

Leading With Diversity: Culture

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DEVELOPING CULTURAL AWARENESS

A first step toward cultural competence is developing one's cultural awareness—of one's own culture, the culture of the school, and the cultures of the students one serves (Spindler, 1982). Many professional development programs and university courses address the notion of culture, specific cultures, and tools for learning about culture. Learning about culture is not a substitute for learning about race and ethnicity and, in particular, racism (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; Singleton & Linton, in press; Tatum, 1997). Yet for many educators it can be a good starting point for understanding and appreciating the many different histories and perspectives of students and their families (Trumbull et al., 2001).

1. The teacher develops awareness of his or her own cultural identity, values, attitudes, and biases.

African American, Latino, Chinese American, and American Indian teachers—like others from nondominant groups—are likely to be acutely aware of their own cultural, racial, or ethnic identity. But in the United States, it is common for those in the dominant group—white, middle-class teachers—to think of themselves as not having a culture or ethnicity (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; Hollins, 1996). In fact, everyone has a culture, but it is often invisible to its members, particularly to those in the dominant group. For those who are part of the

dominant culture, the norms of daily life—and of schooling—are accepted as “the way things ought to be.” The invisibility of one's own culture to oneself is often compared to the invisibility of water to a fish. As anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn said, “It would hardly be fish who discovered the existence of water” (1949, p. 11).

Because they are in the position of power, members of the dominant culture in the United States rarely have to examine their own cultural beliefs, values, and practices. Teachers may have culture-based attitudes and biases that remain unconscious but that interfere with understanding how their own cultural identity influences their approach to students. To address culture in the classroom, teachers can go through the process of surfacing these invisible aspects of their own cultures. Culture can be made visible by exploring contrasts in one's own values and practices with those of others. A starting point might be the question, “What is an ideal student?” There are many different possible responses to this question, and they reveal tensions between values such as respect and self-expression, helping others and taking responsibility for oneself, and putting family first and seeking one's own place in the world—values whose relative emphasis differs from culture to culture and individual to individual.

Several studies suggest that white teachers who have explored their own racial identity are more culturally competent—that is, their attitudes and behaviors toward diversity are more constructive after such an exploration (McAllister & Irvine, 2000). “[S]elf-awareness regarding one's culture has been identified as a key prerequisite and a first step for learners in multicultural programs” (McAllister & Irvine, 2000, p. 19) When participants explore their own culture in the early stage of an intervention, they are more likely to move toward a multicultural frame of reference. Banks (1994) and others suggest that individuals do not become sensitive and open to different ethnic groups until and unless they develop a positive sense of self, including an awareness and acceptance of their own ethnic group (McAllister & Irvine, 2000).

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An effective way for teachers to develop self-awareness is through professional development with other teachers. Professional development on diversity brings with it particular challenges. Exploration of identity can raise painful histories and ongoing unresolved negative feelings for members of both dominant and nondominant cultures. It is important for the professional development leader to establish an environment of trust and acceptance while not avoiding important issues.

2. The teacher is knowledgeable about the culture of the school and seeks ways to accommodate it to students' needs.

The pervasive school culture in the United States reflects the values of the dominant culture (Hollins, 1996). Common beliefs such as "Students should be praised to build self-esteem," "Students need to become independent," and "Students should ask questions" are all associated with the dominant cultural value of independence. This individualistic or independence-oriented approach of classrooms (also associated with competition) often presents conflicts for students who have been socialized to be interdependent and cooperative (Lipka, Mohatt, & Cuilistet Group, 1998; Foster, 1989; Philips, 1983; Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2000). A culturally competent teacher understands the underlying values and beliefs that motivate the way education is carried out in U.S.

Building a Hybrid Culture in the Classroom

Chamorro teacher Tita Hocog, who teaches sixth grade on the island of Rota in the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, incorporates both "Western" schooling practices and those familiar to her students. Not only does she use local knowledge about fishing, agriculture, and weaving as part of her curriculum, but also she organizes instruction to include home ways of interacting. For instance, in assessment, she allows students choices about presenting in front of the class individually, or as a group. For those not comfortable with a presentation mode, she offers the option of an individual conference with her, which she may tape-record.

Whereas Ms. Hocog uses content standards comparable to those of the mainland United States, she nearly always has students working in groups—something that is harmonious with their naturally peer-oriented learning. Nor does she worry about individual grades for every project. Because she observes students very closely and assesses them through a wide range of means, she believes she is well aware of their progress. She reasons, moreover, that in judging the beauty and integrity of a basket, one does not ask who wove each individual palm leaf.

(Based on field notes of the Coconut Wireless Project [Nelson-Barber, Trumbull, & Wenn, 2000])

schools and makes efforts to address cultural differences by incorporating elements of other cultures. It is not only at the classroom level, of course, that school culture exists, as the following story shows.

Beyond these potential differences between home and school culture are practices that represent what has been called "the hidden curriculum" (Giroux & Purpel, 1983; Wilcox, 1982). In brief, the hidden curriculum is the set of assumptions that perpetuate social class and racial or ethnic inequities within school and beyond. It is also the knowledge of how to behave and use language in the way that is valued by dominant-culture students but unknown to nondominant-culture students (Cheng, 1995).

The negative effects of the hidden curriculum occur when students from nondominant groups (including the poor) are held to lower expectations and implicitly prepared for lower level jobs while their dominant-culture peers are prepared to be the leaders and professionals of U.S. society. These assumptions are often well below the level of conscious awareness: Few educators would espouse such an inequitable stance. However, the lack of full commitment to equity (including the necessary funding) belies the continuing existence of the hidden curriculum. A culturally competent teacher does not accept the premise that some students will inevitably do more poorly in school than others on the basis of their cultural, racial, or ethnic group differences; instead, the teacher intervenes with school practices that perpetuate the hidden curriculum.

In Short...

The culturally competent teacher

- Recognizes that everyone has a cultural identity and learns about his or her own culture and cultural values
- Understands the primary attributes of U.S. school culture and how they may differ from those of students' cultures
- Addresses cultural differences that students may experience
- Recognizes how a "hidden curriculum" can exclude students from nondominant cultures, lower expectations for them, and depress their academic performance

PROVIDING HIGH-LEVEL, CHALLENGING, CULTURALLY RELEVANT CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Studies show that students who have access to high-quality, challenging courses in high school are more likely to enroll in college and complete a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). To be prepared for rigorous coursework in high school and beyond, students need access to excellent curriculum and

instruction throughout their formal education. Culturally relevant instruction and assessment practices ensure greater success and engagement with students from various cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.

This general competency reflects the importance of engaging students actively and interactively in learning throughout their schooling. As Bruner (1996) said, “learning... is best when it is participatory, proactive, communal, and collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them” (p. 84). One way to make learning participatory and collaborative is to encourage students to have a voice in classroom processes (Kordalewski, 1999). Even young students can help make choices about what they want to read and study. Panofsky observed, “As educators, our task is to foster children’s interaction with the language of valued social practices” (Panofsky, 1994, p. 240).

Including Student Voice

[A] curriculum that presents students’ cultures in a positive light invites students’ participation (Sheets, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Similarly, lessons in which students’ everyday experiences are recognized as sources of knowledge promote the exercise of student voices—and the academic learning that can result from active engagement. (Kordalewski, 1999, p. 3)

The following five research-based standards for effective pedagogy developed by scholars at the Center for Research on

CREDE’s Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy

1 Teachers and Students Working Together

Use instructional group activities in which students and teacher work together to create a product or idea.

2 Developing Language and Literacy Skills Across All Curriculum

Apply literacy strategies and develop language competence in all subject areas.

3 Connecting Lessons to Students’ Lives

Contextualize teaching and curriculum in students’ existing experiences in home, community, and school.

4 Engaging Students With Challenging Lessons

Maintain challenging standards for student performance; design activities to advance understanding to more complex levels.

5 Emphasizing Dialogue Over Lectures

Instruct through teacher-student dialogue, especially academic, goal-directed, small-group conversations (known as instructional conversations), rather than lecture.

(Available: www.crede.org/standards/standards.html)

Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) are a useful guide to maintaining a challenging curriculum for all students, and they also prefigure many of the subcompetencies in this section.

An important characteristic of these standards is that high expectations are maintained for all students. Lower expectations of English language learners (ELLs) and other students from nondominant groups are a strong contributor to lower achievement outcomes (August & Hakuta, 1997; Díaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986; Gallego, Rueda, & Moll, 2003; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995).

One cautionary note is that sometimes teachers who seek to adapt the linguistic demands of the curriculum for their ELL students mistakenly simplify the content. However, ELL students deserve access to and benefit from instruction that is based on the same content standards as their native-English-speaking peers (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2002; Hakuta, 2001; Lturnau, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). An extensive research review concluded that “[p]rograms for ELLs that are enriched, consistent over grades, and provide challenging curricula yield superior levels of academic achievement” (Genesee et al., 2002, p. 2).

However, expecting ELLs to perform in the same ways as native English speakers (NESs) is both unfair and damaging. Any academic performance dependent on language will not look the same between ELL and NES students (Valdés & Figueroa, 1994). To guide educators and parents in what to expect developmentally with regard to language, some groups, such as the organization for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), have outlined English Language Development (ELD) Standards (see www.tesol.org).

Maintaining Standards and Understanding ELL Development

It is unreasonable to expect ELLs to perform comparably to their native-English-speaking peers in their initial years of schooling (hence, the need for standards specific to ELLs), and holding them to this expectation too early in their educational careers can be detrimental to their academic progress, not to mention their self-esteem. The problem enters when students are not pushed to go beyond this stage over time, are presumed to be at an elementary level, or are misdiagnosed as having educational disabilities by teachers unfamiliar with the needs of ELLs. (Hakuta, 2001, p. 3)

1. The teacher engages in culturally relevant instructional practices.

The culturally competent teacher explores curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices shown to be effective with students from diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.

Not all students benefit from the traditional (often competitive) approaches typical of education in the United States. One approach shown to be culturally harmonious for students from many nondominant groups is cooperative learning, which requires students to interact as they solve a problem or complete a task. Members of a cooperative team share the labor, accountability, and success attached to the task (Kagan, 1994). Many cultures socialize children to collaborate with each other, to be productive and cooperative members of a community—beginning with the family. Children from those cultures come to school with many of the skills necessary for cooperative learning (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, Isaac, Daley, & Pérez, 2003).

According to Ladson-Billings (1994), culturally relevant instruction for African American students encourages them “to learn collaboratively and expects them to teach each other and take responsibility for each other” (p. 70). Likewise, American Indian (Suina & Smolkin, 1994; Swisher & Deyhle, 1992) and Latino (Clark & Flores, 1997; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994) families tend to pass on a strong value of cooperation and interdependence to their children, a value which is not always reciprocated in U.S. classrooms (Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2000).

Teachers can maximize the learning potential in their classrooms by tapping students’ inclination to help each other, both through formal cooperative learning activities and by allowing students to help each other in general (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Rothstein-Fisch et al., 2003). Teachers also come to an understanding with students about what counts as help and what counts as cheating so as to avoid misunderstandings. Research has shown that African American students may be more likely to help and seek help (Nelson-LeGall & Resnick, 1998), and in some contexts such behavior can be misinterpreted as cheating.

These are a few examples of the steps that teachers can take to meet their students’ needs; there are many more ways that teachers can make their classrooms accommodating.

2. The teacher connects students’ interests and background knowledge to content standards in instruction.

Capitalizing on student interests and related background knowledge can foster a student’s involvement in a high-level learning activity, along with promoting reading engagement and comprehension (George, Raphael, & Florio-Ruane, 2003; Graves & Fitzgerald, 2003; Tharp et al., 2000). For instance, topics that are meaningful to a student can motivate involvement in challenging mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies activities (Aikenhead, 1997; Hilberg, Doherty, Dalton, Youpa, & Tharp, 2002; Lee & Fradd, 1998; Trumbull, Diaz-Meza, & Hasan, in press).

To ensure that students have access to a high-level curriculum, it is important to link student knowledge to standards.

One approach is to clarify what the learning goals are before deciding on an activity or set of activities (Laternau, 2003). These goals may be linked to three or four standards. Then a teacher can consider what type of evidence of learning will be needed and envision a culminating task. At that point, it is easier to evaluate whether the activities will likely result in the desired evidence of learning (Laternau, 2003).

The following example shows how one teacher made links to both mathematics standards and her students’ cultural knowledge.

Shapes and Patterns

Portions of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) Algebra and Geometry Standards read as follows:

- Recognize, name, build, draw, compare, and sort two- and three-dimensional shapes.
- Recognize, describe, and extend patterns such as sequences of sounds and shapes or simple numeric patterns and translate from one representation to another.

In Dillingham, Alaska, Yup’ik Eskimo kindergarten and first graders are learning about geometric shapes and patterns. A poster in the classroom displays traditional Yup’ik border patterns that are traditionally used on fancy fur parkas. The seven patterns displayed are composed of triangles, squares, and non-square rectangles. Another poster shows children and adults wearing parkas with these patterns. As children notice the posters and comment on them, the teacher responds and mentions the name of a pattern. Later, she asks who remembers the pattern’s name.

The following week, the teacher introduces the children to a new learning center that will remain in the classroom for up to a month. Here they will explore shapes and patterns themselves, using shape cards, a small poster with the patterns and pattern names on it, and a paper doll for whom paper parkas can be made. The whole process is harmonious with Yup’ik ways of learning: Observation comes first (the posters), then hands-on learning with meaningful materials takes place with each child learning at his or her own pace. The teacher assesses children by observing their proficiency with reproducing and naming the patterns and shapes.

(Based on Ilutsk & Zaslavski, 2002 and NCTM, 2003)

Another strategy, with a completely different population of students, is illustrated in the next example.

A White Teacher Gets to Know Her African American Students

Every fall, Teacher Margaret Rossi gives each student an “entry questionnaire.” She asks them to write not only their name, address, phone number, and birth date, but also what they do outside of school and which subjects they like. As Rossi says, “I try to find out as much as I can about the students early in the school year so I can plan an instructional program that motivates them and meets their needs. You’d be surprised how many kids tell me that nobody has ever bothered to even ask them what they like. The entry questionnaire is also a great way to learn a little about their reading and writing levels. I think that it’s hard for sixth graders in a community like this one to trust, white people especially. They’ve been lied to too many times. I don’t blame them for not wanting to open up with me right away. But soon enough they begin to see that I take the information they give me to heart.”

(Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 67)

3. The teacher considers the appropriateness of instructional activities for individual students based on their cultural histories.

Part of making connections to students’ needs and interests is anticipating how their different histories may affect the ways in which they interpret or respond to classroom assignments. Learning about students’ histories and interests can reduce the likelihood of making the mistake described below.

Failing to Consider the Impact of an Assignment

A middle school teacher gave what appeared to be an assignment that would personally involve students in thinking about history. She asked each of them to pretend he or she was alive during the U.S. Civil War and write a letter to someone who was alive at that time. Researcher Dr. Arlette Willis’s own son was a member of this class. He came to his mother distressed: How was he to go about completing this assignment, which made him uncomfortable and presented some difficulties with figuring out what to write. If he were a slave, would he be able to read and write? Was he supposed to pretend he was White? “Clearly, the teacher was not taking into account the message... sent in terms of whose participation and identity were important in the classroom.”

(García & Willis, 2001, p. 14)

Teachers who ask students from immigrant families to participate in certain activities may introduce equally troublesome dilemmas. A common activity for fourth or fifth graders in some schools is to interview their families about their own histories in the United States and report to the class. Students in border states may fear exposing portions of their history that they surmise could subject their family to negative consequences (e.g., perhaps a father immigrated illegally). Others, who have been separated from parents for social and economic reasons, may not want to talk about that fact. And students whose families have fled war, or even genocide, may not want to share personal stories related to those events.

4. The teacher uses a range of classroom organizational and participant structures and documents student participation.

Cultures differ fundamentally in language use. Furthermore, different organizational structures—such as those in schools—require different ways of using language. Typically in U.S. schools, the norms of the dominant culture inform how teachers use language and structure classroom activities that call for student participation. Too often, students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds are judged as having language or learning problems because they are expected to interact in ways that are disharmonious with what they have learned at home. It is important to give students the opportunity to interact in a variety of configurations—whole group, small group, pairs—and to use a variety of communication styles. Some students will be comfortable with teacher-controlled talk; others will participate more in talk that is regulated among peers. To determine appropriate classroom practices, teachers assess and document student participation throughout the process.

5. The teacher provides opportunities for student choice.

Many educators believe that student choice is a key element of student engagement and that choice promotes development of independent learners (Oxley, 2005; Mednick, 2003). Even preschools have “free choice” time during which children can select a play corner or activity. Choice is a staple of classrooms that are centered on the learner and on promoting independence. But it is also a feature of collectivistic cultures (see sidebar), albeit in different forms (Estrin & Nelson-Barber, 1995; Rogoff, 2003). Student choice can make the curriculum more inclusive. For example, students can have the opportunity to choose the topic of a project or select their own books from the school or classroom libraries.

Collectivist Cultures

The continuum of individualism-collectivism represents the degree to which a culture emphasizes individual fulfillment and choice versus interdependent relationships, social responsibility, and the well-being of the group. Individualism makes the former the priority, collectivism the latter.

(Trumbull et al., 2001, p. 19)

Approaches, such as project-based and thematic instruction, are particularly promising because they allow for student choice. They also

- provide for integration of many skills across disciplines;
- promote active engagement of students and higher level cognitive activity;
- demonstrate interrelationships among different topics and domains;
- combine language and content learning (e.g., through library research, reading, classroom presentation); and
- incorporate multiple modalities (i.e., visual as well as verbal representations of concepts and information).

In addition, teachers can pick themes that build on students' homebased knowledge and family "cultural capital." Fitzsimmons (2003) describes how a teacher working with many immigrant families involved in cultivation and construction created thematic units on gardening and dream homes that addressed grade-level mathematics standards.

***cultural capital:** knowledge associated with those in power. According to Bourdieu (1986), it can exist in three forms: disposition of the mind and body; cultural goods such as pictures, books, and other material objects; and educational qualifications.*

6. The teacher implements cooperative learning and other interactive strategies.

Interaction—between and among students, between teacher and students—in the context of meaningful learning activities is the principal way of building both language and academic development (Tharp et al., 2000). Cooperative learning is a learner-centered approach that requires students to interact in teams as they complete a task. Cooperative learning has been shown to be beneficial for both social and academic development of students from many backgrounds (Schofield, 1995; Slavin & Cheung, 2003); successful in bilingual settings (Calderón & Minaya-Rowe, 2003; Calderón, Hertz-Lazarowitz, & Slavin, 1998); and useful in promoting equal

status among students of different backgrounds in heterogeneous classrooms (Cohen & Lotan, 1995). In addition, Tharp et al. (2000) have shown that cooperative learning involving racially mixed groups of students has a positive effect on intergroup friendships.

Cooperative Learning and Intergroup Relations

[S]tudies show that when students work in ethnically mixed, cooperative learning groups, they gain in cross-ethnic friendships. In addition, the evidence indicates that the friendships are long lasting and tend to be close, reciprocated friendship choices.... Moreover, [one study showed that] many of the cross-racial friendships made during [a] cooperative learning intervention were formed between students who had never been in the same cooperative group. (Tharp et al., 2000, p. 81)

Some research has pointed to the appropriateness of cooperative learning for Mexican American students because it mirrors the value of cooperation characteristic of Mexican society (Clark & Flores, 1997; Macias, 1992; Rothstein-Fisch et al., 2003). Students from a Southeast Asian background, such as Hmong Americans, may also be inclined to cooperate naturally, as a result of the collectivistic orientation of their culture (Kang, Kuehn, & Herrell, 1994). The common denominator in cooperative learning methods is the use of small groups (sometimes as small as two or three students) and the promotion of positive interdependence, or the necessary cooperation of all group members in order to complete a task (Kagan, 1986). Teachers can maximize the likelihood of a group's success by assigning tasks that lend themselves to group work, modeling desired behaviors, monitoring group work, and intervening in order to ensure everyone's participation and appreciation for everyone's contributions (Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Webb, Farivar, & Mastergeorge, 2001).

Another powerful interactive approach in the classroom is instructional conversation (IC). Through this approach, teachers participate in a dialogue with students—not merely eliciting known answers but truly engaging students in meaningful talk. Such conversation

“provides the cognitive and experiential basis for relating school learning to the individual, community, and family knowledge of the student. It provides the critical form of assistance—dialogue—for the development of thinking and problem solving, as well as for forming, expressing, and exchanging ideas in speech and writing.” (Tharp et al., 2000, p. 32)

(See Tharp et al., 2000 and Goldenberg, 1991 for an explanation of how to carry out this approach.) IC is especially useful

for developing academic language because the teacher can guide students' participation with specific cues on how to use the language of school (Cummins, 2003).

Description of an Instructional Conversation

Mrs. Ortiz, a third-grade teacher in Puerto Rico, began an instructional conversation by opening the floor to all of her students through the use of *wh-* questions, chorus elicitations*, or sentence completion activities. In this way, she did not specifically call on certain students, as teachers commonly do. In addition, Mrs. Ortiz allowed her students to have considerable control over the conversation. In her classroom, students themselves initiated 38% of the conversational interactions, while students in a comparison classroom in Chicago initiated only 9%. Mrs. Ortiz was also more accepting of students' initiations, either commenting on them or incorporating them into the conversation (77% of the time), as opposed to 46% in the comparison classroom.

Another feature of Mrs. Ortiz's instructional conversation was its personal nature. Students would "often introduce a personal topic into the lesson and be allowed to expound upon it at great length. Many times, Mrs. Ortiz would introduce information from her personal life or childhood into the lessons as well" (McColum, 1991, p. 115). In the case of Mrs. Ortiz's lesson on a story the students had read, *El Cangrejito de Oro* (The Golden Crab), about a boy who was learning how to fish, the teacher and students spent a full nine minutes sharing their experiences about fishing for crabs.

Mrs. Ortiz's instructional approach, which elevates the role of peers in each other's learning, could be characterized as constructivist. It explicitly engages students in active learning, supports students to connect their prior knowledge and experience to the topics of the classroom, and places the teacher in the role of a facilitator who guides the lesson expertly but does not completely dominate the talking. It is an approach that has been shown effective with immigrant students from group-oriented cultures, such as those in Mexico and Central America (Trumbull, Diaz-Meza, & Hasan, in press); yet it also has all the hallmarks of the kind of instruction identified as exemplary for all students by recent reform agendas.

*allowing students to answer in unison rather than one-by-one

(Adapted from Trumbull & Farr, 2005. Based on McColum, 1991)

7. The teacher provides opportunities for students to use nonlinguistic forms of intelligence, such as artistic and musical.

Students need opportunities to learn and demonstrate learning through means other than linguistic. Teachers can encourage

students with artistic intelligence or interests to use art forms as part of project-based or thematic instruction.

Research has shown that music can scaffold language use for ELLs: Singing does so in part because musical processing draws on the same part of the brain as language (Lems, 2001). In teaching older learners, Lems notes that ESL teachers can use music to "create a learning environment; to build listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing skills; to increase vocabulary; and to expand cultural knowledge" (p. 1). For students who are musically inclined, this approach can provide an opportunity for them to shine.

As described below, drawing or building models to represent complex relationships may allow students who are still learning English and others with a creative inclination to demonstrate their understanding of concepts (Lee & Fradd, 1998).

Using a Visual Representation Instead of Language

A fourth-grade class of NELB [non-English language background] students conducted an activity demonstrating the concept that when water freezes, its weight remains the same, although its volume increases. A student who had difficulty writing expressed the concept by drawing two scales, one with a container of water and the other with a similar container of ice. He marked both scales with arrows showing that the weight stayed the same and made lines on the two containers showing the volume increased when the water turned to ice.

(Lee & Fradd, 1998, p. 17)

In Short...

The culturally competent teacher

Holds high expectations for students' learning and performance

- Recognizes that ELLs' performance patterns will differ from those of NESs
- Links students' interests and knowledge with standards
- Considers how assignments might affect individual students
- Uses a variety of classroom organizational and participant structures
- Uses instructional approaches that allow for student choice
- Promotes interaction in the classroom through cooperative learning and other tested methods
- Provides opportunities for students to use non-verbal intelligences

COLLABORATING WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES

Research supports the need for collaboration among families, schools, and communities (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Griego-Jones, 2003; Valdés, 1996) to foster understanding. It also shows that involving parents in their children's education benefits student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). One recent study of Latino and European American sixth- and seventh-grade students concluded that parents were "key resources in helping students coordinate their family, school, and peer worlds" (Azmitia & Cooper, 2002, p. 4).

Parents' involvement in their children's schooling is widely cited as an important factor in student success (Epstein, 1996; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). According to a recent research synthesis, schools that are successful in engaging "families from very diverse backgrounds share three key practices.... They

- focus on building trusting collaborative relationships among teachers, families, and community members;
- recognize, respect, and address families' needs, as well as class and cultural differences;
- Embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 7).

However, involving parents and other family members from nondominant cultural backgrounds has been less successful than involving those from the dominant culture (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Moles, 1993). To support real engagement of families (as opposed to only participation in typical, school-organized functions), it is important to understand families' orientations to education and the world and how those orientations shape their approaches to school involvement (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Valdés, 1996).

In order to support the involvement of parents and families in the school community, school personnel need to get to know families personally. Rather than simply informing families about school expectations for their involvement, it is important to learn about how particular families want to participate in their children's schooling. Furthermore, it takes considerable skills to form effective and meaningful links between school and home. Many teachers have had no formal education on how to work with families and communities, and they will need professional development to build their capacity (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

To relate to families in culturally diverse communities, it is important for teachers to investigate the traditions of different cultural groups along with learning about the details of students' lives (Mehan et al., 1995). This personal context helps to avoid making generalizations about cultural groups that can

lead to stereotypes. Speaking to teachers directly, Cross (1996) suggests that they take the following steps:

"First, spend more time with strong, healthy people of that culture.

Second, identify a cultural guide—that is, someone from the culture who is willing to discuss the culture, introduce you to new experiences, and help you understand what you are seeing.

Third, spend time with the literature. Reading articles by and for persons of the culture is most helpful. Along with the professional literature, read the fiction. This is an enjoyable way to enter the culture in a safe, nonthreatening way. Find someone with whom you can discuss what you have read.

Fourth, attend cultural events and meetings of leaders from within the culture. Cultural events allow you to observe people interacting in their community and see values in action. Observing leadership in action can impart to you a sense of the strength of the community and help you identify potential key informants and advisors.

Finally, learn how to ask questions in sensitive ways. Most individuals are willing to answer all kinds of questions, if the questioner is sincere and motivated by the desire to learn and serve the community more effectively." (p. 2)

Cross's recommendations reflect an ethnographic approach to learning about students and families from other cultures (Fetterman, 1989; Spindler & Spindler, 1992) that educators have found useful (Freedman, Simons, Kalnin, Casareno & The M-Class Teams, 1999; Lipka et al., 1998; Trumbull et al., 2001).

As mentioned above, Azmitia and Cooper (2002) identify parents' roles in coordinating their children's many worlds as a key consideration of families' involvement with schools. Similarly, *Inside City Schools: Investigating Literacy in Multicultural Classrooms* (Freedman et al., 1999), provides accounts from classrooms of teachers in the M-Class Project, the international teacher-research network of secondary school English and social studies teachers that addresses ways of involving parents and families with schools. One example (Kalnin, 1999) from secondary school engages families in students' work through self-discovery assignments requiring students to write from interviews and dialogues with their families and communities.

Across All Groups, Parents Do Care

Recognize that all parents, regardless of income, education level, or cultural background, are involved in their children's learning and want their children to do well in school. Every study in this review that compared levels of parent involvement found that families of all backgrounds are equally involved at home, although the forms of involvement varied somewhat by culture and ethnicity...[A]most all were willing and able, with training, to implement practices linked to improved achievement. And every study that looked at high-performing schools in low-income areas found that parents were highly engaged. Furthermore, most studies showed that children's gains were directly related to how much their families were involved. (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 61)

School staff have often viewed parents from nondominant groups as not possessing the interest or skills necessary for parent involvement (casanova, 1996). However, all families have particular "cultural capital" that can contribute to their children's education (Barton et al., 2004). Parents who cannot relate to the formal academic classroom need to create a sense of personal space in order to feel that they do belong. In a sense, parents transform their concept of the classroom space and school expectations to find a way to be involved with their children's schooling (Barton et al., 2004).

1. The teacher uses cultural knowledge to communicate well with families.

In communications between school and home, some school districts translate written communications for non-native-English-speaking families. However, misunderstandings between school and home may arise not only from actual problems with language but also from unspoken beliefs and expectations (Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2000; Valdés, 1996). For this reason, teachers need some cultural knowledge to interact with families—even when families speak English or an interpreter is available. This is true of relating to native-English-speaking families as well, when there is a cultural difference between teacher and family.

Because many aspects of communication are indirect or even nonverbal (Lustig & Koester, 1999), a culturally competent teacher is sensitive to subtle clues about parents' level of comfort with a topic or specific suggestions. For instance, when a parent or family member ceases to respond verbally or nonverbally or changes topic, it may be a sign of discomfort or disagreement (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000). At that moment, the teacher can gently explore, through indirect questions, what the parent is thinking. A culturally competent teacher tries to understand parents' perspectives and helps

them feel comfortable enough to share their concerns, hopes, and goals for their children. The teacher can explain the goals of the classroom, and together parents and teacher can construct a set of shared goals. Sometimes they will have to discuss how to address cultural differences. If there is a difference in how parents and teacher construe a "successful student," it is better to have this difference overt and available for discussion, as in the following example.

Conflicting Values

A Mexican American immigrant father is having a parent conference with his fourth-grade daughter's teacher. "She's outstanding," says the teacher. "She speaks up in class and expresses her opinions so well."

The father looks down at his lap. There is a moment of silence. Then he looks up at the teacher somewhat tentatively. "She's doesn't talk too much, does she?" he asks with a look of concern.

At home he and his wife have taught their daughter to listen respectfully to adults. They believe this is especially important in the classroom so that their daughter will learn what the teacher, the expert, has to impart. The teacher believes that active learning is important and involves students by encouraging them to interact verbally, posing questions and stating opinions supported by evidence.

(Based on Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000)

Even young students can learn that different behaviors are expected at home and at school. At home, students can show respect to parents and grandparents in the ways that the family expects, and in the classroom students can adopt a different way of interacting with an adult that is not only permissible but expected. However, good communication between teacher and parents is required to arrive at this kind of understanding.

2. The teacher promotes two-way learning: Families learn from the school, and school staff learn from families and the community.

Parents rely on teachers and school personnel to initiate the home-school conversation and provide information about school expectations and activities (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; McCaleb, 1997). Immigrant parents, in particular, may need to have school regulations and their rationales explained (Trumbull et al., 2001). However, communication should not be one way, and teachers can a lot learn from parents and families. When schools promote two-way information sharing, parents are more involved (Connors & Epstein, 1995).

Culturally competent teachers learn about families' histories, goals for children, and preferred ways of interacting with the school. They also invite parents and other adults from the community to come to the classroom to share their expertise with the group (Gonzalez, Andrade, Civil, & Moll, 2001).

It is important for teachers to learn from immigrant parents about the nature and extent of parents' education (Trumbull et al., 2001). In addition, an understanding of a student's schooling experiences in the country of origin can help the teacher understand the adjustments that he or she needs to make (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000; Trumbull et al., 2001; Clark & Flores, 1997).

Parents' educational experiences are the foundation upon which they make sense of their children's schooling. For instance, Mexican American parents may believe that children are not ready to learn literacy-related skills until they go to school and that literacy is something best taught by teachers (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001; Goldenberg, Gallimore, & Reese, 2003). However, they may be open to another approach. Research shows that if parents have already had another child in school, they may have developed a repertoire of home activities to support literacy development (Goldenberg et al., 2003). Therefore, it is important to learn directly from families about their own beliefs and experiences, and to do so in a respectful and nonjudgmental way (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

A parent-teacher conference or informal conversation is also an occasion for finding out the best ways of communicating from school to home and vice versa. Factors such as parents' levels of literacy in English or another language and their culturally preferred modes of communication (e.g., personal, oral, via the student or an older sibling, written notes, newsletters) influence the success of teachers' attempts to communicate (Valdés, 1996).

Paraprofessionals, who often come from the same communities as students, can be valuable sources of information about students' and families' culture-based ways of learning and communicating (Lewis, 2004; Monzó & Rueda, 2001). Paraprofessionals can help explain the school culture to parents and the parents' cultures to school staff.

3. The teacher assumes that parents are interested in their children's schooling and offers flexibility in the ways that parents can participate.

School personnel sometimes assume that parents from nondominant cultures lack interest when parents do not participate in school activities. Research shows that this assumption is not true: Most parents are very eager to support their children's success in school (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Diaz, 2000; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995).

Considerable research suggests that many parents from nondominant cultural backgrounds want to be involved in their children's schooling (Allestaht-Snyder, 1992; Diaz, 2000; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995), but would prefer more personal and informal interactions with their children's teachers (Diaz, 2000; Finders & Lewis, 1994; McCaleb, 1997; Trumbull et al., 2001). These parents favor brief conversations before and after school when dropping off or picking up children, stopping by the classroom for a few minutes when in the school, and blending personal conversation with professional communications (Díaz, 2000; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003).

Teachers are most likely to succeed in involving parents from nondominant cultural backgrounds when they present flexible options matched to parents' needs and preferences. Some parents do not think it appropriate to be academic tutors for their children; they believe instruction is best left to teachers (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Valdés, 1996). Some may doubt their ability to help their children with academic work (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Others may resent being requested to attend classes on how to parent their children (Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998). When teachers approach parents respectfully to find out how they would like to be involved, teachers often discover that parents are willing to help in many ways and are open to learning new ones as well (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Trumbull et al., 2001).

Many families are not able to attend school functions or conferences at the scheduled times because of job demands or transportation difficulties (Louie, 2004; Trumbull et al., 2003). Some will not be able to attend if they cannot bring their preschool infants and toddlers. Some will be intimidated by the formality of school events or interactions with their children's teachers. They may not understand the need to register in the office or meet at a specified time and may be affronted by the impersonal nature of school-to-home communication (Valdés, 1996). All of these issues are factors in the lower rate of parent participation in school-related activities (Diaz, 2000; Finders & Lewis, 1994; McCaleb, 1997; Trumbull et al., 2003). The culturally competent teacher does not make assumptions about why parents may not be involved but rather investigates what can be done to involve them.

Parents are likely to try to accommodate schools' needs when (1) the reasons for certain procedures are explained and (2) parents are afforded some latitude in the timing and manner of participation (Trumbull et al., 2003). Small-group conferences rather than back-to-back, 20-minute, individual conferences may solve the scheduling problem and foster a connection with parents. To encourage further communication, teachers can invite parents to stop by the classroom when they are in the school. To avoid any misunderstandings, teachers can explain the school's regulations for registering at the office. Providing a play area for younger siblings enables parents to attend a classroom event that they may miss otherwise.

4. The teacher uses cultural knowledge to mediate between home and school and advocate for what students and families need.

Once they get to know families, teachers can be excellent advocates for them within the school community (Trumbull et al., 2003). For example, they can explain school culture and requirements to parents and intervene when a policy or practice within the school threatens to damage relationships with families. Having talked with family members, teachers can suggest modifications to the ways in which the school traditionally seeks to involve parents.

A teacher who has some knowledge of families' past experiences and current lifestyle can often troubleshoot a difficult situation, as happened in the instance described in the following example.

Explaining and Modifying a School Practice

Many schools in urban areas have resorted to locking their buildings around the clock and permitting entry only via a guard, who checks whether visitors have an appointment and proper identification. Even parents who have arranged a visit have to leave any infant equipment (such as strollers and baby carriers) outside in the bicycle area. This means problems getting around from one place to another in the large schools that tend to populate large cities, particularly if the parent has more than one preschool-age child.

These practices can be especially alienating and mystifying to families who have come to the city from rural areas, where safety was not a problem. They may not automatically interpret the practice as a safety measure but sense that the school is for some reason intentionally preventing parents from having contact with their children and children's teachers during the school day. A formal letter may not be nearly as effective in fostering understanding and trust as a conversation with a trusted teacher who understands something about the family background.

Faced with this situation, teachers in Los Angeles explained the safety issues to parents and then worked with school administration to revise the policy so that strollers, carriages, and baby carriers could be brought into the school—once inspected. School personnel had not realized that their policy was going to shut parents out and alienate them in the ways it did.

(Based on teacher reports in the Bridging Cultures Project, Trumbull et al., 2001)

support their children's schooling (Casper, 2003; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; McCaleb, 1997; Trumbull et al., 2003). This means taking a mutual approach to families, learning about them, and helping them make connections between school activities and family goals and needs. Research on family literacy programs, for example, has shown how much more powerful parent learning is when programs do the following:

- 1 Learn about families' literacy strengths and literacy histories,
- 2 Provide opportunities for families to reflect on their uses of literacy and its meaning in their daily lives,
- 3 Respond to the interests of families (adults and children), and
- 4 Work with families to empower them in ways that are meaningful to them and that engage them actively in their own learning (Casper, 2003).

A teacher can apply the four actions listed above to any area related to student learning and development. The following story shows one effective example.

Parents Learn Along With Their Children

Mrs. Hernandez, a Mexican American kindergarten teacher in the Los Angeles area, was highly successful in getting the parents of her immigrant Latino students (mostly mothers) to participate in their children's schooling. Many parents volunteered in the classroom, but with the advent of a highly prescriptive reading program, she found that there were fewer ways for parents to participate.

Mrs. Hernandez began to organize some small groups to train parents in how to help with particular skills. Five mothers, all of whom were concerned about their children's slow progress in reading, agreed to come together after school on several occasions. As it turned out, these mothers were all nonliterate, not having had the opportunity to go to school in Mexico and Central America, where they lived before immigrating to California.

Mrs. Hernandez had the mothers make alphabet flashcards. They had to trace the letters and cut out the cards. In the process, they learned the English alphabet themselves. They then helped their children practice to the point of fluency in identifying the letters, and all of the children improved in reading skills by the end of the year.

(Based on Trumbull et al., 2003)

5. The teacher supports family members in acquiring skills that families deem important.

Involving parents is in part a task of learning how parents want to be involved and what they want to learn in order to

In Short...

The culturally competent teacher

- Uses cultural knowledge to promote successful cross-cultural communication
- Promotes two-way learning between parents and school, explaining the school culture and learning about parents' experiences, hopes, and goals for their children
- Learns about parents' and students' educational histories
- Assumes parents are interested in their children's schooling
- Creates flexible parent involvement opportunities
- Learns from families how they want to be involved in their children's schooling
- Advocates for families' needs through the school
- Finds out what skills families want to learn and supports them in whatever ways possible

MAKING CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT EQUITABLE AND VALID FOR ALL STUDENTS

The history of assessment and testing of students from non-dominant groups in the United States reveals many inconsistencies (Gould, 1981; Olmedo, 1981; Sanchez, 1934). Educators, researchers, and students alike harbor serious doubts about the fairness and validity of assessments, particularly standardized tests (Chavers & Locke, 1989; O'Connor, 1989; Popham, 2001; Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003). However, classroom assessment is an important tool, and teachers can take steps to make testing more culturally appropriate, fair, valid, and useful for students from nondominant groups.

Language is involved in almost all forms of educational assessment. Even with those that rely on performance or non-verbal skills, language is commonly used in directions or in mental formulation of a response. Although mathematics assessments rely less on language, research has shown that language is still a factor (MacGregor & Price, 1999; Secada, 1992). Thus, a student's reading ability strongly influences performance on many assessments. The scores of students with low reading skills, who may have actually learned the content being tested, are likely to be lower (Popham, 2001).

Of great concern is the role of language in assessment of ELL students: It is difficult to ascertain whether a test is assessing ELLs' language proficiency or their skills and knowledge related to the content being tested. Research has shown that when the language of tests is simplified, the performance gap between ELLs and NES is narrowed (Abedi, Lord, Hofstetter, & Baker, 2000; Kiplinger, Haug, & Abedi, 2000). To reduce some of the sources of error in assessment,

professional development can focus on helping teachers examine and modify the linguistic demands of their classroom assessments.

1. The teacher ensures that students and their families understand the purposes and consequences of assessments.

Some students, particularly younger students from nondominant cultural backgrounds, may not understand the purpose of assessments and tests in general (Deyhle, 1987). They and their families need to learn that assessments and tests have important consequences—especially tests that are used for decision-making purposes, such as program entry or grade promotion. Older students from some backgrounds may believe that tests can only have negative consequences and may avoid them by staying home on test days; some may fail to perform well because they internalized messages of low expectations from teachers or society in general (Chavers & Locke, 1989; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Culturally competent teachers give such students special support and a strong rationale for participating.

2. The teacher uses multiple methods of assessment and multiple samples of performance to make decisions about students.

The greatest risk of unfair assessment comes from the use of a single standardized test score as the basis for an important decision about a student. No test is infallible. A student's performance varies over time (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997). Thus, using multiple sources of information about a student's learning increases the likelihood of making accurate inferences and better decisions about that student (Winter, 2001).

It is widely agreed that the best way to get a full picture of a student's learning is to use a variety of assessments and to gather many indicators of student learning over the course of a semester or year (Coady et al., 2003; Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997; Tinajero & Hurley, 2001; LaCelle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994). Culturally competent teachers routinely assess students through multiple methods, including criterion-referenced tests (teacher-made or commercial), work samples, dialogue journals, oral interviews, formal and informal observations, cooperative group products, performance tasks, parent feedback, and many other sources. Students benefit from many opportunities to show what they have learned on different forms of assessment.

Systematic assessment of student progress is a feature of effective ELL instruction (August & Hakuta, 1997; Genesee & Hamayan, 1994). However, tests designed for monolingual students are ineffective for ELLs (Valdés & Figueroa, 1994;

Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003), and appropriate tests are not always available in ELLs' first languages. One risk of placing ELLs in general education classrooms is that teachers may fail to monitor students on an ongoing basis and therefore overlook any comprehension problems, which can compound over time. Thus, it is important to regularly test ELLs' language proficiency (ideally in both languages). Because tests examine different linguistic skills and yield estimates of a student's language proficiency, culturally competent teachers use more than one test—particularly when making decisions about placement in programs. The same approach applies to other students, particularly those for whom the educational program has not been successful.

3. The teacher allows student choice about forms and times of assessment and provides enough time for all students to complete an assessment.

Whenever possible, students should play a role in choosing when and how they are assessed. Asking students to judge when they are ready to accomplish a task or be tested on a skill engages them in judging their own cognition (one goal of recent educational reforms) and is also more culturally harmonious for some students (Estrin & Nelson-Barber, 1995; Nelson-Barber et al., 2000). Although at times a teacher will want students to respond in a certain way (e.g., through writing), at other times a teacher can ask a student whether he or she would prefer to write a report, make a presentation, or construct a model. It is possible that each of those products could serve as a useful form of assessment on progress toward the same standards (Wiggins, 1993).

With classroom assessments, the teacher has the latitude to schedule enough time for students to complete them. ELLs may need more time than their native-English-speaking peers for language processing (reading, listening, responding to questions), particularly when the items are longer or call on higher level language skills (Abedi, Lord, & Plummer, 1997; Shaw, 1997). In a review of research studies on test accommodations for ELLs, Rivera and Collum (2004) conclude that "ELLs may not have performed to advanced levels, but often performed better when afforded extra time" (p. 13). However, they note that ELLs do even better when extra time is paired with other types of accommodations that directly target their linguistic needs (p. 13), such as linguistic simplification of assessment items.

4. The teacher manages language demands in ways that maximize each student's performance on assessments and minimize difficulties for English language learners.

On tests that are not intended to assess language proficiency itself, it makes sense to keep the language of instructions and test prompts simple. Simplification of the language of standardized tests has been shown to benefit students generally and to narrow the gap between ELL and NES performance (Abedi et al., 2000; Kiplinger et al., 2000). Following are some ways to simplify language:

- Avoid extremely long, complex sentences (e.g., Use the following information to calculate how much money you would need to construct a greenhouse that measures 12 feet high, 24 feet long, and 8 feet wide.)
- Avoid unnecessary negatives (e.g., Which of the following is not a product of photosynthesis?)
- Avoid embeddings such as relative clauses (e.g., Mrs. Green's class, which had raised \$200 at the school fair, wanted to find the best way to spend the money.)
- Avoid the passive voice (e.g., The book was read by the student.) in favor of the active voice (e.g., The student read the book.)

Simplifying the Language of a Math Task

A multiday performance task on volume requires middle school students to solve a company's problem in packaging candies. One sentence reads:

"Prove, in a convincing written report to company executives, that both the shape and the dimensions of your group's container maximize the volume" (Wiggins, 1993, p. 114).

This sentence is unnecessarily complex. One can imagine how difficult it might be for an English language learner or for a student with low reading skills to understand it. The student might have the mathematical skills and knowledge to solve the problem but stumble over the complex language. The sentence could be simplified as follows:

Explain how both the shape and dimensions of your group's container provide the maximum volume for the candies.

This sentence is simpler in terms of both vocabulary and syntax. It is also shorter. The original prompt seems to emphasize writing skills as well ("...in a convincing report") rather than only mathematics. Although one of the standards proposed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) does refer to "communication," that communication should be evidence of a student's ability to explain his or her mathematical thinking, not to write a persuasive essay.

(Wiggins, 1993)

5. The teacher ensures that students understand what they are being asked to do on a standardized assessment.

A key to successful completion of an assessment item is correct interpretation of the directions or problem that it presents (Durán, 1985). If a student doesn't understand what he or she is being asked, the likelihood of an acceptable response is low. Poor readers and English language learners may misunderstand assessment items, and research shows that both groups benefit from linguistic simplification of assessment items (Kiplinger et al., 2000).

With few exceptions, numerous standardized tests in English are required of ELLs who have been placed in general education classrooms. Instructions on assessments may be difficult for an ELL to process, particularly in the case of performance assessments that have many steps. Linguistic simplification is one of the most effective forms of standardized test accommodation for ELLs (Abedi, 2002; Rivera & Collum, 2004). Teachers can ensure that the assessments they create are clear and easy to read by keeping sentences short, using high-frequency words (except for content words germane to the subject matter being assessed), and simplifying the syntax. Teachers can also ensure that students experience different assessment formats (e.g., multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and open-ended questions).

6. The teacher explores the reasons for students' responses on assessments.

One way to explore sources of poor performance and misunderstanding is to interview a sample of students after a test to determine how they interpreted assessment items and why they responded as they did (Solano-Flores, Trumbull, & Nelson-Barber, 2002). The teacher may find out that a student did not understand a term or incorrectly read a sentence. Whereas any student may have difficulty understanding a complex sentence, ELLs are more likely to do so and may perform poorly because of misunderstanding based on language (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999).

Students' personal experiences can also produce unintended interpretations of a test question, especially if the language is complex, as shown in the following example.

The Lunch Money Problem

A standardized fourth-grade test item reads:

Sam can purchase his lunch at school. Each day he wants to have juice that costs 50¢, a sandwich that costs 90¢, and fruit that costs 35¢. His mother has only \$1.00 bills. What is the least number of \$1.00 bills that his mother should give him so he will have enough money to buy lunch for 5 days?

In a research project, the third sentence in this item caused some problems for certain students, apparently on the basis of their personal experience (related to socioeconomic class). Most (84%) White, high-income students read the sentence correctly. However, only 56% of low-income American Indian and 52% of low-income African American students read it correctly. Some in these latter groups interpreted the sentence to mean that Sam's mother had only one dollar altogether. They tried to solve the problem by having Sam select items that would cost less than a dollar and missed the point of the problem.

Teachers observed that since most of the low-income students were on free-lunch programs, the context of the problem was not relevant to them. But the complexity of the sentences and the choice to use "\$1.00 bills" instead of "one-dollar bills" quite likely affected students' interpretations as well.

(From Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003)

The majority of assessments require students to write, and many call upon students to write an extended response, posing challenges for ELLs. As described above, students who have learned to read and write in their first language often apply the spelling conventions of their first language to English (Beaumont, deValenzuela, & Trumbull, 2002; Fashola, Drum, Mayer, & Kang, 1996). In cases where there is a bilingual or ESL program in the district, teachers can prevail on a speaker of a student's first language to review a sample of a student's writing on an assessment. The native language speaker can give insights into the reasons for a student's language errors and may recognize what a student is trying to communicate—even when the teacher does not, as shown in the story (August & Hakuta, 1997).

Deciphering English Language Learners' Writing

In a northern California district, Spanish-English bilingual fifth graders who were completing their first year in English-only instruction had to take the same reading test as native English speakers. Teachers scoring their tests were not surprised that these students were still struggling to master the English spelling system, but those who didn't speak Spanish themselves found they needed the support of Spanish-speaking teachers to decipher many words and phrases. Here are some examples from students' answers to open-ended questions about two different stories the students read.

He geib ibriting hi had hi dident kip nating...(He gave everything he had he didn't keep nothing).

...the was slipping in the estrits (they was sleeping in the streets)

Yo yahto knoe way I don't gib many bicas wen I diden hab many they ! deden Helpmy! (You ought to know why I don't give money because when I didn't have money they didn't help me!)

(From Beaumont et al., 2002, pp. 250–251)

In Short...

The culturally competent teacher

- Ensures that students and their families understand the purposes and consequences of assessments
- Uses multiple methods to assess students and elicits many samples of performance over time
- Allows students latitude about how and when they will be assessed
- Minimizes the language demands of assessments that are not intended to assess language
- Ascertains whether students understand what they are expected to do on a given assessment and later listens to the reasons for their responses
- Explains and gives practice with different assessment formats
- Collaborates with native speakers of students' languages to gain better understanding of students' written responses
- Is cautious in the interpretation and use of scores on standardized tests

7. The teacher exercises caution in interpreting and using standardized achievement test data.

Classroom teachers often administer standardized tests and report their outcomes to parents. Many experts and organizations assert that standardized tests norms are largely based on European American, NES, middle-class students, making the results inaccurate for ELLs and other students from nondominant cultural groups (American Educational Research Association, 1999; Hood, 1998; Lacelle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994; Valdés & Figueroa, 1994). Because tests depend so heavily on language, the question is whether an achievement test yields a true measure of an ELL's learning. Testing experts do not believe that accommodations such as providing extra time, repeating and rephrasing instructions, or even allowing the use of dictionaries have come close to making achievement tests valid and equitable for ELLs (Hakuta & Beatty, 2000; Rivera, Vincent, Hafner, & Lacelle-Peterson, 1997). Culturally competent teachers can caution parents, students, and their own district personnel about the limitations of standardized achievement tests for ELLs.

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