Nine Complementary Principles to Retain Adults in an ESOL/Literacy Program

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Dimensions of ESL Programs
This issue of TESOL in Action features four articles that address specific aspects of ESOL programs. The first two articles offer valuable ideas for working with ESOL students. In his essay, Edmund Hamann shares ideas for maintaining viable adult ESOL programs. Drawing upon his own experiences in bilingual literacy programs, Hamann offers nine principles for creating and maintaining active communities of English language learners. Also concerned with fostering classrooms of active learners, Mary Hadley and Laurie Cox describe a creative instructional practice for “unraveling” the syntax typically found in Shakespeare’s writings. This activity, they note, can be effective for ESOL students at both the high school and college levels.

The last two articles focus on two special groups, teachers and administrators, who are essential components of ESOL programs. In their article, Jo-Anne Schick and Diane Boothe report on a research study in which they examined pre-service teachers’ attitudes toward diversity. Their findings will be of special interest to those in teacher education programs who prepare ESOL teachers to work with the children in our public schools. In the final contribution to this issue, Les Potter and Sandra Hansen highlight a myriad of ways that middle school administrators can encourage the development of schooling environments in which diversity is valued. Taken together, these four articles provide nourishing food for thought.

Joan Kelly Hall and Diane Boothe

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Theme for
Winter 1998 issue:

ESL IN HEALTH CARE SETTINGS

Don Rubin at the University of Georgia will be guest editor for this special, themed issue. Articles will address questions such as the following: (1) How can ESOL teachers help prepare their students to negotiate health care interactions? (2) What are some special needds of ESL populations in terms of accessing and using existing health promotion resources? (3) What are some cultural barriers to using Western health care methods—beyond language proficiency—that some ESL speakers may experience? (4) How can ESOL teachers work in partnership with health care providers—e.g., as interpreters in clinics, as patient advocates, or as disseminators of health care messages—to promote the health of their student populations. (5) What ESL or ESP training is available to students who wish to prepare for careers as health care professionals?

Dr. Rubin asks any readers of TIA who may be interested in contributing a paper on this subject to contact him by November 15, 1997 to discuss their ideas. Please contact him by phone at 706-542-4893, or by fax at 706-542-3245, or by e-mail at drubin@uga.cc.uga.edu.

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TESOL in Action
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Nine Complementary Principles to Retain Adults in an ESOL/Literacy Program

Edmund T. Hamann

Preface

After taking time off for full-time graduate school and relocation from Kansas to Georgia by way of Philadelphia, I recently returned to the world of adult ESOL teaching after a hiatus of several years. In order to reorient myself, I re-viewed the write-up I had made for a presentation at the National Center for Family Literacy’s Annual Conference in 1993. As I reflected on that write-up, on my experience leading an experimental bilingual literacy program from 1991 to 1993, and on my subsequent teaching and classroom experiences, I realized that I still believe in the conclusions I drew 4 years ago about how to work effectively with adult ESOL students. Moreover, I thought my conclusions might be of interest to a Georgia audience of ESOL instructors, particularly to instructors who work with adults and older adolescents and who have no means of keeping LEP students in class apart from maintaining the students’ faith in them-selves, their program, their instructor(s), and the learning process.

The following list of principles is my attempt to share general recommendations to teachers of ESOL and/or limited-literate adults, based on my specific practice running a bilingual family literacy program and confirmed by my more recent experience as a volunteer bilingual literacy teacher at the Asociación Latinoamericana (in Atlanta). Though I am a believer in bilingual classroom environments, I think the principles I have identified are also pertinent to monolingual ESL environments. Before reciting the list, it makes sense to describe briefly the original context from which these principles were derived.

Context

From 1991 to 1993 I worked as the coordinator and lead instructor of an experimental, bilingual, family literacy program called Family Reading, which met at a public library in Kansas City, Kansas. Each of the roughly 100 students that I taught were Spanish-speaking immigrants, 90% of them originally from Mexico. All came voluntarily to my class (as opposed to by mandate from the welfare department, the courts, etc.). All had the right and power to leave the program, at their own initiative, if and when their life circumstances changed or if they decided the class was not responding to their self-described interests and needs.

The Kansas City program was a test-site for the National Council of La Raza’s (NCLR’s) experimental Family Reading curriculum. Family Reading was one of six components of NCLR’s Project EXCEL (Excellence in Community Educational Leadership). All the EXCEL models were intended to demonstrate methods for improving Latino educational success across the United States by discouraging dropping out, encouraging adult literacy and inter-genera-tional learning, and rewarding academic success.

The Family Reading curriculum borrowed heavily from the ideas of the late Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1989), particularly in its use of the Language Experience Approach (LEA) and its belief in the centrality of student empowerment. According to the LEA philosophy, students learn language best when they study topics of direct relevance to their lives (e.g., their own experiences). LEA adherents believe that people want and need the oral and literary skills to speak and write about who they are, what they want, and what they know.

The Family Reading curriculum also included the completion of entrance and exit examinations, a bilingual format, and the frequent promotion of home literacy activity with the students’ children. Beyond that, there were few program guidelines. Nonetheless, these requirements did sometimes put parameters on how the class could be led and how to respond to student requests. Required entrance and exit exams were a particular stumbling block. (They were intimidating.) Thus, on some occasions a balance needed to be found between students’ goals and tolerance levels and NCLR’s wish to know how well their model worked.

Unlike many family literacy programs, there was no classroom-based, inter-generational learning that was explicitly part of the Family Reading model. Though it was a program goal to help parents and other care-providers recognize the opportunity and responsibility that each had to teach and guide their children, these items were written about, talked about, and critiqued in class, but not practiced. For that reason, the Family Reading model sometimes looked as much like an adult literacy classroom as it did a family literacy classroom. (Kids played and learned with trained instructors one room away.)

It is from this experiential background that I created the list. I do not presume the list to be complete or flawless. I know that what my students, the volunteers, and I practiced worked. Excepting the final principle, which I hope lingers with you, the reader, there is no particular order to this list.

1. Be responsive to student expectations vis-à-vis teaching method(s) and curriculum. Schooling may have been very different in their country of origin. Students will continue to attend if the class is satisfactorily compelling. Students can and will adjust their expectations, tolerating and even enjoying unanticipated activities, but they need to feel that their agenda is also being heeded.

All my students were from Latin America, mostly Mexico. Though the amount of previous schooling experience that each had varied considerably (from zero years to university experience), nearly all shared similar expectations about what a formal learning environment should look like. They expected and asked for dictations, for phonetics practice, and for grammatical reviews (none of which fit very easily with an LEA approach). They expected me to be at the front of the classroom, at the chalkboard. And most called me
maestro (teacher) or profesor (professor), instead of using either my first or last name, even though I was younger than many of them and introduced myself as ‘Ted’.

I accepted the name maestro from those who chose to use it, and in many class sessions I led phonetics reviews and dictation exercises. By sometimes indulging their wish lists, the students would in turn accept my departures from their expectations—be it for biographical writing exercises, bilingual reading activities or small group tutorials. If I explained the relevance or connectedness of the activity I was proposing to goals and expectations that they had expressed, they were even more willing to accept a novel activity. Students’ expectations were not static; as long-time students became accustomed to some of our particular practices, they began to anticipate them and enjoy them more.

Still, several times I was told by a student who had just made (in my mind) astounding gains, ‘That was fun, but when will we do real learning?’ If I did not respond to that question by justifying the present activity or by switching to a new topic and/or pedagogical method that was more to their style, the questioning student would remain dissatisfied and could even leave the program altogether. It is hard to teach someone who is not there; I learned that the dissatisfied and could even leave the program altogether.

If we were going to study Spanish, if we were going to focus on home literacy activities, those activities needed to be explicitly related to the students’ goals. I taught Spanish literacy skills using the rationales that sometimes ‘reviewing’ Spanish helped explain a point in English (e.g., the use of the auxiliary verb haber in Spanish is similar to the use of ‘have’ as an auxiliary in English), that creating versions of text in both languages meant students could more easily review at home, and that the Spanish was necessary practice for our high school student volunteers who were trying to learn or improve their Spanish. I did not refrain from sharing the findings of education researchers, but I did find that the off-the-cuff alternative explanations shared in this paragraph were more acceptable to the students.

In class I regularly echoed my students, agreeing that our goal was to teach/learn oral English, but I also reiterated that I had additional goals as well. Ultimately, so did many of my students.

2. Promote a sense of community between and among students and volunteers. Your adult/ESOL class may be a primary means for an immigrant student to create a network of friends and support in their new neighborhood. Friends encourage each other to come to class.

Though Spanish oral fluency and limited English proficiency were common denominators amongst my students, their lack of English oral skills and English literacy skills was typically not their only unmet life need. Indeed, if I did not pay attention to my participants’ other life circumstances, many would drop out for reasons that had nothing to do with any of the specific activities of the class, while the attendance and ability to function of others would also be compromised. Put simply, being an immigrant in America is hard. Lack of English literacy and oral skills are two obstacles to getting ahead, but students also needed a chance to forge new friendships, to learn about community resources, and to feel part of a community.

Though it occasionally felt frustrating and “off-task,” promoting relationships between program participants and between staff and participants was a form of enlightened self-interest. If a student came to class to see a friend, she was still coming to class. If students met with each other away from class they would sometimes talk about class and even study together. Participation in the class was a point they had in common. Even when friendships had no direct classroom significance, the sunnier disposition of a student who did not feel as lonely would dispose that student to learn better.

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3. Remind each student that she/he is competing only against herself/himself. Each student brings a different personal history to class and a different range of skills. That individual skill level should be the only threshold which a student uses to measure her/his progress.

This is perhaps the hardest idea to sell, but it is crucial. While students may see both superficial and significant similarities between themselves and their fellow students, (e.g., age, parenting experience, country of origin), if their educational experiences (or lack thereof) are significantly different, they cannot begin to compete on the same footing.

A student with a degree in engineering earned at a Mexican university should have more classroom skills, and thus faster classroom success, than a student who has attended just two years of primary school in her entire life. Similarly, if two superficially similar students have different histories trying to learn English—e.g., one has taken other classes while another has not, one works surrounded by English-speaking colleagues and another does not—then those students should expect different rates of language skill improvement as well.

This is to say nothing of variations that exist naturally because of varied levels of exhaustion caused by raising kids, keeping house, and/or going to work. Sometimes even the message that students are differently talented for innate reasons is a palatable message for a frustrated student (though that is one I would use most cautiously).

What is important is to make the class a noncompetitive and cooperative learning environment. You should heed but not dwell on skill differences, while protecting each individual’s self-esteem. It makes sense when you recognize that a student has developed a new skill, or expanded one, to remind that student of his point of origin. “You didn’t used to know that; now you do. Congratulations!” A student who knows five words in English should not be trying to keep up with her neighbor, but rather trying to learn words number six, seven, and eight. Sometimes it is helpful to remind her of that.

4. Don’t let students get bogged down with frustration because they have not immediately realized long-term goals. Help them recognize and be proud of their incremental gains. Help them establish intermediate goals.

If certain students arrive at class with little experience studying or practicing English, those students are not going to have the entire language mastered after a month or two, though that may be their wish. The instructor needs to help the student recognize that language learning will be a long haul with no end—you can always learn more. The instructor needs to emphasize the functional aspects of what students have already learned by identifying tasks that they are newly capable of or better at.

I had five or six students who regularly told me that they were stupid and could learn nothing. I had to tell them they were wrong, but I had to do so in an extremely sensitive fashion. The last thing a person with such low self-confidence needs is to be told they are wrong. Instead I would try to show them. “Where do you live?” I would ask. They would tell me the address and I would ask them how they learned that. “How do you get to work?” I would ask. As I heard complex explanations of bus schedules and transfers en route, I would ask how did they learn that. The important next step was to come up with an example of something they had learned in class.

5. Create alternate arenas for students to feel successful (perhaps in fields that have nothing to do with their studies).

Twice in my two years as coordinator we put on fund-raising meals at a nearby community café. Both of these events contributed significantly to the program’s success and did so for a number of reasons. (Raising money was not primary among them; after food costs and the distribution of free tickets to family members of program participants, each dinner netted about $300.) The dinners gave the students a format in which to give back to the program which was giving to them. The dinners were also a change of pace, an economics lesson, and chance to collaborate with each other for extended periods (i.e., a group project). The solidarity produced and demonstrated by production of the meals was obvious and welcome. Most importantly, in the kitchen and as a server, different skills were needed than those required in the classroom. Students who were shy, frustrated, or confused during classes became kitchen leaders, offering instructions and keeping the group on task.

I remember one of my less confident students handing me a cheese grater and showing me how to grate cheese. (I knew how to grate cheese.) Watching her take charge was exhilarating. After our dinner fund-raiser, she was a different, more confident student. For other students, the chance to teach Spanish to the high school age volunteers provided a means for students to feel competent. The students could take pride in the volunteers’ successful learning.

Students who found their skills rewarded kept coming to class. Students who felt needed in class and for class activities (e.g., for the dinners and Spanish teaching) liked the responsibility and stayed with the program. Students who felt frustrated by some aspect or another of class would ignore or overcome some of that frustration if they felt rewarded and successful in other ways.

6. Have coherent lesson plans and long-term strategies, but mix teaching methods and classroom formats and be explicit as to why. Everyone learns differently so different types of lessons will appeal to and help different students.

Consistent with Principle #5, giving students a variety of ways to demonstrate their competence increases the likelihood that in at least one case they will. As a teacher, I tried to reach all of my learners; mixing approaches helped ensure that through one activity or another I did. Also, this strategy helped avoid the development of fissures between students of various skill levels because, depending on the activity, students’ skill levels overlapped, being superior for one activity and inferior for the next. For example, the person who was best at recording dictations may not have been the most creative and/or poignant story writer. Of course, students needed to work on the areas they were weak in as well as what they were good at. Mixing formats promoted this multiple skill development. Energy from learning successes could be expended to tackle more difficult exercises.
7. Give students the space to negotiate the class as they, according to their life circumstances, so choose. Don’t close doors to them.

This could be aggravating. I would expect five people to be at class and fifteen would show up, three who I had not seen for months, four who were new, three who came intermittently, and the five I had expected. What to do? I always tried to remember to be patient, accepting and gracious. None of my students lived lives that were easy. All needed to improve English speaking and literacy skills. Still, however tentatively, all were seeking to learn. I needed to focus on what opportunities were created by their presence, rather than worry myself or castigate them about why they had been gone.

New adult literacy students, LEP or not, have often had previous uncomfortable learning experiences. Classes are an activity they may be quite suspicious of. If they were uncomfortable, they would leave and sometimes never come back. That was not the outcome I or they were seeking or needing. So I grinned, enjoyed their presence, and sought ways to make the classroom welcoming.

I remembered too, that returning students may have had many good reasons for having been away. Those reasons were sometimes personal. I thought that it was polite to ask why they had been away (often they blurted it out even before I could ask). When their answer was forthcoming I had a writing exercise in the making (i.e., ‘Where were you since you last came to class?’). If they were more uncomfortable, that was their prerogative and I moved on.

The patient welcoming ambiance I tried to maintain in the classroom was greatly facilitated by the presence of flexible volunteers. If new students or unexpected numbers of students came on a given night, I could split up the class at a moment’s notice, giving various volunteers and students different tasks and then dedicate my time to welcoming the newcomers. I always kept some tried and true introductory exercises with me which I could take out whenever they were needed.

8. Gently, but overtly, remind students that it is not just their individual learning at stake. All the good reasons for a family literacy program (being a role model, gaining new skills to assist your child’s learning, etc.) can be motives for a student to stay involved in a program, even if it was not his/her original reason for coming.

Principle #1 was a reminder to pay attention to where students are coming from—experientially and psychologically. That advice needs to be supplemented by the reminder that students are changing (hopefully learning) as they keep coming to class. I needed to respond to ‘where they presently were’ as well as ‘where they had been.’ Fortunately, ‘where they presently were’ often partially reflected what I had been teaching. My students and I were getting into closer sync all the time. Ideas that were novel to them when I first suggested them to them may have become sacrosanct in a matter of weeks (e.g., ‘read to your child everyday’).

Bilingual family literacy, even in the modified fashion that I practiced it, was more than regular adult ESOL/literacy. Built into it was the notion that students are also teachers and promoters of learning. Family literacy may not have been the reason my students came to our program, but, for a few, it was the reason they stayed. Attending class for one’s child’s sake could quickly become a compelling reason to stay with the program.

9. Care and be sincere.

For this, it does not matter what you are teaching. Sincerity, if you have it, always shines through and makes students feel welcome and motivated. My students’ success and their well-being (and their children’s well-being) was important to me. They could see that. I showed that I respected them and that they, as individuals, deserved such care and respect. A respectful environment was one they were willing to remain part of.

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References


1See the National Council of La Raza (1991) or Cummins (1979) for further discussion of this research finding.
Clarifying Shakespeare’s Language for the ESL Student
Mary Hadley and Laurie Cox

Today’s high school or college ESOL students often move quickly from the sheltered ESL class to the mainstream English class, only to meet Elizabethan English as one of their first encounters with English literature. At the same time, literature is beginning to play a more important role in traditional ESL courses (1993). Yet the Bard may inspire fear and a sense of alienation in many international students. What, they believe, has Shakespeare to do with their lives, and how will they possibly be able to understand his strange English? In their fears they are not alone, and we have found that many of our American students in the same class are also filled with foreboding at the thought of deciphering Othello, Hamlet or other tragedies. Yet for international students, the Bard’s syntax is perhaps most problematic. One of our ESL students clarified the situation for the class as she said, “But where is the subject of this passage and why is the verb placed so far from it? Why is the word order so odd?”

Aki’s words struck a chord, and we started to look very carefully at some of the key speeches of Othello, the play we were then studying, including an example in Act 1 scene 1 where Roderigo is speaking to Brabantio and says:

... that your fair daughter,
At this odd-even and dull watch o’ the night,
Transported with no worse nor better guard
But with a knave of common hire, a gondolier,
To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor- (1.1.125-129)

It is easy to see from these few lines that numerous problems exist for the international (and American) student. The use of transported as an active verb rather than has been transported, the passive; and the separation of the subject, fair daughter, from the verb by a distracting adverbial phrase, both cause difficulties for the student. In addition, vocabulary words such as gondolier, knave, lascivious, and Moor, which may be unfamiliar to many international students, may cause the students to feel anxious or even antagonistic before the play has hardly begun.

At this point one handbook proved particularly useful. Unlocking Shakespeare’s Language: Help for the Teacher and Students by Randal Robinson does exactly what its title suggests. It unlocks and explains the peculiarities of Shakespeare’s language in a series of activities designed to unravel students’ problems and make Shakespeare a pleasure rather than a pain to read. We decided to modify some of Robinson’s activities specifically for the text we wished our students to read, Othello. Unlike Robinson, we did not address vocabulary problems but concentrated on Shakespeare’s unusual arrangements of words because we felt that this was the area which caused most trouble for our students.

ESL students are in a double bind with Shakespeare, facing both new vocabulary and new sentence structures at the same time, so taking strange vocabulary out of the picture may leave students free to concentrate on Shakespeare’s syntax. According to Robinson, and as we found out for ourselves with numerous students, if students are shown in modern language Shakespeare’s more unusual structures and have to unravel them to make complete sense for themselves, then when faced with similar sentences in Shakespeare’s words, they begin to process them almost without consciously making an effort.

Thus, first we analyzed the difficult Shakespearean structures, of which three were easy to find in Othello: inversion of subject and object, splitting of the auxiliary and the main verb, and the use of extended adverbial and other clauses before the subject and the verb, which Robinson calls “delayed constructions” (21). Following Robinson’s suggestions, before tackling Shakespeare’s language we then gave our students modern sentences which imitated these difficult Shakespearean constructions. Therefore, for inversion of subject and object, we had a variety of sentences similar to the following one:
"Five students of Japan, handsome, brilliant baseball players, that never flaunt their skills, the very cream of our team, did I today watch in an exciting game."

The modern version of the splitting of the auxiliary verb was

"He should the doctor in the student health center visit."

And the delayed constructions was

"When from the supermarket with large grocery bags that hurt her arms was my mother walking, a large dog in the parking lot she was frightened by."

We discovered that the stranger and more amusing the modern sentences were, the better. If some of the students find this quite easy and others find it difficult, then one can extend this first stage of the activity by having the better students construct sentences for the weaker ones as they work in small groups or pairs.

Next we examined Shakespeare's own words. The first examples, which we took from Robinson, addressed inversion of subject and object, a very frequent occurrence. For example:

Three lads of Cyprus - noble swelling spirits,
That hold their honours in a wary distance,
The very elements of this warlike isle -
Have I tonight flustered with flowing cups... (2.3.52-55)

and

"That handkerchief / Did an Egyptian to my mother give” (3.4.55-56).

The next problem we examined was that of splitting the auxiliary and the main verb, and here we did not use Robinson’s examples but had students find some for themselves. For example:

- "I would not my unhoused free condition PUT into circumscription and confine...” (1.1.26/27)

- "I will a round unvarnish’d tale deliver / Of my whole course of love;” (1.3.90-91)

- "Would ever have, t’incure a general mock, / Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou...” (1.2.70-72).

Again, if more experienced students are put in groups with less experienced students, they can usually find a few such sentences in the first Act.

Finally, we had students identify and tackle those long, awkward “delayed constructions.” For example:

... I therefore vouch again
That with some mixtures powerful o’er the blood,
Or with some dram conjured to this effect,
He wrought upon her (1.3.105-108).

And again:

Something, sure of state,
Either from Venice, or some unhatch’d practice
Made demonstrable here in Cyprus to him,
Hath puddled his clear spirit (3.4.139-142).

And a further example which caused a great deal of angst in the classroom:

... No, when light-winged toys
Of feathered cupid seel with wanton dullness
My speculative and officed instruments,
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
Let huswives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and base adversities
Make head against my estimation! (1.3.271-277).

Then, when the students have “unlocked” Shakespeare’s language in what will hopefully end up as an amusing exercise, they can move to the final part of this activity, making up their own Shakespearean type sentences. By actually creating Shakespearean sentence structures, the students will also become aware of the poetic nature of some of the difficult structures and also realize that, as Robinson claims, Shakespeare deliberately chose not to follow the “basic, conversational patterns” of his own day for dramatic purposes.

So how does an exercise like this one translate into greater understanding and appreciation of the whole play? For many students, including international students, once they have seen that the language problems can be unraveled, they begin to enjoy the language and can spend more time analyzing the characters instead of feeling frustrated because they have no idea what anyone is saying. And we believe that the benefits go further; giving students practice in unraveling convoluted syntax can only heighten their awareness of sentence structure in general. Finally, we have seen how students’ success with Shakespearean English builds their confidence in their abilities to tackle other unfamiliar texts, from poetry to modern novels.

Mary Hadley is an assistant professor and Laurie Cox a temporary instructor in the Department of English & Philosophy at Georgia Southern University.

References


For the past several years, both teachers and researchers alike have noted the increasing numbers of minority children in public schools in the United States. However, the reverse is true of teachers in these schools—more and more public school teachers belong to the dominant Euro­pean American culture (Larke, 1990 & 1992; Reed, 1993). With such an increase in diversity in U.S. schools, colleges of Education have instituted requirements in multicultural education in order to better prepare teachers to understand and meet the needs of ethnic and language minority students. Such requirements should ensure that minority children receive effective instruction that is sensitive to their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In fact, those institutions which hope to be accredited by NCATE (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education) must include a multicultural component in their teacher preparation programs. In this way, “the learning experiences created by teacher candidates build on students’ prior experiences, exceptionalities, and cultural backgrounds based on membership in ethnic, racial, gender, language, socioeconomic, community, and family groups, to help all students achieve high levels of learning” (NCATE, p. 18, 1995).

Despite the fact that most pre-service teachers receive an introduction to the fundamentals of multicultural education, teachers’ underlying negative attitudes toward minorities often affect the degree to which they implement such multicultural curricula in their classrooms (Rios, 1993) and may result in unintentional discrimination (Nieto, 1996). For example, teachers may develop instructional materials or strategies which are inappropriate for the needs of minority students. In addition, many teachers hold lower expectations for minority students than for those from the dominant culture. While this is often unintentional, it is one explanation for the differential success realized by many minority students. Because teacher expectations strongly influence academic success, teacher attitudes are of great concern when developing programs which promote cultural diversity (Bennett, 1995).

Researchers (Perkins & Gomez, 1993) have increasingly maintained that teachers must first begin with a process of self-reflection in order to understand their own attitudes and to ensure that their attitudes, behaviors, and strategies are in keeping with the principles of multicultural education. This examination of attitudes has often been incorporated into, or used in conjunction with, courses in multicultural education as a measure of the effectiveness of such courses (Dewitt, 1994; Larke, 1990 & 1992; Reed, 1993; Rios, 1993). Positive attitudes on the part of educators and students will hopefully lead to the development of respect and appreciation for racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse groups (Davidman & Davidman, 1994). When both students and teachers learn to appreciate one another and the unique contributions each group can bring to the classroom, effective learning will result.

Researchers have sought to measure the attitudes of pre-service teachers toward cultural diversity. In one such study, Larke (1990) administered a questionnaire to 51 pre-service teachers who had completed one course in multicultural education. Results indicated that these students still felt some discomfort working with students from different cultures and their parents. They were critical of nonstandard English, and they did not object to the use of ethnic jokes. The researcher felt that this was an indication that those students did not understand the more subtle forms of racism. Larke concluded that one course in multicultural education was certainly not enough and that the issue of diversity should be an integral component of all education courses. In addition, Larke (1990) suggested extensive contact of pre-service teachers with minority students in school settings.

Reed (1993) has also indicated that change in attitudes and behaviors toward minority students may be tied to actual experience with these populations, in conjunction with a multicultural curriculum. For, “the effective multicultural teacher should have the knowledge and the academic, social, cultural, and interpersonal skills necessary to facilitate student achievement, regardless of students’ or teachers’ race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status” (Larke, 1992, p. 135).

At the State University of West Georgia, the concerns of diversity and multiculturalism are being addressed at all levels. A university-wide committee on International Education has recently been formed, and the College of Education Diversity Committee has been charged to develop a plan for the recruitment and retention of minority students, faculty, and staff, and for the infusion of multicultural perspectives into all curricula. An initial report will be completed by April 15, 1997. The present study was undertaken as a preliminary step in the measurement of the attitudes of pre-service teachers toward diversity with a view to refining the test instrument so that ultimately more effective programs dealing with multicultural education and diversity could be set in place.

Method

Subjects

Attitudinal surveys were administered to pre-service teachers in both Secondary and Middle Grades blocks. Students surveyed from the pre-internship Secondary Education block included 63 undergraduates (college seniors) and 24 post-baccalaureate students. These students had majored in one of the following fields: Business Education, English, Mathematics, Science, or Social Studies. Secondary block students spent five weeks in methods classes, curriculum and media, and adolescent psychology, followed by five weeks of pre-internship in middle grades and secondary
schools. Students typically enroll for their student teaching practicum in the quarter following their Secondary block.

In the Middle Grades Block, students participate during both the fall and winter of their senior year. During the fall quarter, they enroll in course work which includes Middle Grades Curriculum and Methods in Middle Grades Education, as well as a course in Counseling and Educational Psychology which relates to the nature of the Middle School student. During the winter quarter, students spend five weeks studying the techniques and methods of teaching language arts, social studies, mathematics, science, and reading. The second five weeks of the quarter, they are involved in pre-internship consisting initially of observation with progress towards teaching in middle schools. The final quarter involves student teaching, when students are directly involved in a sustained period of internship in a middle school setting.

Of the students surveyed, (N=108) 71 were women and 37 were men. The majority indicated that they were of European descent (84%), while 14% were African-American. One student indicated Hispanic heritage and another “other.” The majority of the students (80%) ranged in age from 20 to 30 years of age, with 18% between 30 and 50 years of age. There was little difference in teaching experience: 99% of the students had less than five years experience.

Procedure

Students in both classes were administered the questionnaire during the first class sessions. The questionnaire was developed by the researchers from information obtained through discussions with colleagues, researcher experience, analysis of content of other survey instruments, and a search of relevant literature. The instrument consisted of 40 items designed to examine the students’ attitudes and beliefs towards the notion of multicultural education and the implementation of multicultural strategies. All items were graded on a Likert scale from one (almost never) to five (always). In addition, biographical data on each respondent was collected. These included gender, ethnicity, age, and experience. Students were assigned numbers and were instructed not to put their names on the questionnaires.

Results

Although results are preliminary at best, some interesting tendencies already seem evident. It is important to note that the standard deviation on many items was greater than 1.00, so the students ranged greatly in their attitudes.

In general, students seemed to feel less able to deal with language minority students than with other aspects of diversity. On the second question, “I would be comfortable teaching a class of students who do not speak English,” students indicated that they would rarely be comfortable (M=2.10) with such a population. Students likewise indicated a reluctance to meet with the parents and families of language minority children (#12, M=3.05) and to teach in a classroom with large numbers of language minority students (#15, M=2.59). Students were also hesitant to support languages and dialects spoken by students at home (#38, M=3.32).

More generally, students expressed only mild support for changing demographic trends towards increased diversity (#5, M=3.49; #13, M=3.57) and increased immigration (#27, M=3.62). Students also indicated a reluctance to speak out against apparent discrimination/prejudice in the media, books, and events (#24, M=3.14). This attitude may indicate a lack of willingness on the part of students to act as advocates for minority issues.

Discussion

Although the sample size was relatively small, some important considerations have already emerged that may be integrated into future block experiences for pre-service teachers. Attitudes of students in the sample towards recent immigrants, especially those who do not speak English, seem to reflect negative attitudes expressed in much of the media today. This reluctance to accept and work with language minority students could seriously hamper their effectiveness as teachers in an increasingly diverse society.
We have already taken steps to address this need by incorporating an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) component into the block classes. Although this module is still in the developmental stages, we have received excellent feedback from students and professors alike.

We hope to administer this survey to the student population presently enrolled in our P-12 block so as to increase our sample size and ultimately to refine our instrument by way of a factor analysis.

For the purpose of this pilot study, these findings establish a framework for future discussion and investigation of issues affecting teacher attitudes. Such findings are important in the education of teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse populations so that they may better meet the needs of their students.

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References


Until middle level educational leaders understand that cultural traits that conflict with macroculture values are differences that have proven strategies, many students who are culturally different and often labeled at-risk will continue to be at-risk in classrooms where to be culturally different is risky business (Taylor & Turk, 1993). As a middle school administrator, transforming the prevailing culture in school and classroom can be in itself risky. Most administrators are not familiar with the different cultures and often do not get involved with disturbing the norm. Many times administrators will not tackle the existing culture for fear of upsetting the majority. This includes the teachers, students, parents, community members, central office, etc. If change is instituted, it comes from the district office in the form of a mandate. Warren Bennis argues, however, that the administrator sometimes becomes ensnared in an “unconscious conspiracy,” a dilemma of allegiance to the status quo and an allegiance to his/her genuine concerns. This is upsetting the existing apple cart (Parrish & Aquila, 1996). The responsibility of assuring that middle schools are a place where ethnicity, gender, religion, cultural difference, and social class are not reasons to sort or sift children but to seek and serve them falls on administrators, as does the responsibility to assure the community that all students are receiving an equitable and excellent education, regardless of their differences. If the school administrator is afraid of upsetting a culture that espouses the notion that “poor children and children of color, on average, do not learn as well as middle-class and affluent” (Parrish & Aquila, 1996, p. 229), then we will continue to foster the political rhetoric of reform and remain stagnant in our restructuring efforts. Merely painting the surface of a flawed structure is not enough to hold it together. “If schools are to be transformed so that all are educated well...cultural ways of schooling must change” (Parrish & Aquila, 1996, p. 299).

Administrators must take the lead in implementing and supporting school-wide programs that support multicultural diversity, create opportunities for teacher development, improve curricula, and establish new cultural discourse in pedagogy. Certainly, that is easier said than done when one’s career is at stake. However, taking the lead as a school administrator is the key to change by empowering personnel; supporting individuals who have the initiative to propose change; researching and presenting opportunities to create and facilitate change; educating self, staff, parents, and the community intellectually on the philosophies associated with that change; and finally, being confident and positive about the change. Administrators need to provide faculties with as many positive experiences in multiculturalism as possible. It is important to remember that cultures to be represented should not be just the biggest group but all groups. One way to enhance the experience is by getting school clubs to put on festivals celebrating a variety of cultures. Have parents and community members come in and share their cultures in classes. Administrators can encourage teachers to invite speakers from diverse backgrounds to share their experiences, foods, travel, and language to classes, functions, and assemblies. Schools can initiate an exchange program where students and teachers of different cultures can spend time in other schools. This can be done as simply as exchanging persons from an inner city school to a suburban school. This is a good way to see others for a day or more in their own schools and situations. This increases the appreciation of those unlike ourselves and will shatter any preconceived notions that may exist. The school band and chorus can be encouraged to address diversity in music and in school plays. Technology offers a variety of opportunities for national and international communication. This is a great way to explore other cultures from the ease of one’s own classroom. Of course, selecting textbooks and other resources that reflect a variety of cultural experiences is helpful; however, it is of little value if the teacher cannot use...
them effectively in the classroom. Administrators must be in classrooms observing what is being taught there. Principals must lead staff development to ensure that the staff is familiar with and sensitive to different cultures. This isn’t easy and may not be popular, but it must be done.

Administrators and staff must be made aware of the cultural differences that exist, even in like races. For instance, we sometimes lump together Spanish speaking persons. But Mexicans, Cubans, and people from Spain will be quick to remind you that there are differences in culture, language, and heritage. One teacher in a school in Georgia asked a Vietnamese student to work with a Cambodian immigrant. The Vietnamese student told the teacher he would, but that he did not think the student would accept his help. The teacher dismissed his concerns believing that since they were both Southeast Asians they would have a natural connection. A little while later the Cambodian student came to the teacher and angrily stated that he would not work with the Vietnamese student. The teacher learned that past problems between two nations located thousands of miles away from Georgia affected her classroom. Change, especially when it deals with cultural norms, can be difficult. “In current school culture, challenging existing ways is often viewed negatively” (Parrish & Aquila, 1996, p. 300). Administrators can begin to transform this culture proactively by the allocation of resources and staff necessary to correct this situation.

Staff development is one resource that can be controlled by a building administrator; it is a silent power that is easy to use. Valerie Ooka Pang (1994) suggests that individuals who are most reluctant to change are the very individuals administrators want to use to be harbingers of change. These are the individuals in whom staff development monies should be invested. These same individuals will contribute to a very positive change in the school’s cultural philosophy once they have gained sensitivity, understanding, and the tools to work with. Staff development can be a significant factor in an administrator’s ability to create change. In this way an administrator can empower the faculty for change and improve multicultural awareness.

According to curriculum specialists in Dekalb County, Georgia, in their approach to multicultural pedagogy administrators should have teachers explore the following areas: (a) approaches to classwork, (b) testing, (c) learning styles, and (d) communication styles (Taylor & Turk, 1993).

Teachers should also be aware of the reasons for the implementation of a culturally diverse curriculum/school culture. This fact needs to be expressed with clarity and passion. In order to articulate this to a faculty, it is the leader, the administrator, who must be convinced of the significance and impact multiculturalism has on our educational, economic, and global standing.

The United States is not the only country that is attempting to expand its educational discourse on comparative perspectives from around the world. According to Robert McNergney (1994):

...when American educators are given the chance to view international classrooms and schools through their own and others’ eyes, as they can when studying cases of teaching and learning in settings outside the United States, education that is multicultural acquires new meaning. And with new meaning come fresh possibilities for teaching and learning. (p. 297).

This pioneer of educational nuance and a group of his colleagues from Virginia traveled to Singapore, India, South Africa, Denmark, and England to visit schools engaged in multicultural education. McNergney says these schools were developing strategies for enhancing mutual understanding among racial and ethnic groups. Their search for the philosophies that underlie their multiculturalism is exactly what our administrators need to articulate as part of their mission statement for change. While visiting these areas, McNergney and his group created “videocases” of a variety of teaching and pupil/teacher interaction situations. These videocases can be used in professional settings to help teachers engage in “problem-solving behaviors, perception problems, values that drive actions, and empirical and theoretical knowledge of various classroom situations” (p. 297). These tapes give teachers a global perspective of multiculturalism and an opportunity to create a simulation that will facilitate a tossed salad approach to the classroom instead of the old-world view of the melting pot perspective (Taylor & Turk, 1993, p. 15).

Administrators need to be able to articulate that “multicultural education is the study of schooling aimed at providing all children with an equal opportunity to learn in a culturally affirming and caring environment” (McNergney, 1994, p. 291), and that race, class, and gender discrimination serve as barriers to a goal of excellence in educational achievement and global relations (1994). In addition, administrators cultivating transformational leadership must understand that the outcome is really a change in the culture of schooling. For this to occur there must be an identification of the informal norms and covenants (traditions, rituals, values, biases, etc.) of the old schooling, and these must be transformed into a new discourse about how we view students and learning in schools (Parrish & Aquila, 1996). A multicultural curriculum is a way to provide students with an opportunity to be the very best they can be. It is also a way for instructors to be actively involved in our changing global society and to change the “us and them” mentality. Today’s administrator can contribute much to the effort to remedy institutionalized racism and its inevitable disenfranchisement.

Multiculturalism as a project of new culture formation is often attacked by defenders of the status quo and is seen as a wink at political correctness, when in effect it is “an overdue response to the demographic realities of heterogeneous societies” (Pang, 1994, p. 297). Today’s middle school administrator reaching for change and implementing multicultural pedagogic strategies towards this discourse of comparative perspectives should be applauded. They are doing the right thing!

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References


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