offering counterevidence that contests the idea that economically disadvantaged, minority, and immigrant families disvalue literacy development. She adds that "those families most marginalized frequently see literacy and schooling as the key to mobility, to changing their status and preventing their children from suffering as they have" (1995, p. 15). Conversely, however, some families of color do not trust schools and teachers. Such lack of trust often is born in part out of their personal experience. Parents may feel intimidated by school representatives or ashamed of their language, cultural or class differences; they also may have misunderstandings about the school system. A common notion for some parents of color is to think that the school is and should be primarily responsible for the education of children. Unfortunately, these parents believe that education is the key to ascension from poverty, but do not usually look at it as a realistic hope. As a result, little interest in school is shown as this belief is mostly viewed in an abstract form (Payne, 2005).

CONCLUSION

Culturally competent instruction at the very least is the acquisition of all of these knowledge bases. These knowledge bases—self-knowledge, cultural knowledge, linguistic knowledge, knowledge of methods and materials, and knowledge of home-school relationships—are extremely important in helping educators address the literacy needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. They help teachers develop a collaborative and culturally sensitive learning environment that encourages meaningful, engaged learning for all students in their classrooms. School administrators and classroom teachers should acquire cultural competence through the acquisition of these knowledge bases from teacher education programs or staff/professional development opportunities. As a result these culturally competent teachers would be highly trained to provide informed literacy instruction so that their students achieve academic success. What better way to grow together as a nation than to validate all children by meeting their literacy needs through culturally competent instruction?

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