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Who Are Our Diverse Learners?

New Definitions, New Responses

The first staff meeting of the year used to be a time for reunions, catching up with colleagues after 10 relaxing weeks, and sharing enthusiasm for the new year. Over the past three years, the first days of school had become increasingly tension filled for teachers at Glendale Middle School. These days would typically bring news of how the school's student body—a diverse group who hailed from more than 80 countries, had various disabilities, and was overwhelmingly eligible for free and reduced-price meals—had done on the state's exam. For the last two years, Glendale had failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP). As the principal stated to a somber group at this year's meeting, this upcoming year would “make or break” them. If the students failed to make AYP (in all subgroups, including special education, students receiving free and reduced-price meals, and English language learners [ELLs]), then the school would go into corrective action and could even, down the road, be selected for restructuring. The principal—whose own job was on the line—ended by urging teachers to redouble their efforts, doing whatever was necessary to ensure that every student passed the state's proficiency test.

As she walked out of the meeting, Katrina, a first-year teacher, felt apprehensive and turned to Roberto, a veteran who was widely regarded as a competent teacher respected by the students. “What do you think of this?” she asked. Roberto shook his head. “All those people who make policy . . . don't they know what kind of students we have?” he said. “I love these kids. I think they're amazing. But they're never going to read and do math as well as kids from the other side of town. That's the hand we've been dealt. When will those people at the state board of ed. realize that?”

THE ISSUES

- Teacher preconceptions of students' abilities
- Increasing diversity in student populations
- Increased pressure on teachers to ensure all students achieve
- Ability of teachers to identify and respond to diverse student needs

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What new challenges do the changing demographics of Glendale Middle present to the school's teachers?
2. How can teachers at Glendale provide support to scaffold successful test performance for a diverse student body?
3. What specific factors (cultural differences, language proficiency, family issues, community challenges, etc.) are limiting the achievement of students at Glendale?
4. How can teachers at Glendale adapt and change their instructional approaches to respond to those specific factors?
5. How does Roberto's preconception of his students impact his ability to reach those students?

GETTING THE ANSWERS

Although fictional, this scene is representative of much of what occurs at schools across the country in teachers' first weeks back to school. Increasingly, the trend toward accountability has put teachers and administrators under pressure to raise test scores, at any and all costs. Teachers are being challenged to target all students, to retool their approaches to ensure that all students are learning, and to reevaluate their own established practices in the process. All of this, to some degree, is good, as it ensures that teachers will continue to pay attention to all students. However, the challenge for teachers lies in reconciling the push toward testing proficiency with a true reflective approach to teaching—while still maintaining a willingness to teach beyond the test; to try whatever is needed to help students achieve; and to assess students in a manner appropriate to their culture, language background, skills, and abilities.



Teachers increasingly must master a variety of skills and must be familiar with current research on diversity, language, and differentiated instruction.

These two goals may seem incompatible, but they are both inescapably part of the post-NCLB landscape in America.

We believe that true reflective teaching is essential to reach students and to transform their lives—and that reflection is not something abstract or apart from the classroom. Rather, reflection is a process that must be deeply connected to the classroom and must occur within it—as we look out at our students, survey their accomplishments, examine the roadblocks they encounter, and think about what we might change. Throughout this book, we model that process of reflection, with aids and activities designed to help you reevaluate the issues and dynamics of your classroom and the effectiveness of particular approaches and strategies.

For teachers at schools like Glendale, the challenge lies in finding a way to identify the increasingly diverse needs of the student population, so as to begin addressing those needs in the classroom. This can be a complex process: Our schools have increasing numbers of English language learners; students with special education needs; students who are commonly considered at risk due to any one of several factors (such as poverty or socioeconomic disadvantage); and students who may fall into one, two, or all of those groups. These are referred to as “triple-threat” students (Rueda & Chan, 1979). To identify students’ needs and appropriate strategies to meet those needs, the teacher must first identify what type of prior knowledge and skill set students bring to the classroom. The students, for their part, must figure out how prior knowledge and prior experiences relate to the classroom demands encountered in school. Often, for the students, this task is overwhelming, as they struggle to figure out classroom expectations, use of academic language, nonverbal communication, cultural and pragmatic norms, the literal and behavioral language of the classroom, policies, and procedures while also struggling to master academic content. The onus is often placed on students to determine how to negotiate complex classroom and school questions while also attempting to master curriculum.

The questions in Figure 1.1 are faced on a daily basis by a growing population of students, who must navigate their way through the complex academic, social, and emotional issues that are part of any child’s educational process. In fact, the phenomenon of students bearing greater responsibility for their own acculturation into school has become more common as the number of diverse learners in our school continues to increase. As our national demographics change and our society becomes more diverse, so too do our schools and classrooms change. Since 1991, in fact, the population of school-age ELLs nationally has increased over 100% (Kindler, 2002). In other words, across the nation we have seen our English language learner population more than double—and some areas have experienced far more dramatic growth. Twenty-four states currently count ELL students as 5% or more of their general student population—a statistic which, if extrapolated to the classroom level, indicates that in a classroom of 20 students, at least one, and probably more, will not have English as a primary language. In the states with the highest concentration of ELLs, the percentage is much higher than that average indicates (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2008). Of these ELL students, it can be assumed that 10% to 12%, like the general U.S. population, may

Figure 1.1 Questions Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Students Face

For a CLD student, the process of becoming used to school procedures and environments can be overwhelming. Before even confronting the question of mastering content, this student may be confronted with various other complex questions, the answers to which are implicit but may not ever be explicitly taught:

How do I order lunch?

What materials can I take home?

What materials are “mine” as opposed to “ours” and “shared”?

Where do I get my books?

When can I talk to my neighbor: When is it “working together” and when is it “misbehaving”?

Where should I sit? Can I sit next to others? Where do I keep my things?

Can I use the restroom at school? Do I need to ask for permission to do so?

What emotions can I show, and when?

Can I ask for help? How? Who can help me?

What if I don’t know how to ask for what I need?

What if I don’t know what I need?

What if no one else understands the language I am speaking?

What if I don’t feel safe?

require special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), and certainly require informed, linguistically appropriate assessment to determine their eligibility for services (Hoover, Klingner, Baca, & Patton, 2008). All of these changes mean that general educators, who used to be assured of a fairly homogenous class, now find themselves in the role of ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) teacher, reading specialist, counselor, special educator, and so on. Therefore, educators increasingly need to expand their skill sets, using a variety of strategies to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional (CLD/E) learners, including ELLs with or without disabilities as well as all students with special education needs, and other students—and to effectively differentiate among all of those needs. This process begins with an accurate understanding of who your students really are—what backgrounds they have, what prior experiences and knowledge they bring, and what type of family situations they go home to each evening.

This process also involves an awareness of the impact that factors such as cultural diversity, changing cultural norms, family trauma and emotional adjustment, and second-language acquisition can have on learning. Figure 1.2 describes some of the expectations that may be challenging for ELL students—though our schools are set up to take them for granted. Cummins (2007) describes the process of second-language acquisition, pointing out that students can acquire basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) in one to three years, but they typically need five to seven years, and sometimes up to ten years, to master academic language (cognitive academic language proficiency, or CALP).

Figure 1.2 Hidden Demands of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

Many of the linguistic demands we place on students actually may require more-advanced language proficiency skills than we realize. The ability to use academic English becomes a prerequisite for understanding, as students cannot comprehend a text without understanding these crucial words. The following list highlights 10 common academic keywords that may be challenging to ELL students, with or without disabilities. The language and content demands of your classroom may vary; you may wish to skim the textbooks and materials you use to see what other academic words are prerequisites for understanding.

Above
 Below
 Beyond
 Behind
 In Front of, Before, Preceding
 Different
 Same, Similar
 Compare
 Contrast
 Within

NEW STEPS TO TAKE—TOMORROW

We don't actually advocate trying all of these new steps in one day. However, we do recommend making a deliberate commitment to engage in Freire's (1993) type of reflection—reflective activity connected to the classroom and occurring inside the classroom rather than separate and away from it. In this section, you'll see some suggestions, tips, and charts that you can begin to use immediately in order to get to know your students better.

1. Consider your classroom: Who are your students?

In addition to understanding your own perceptions and attitudes, it is helpful to understand your classroom demographics and dynamics—and how they relate to national or schoolwide norms. As much of our social discourse is based on traditional labels designed around concepts such as ethnicity, cultural identity, and ability, we include charts based on traditional categories—but we also encourage you to think outside the box and chart your own categories here, defining your students in ways other than the traditional deficit-based ones.

Complete the tables in Figures 1.3 and 1.4 to compare your school and classroom demographics to national norms. Figure 1.3 prompts you to think through the cultural and ethnic diversity of your school and your classroom as they relate to national trends. Figure 1.4 provides a space to record the diversity of educational and etiological needs (related to a particular condition or set of symptoms) in your school and classroom.

Figure 1.3 Cultural and Ethnic Diversity in Your Classroom and School

	Nationally (as Percentage of Total Student Enrollment)	In My School	In My Classroom
Caucasian	66.9		
African American	12.3		
Latino, Hispanic	14.4		
Asian, Pacific Islander	4.3		
Native American, Alaskan, Hawaiian	0.8		
Other or more than one race	1.3		

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (2008).

Figure 1.4 Continuum of Needs in Your Classroom and School

	Nationally (as Percentage of Total Student Enrollment)	In My School	In My Classroom
Specific learning disability	5.8		
Autism spectrum disorder, developmental delay	1.0		
Hearing, vision, speech, and language impairment	3.3		
Orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, and multiple disabilities	1.5		
Emotional or behavioral disorder	1.0		
Intellectual disabilities	1.2		

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (2008).

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How to Use This Information

First, reflect on how your own school looks in relation to national norms. Do the trends in your school echo those across the country? The point of asking these questions is not to label or categorize your students (or to limit your own perceptions of their abilities) but rather to gain a sense of who your students are and what their needs are. What does the diversity of your school population tell you about your students' needs? How might your students' needs differ from those in the general national population? (This fact is important to keep in mind if you are using curricular resources, such as predesigned curriculum materials, designed by a national company rather than your own district or school.)

Second, engage in the same reflection regarding your own students, in your own classroom. Perhaps your students are representative of the school's demographics; perhaps they are a specific subset of the school's population. Either way, it is important to place their needs in context. Again, consider what challenges—and opportunities—are presented by the unique composition of your student population. No other teacher has exactly the same students you do; no other teacher has the same potential to impact those students' lives in the same way.

Paradoxically, we advocate a cross-categorical approach, yet we believe that at the same time we must be aware of what categories exist and what similarities exist across categories. This is so because many diverse learners are not incidental learners. Strategies must be purposefully chosen with students' particular needs in mind—yet inclusively implemented so that students are not separated from the general education population. For example, the use of visual aids is an excellent strategy to make content accessible to students—but may be inappropriate and ineffective for a visually impaired student. For that student, using a study buddy, auditory cues and repetition, and braille materials are much more effective strategies, all of which can be implemented in the general education setting.

It is important to recognize that these categories can bring additional information about your students, their backgrounds, and their needs—but categories can also be misused. When categories are used to create

or validate stereotypes, without reference to individual learners and their needs, they cease to become useful. Similarly, when categories are used to stratify student groups rather than to plan for responsive instruction that looks to similarities across and between categories, they are no longer useful and, in fact, become destructive to student achievement. In the past, categories have



As classroom demographics change, it is essential for schools to provide up-to-date professional development so that teachers can meet the needs of the students in their classrooms.

been used in society as a means of oppression, which may make some hesitant to use defined groups at all. It is important to recognize the goal in categorical analysis: to become aware of students' needs, beliefs, and backgrounds in order to access resources, instructional strategies, and cultural information that will help them learn.

In any situation, there is always the point where we ask, "What practical benefit will this information have?" How will understanding the diversity of your classroom help you to plan for more effective instruction to meet the academic, linguistic, cultural, and affective needs of students? What information do we need to understand regarding diversity and its impact on teaching?

2. Consider your students' language backgrounds: Is your instruction linguistically accessible?

What does your student population look like, linguistically speaking? Are all of your students fully proficient in English? Do you have a number of ELL students? If so, what level of English language proficiency do they demonstrate? Do you have other students who struggle with language for reasons of disability, culture, or other factors?

Frequently, in thinking about language, special needs, and other issues, we fall into a "deficit" model of thinking, where we consider only the drawbacks or limitations of students' linguistic, cultural, physical, cognitive, and other diversities. In this activity, we suggest you consider not just the linguistic diversity of your students but also some potential benefits or strengths that the students may exhibit. For example, a student who is an ELL but who is fluent in Spanish may be able to translate some materials for other students, may respond well to use of Spanish songs and bilingual books in class, and may have an ability to serve as an interpreter for family members or other parents in the class. A student with an autism spectrum disorder may have challenges in using language to describe events but may have unusually strong sequencing and memory skills—which you can use in scaffolding language activities that will help that student develop descriptive, expressive skills.

Therefore, we ask you to consider students' language proficiencies in the chart (see Figure 1.5), to think about instructional approaches (and accommodations) that may benefit each student, and to list three possible benefits or strengths which you can teach to. While this chart is organized for you to consider one student in your classroom, we encourage you to repeat the process with various students and to share your thoughts and findings with colleagues.

How to Use This Information

In an ideal world, every lesson plan and every teacher will be responsive to the needs of every student, at all times. However, as teachers and teacher trainers ourselves, we are aware that real life interferes. The fire drill fourth period,

Figure 1.5 Impact of Language on Instruction

Consider *three students* in your classroom who appear to demonstrate some type of linguistic diversity. You may consider students with a language-processing disability or an autism spectrum disorder, students with cognitive impairments, or ELL students. Please identify and reflect on the following factors:

Student (Name, or Pseudonym if Chart Will Be Shared)	Language Issues for Student	Benefits and Strengths of Student's Language-Use Patterns	Instructional Strategies That May Benefit Student
		1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.
		1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.
		1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.

the assembly that shortens your testing time, the community events that can interfere with students' abilities to attend and to focus . . . all of these are factors that can undermine the best-laid lesson plans. Therefore, it is important not to take responsiveness for granted, but rather to be deliberate in planning for the needs of students who are not incidental learners. Students who are CLD (culturally and linguistically diverse) and ELLs need deliberate and consistent structure, activities, and plans in order to have the ability to access learning every day, every class. Teachers need opportunities to reflect on their students' needs—and a meaningful way in which to connect the students' needs to instruction.

We suggest you use this chart (Figure 1.5) as a springboard for developing and trying new strategies, approaches, and activities that build on your students' strengths and existing skill sets. Think first of all about your students and what they bring to the table, so to speak. Then, think about the ways in which we view student characteristics. Often, we unconsciously fall into that deficit-model thinking, which blinds us to the abilities and strengths that students do have. Thinking about student “can-ness” (the abilities and talents that do exist rather than those that appear to be missing) can provide a powerful way to reframe both your individual lessons and your overall approach to teaching.

3. Consider your students' experiences: What do they bring to the class?

In structuring our classroom expectations, we frequently forget to think about what students have experienced, what their home and family lives may be like, what beliefs and attitudinal sets they bring with them, and what values they may hold dear and how those values impact their school participation. For this activity, please select one of your students and consider the factors in Figure 1.6.

How to Use This Information

As in the list of academic English words (see Figure 1.2), we frequently forget how the context and background of our students influence their abilities to meet standards and attain objectives. Consider the different areas of impact that you've identified—and that is just for one student! The thought of identifying and differentiating for every student's needs may seem overwhelming at this point. However, the rest of this book is designed to provide you a step-by-step guide to working through the needs of students, ensuring your classroom routines and instructions are responsive to those needs, and collaborating with colleagues to evaluate your progress toward responsiveness on a schoolwide level as well.



Educators are increasingly cognizant that families, and family structures, have become less homogenous and more diverse.

Figure 1.6 Student Background Survey

Question	Answer	Potential Impact on Learning
With whom does the student live?		
What is the student's cultural and linguistic background? (Does the student speak another language or dialect? How proficient in each language is the student?)		
What cultural or religious beliefs does the student have?		
How long has the student's family been in the United States? Have they lived in the same area the entire time?		
What is the student's socioeconomic status?		
How does the student's family perceive school? Perceive school authority and teacher authority?		
Who is the student's peer group?		
What prior educational experiences has the student had?		
What prior social experiences has the student had?		

SUMMARY

As the diversity of the nation, our schools, and our classrooms changes, we recognize the importance of understanding student backgrounds, language proficiencies and skills, and instructional needs. The charts and guides presented in this chapter provide a format for you to think through the issues and reflect on the impact of diversity in your own classroom, for your own students. The impact of diversity can frequently be linked to student language proficiency and the demands of academic English, social and cultural factors, and the background and skills that students bring to the class.

EXTENSION AND COLLABORATION

Take a few minutes to discuss one or more of these questions with a colleague: (You may wish to “partner up” with a coteacher or with someone in your department, grade level, or team and work through these chapters and discussion questions together over the course of the year.)

1. Have the demographics of your school and community changed in the last few years? How? How has this impacted students’ abilities to access curriculum?
2. What services and support are available for diverse learners in your school? What additional supports might be useful or helpful to students and teachers?
3. Are there particular issues (background, language, skills) that teachers across the school need to be aware of? Are there concrete steps and strategies that could be provided to all teachers?
4. Consider the students you have in common, if any. What supports or structures could each of you implement in order to build consistent frameworks across classes and services? (Consider students you have simultaneously, such as those who have one teacher for fourth period and another for fifth period. Consider, also, students you may share with another teacher in sequence: if you are a third-grade teacher and your discussion partner is the fourth-grade teacher, for example.)

NEXT STEPS

The next step in this process is to consider how our society has dealt with larger issues of diversity. Being an informed, engaged professional requires one to understand the local and national policy issues—such as welfare reform measures, immigration legislation, and special education law—that impact students’ lives. As related to diverse learners, all of the issues discussed in this chapter require a thorough understanding of legal issues impacting diverse learners and of second-language acquisition and acculturation. Therefore, the chapters immediately following this one will deal with those topics, so you can

integrate all of these pieces as you consider your classroom instruction, assessment, and interpersonal relationships. As you will consider in Chapter 2, many of these policy and legal issues impact students' abilities to access learning—and many of them are directly linked to student strengths, needs, cultural diversity, language proficiency, and expectations. Before doing so, however, we encourage you to revisit the insights you have gained in this chapter and, even more important, to share them with colleagues: Consider together how you might collaborate to better understand the students within your classrooms and schools. In doing so, you can continue to grow not only as a reflective practitioner but also as a change agent and a leader within your own school, helping others to gain insight into student backgrounds and needs as you have done yourself.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

1. Identify one advocacy group whose work is relevant to your student population—perhaps CEC (the Council for Exceptional Children), a parent organization for students with disabilities, National Council of La Raza (a national Latino advocacy group), or a local advocacy and assistance group. Draft a short summary of the group's work and available resources, and share it with your colleagues at the next staff meeting.

2. Peruse the website of the group you identified and choose one website, link, or resource that would be useful for parents. Send a note home to parents and family members of your students explaining the website and how it might help them. If you have bilingual students, you may wish to ask them to translate the note into their native languages.

3. Select a recent news story from your local newspaper that you feel is relevant to the needs and demographics of your classroom population. Build the news item into a lesson in a manner appropriate for your students' language proficiencies and skills (you may use it in modified form or original form as an introductory motivator, as extended reading, or as a topic for discussion). Post the article on the board of your faculty lounge or copy room so that colleagues can see it (and can see the lesson materials you developed to accompany it!).

USEFUL WEBSITES

- National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition: www.ncela.gwu.edu. NCELA provides state and national demographic data.
- Wrightslaw: www.wrightslaw.com/idea/index.htm. Wrightslaw, a legal resource page, offers a wealth of information on the revised Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), covering various topics important to teachers working with students who have exceptionalities.
- Civil Rights Project: www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu. The UCLA Civil Rights Project (formerly the Harvard Civil Rights Project) is committed to ongoing examination of diversity in our society, and their website has links to a number of research resources, studies, and policy papers on topics including high-stakes testing, special education, and desegregation.