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Promoting Teachers of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Students as Change Agents: A Cultural Approach to Professional Learning

This article proposes a cultural approach to professional learning to empower pre- and in-service teachers to successfully address increasingly diverse student populations and become culturally responsive to students' diverse backgrounds. This cultural approach treats culture as a vital source for reshaping the politics of identity and difference. It emphasizes building teachers' ability to recognize their own cultural practices and relate to those of their students, as well as enhancing their performance and action in empowering their students to work against

cultural hegemony. The article explicates the 3 stages of the approach, namely, the cultural reconciliation, the cultural translation, and the cultural transformation stage, and discusses how they can be applied in professional learning for teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students.

Teachers as Cultural Workers

THERE IS A CONSENSUS in research that culture plays a critical role in culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students' learning and social integration in the host society. According to Li (2011), culture affects CLD students' academic learning and social integration in many ways. It can influence learner identities, both how they view themselves and how they

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perceive that others view them. This awareness can have a significant impact on student learning and development. Espoused beliefs and values in CLD students' heritage culture may be in conflict with dominant views; and these conflicts may result in cultural clashes and identity conflicts. More significantly, cultural discontinuities between school and home, especially in terms of gender roles, literacy beliefs and practices, and interactional styles, as well as parental involvement patterns, also influence CLD students' learning in significant ways. Therefore, helping CLD students gain the abilities and skills that enable them to translate the differences among diverse domains of life in and out of school is critical in their educational experience. To this end, teachers of CLD students (both regular mainstream and ESL/bilingual teachers) must become cultural workers—they must not only learn about their students' cultural practices and social realities outside of school, but also about how to integrate cultural knowledge and practices into their everyday teaching to successfully educate CLD students, as well as support them socio-emotionally and politically.

Professional learning programs must help teachers examine their own cultural beliefs and practices, gain a repertoire of cultural practices relevant to their CLD students, and acquire pedagogical knowledge and skills about how to create spaces to connect these cultural practices to the curriculum and in their daily instruction. Professional learning programs must also help teachers learn to provide opportunities for their students to move across diverse physical and social borders, counter the cultural dominance, form positive social and cultural identities, and find alternative paths for success.

However, in reality, the majority of pre- and in-service teachers are underprepared to meet the demands of the rapidly growing CLD student population. A national survey of K–12 public school teachers conducted by the National Center for Education Information in 2005 found that 85% of teachers were middle class, White, monolingual, and 87.5% had little or no training in teaching linguistically diverse students (NCELA Newline Bulletin, 2005). Among those who

received training, the focus of their training programs or sessions was on instructional strategies or programs, seldom on cultural diversity. In a national survey study specifically on the preparation of teachers for diversity, Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley (2008) found that more than 1 in 3 teachers in this sample reported having had very little or no training in strategies to help CLD students. Additionally, there were significant differences in training for working with CLD students by region and by race/ethnicity. Moreover, when asked about their preparation in using one important proven method of improving both race relations and average achievement levels in diverse classrooms, only 29% of these teachers reported a great deal of training in designing racially diverse groups. These findings suggest that the preparation of teachers for diversity, especially in terms of building teacher capacity to become effective cultural workers, is “imperative to ensure that demographic transition does not destabilize schools and that student performance, among all subgroups, reaches increasingly demanding benchmarks” (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008, p. 9).

How, then, can one help teachers become effective cultural workers? Although there are many researchers who argue for the importance of addressing cultural diversity and increasing intercultural sensitivity among teachers, there are few discussions or studies about how to make culture and diversity issues an integral part of professional learning programs. In this article, I outline a cultural approach to teacher professional learning to empower pre- and in-service teachers to successfully address the needs of an increasingly diverse student population and become effective cultural workers.

A Cultural Approach to Teacher Professional Learning

A cultural approach to professional learning treats culture as a vital source for reshaping the politics of identity and difference through the redesign of teaching practices in ways that enhance CLD students' learning experiences and

school success. This approach emphasizes building teachers' knowledge base in language and culture, their ability to recognize their own cultural practices and relate to those of their students, as well as enhancing their performance and action in empowering their students to work against cultural dominance and bias (Li, 2008). The culture here is not the "hallway multiculturalism" currently practiced in many culturally and linguistically complex schools, defined by Hoffman (1996) as the happy mix of different cultures at face value by simply adding ethnic content such as the food, folkways, and holidays approach. Rather, it refers to value-based deep culture that gives meaning, security, and identity to a group of people; it includes thoughts, ideas, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and relationships as expressed in actions and words in day-by-day details of life as it is lived (Hanley, 1999).

This cultural approach to professional learning consists of three interrelated stages, shown in Figure 1. The first is the cultural reconciliation stage, in which professional learning programs address how to support teachers as they come to know themselves and others as cultural beings and reconcile with CLD students' diverse home literacies and cultures. The second is the cultural translation stage, in which professional learning programs identify the strategies, skills, and competencies that teachers need to translate this knowledge into powerful tools useful in instructional design and practice to bridge students' literacy and cultural discontinuities in and out of school. Last is the cultural transformation stage that involves providing effective ways to develop critical abilities that can transform teachers from mere cultural translators into change agents who can redesign school practices that enable CLD students to become successful border-crossers who engage in syncretic or hybrid literacy practices that constitute different cultural codes, values, traditions, experiences, and languages.

Stage One: Helping Teachers Reconcile Cultural Differences

Teachers' capacity to teach CLD students in different ways is connected to their views

of themselves, their beliefs about their roles, and their perceptions about their students in classroom activities. Because most teachers in culturally and linguistically complex classrooms are White, monolingual, middle class, and live outside the communities of their CLD students, it is critically important to help teachers examine their identities, both as teachers and learners of diverse cultures in relation to their CLD students. As Milner (2012) points out, thinking about the self in relation to others means that teachers think deeply about their own perspectives, privileges, beliefs, and life worlds in conjunction, comparison, and contrast to those of their students and their communities. Only through such self-exploration, can teachers of CLD students make meaningful improvements in their understanding of cultural and racial diversity, as well as in developing empathetic dispositions toward their students. Professional learning programs for teachers, therefore, must start with teacher personal inquiry and change to help them reassess their own cultural beliefs and social positioning, and to rearticulate their own expectations for the students.

There are many strategies that can help teachers explore their personal histories and value systems and develop respect and value for other cultures and practices. Group discussions and dialogues about teachers, themselves, as cultural beings is a crucial step in teachers' cultural self-discovery as such forums provide opportunities for teachers to self-reflect and respond to questions raised by colleagues. Engaging teachers in writing cultural memoirs or autobiographies that detail their own individual, private cultural histories and events (e.g., education, family, religion, victories, defeats, etc.) that have direct influence on their present identities as teachers of CLD students is an effective way to help teachers understand their own cultural selves (Allen, 2007; Schmidt & Finkbeiner, 2003). Souvenirs, artifacts, photographs from the past, and new technologies (e.g., blogs, iMovies) from the present, are useful to construct such memoirs. A book club to engage teachers of CLD students in discussions of ethnic autobiographies is also a way to help them learn about culture, literacy, and

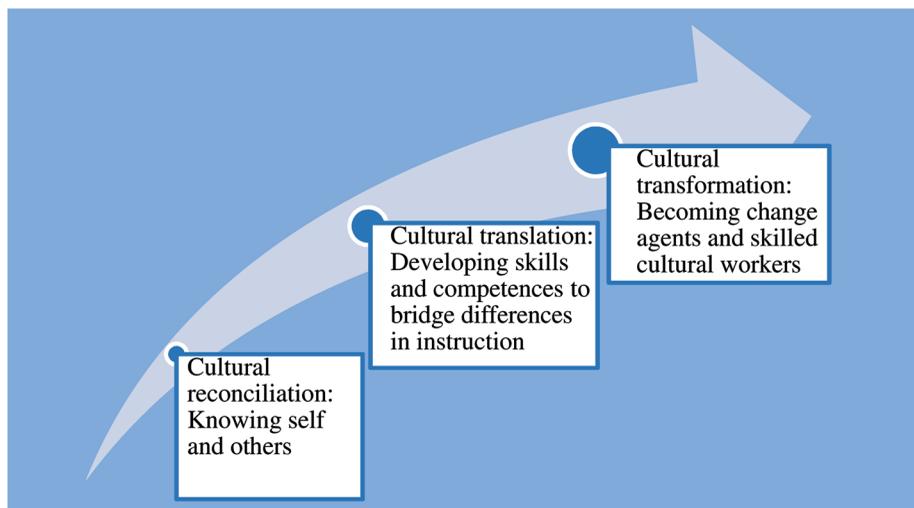


Figure 1. Three stages of the cultural approach to professional learning. (color figure available online)

education in their lives and the lives of others, and to foster teachers' appreciation of diversity and critical thinking (Florio-Ruane & de Tar, 2001).

In addition to knowing themselves, professional learning programs must help teachers find effective ways to collect student social and cultural data outside of school. In effect, direct contact with and systematic study of students' families and communities should "become the basis for curriculum planning and instruction, rather than unfounded generalizations or unconfirmed information" (Mercado, 2005, p. 147). In addition to learning basic information about students' cultures, origins, languages, prior schooling experiences, and exposure to English, teachers of CLD students must also engage in asking critical questions such as: Who are the learners? What stereotypes exist about their cultural group? What are their cultural views of learning? What are their expectations of learning? What do learners and their families do outside school?

The strategies and activities suggested for teachers' cultural self-exploration can be used in tandem for teachers' understanding of CLD students, their families, and communities. Group discussion and cultural dialogues should include perspectives of parents of CLD students. CLD

students and/or their parents can also be included in writing and sharing cultural memoirs (see Allen, 2007). Professional development programmers can also adopt Schmidt and Finkbeiner's (2003) "ABCs of cultural understanding and communication" model that requires teachers to write a biography of a culturally different person through interviews and conduct a cross-cultural analysis that charts similarities and differences. González, Moll, and Amanti's (2005) "funds of knowledge" approach that requires teachers to conduct home visits and household analysis is another good way to train teachers to become learners of their CLD students. Similarly, enlisting parent stories or narratives about their literacy activities and cultural events (such as routines of parents and children, parents' recollections of their children's early learning efforts, descriptions of parents' teachable moments" artifacts of children's literacy histories such as scrapbooks, videos, and photographs) is another good approach (Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999).

Stage Two: Helping Teachers Translate Cultural Differences

In addition to developing more empathetic understanding of CLD students' cultures and

lives outside of school, teachers also need to have the skills to incorporate the multiple cultural perspectives into their curriculum, anticipate and adjust for students' different communication and learning styles and abilities, and accept and value cultural differences in their classrooms. de Jong and Harper (2005) maintained that to address the gap in teachers' knowledge base and skills necessary for translating cultural differences, teachers must be prepared in three areas in effective instruction for CLD students: how to address the cultural context of schools, the cultural foundation of first and second language literacy, and the cultural identity of CLD students.

Professional learning programs can help educate teachers about "how to make positive, programmatic use of the insights they acquire about each child's family, cultural membership, families stories, language use, and home literacy practices" (Lapp, 2009, p. 272). For instance, to build a positive classroom culture that values differences, teachers need to learn ways to incorporate students' diverse cultural experiences, provide examples, and use artifacts to make content knowledge become more relevant to the lives and cultural backgrounds of CLD students. These skills are especially important as some concepts and methods in content area subjects such as Western science are contrary to many CLD students' cultural beliefs and practices. For example, Western modern science emphasizes scientific inquiry into authentic questions generated from students' experiences; this emphasis is different from many cultures that treat teachers and texts as authoritative sources of knowledge (Lee, 2004).

Teachers must also understand how to accommodate differences and incorporate students' background knowledge and experiences in classroom participation structures. For example, although active questioning and peer discussion are considered fundamental in the process of learning in many US classrooms, many CLDs may come from cultures where teachers are considered to be the final authority and where questioning the teacher is considered disrespectful. Therefore, it is important for teachers to be able to interpret student behaviors in light of different cultural

beliefs and traditions. Further, teachers also need to know appropriate strategies to elicit students' prior knowledge. Some of the strategies, such as story maps, semantic webs, or K-W-L, although effective with students with high levels of proficiency, may not work effectively, especially when CLD students have limited English proficiency (de Jong & Harper, 2005).

In addition, to become effective teachers of CLD students, teachers need to be able to recognize students' strengths (e.g., languages used by the students and their family members, the students' cross-cultural experiences, and their first and second language history) in areas often excluded from monolingual contexts. Different cultures have different literacy expectations, traditions, and practices as well as different oral and written skills. These diverse traditions, practices, and skills can go unrecognized if teachers do not know how to integrate them in instruction. Further, factors such as different cultural values, family socioeconomic backgrounds, and parental educational level may lead to families' different perceptions of parental involvement in school settings. Teachers must know how to adapt and adjust instruction to address these cultural conflicts and how to involve culturally different families in their children's education.

Further, teachers also need to understand how to respond to a range of student attitudes, motivations, and behaviors related to cultural identity. Some CLD students may feel the pressure to assimilate at the expense of their own cultural heritage, withdraw from interactions with the mainstream students, or act out and become apathetic to preserve their cultural traditions. Teachers of CLD students must be able to understand how societal and school contexts influence these students' attitudes toward learning and the process of acculturation and, more important, be able to incorporate this understanding into a teaching process that positively affirms students' cultural identities.

Translating cultural differences in instruction, therefore, is a demanding process that requires teacher reflection and inquiry, formal training and informal learning, and extensive support. Many formal and informal reform-oriented pro-

professional learning activities and programs can guide teachers into contexts and situations that offer them opportunities to acquire authentic experience and knowledge about cultural diversity, and to develop competence in validating and linking home and school literacies in their instructional designs. These include attending workshops and university-level courses; being mentored or coached; participating in a committee, study group, or networks; engaging in an internship; or being involved in resource centers (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). These professional learning activities can provide an effective structure (such as common planning time, shared opportunities to examine student work, or tools for self-reflection) and a wide range of authentic experiences that can increase teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and change their instructional practice in ways that address cultural differences and support student learning.

Stage 3: Helping Teachers Transform Cultural Differences

Another important aspect of the cultural approach to professional learning is to enable teachers to promote the development of critical thinking abilities in CLD students to tackle the broader contextual and societal factors in learning. Teachers need to learn how to provide CLD students with an ideological space not only for the development of bilingualism and biliteracy, but also for trying out multidiscursive practices and readings of the world (e.g., different ways to combine different language styles in literacy activities or alternative perspectives on issues related to social justice; see González, 2005). This process of cultural transformation is a strategic transfer of power from a practice of cultural dominance to an emergent process of intermingling and merging of different cultural traditions and values. Teachers need to help CLD students develop the ability to understand different cultural ways of seeing the self–other relationship and to explore new alternative versions of self. This requires teachers to be able to create third spaces that are characterized by cultural

hybridity, that is, co-existence or intermingling of different languages, values, and traditions in different social contexts (see Moje et al., 2004).

Pedagogically, to be able to create such ideological spaces requires teachers to rethink what and how major questions in minority education are asked and how diversity should be addressed in their classrooms. Teachers must teach students to ask questions such as, “Where do I belong to in this present? In what ways do I identify with or distance from ‘we’ or my first language and culture? And in what forms do I identify with or distance myself from ‘they’ or the Others?” In addition, teachers must also engage students in constant inquiry into how their present might interface with their future. To facilitate the process, teachers must learn how to use students' cultures and literacies as texts and build on students' histories, languages, memories, and community narratives that are gendered, classed, and raced. They also need to teach CLD students to learn how to analyze their lived experiences and develop abilities to explore alternatives that may rewrite their learning trajectories—from those in the margin and prescribed as failures to those in the center and with promises for academic success.

This cultural remapping, therefore, allows teachers and students to move beyond the “half-way multiculturalism” and subscribe to a practice that “engages both self and other, students and teacher in rethinking constructions of identity, culture, representation, and power” (Asher, 2005, p. 1081). To work from this perspective, teachers must approach culture as genuine learners and students as natural explorers who are able to transform and be transformed by their encounters and to productively use methods of transcultural sensitization and reflective cultural analysis, paying particular attention to their own framework in cultural observation and interpretation (Hoffman, 1996).

Unlike other instructional strategies, gaining competence to successfully monitor this complex, demanding process of cultural transformation cannot be accomplished by the traditional workshop model of professional development that limits teachers' growth and change. Rather,

teachers of CLD students must be provided with opportunities to exercise their agency in assessing how their students are doing, identifying problems, engaging in the process of their own professional learning, and planning for and monitoring change (National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement, 2009). For change to occur, they must engage in constant inquiry and reflection and have opportunities to experiment with their new learning, and identify strategies and creative spaces that work well with CLD students in their classrooms.

Conclusion

The goal of a cultural approach to professional learning for teachers of CLD students is to increase teacher capacity in all of its dimensions. These dimensions include enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills about diversity, changing their attitudes and dispositions toward self and their CLD students, and developing their ability to translate this knowledge into practice and move their students to the next level of education. This next level of education, as Milner (2012) describes it, is "an education that moves beyond the rhetoric of policy and reform to one of practice, commitment, effort, and results" (p. 241). It requires that, in addition to coming to know themselves in relation to others, teachers and students must envision life beyond their present situations, speak possibility and not destruction, care and demonstrate that care, and change their thinking to change their actions. This charge, however, should not be limited to individual teacher's efforts only; rather, there should be concerted institutional support at local, state, and federal levels that will enforce systematic structural changes to create an education that is truly responsive to cultural diversity.

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