

Static Structures, Changing Demographics: Educating Teachers for Shifting Populations in Stable Schools

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In considering the ways in which teaching traditions become institutionalized over time, Cole (2005) discusses a classroom that existed roughly 4,000 years ago in Mari, Syria. (A photo of this classroom is available at <http://www.infodiv.unimelb.edu.au/tss/archive/history.html>.) This classroom embodies educational conceptions in which a teacher stands before students who face forward in rows of seats and who are supposedly poised to listen and learn. Recitation, copying, imitating, and memorization have characterized the student's role since the beginning of formal Indo-European education.

Cole (2005) argues that these practices coalesced in a "European model that evolved in the 19th century and which followed conquering European armies into other parts of the world." Even with adaptation, educational practices "still retain many of the structural features already evident in the large agrarian societies of the Middle Ages" (p. 202). These features comprise what Cuban (1993) calls teacher-centered instruction, in which "knowledge is often (but not always) 'presented' to a learner (via lectures, textbooks, and testing) who is—and the metaphors vary—a 'blank slate' or a 'vessel to fill'" (n.p.). The culture of school conserves these practices across generations and is remarkably resistant to change (Smagorinsky, in press a).

In this article we look at the degree to which stable schools and authoritarian instruction accommodate the needs of learners exhibiting difference, with special attention to English Language Learners (ELLs) in a Southern setting. The Deep South has long been characterized by authoritarian social settings (Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005). Yet as Moll (2000) and others have argued, the individualistic, competitive requirements in authoritarian schooling often serve immigrant students from south of the U.S. border poorly.

A Cultural Perspective on School Reform

Standardized testing illustrates the ways in which monolithic educational practice can embed biases that affect how students' learning is assessed. If intelligence and achievement are disembodied qualities, then perhaps they are amenable to objectivist testing that serves to estimate individuals' "true" intelligence according to one community of practice. Yet if intelligence and achievement are qualities that can only be considered in relation to the specific cultural practices that they serve, then the people who develop the tests build in a bias that privileges knowledge as normalized in their cultural experiences.

From a cultural-historical perspective (Cole, 1996), intelligence and achievement tests are measures of cultural knowledge within a particular context. They are not valid for accurately assessing the abilities of culturally-linguistically different children or to justify tracking, a practice that results in segregation in classrooms by ethnicity (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Oakes, 1985). Their purpose is to nominally predict how well students will learn in school environments designed by a dominant culture to accomplish particular goals and meet certain expectations, all of which are interlocked with culturally defined values (Cole, 1996; Portes, 1996; Smagorinsky, in press b). Because educational reform is often tied to students' test scores, reformers usually institute these tests to reify transmission-based assumptions and related mimetic practices about teaching, learning, and evaluation.

Reform based on culturally myopic principles tends to reinforce inequality in teaching and learning outcomes for most nondominant minority groups (Portes, 2005; Portes, Gallego, & Salas, 2009). Political attacks on bilingual education undermine an essential form of mediated learning for Latino/Latina students. Thomas and Collier (2002) argue that current educational policies fail to close the gap because they often rely on charter schools that weaken neighborhood schools or the use of transitional models for ELLs. These policies leave ELLs behind their peers in school.¹ Less-advantaged students are subject to authoritarian teaching practices and tests biased in favor of the dominant group, in spite of available alternatives (Estrada, Tharp, & Dalton, 1999). Under the banner of "reform," then, many policymakers work to institutionalize the hoariest means of education known to Western culture, under the assumption that lecture and exam-oriented instruction is the optimal form of schooling for all. We contest that assumption.

The Education of English Language Learners

The enforcement of Public Law 94-142 (PL-94; since changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)² illustrates how opportunities afforded

to special-needs students are not available to ELLs. PL-94 provides the *least-restrictive learning environment* for special-needs students. It requires school districts to mainstream exceptional students in regular classrooms with their peers, in the school they would attend if not disabled, to the greatest extent possible. This law does not apply to immigrant students who would benefit if their first language were used to promote learning English and content. In cases in which “English only” rules apply, bilingual teachers are discouraged from helping students in their first language. Current reform does not always provide funds to prepare bilingual teachers, nor does it organize dual immersion options for a vast number of students, 79 percent of whom are Spanish speakers. In restricted environments, these students predominantly learn below grade level and drop out at disproportionate rates.

This is but one example of how reform requires attention to agency: Educational reform in today’s context too often relies on developing new means of reinscribing old practices in “new” public policy. With these beliefs in place, most schools are resistant to the restructuring needed at various levels that would provide a more culturally responsive education.

One factor that can affect a new cultural group’s school performance is acculturative change. Alva and Padilla (1995) and others argue that when cultures collide in educational settings, ethnic minority children are typically expected to assimilate and adapt to the existing values of schools. To do so successfully, according to the assimilationist model, they should lose some secondary characteristics as favored by the melting-pot model. However, according to Berry (1998), members of ethnic minority groups generally employ one of four strategies to handle acculturative stress:³ assimilation (keep their cultural identity as they are immersed in the dominant one), separation (maintain their cultural values and avoid interaction with others), integration (maintain their culture but also interact with others), and marginalization (have little interest in the new culture and relationships with others). The majority group member may choose to respond to those undergoing adaptation in defensive or welcoming ways (Portes, 1999). They may feel threatened by the presence and agency of the out-group members and believe that to maintain their identity, minority group members must be devalued (Erikson, 1968). Hence the process of acculturation can appear complex from psychological and sociohistorical stances that directly concern the lifelong development of a healthy identity.

Acculturation can also be a difficult and stressful process. Children undergoing cultural change must not only come to understand the norms and expectations of the new culture but also develop an identity that integrates

the social practices of two cultures. Ogbu (1999) notes how low-SES African American children often experience an identity crisis regarding their use of language upon entering school, much earlier than when older majority adolescents undergo this normative process (Erikson, 1968). In school their English is regarded as nonstandard and inferior; at the same time, use of textbook English outside school may invite censure from peers and members of their minority group (Lanehart, 2001). Acculturation can involve difficult decisions as to which cultural values and practices should be adopted and integrated into a self-identity.

Typically, by third or fourth grade, academic demands help children of minority cultures “learn” they are inferior to their dominant-culture peers. Hispanic children are less likely than other groups to have attended preschool (National Taskforce on Hispanic Early Childhood Education, 2007). Testing often segregates them further from instructional practices that differ considerably in terms of pedagogical standards in the quality of instruction. Meanwhile, the institution of school carries on, perpetuating the way it educates students in uniform ways in spite of differentiated needs and learning histories (Moll, 2000). The identity formation process for these students may be fueled by aversive reform practices and feedback that can become discouraging. Such inequity may affect learning adversely and motivate students to resist academically (Wilensky, Galvin, & Pascoe, 2004). As the bar is raised and support is not, the most disadvantaged students begin to drop further behind and, often enough, out of school (Moses, 2002).

In an era of rapid change, then, schools seek stability. If reforming schools by homogenizing teaching and learning means judging large populations within the school according to non-optional means, goes the thinking, then so be it; what matters most is to provide a deep structure that perpetuates extant values. In effect, such reform becomes an effort to recast cultural minorities into caste-like groups in the context of a new global economy built largely on the shoulders of a growing service sector. Children of immigrants with lower parental social capital are susceptible to be screened from college admissions through the production and expansion of a P–12 gap in teaching and learning. When a complex assessment apparatus further institutionalizes inflexible notions of knowledge, students are forced into a mold that can marginalize their out-of-school abilities (Smagorinsky, 2009).

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The State of Georgia: New Demographics, Stable Schools

Historically, race relations in the state of Georgia have followed segregation to present day. With the majority of the indigenous population removed by Andrew Jackson on the Trail of Tears in the 1830s, the major groups have been of European and African descent. In the 2000 Census, roughly 65 percent of the state's residents were White and 29 percent Black. Many African Americans continue to live in segregated communities and poverty, long after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, in Georgia and throughout the United States (Lamb, 2005). Until recently, when most people in the South thought of race relations, they thought in terms of Black and White.

During the 1990s, however, Georgia's Latino/Latina population tripled in size; it increased sixfold if foreign nationals⁴ are counted (Moser, 2004). This dramatic rise has been credited to the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta and the need for a sudden infusion of cheap labor, which came primarily from south of the U.S. border. Laborers stayed to work in the state's poultry and textile industries and other service jobs and provided a pipeline that brought more immigrants to the state (Williams, 2000). The state's population is now 5.3 percent Latino/Latina, roughly 65 percent of whom have origins in Mexico and Guatemala. At present, Latino/Latina children comprise over 12 percent of all births in Georgia and 25 percent of children in the nation below age six (National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007).⁵ Complicating Georgia's racial mix are immigrants with limited education and literacy in Spanish, in combination with cultural practices that make their communities unique in the Southeast.

In the daily life of many residents of Georgia and other Southern states, communities remain segregated. The one area in which social and cultural groups gather together is the public schools, even as independent and charter schools siphon off many upper-class White students and others who can qualify for admission or afford the tuition. The public schools remain culturally diverse; yet, the persistence of academic tracking enables segregation of students by race and social class (Oakes, 1985; Oakes & Lipton, 1990).

In Clarke County, Georgia, where we live, White people make up roughly two-thirds of the county population but only one-fifth of the school population. Although African American students make up over half the school population, their teachers and administrators are overwhelmingly White, above the national rate of 82 percent (Johnson, 2002). Somewhat lost in this mix are the Latino/Latina students, whose numbers are even more skewed. Although Latinos/Latinas comprise roughly 9 percent of the county population and 20 percent of the school population, the district includes eight

Latino/Latina American teachers out of the 975-member teaching force—less than 1 percent. And Clarke County has a far smaller immigrant population than do other counties that house the industries in which Latinos/Latinas often find employment.

Latino/Latina immigrants to Georgia tend to come from high poverty areas. Moser (2004) notes that the new immigrants come from the poorest places in Mexico and Guatemala to a place where people are not familiar with migrant laborers, or with Hispanics (“Coming to America,” para. 10). People from extreme poverty in their home country arrive in a place where they must learn a new language and customs, all the while living in isolated communities. This immigration has come to a state in which Confederate flags still adorn many cars and trucks, a place in which, as Moser (2004) reports, Republican state Rep. Chip Rogers stated, “Everybody had a Southern accent when I was growing up. We were part of the Old South, for better or worse. We were all the same” (“Coming to America,” para. 11). Reaction to immigration often is concerned with different values and different conceptions of who has a right to belong here. Moser documents a number of violent acts committed against Latino/Latina residents of Georgia, or “Georgiafornia” as it is known to some anti-immigration activists.

For many immigrants and their children, schools can be alienating and frightening places full of angry and antagonistic classmates and their parents. Within this context, a growing Latino/Latina population is contending with the long-established yet still discriminated-against African American population among minority groups, and the values and social practices promoted by middle-class Whites in the schools and community. White flight to neighboring communities leaves local minority students to populate schools that struggle with Annual Yearly Progress.

In this state, like so many others that have new Hispanic demographic growth, an enduring teaching and learning gap increases in public schooling. Children of immigrants become citizens and learn English, yet most remain grades behind. Those who graduate generally are three to four grade levels behind (Portes, 2005). That they consistently fall so far behind reflects the educational system’s limitations in providing equitable opportunities that ensure learning at grade level. While not all Latino/Latina students can expect to go to college—although they do enroll in two-year colleges, albeit with a roughly 50 percent graduation rate (Fry, 2002)—the problem is that this fast-growing population may seek a sound education and yet be left behind. Unequal learning opportunities prevail through college, where only 9 percent of them graduate relative to 48 percent of Whites.

Feeding the challenges that Latino/Latina immigrants face are stereotypical representations. What persists, fueled by the nightly rants of anti-immigrant pundits on TV, is the image of Latino/Latina immigrants as a violent, drug-infested scourge that must be stopped at the border, segregated from White society should they gain U.S. entry, and incarcerated or deported for any transgression of law or custom.

The most serious problem facing these children in school is that their first language and related cultural resources are not used or valued in typically unresponsive teaching. While dual immersion allows students to catch up with and surpass those who are in English-only ESOL classes (Collier & Thomas, 2004), the current policies do not allow or provide effective bilin-

gual education to help close the gap. Unless these students are middle class or above, they will fall further behind academically each year they stay in school or drop out. Hispanics constitute the majority of those who remain undereducated in and by schools. What is then most problematic is that unless the current policy against inclusion changes, an even greater percent of the Hispanic population will remain in poverty and underedu-

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cated in the coming decades. By 2050 half of the student population will be Hispanic, many still in the process of learning English. Addressing their scholastic—and thus economic—needs would seem to be a critical consideration for policymakers in education. While better and more responsive education for all groups of children is available, the real causes for the gap in achievement seem to originate at the structural level, informed by policy but not necessarily the best evidence.

In the meantime, many Hispanic students lose most of their first language and struggle to become proficient in the second, a condition referred to as *subtractive bilingualism*. Those who are taught using the first language perform far better in school as opposed to those taught English only. The problem with English-only policies is that they violate the students' rights to learn in the least-restrictive environment. When segregated in English-only classes, students are typically exposed to the drill-oriented teaching methods associated with remedial instruction. In contrast, when both languages are used to learn at grade level, the first language helps a child acquire the second language and accompanying academic content. This condition is referred to as *additive bilingualism*, which can increase intelligence, if intelligence tests are to be given credibility (Vellutino, Scanoln, & Lyon, 2000). In spite of this evidence, bilingual education options are scarce in Georgia and outlawed in

other parts of the nation; English-only ESOL programs fueled by the current political economy of the dominant majority are the rule. Teacher education lags far behind inservice education in preparing culturally responsive educators in bilingual instruction.

There still is no strong evidence for “sheltered instruction” actually closing the teaching and achievement gaps. New, untested approaches to professional development supplement pull-out and co-teaching options that constitute the prevailing transitional programs offered in the United States. Effective dual immersion/bilingual education strategies are rare. One reason schools are allowed to violate the least-restrictive environment law (PL-94) and not mainstream ELLs is that not enough bilingual teachers are certified or trained in universities, leaving schools with few options for integrating new immigrants. Another is that organizing dual immersion and culturally responsive practices are not part of the knowledge base in preparing certified educators.

One pernicious consequence of segregating ELLs is that the social setting of their education can stigmatize them and lead to further diagnoses of learning disabilities. Vygotsky (1993) regarded such diagnoses as the social construction of a *secondary disability*. Kozulin and Gindis (2007) describe this condition “as a sociocultural rather than an organic or individual developmental phenomenon” (p. 334).

The political economy that supports English-only or required ESOL classes continues to thrive. Colleges of education fail to invest in preparing bilingual teachers or culturally compatible strategies while states fail to develop programs that prepare additive bilinguals for a global society. The absence of such options, however, substantially diminishes the prospects for economic stability and advancement among all who are culturally different due to poverty or other social factors. In sum, what matters is organizing reform in developmentally and culturally responsive ways, and in the case of ELLs, ways that allow mediation to occur in the most sensitive signal system (L1) in mastering English and school content.

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Implications for English Educators

English education has traditionally focused on how to prepare teacher candidates to teach writing, literature, and language, with the more recent addition of multimodal twenty-first-century literacies. There has also been attention to understanding students: who students are, what their interests are, how English can serve their personal and developmental needs, and

how to make classrooms more accommodating to students' needs as they engage with the curriculum.

We believe that the Latino/Latina immigration issue provides a teachable moment for English educators. First, the implications of the influx of immigrant students helps to lay bare the normative institutional structure and practices of conventional schooling that tend to follow axioms that go largely unchallenged unless a new cultural group reveals that what is normative to some can be alien to others. Traditionally, the myth of the U.S. melting-pot society assumed that the role of the immigrant was to assimilate and blend in. This approach in schooling has been kept alive with some degrees of accommodation, but it is also producing too many dropouts and feelings of disenfranchisement among Latino/Latina youth.

A benign neglect of acculturative dissonance is not advisable or tolerable. Rather, members of the school institution need to make education flexible enough to change with new populations and consider what they reveal about prevailing norms. Cultural bias follows from the ways in which a dominant group's norms go unexamined in the development of educational and assessment materials, until it becomes evident that some cultural groups perform poorly with them. We see this problem at work in U.S. schools' continuing difficulties in serving their immigrant students.

Effective solutions to the problem of how schools should absorb waves of immigrants already exist. Such efforts can help English educators question school norms in terms of which populations they do and do not serve well. How they do so is undoubtedly idiosyncratic and may depend on how well resourced and informed their programs are. Teacher education programs are typically understaffed and, in meeting state certification requirements and university general education basics, have little room for additional courses in bilingual education, school law, the cultural practices of different populations, and other topics. We hesitate, then, to make grand recommendations that few educators and planners have the ability to implement. Rather, we urge our colleagues in English education to incorporate issues relevant to questioning norms into their teacher education programs so that teacher candidates will be encouraged to reflect on issues of normative differences in thinking about how to teach their students with the greatest effectiveness.

Notes

1. While we know bilingual education or dual immersion for immigrant students is effective, sheltered instruction has yet to show a reliable positive effect. English-only approaches that limit use of the first language (L1) in pull-out ESOL classes leave most students grade-levels behind.

2. This law is extensively explained at <http://www.nd.edu/~rbarger/www7/pl94-142.html>. Briefly, as this site explains, the law “provided that handicapped children and adults ages 3–21 be educated in the ‘least restrictive environment’ to the maximum extent appropriate, meaning that they are educated with children who are not handicapped and that special classes, separate schools or other removal of children from their regular educational environment occurs only when the severity of the handicap is such that education in regular classes cannot be achieved.”

3. *Acculturative stress* refers to the psychological, physical, and social problems and challenges accompanying adaptation to a new culture.

4. We use this term out of respect for the Hispanic Bar Association’s complaint that when Latino/Latina settlers who have bypassed the immigration system are referred to as “illegal” or “alien,” the court system dehumanizes them. *Foreign national* is among the terms that the association recommends.

5. We should note that Hispanic/Latino ethnicity is officially considered to include all racial groups defined by the Census. However, the surge of immigrants in this area tends to be indigenous and varied linguistically.

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