

Focus on... DIVERSITY

Transformative Advocacy: How Higher Education Can Help Improve ELL Student Achievement

By Socorro Herrera & Kevin Murry

Over the past decade, the number of English-language learners (ELL students) in American classrooms has increased from 2.1 million to 4.4 million (Kindler, 2002). Even among Midwestern states, not traditionally associated with significant linguistic diversity, ELL students often constitute up to 70% of kindergarten enrollment (Herrera & Murry, in press). Yet as the cultural and linguistic diversity of U.S. classrooms increases, a number of problems persist.

One is the enduring overrepresentation of ELL students among the nation's low academic achievers. According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1997), ELL students at the national level are three times more likely to be low achievers than high achievers, two times more likely to be at least one grade level behind in school, and four times more likely to drop out of school than their native-English-speaking peers. Moreover, less than 9% of these students are served in English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual education (BE) programs at the elementary level, and even fewer are served at the secondary level (Kindler, 2002).

Anecdotal data suggest that the situation has not improved since 1997 (Herrera & Murry, in press). In fact, demographics in many schools are now so changed that in some districts where ESL pullout programs dominate, as much as

60% of a teacher's class may be pulled out for auxiliary instruction.

Recent evidence indicates that more than 40% of teachers teach at least one ELL student (Kindler, 2002). Yet only 29% of those teachers have relevant training. Although 45% of teachers of ELL students hold a master's degree, less than 10% hold BE certification, and less than 9% hold ESL certification. Post-secondary education must be concerned with preparing teachers to serve culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Yet just as programming options remain limited for ELL students, so too does preparation for their teachers. In fact, since the 1960s, little has changed in the way in which institutions of higher education respond to the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in schools. Although many institutions require at least one class in multicultural edu-

cation for preservice teachers, a notably smaller number offers appropriate coursework to prepare teachers for today's degree of cultural and linguistic diversity. A still smaller number offers coursework for preservice or inservice teachers leading to an ESL endorsement. Concomitantly, not only has the U.S. Department of Education terminated funding for graduate students who wish to pursue careers in bilingual education, but also few institutions have maintained these programs of study.

As one of the nation's fastest growing student populations continues to demonstrate low academic achievement, institutions of higher education are not keeping pace. What is their appropriate role in building teacher capacity to reverse the trend?

Herrera & Murry (1999) assert that advocacy provides a pragmatic framework for the transformation in teachers' capacities and institutional organization necessary to accommodate linguistic diversity in the classroom. The framework encompasses three levels of preparedness: currency, defensibility, and futurity.

Currency is the extent to which teachers have current knowledge of sociocultural diversity and sociopolitical trends in a school's community, potential threats to ELL programming, and the skills necessary to remain effective educators. Institutions of higher education are in a position to offer research- and theory-driven courses to support teachers' currency and foster critical thinking and reflection. Appropriate courses of study might include ESL/dual language methods, linguistics, and assessment as well as studies in cross-cultural dynamics, reading and the bilingual child, and family literacy.

Defensibility is the extent to which teachers are capable of maximizing critical thinking and self-reflection. Institutions should offer a curriculum grounded in standards for working with ELL students.

The recently articulated TESOL *ESL Standards for P-12 Teacher Education Programs* (2002) already serves as a defensibility framework at some institutions (Herrera & Murry, in press). The standards span the full range of best practice with ELL students, including the following domains (TESOL, 2002, p. 17):

- **Professionalism.** Candidates know the history of ESL teaching; keep up with new instructional techniques, research results, advances in the field, and public policy issues; reflect upon and improve their instructional practices; provide support and advocate for ESL students and their families; and work collaboratively to improve the learning environment.
- **Language.** Candidates know, understand, and use the major concepts, theories, and research related to the nature and acquisition of language to construct learning environments that support students' language and literacy development and content area achievement.
- **Culture.** Candidates know, understand, and use the major concepts, theo-

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ries, and research related to the nature and structures of culture to construct learning environments that support students' language and literacy development and content area achievement.

- **Planning and managing instruction.** Candidates know, understand, and use effective practices and strategies related to the planning and management of ESL instruction, including classroom organization, language skills, teaching strategies and structures, and classroom resources.
- **Assessment.** Candidates understand and use assessment measures as they relate to ESL students.

Finally, *futurity* reflects the extent to which a teacher is able to step outside of traditional roles to advocate for appropriate programming and practices for ELL

students (Herrera & Murry, 1999). Competence in futurity may involve pre-assessing ELL student/family needs through home visits, collaborating with other teachers to modify curricula, or arguing for program changes before a school board.

Because of their capacity to structure programs that emphasize reflective thinking, cross-culturally sensitive perspectives, articulation, argumentation, case building, persuasion strategies, and defensibility, institutions of higher education are in a formidable position to better prepare teachers for linguistic diversity in the classroom.

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