Enhancing English Language Learners’ Academic Experiences: Going Beyond the Score!

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Abstract

The Hispanic population is rapidly growing in the United States, and with this rise the number of ELLs in public schools continues to ascend. This growth of population and the enactment of NCLB have translated into a need to implement research-based effective teaching practices to promote linguistic and academic success for ELLs. Nonetheless, despite the pledge of leaving no child behind, there are serious questions regarding school practices and the crisis becomes more apparent when it comes to analyzing the rate at which ELLs are reaching academic achievement. A minimal number of Hispanic students are able to confront hardships and achieve academic success. What happens in these children’s lives that they surmount the adversities? Is it something their educators did? Were they lucky to have teachers who were knowledgeable of ESL instruction? What socio-cultural contexts nurtured their academic endeavors? This article explores variables that positively and negatively affect the academic achievement of ELLs and invites educators to actively seek continuous professional development that prepares them to enhance and advocate for ELLs’ academic achievement.

Introduction

The Hispanic population is rapidly growing in the United States. With a total estimate of 42.7 million people inhabiting the Nation as of July 1, 2005, 14% of the population was composed of Hispanics and 18 year olds or younger accounted for 33.9% of that 14% (U.S. 2005 Census). As the number of Hispanics in the United States increments, the number of English language learners (ELLs) continues to ascend. The enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) caused a series of educational reforms by stressing rigorous academic standards, the regular administration of standardized assessments to all children, highly qualified teachers in the core subjects, the use of research-based instructional methods, and timely information options for parents, as well as other issues ensuring the improvement in the quality of education in all public schools (Spellings, 2007). The rise in the number of ELLs and the inception of NCLB translates into a need to implement research-based effective teaching practices to promote linguistic and academic success for those ELLs in our public schools. Nevertheless, despite the pledge of leaving no child behind, there are serious questions regarding school practices (American Federation of Teachers, 2004), and the crisis becomes more apparent when it comes to analyzing the rate at which ELLs are reaching academic achievement.

In the state of Texas, ELLs continue to disproportionately fall through the cracks, performing far below their English native speaking counterparts on the state mandated assessment. As NCLB demands for all students to participate in the state mandated assessments, and disaggregated accountability reports are required from each school entity, educators face the challenge of working effectively with ELLs, and school districts search for better ways to meet the needs of such population (Batt, 2008). Teachers are being faced with an overwhelming problem of underachievement as determined by state mandated assessments and drop-out rates among Hispanics. In fact, in 2006
the U.S. Department of Education reported a 22% dropout rate for Hispanics while their White counterparts were reported to account for only 6% of the dropout rate in the Nation. In addition, a wide achievement gap is reported as indicated by the immediate college enrollment figures. Hispanics accounted for 58% of immediate college enrollment while White students accounted for 69% in 2006. In spite of these data, a minimal number of Hispanic students are able to confront hardships and achieve academic success. What happens in these children’s lives that they surmount the adversities? Is it something their educators did? Were they lucky to have teachers who were knowledgeable of ESL instruction? What socio-cultural contexts nurtured their academic endeavors?

**ELLs and Academic Failure**

For decades, substantial research has documented that the academic success of Hispanic students is associated with certain socio-cultural factors. Some of the causes mentioned in the extant data include both, the educational and professional accomplishment levels of parents, the family composition and income, and the ethnic and language minority status, as well as the lack of instructional resources that exist in the home environment. It is generally assumed that socio-cultural factors, such as the ones mentioned, can and do originate the disproportionately towering level of scholastic failure and attrition that surround Mexican Americans (Alva & Padilla, 1995).

Moreover, earlier research has correlated reasons Hispanics have for dropping out to school practices that marginalized them (Davison Avilés, Guerrero, Howart, & Thomas, 1999). Kearney, Plax, Hays, and Ivey (1991) established the concept of “teacher misbehavior” which comprises any teacher action that hinders instruction or student learning. Some of these actions include: absenteeism, creating confusion in the students, utilizing sarcasm in the instructional setting, implementing unengaged lessons, grading unfairly, and displaying favoritism, among other behaviors. From the categories identified as teacher misbehaviors, three underlying dimensions which are teacher incompetence (lack of basic teaching skills), indolence (teacher’s disregard for students), and offensiveness (verbal abuse of the students), were identified. These teachers’ actions impact the learning and success of their pupils. Educators should never ignore that interpersonal discourse and interpersonal attitudes that emerge in the classroom are directly tied in with instructional activities. McCroskey (2006) affirms that teachers’ actions and their articulated thoughts are likely to stimulate cognitive or affective outcomes for students either negatively or positively.

Teachers not always display the mentioned misbehavior deliberately. As indicated previously, an overflow of Hispanics is being experienced in our Nation. Such dissipation has caused a short supply in educators who are highly qualified to work with ELLs. According to Batt (2008), it was reported that English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching positions were steadily among the most difficult for schools to fill for the duration of the 2003-2004 and 2005-2006 school years. In such situations, school districts have relied on teacher assistants instead of certified professionals to teach ELL academic content areas. In addition, in some states, such as in Idaho, ELL certified teachers acquired ESL strategies through workshops or in-services as an alternative of sustained professional development or coursework in a teaching certification program (Batt, 2008).

**ELLs and Academic Achievement**

Although a plethora of investigations have recognized an abundance of demographic variables that predispose students towards academic failure, minimum attention has been given to those
ELLs who overcome a great number of cultural disadvantages and succeed academically. Swail, Cabrera, and Lee (2004) posit that even though substantial research concerning Hispanics and academic success has been evolving, most of it has focused on failure, drop outs, and procedures that leave a minimal amount of students prepared to enter a 4-year college or university. Why is it that only a few are able to sustain resiliency? The notion of “Academic Invulnerability” was introduced by Garmezy (1981, 1983) to depict those children who, regardless of major psychological and environmental drawbacks, blossom even under the most unfavorable circumstances. Garmezy’s studies on invulnerability entail these children’s resiliency is due, in large extent, on intrinsic factors such as attitudes, skills, and knowledge the child has and on extrinsic factors such as the number and kind of environmental resources implemented to provide support and reduce stress.

**Exploring what works**

It seems as if educators nowadays are so preoccupied with ensuring their students master the state mandated assessments compelled by NCLB. With loads of paperwork, diverse students' needs to cater to, vast amount of deadlines to meet, and the demands of the state mandated assessments teachers’ lives are hectic and lead to “burn out” (Dunnreed, 2002). In the article entitled “How Do You Spell Stress Relief?” Delisio (2005) asserts that teachers are under pressure and demanded to produce positive test results all of the time. Because it is the educators’ moral and ethical responsibility to ensure all students are guided towards academic success, I propose to take a pragmatic stand and explore what practices work for ELLs, lessen the stress teachers are going through by ensuring they understand the needs of the students they service, and take our students towards academic goals that go beyond the score.

**The critical roles that teachers of ELLs play**

As mentioned in previous paragraphs, educators affect the daily lives of students in their classrooms, but teachers of ELLs have a special role in addition to what every educator has if they want to have a positive impact. Teachers of ELLs are to act as: “language emissaries and mediators;” agents that introduce students to the target culture; and reliable sources of professional knowledge for other teachers on campus who might have no training in ESL practices (Díaz-Rico, 2004). When teachers of ELLs act as agents that help in the acculturation of their students, they must act as critical pedagogists. Critical theorists pose that teachers must, in addition to promoting the “personal efficacy” of ELLs, promote their “social efficacy”. They have the obligation of preparing their students to become leaders of the community (Ornstein & Levine, 2008). Further, teachers of ELLs must understand that the oral and written language used in the classroom and school, district, and federal practices and policies work in potent ways to profit or inconvenience ELLs; therefore, they must be ready to take a critical stance of social conditions that may hinder their students. Cummins studies disclosed ELLs are habitually not encouraged to reflect, to think critically, or to problem-solve. This causes students to perceive their “difference” is not honored and results in “identity eradication.” To work against this loss of identity as human beings, teachers must build up in their students the confidence and motivation needed to thrive academically (Cummins, 1996).

**Suggestions for the classroom**

Empirical research studies on factors that foster academic achievement in ELLs are scarce (August & Hakuta, 1997; Gersten & Baker, 2000), but there are generous investigations focusing on instructional practices that allow for the positive learning environment needed for second language
acquisition to take place. Cummins (1994) suggests students build cognitive academic language while learning the abstract terminology that accompanies math, science, or literary discourse. Hence, one of the promising instructional practices identified in the review of the literature is sheltered English instruction, which poses that ELLs acquire the English language while learning academic content. Amplifying the amount of active engagement in academic learning with daily planned academic dialogue is also suggested in addition to an increment in quality and quantity of feedback provided to students during instruction. Building and using vocabulary as a curricular anchor, the use of visuals to reinforce concepts, the implementation of cooperative learning, and modulating the cognitive and language demands are other strategies discussed as effective instructional strategies to be used with ELLs (Gersten & Baker, 2000). Jimenez and Gersten (1999) recommend the strategic use of the native language in the development of higher-order thinking skills; however, the tendency to provide dual translations is discouraged.

The following are some suggestions and observations (adapted from Cornell, 1995) offered that may aid teachers enhance their instruction and provide for a more positive educational environment for ELLs:

1. Help ELLs to become integrated into the school setting by gaining acceptance and recognition throughout the campus.

2. Implement cooperative learning activities where the learning styles of ELLs are reflected and provide the opportunity for discourse to take place.

3. Conduct class discussions in which ELLs can display expertise by making use of their background knowledge.

4. Be sensitive to different learning styles.

5. Encourage parental involvement by reflecting your school as a place where ELLs can be successful and their culture is recognized.

6. Acknowledge that many ELLs come from low socioeconomic conditions and make appropriate adjustments as needed.
   a. Don’t expect them to have access to instructional literature, magazines, reference materials, or other resources at home.
   b. Don’t expect them to have transportation to the public library to access resources.
   c. Don’t assume they can study at home (some may be required to care for younger children, might not have the space needed, etc.)
   d. Don’t expect contributions to fund drives or other activities.
   e. Don’t assume ALL of them come from a low socio-economic background or have the same culture!
7. Establish a good working relationship with ESL or bilingual specialists at your campus.

8. Incorporate alternative assessment methods.

9. Plan lessons that provide the opportunity to develop cognitive academic as well as basic interpersonal language skills.

10. Accept that ELLs use a different collection of culture-based experiences, and fill in the gaps as needed.

11. Avoid negative self-fulfilling prophecies.

12. Adapt instructional materials that seem to go beyond the language capacity of ELLs.

13. Apply general principles of “best practices” stimulating curiosity, enthusiasm, interest, and active participation.

14. Enjoy and learn from ELLs.

**Family/Culture**

Research stresses the important role parental involvement plays in children’s academic success. The role of the family in a child’s education and motivation is essential according to Good and Brophy (2008). Parents who are successful transfer optimal values, beliefs, and behaviors that treasure education, work, human relationships, and good mental health to their children. How parents transfer these socialization experiences to their children depend on variables such as their own personality, culture, and child-rearing strategies implemented (Davis-Kean & Sexton, 2009). Parents who are actively involved in school activities are better able to understand the demands of the school and support their children’s learning. Subsequently, these children attain higher academic achievement. Turney and Kao (2009) pose that some immigrant parents want to get involved with the school, but they have limited involvement due to cultural challenges; some do not know the expectations the school system has of parents, some might feel at a disadvantage because they do not know the language spoken at the school, and some simply cannot come due to other constrains such as being at work.

In spite of restrains that might prevent them from actively participating in school activities, parents of ELLs are involved in their children’s education through socio-cultural factors. Studies have concluded Latino parents stimulate the desire to achieve academic success in their children through stories of successful relatives, through consejos (advice), and other strategies that are not easily visible in the school setting (Gándara, 1995; Delgado-Gaitán, 1994; López, 2001). Immigrant parents desire a better life for their children and encourage them to pursue an education and take advantage of the opportunities they are given in this country. For these parents, education is viewed as the savior that will help them overcome a “tough life” (Calaff, 2008). Ogbu (1987) states voluntary immigrants have a general disposition to accept hassles, hurdles, and even bigotry in the search of a better life (Cited in Calaff, 2008). Further, Calaff explains Ogbu contends immigrants
are likely to succeed in school because they are able to form a “dual frame of reference” by adding “new cultural approaches to their existing repertoire without threatening their identity,” and their new environment is viewed as an improvement over those formerly experienced in their countries of origin.

**Conclusion**

The review of the literature indicates that in spite of the good intentions of NCLB, ELLs continue to lag when compared to English-speaking students. Corson (2001) states that children should have the right to “be educated whenever possible in the same variety of language that is learned at home or is valued most by them”, that children have the right to “attend a school that shows full respect for the language variety that is learned at home or valued most by them”, and that they also have the right “to learn, to the highest level of proficiency possible, the standard language variety of wider communication used by the society as a whole” (p. 32). The question then becomes, what can public schools do in order to ensure ELLs are indeed provided with such rights? An overabundance of investigations has shown what causes the failure of ELLs; I invite education researchers to further explore factors that foster the success of ELLs. Moreover, I propose to educators to seek continual professional development regarding what instructional practices and social factors promote the academic success of ELLs. The better educated teachers become, the better they can advocate making academic achievement of ELLs a reality. Let us make the NCLB Act a dream come true and leave no child behind! ELLs deserve to “win the race” just as any other child!
References


