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Educating Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Students in Correctional Settings

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Abstract

Linguistically and culturally diverse students are the fastest-growing proportion of the school-age population in the U.S. and worldwide. Research on school effectiveness for these students provides many insights for correctional educators. For immigrants, societal pressures towards assimilation and loss of primary language can have devastating consequences. The circumstances from which immigrants may have escaped, such as war, poverty, or political oppression add to the complexity of their lives. In correctional education, multiple challenges for designing appropriate and effective coursework include consideration of students' emotional and sociocultural needs, the type of linguistic and academic support needed, and ways to stimulate cognitive development. When resources are available, teaching academic subjects, technical skills, microcomputer use, vocational knowledge, and other important life skills through students' primary language as well as second language is crucial to students' chances for productive lives upon release and for avoiding re-incarceration.

> Barefoot, the dirt path soothes my tired feet. Rain suddenly falls. I pluck a banana leaf to protect my belongings strapped on my back.

Who am I? What's happening? How do I feel? Hungry? Anxious? Happy? Fulfilled? An open-ended vignette, read or shared orally, touching memories, can trigger students' powerful life knowledge, and offer potential connections to further learning and development. Students in prison are cognitively mature. Although they may not have had the opportunities for continuous formal schooling, they have grown and matured through their many-sometimes difficult-life experiences. Rich oral and written language development occurs naturally when students can connect to what they already know. Talking, reading, and writing about life experiences-good and bad-leads to personal growth, as well as deeper cognitive, academic, and linguistic development.

Linguistically and culturally diverse students in correctional education present a special challenge to teachers. Connecting to their life stories is a key to assisting them with their life journey. These students may come from diverse countries where they have experienced war or poverty or rural settings where school is not available. They may be second or third generation immigrants whose families have remained in poverty in the host country. Or perhaps they are not immigrants at all but come from a bilingual/bicultural community with ancient ethnolinguistic roots. Whatever their circumstances, they are all proud peoples who may at some time have been denied their identity, their right to chart their own life journey with dignity and respect. Whatever the story that has led to each student's serving time in prison or detention, they deserve the privilege of education. Education that is meaningful, that connects to their life stories, that leads students to new levels of awareness of who they are and who they want to become, can open the door to a new life beyond the prison doors.

New Mindsets for Educators

But in the 21st century, a new life does not mean assimilation into the dominant society, losing one's heritage. On the contrary, it requires a new mindset on the part of educators to recognize and make use of the students' linguistic and cultural knowledge to bridge to new knowledge. The primary languages of new immigrants to a host country are a tremendous resource in the global economy, not to be lost but to be built upon. Students with deep ethnolinguistic roots have the potential to be bilingual/bicultural resources for their communities as they gain knowledge and understanding of the broader world. Often linguistically and culturally diverse (LCD) students have not been well served by their schools and they see few opportunities for themselves. Correctional education can serve the important function of providing the meaningful education that schools did not provide. To explore this further, let us examine research on education for LCD students in the United States in K-12 public education.

Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Students in the U.S.

Currently in the U.S., the educational needs of LCD students are not being met to an egregious degree. Many of these students leave school in frustration during the middle and high school years; for example, 46 percent of foreign-born Hispanic students drop out of school (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Towards the end of high school, LCD students who are fortunate enough to reach the 11th grade, perform as a group at the 10th to 12th percentile on standardized, norm-referenced tests in reading across the curriculum in English (Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2001). Our national longitudinal research with 24 school districts in 15 states over the past 16 years has focused on the academic achievement of these students, across time, examining student background variables and school programs' influence on their school success. What we have found is similar to the findings of many other

researchers, but different from general public opinion presented in the U.S. media on these issues. Our and other researchers' findings have very important implications for correctional educators, because in the U.S. and many other countries, LCD students represent the fastest-growing segment of the population. The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that LCD students will be 40 percent of the U.S. school-age population by the 2030s. To under-prepare this large and growing LCD population for the workplace of the 21st century is a recipe for disaster. Why not learn our lessons now about what works best with these students and in all education settings change our ways?

U.S. Immigrants' History of Assimilation and Language Loss

During most of the 20th century, U.S. school practices focused on assimilating LCD students as rapidly as possible. Stories abound of "Uncle George's" success as an immigrant with no special support . Often forgotten in these stories is the reality that 80 percent of all U.S. students in the first half of the 20th century did not even complete high school, since formal schooling was not required for success in the workplace (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Today 88 percent of all U.S. students receive a high school diploma-an essential requirement for most jobs (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Twenty-first century LCD students face much greater competition for jobs and success than "Uncle George" did.

Furthermore, in the early 1900s English was not as commonly required in the workplace. Immigrant groups tended to settle in similar linguistic communities, with the first generation mostly using their primary language at work and home, the second generation becoming bilingual in primary language and English, and the third generation beginning to lose primary language as they switched to mostly use of English. By the end of the 20th century, however, loss of primary language is occurring even more rapidly with the shift to English in the second generation (Grosjean, 1982; Veltman, 1988). This pattern is very costly to children, families, and society as a whole. The breakdown in family communication results in the loss of normal socialization processes:

> When parents are unable to talk to their children, they cannot easily convey to them their values, beliefs, understandings, or wisdom about how to cope with their experiences. They cannot teach them about the meaning of work, or about personal responsibility, or what it means to be a moral or ethical person in a world with too many choices and too few guideposts to follow (Wong Fillmore, 1991, p. 343).

Wong Fillmore's national study interviewing over 1,000 immigrant families found devastating consequences from the assimilative pressure placed on children to lose their first language. Inability to communicate with parents, and to absorb their cultural, moral, and ethical values, can lead to eventual truancy, gang membership, and increased rates of incarceration.

Other dangers are present for the student experiencing rapid first language loss. Extensive research on language and cognition demonstrates the crucial role that first language plays in cognitive development. When children continue to develop and use their first language throughout young adulthood, cognitive development takes place nonstop (with or without schooling). Children who have lost their first language too soon (before age 12) typically do less well on cognitive measures and school tests than the norm group for their age. On the other hand, bilingual students who have continued strong development of their first language as they acquire their second language can outperform monolinguals on psychological measures of cognition as well as academic tests. Proficient bilinguals are especially gifted in measures of creativity, problem solving, and divergent thinking (see, for example, reviews of this research in Baker & Prys Jones, 1998; Bialystok, 1991; Cummins, 2000). Students who have lost their first language in early childhood or during the elementary school years experience less success in school-this phenomenon, found in sociolinguistics research worldwide, is referred to as subtractive bilingualism (Lambert, 1975). To overcome low academic achievement, subtractive bilinguals especially need intensive academic work in their first language as they continue to learn their second language.

Emotional and Sociocultural Needs

Correctional educators, then, have multiple challenges to consider when designing appropriate and effective coursework for LCD students. The first challenge is to provide the sociocultural support needed to reach students' emotional needs. In the U.S., Spanish speakers are the largest second language group, at 75 percent of the LCD school-age population. New immigrants-both undocumented and legal refugees-may have come seeking refuge from war or from severe economic conditions or from political oppression. These students may have experienced interrupted schooling in their home countries, such as fewer school hours per day because of overcrowded schools, or limited accessibility to formal schooling in remote or rural regions, or missed years of schooling because of war or political instability. Those who are fleeing war may have been through devastating personal experiences, such as family members murdered or lost, emotionally scarring brutality and violence, years spent in crowded refugee camps, or other possible horrors. Students escaping war often exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as depression, withdrawal, hyperactivity, aggression, and intense anxiety in response to situations that recall traumatic events in their lives (Coelho, 1994). Students may have experienced continuing trauma in the host country if living in poverty, including pressure to join gangs or conduct illegal business in desperation to put food on their family's table. When bilingual/bicultural staff and tutors are available for the largest language groups, counseling and support services, provided in the students' strongest language, are an important first step toward addressing their emotional needs.

Often younger immigrants to the U.S. do not come of their own will. They may be encouraged to flee being drafted into the military in their home countries, or they may be sent unaccompanied by parents to escape

escalating violence, or they may join family members in the U.S. who are strangers to them as they attempt to lead new lives. They are often frightened, angry, bitter, but may have been hopeful and energized in their new country. After serving their time in prison or detention, these younger immigrants can become hopeful again. Bilingual counselors can provide important emotional support as students attempt to sort out their lives.

Linguistic and Academic Support

Another important step for correctional educators to take is to provide effective linguistic and academic support that best meets LCD students' needs. The longitudinal research on school effectiveness for LCD students provides many insights. We have now collected over 2 million student records from 1982 to the present in 24 school districts in 15 U.S. states, following all LCD students in each school district for every year of their attendance in cohorts of similar student background (e.g. socioeconomic status, primary language and second language proficiency upon entry, amount of prior schooling) by each school program in which the students are placed. We then follow these students for as many years as they remain in that school district, including in the mainstream, to examine their long-term academic achievement as measured by all the tests given by the school system at each grade level in math, science, social studies, reading, and writing. We especially focus on those students who enter the school district with no proficiency in English, to examine how long it takes them to reach grade-level achievement in English across the curriculum.

What we, as well as many other researchers, have found is that being schooled in one's second language is not a quick and easy process. Furthermore, all of the longitudinal studies examining this process have concluded that only enrichment schooling through students' two languages provides the conditions needed for students to eventually reach grade-level performance in second language in 4-7 years (e.g. Cummins, 1981; Genesee, 1987; Krashen & Biber, 1988; Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Ramirez, 1992; Swain & Lapkin, 1982; Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2001). Furthermore, students receiving their schooling only through their second language (the large majority) never make it to the 50th percentile on standardized, norm-referenced tests unless they have been lucky enough to receive at least 5-6 years of grade-level schooling in their home country before they emigrated to the host country. How could this be? Why does it take so long to reach parity with native-English speakers in U.S. schools? Politicians and voters who approved English-only Propositions 227 in California and 203 in Arizona apparently think that it is easy to become fluent in school English in 1-2 years. But linguistics and education research clearly shows that this is an absurd idea.

It takes so many years because for the U.S. school-age student, English development is only one of many processes that must occur. With every year of school, all students go through intense academic, cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical development that is measured in school tests based on the typical growth of the norm group (in the U.S., native-English speakers). These tests measure cognitive growth as well as vocabulary and concept knowledge in English and the application of that knowledge across all the subjects taught in school. With each year of school, to stay at the 50th percentile, students must achieve 10 months of gain on the tests given across the curriculum.

LCD students not yet proficient in English are tested on this type of test after they have received schooling in English for 2-3 years. We find that at this point they have reached the 8th -10th percentile as a group (Thomas & Collier, 1997). Then these students must accomplish more than one year's achievement for six years in a row (e.g. 15 months' growth per 10-month school year for 6 consecutive years) to eventually close the 40-percentile gap between them and native-English speakers. Native-English speakers, in the meantime, are not sitting around waiting for these students to catch up with them. They continue to make one year's progress in every subject including English. For LCD students to catch up, they need strategies that accelerate their academic growth, exceeding the rate of typical native-English speakers. Even the strongest, most effective school programs require 5-6 years to close this large a gap.

Accelerated Learning Through Two Languages

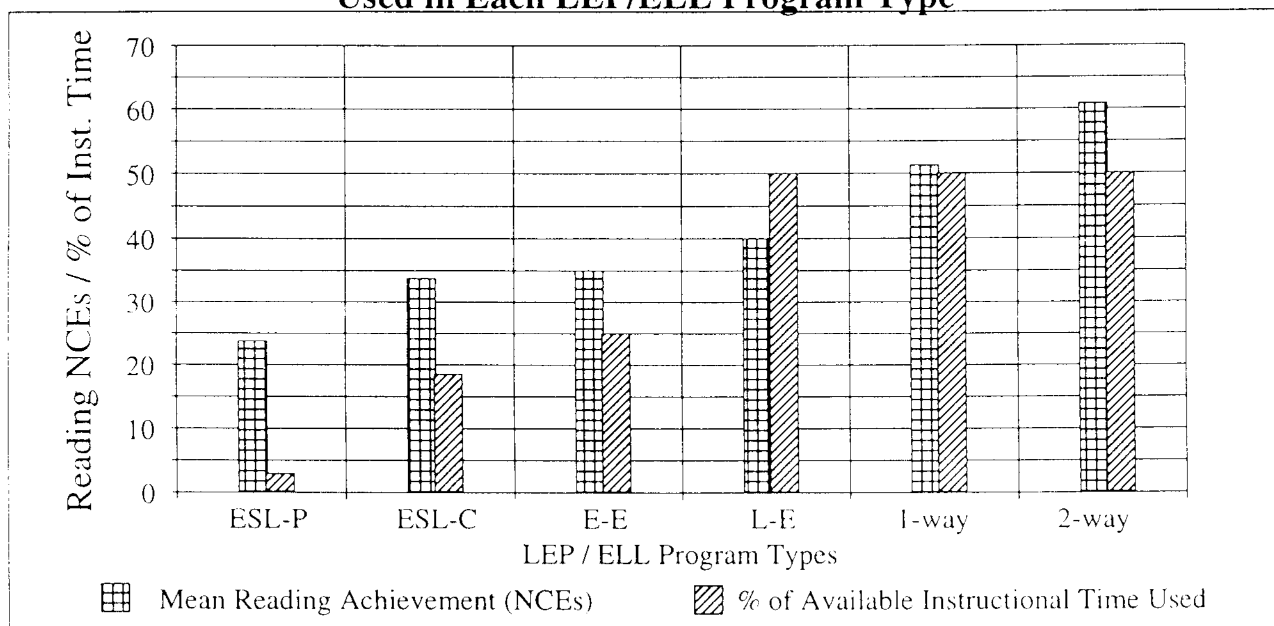
One of the strategies that clearly works is accelerated learning through the students' primary language and English. Few LCD students in the U.S. have received bilingual schooling through an enriched, accelerated program, but these schools are expanding in number throughout the U.S. For example, the Center for Applied Linguistics (2000) has identified 253 two-way bilingual schools in 24 states. One-way refers to one language group being schooled bilingually (through two languages); two-way refers to two language groups-speakers of the majority and the minority languages-being schooled together through their two languages. In Figure 1 on the following page, we present our current research findings from 24 school districts in 15 states on program variations for English Language Learners (learning English as a second language). Only those students attending one-way and two-way enrichment bilingual schools are able to close the gap in academic achievement, reaching the 50th percentile or normal curve equivalent (NCE)1 in their second language after 5-6 years of bilingual schooling (Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2001).

In these enrichment models, teachers use cooperative learning, literacy development across the curriculum, process writing, use of video and microcomputers, learning strategy development, cross-cultural or global perspectives, problem posing, knowledge gathering, reflective thinking, and collaborative decision making, to create an interactive, discovery, hands-on learning classroom (Ovando & Collier, 1998). The two languages are used separately for instruction, to develop high

1 Figure 1 presents each program's achievement outcomes in NCEs - equal interval percentiles - because the use of percentiles would distort program comparisons. The amount of achievement by each percentile changes as the percentile values change. NCEs resolve this problem.

Figure 1

Long Term Student Achievement in Total Reading by Percentage of Available Instructional Time Used in Each LEP/ELL Program Type



Program Codes:

ESL-P = ESL Pullout
ESL-C = ESL Taught Through Content
E-E = Early-Exit Bilingual Education
L-E = Late-Exit (Gradual Exit) Bilingual Education
1-way = One-way Developmental Bilingual Education
2-way = Two-way Developmental Bilingual Education

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proficiency in each language. For example, if social studies and health are taught in Spanish while math and science are taught in English (with language arts lessons in each language), the following year the reverse is done. Many of these teaching strategies can be applied in correctional education when teaching meaningful content that adult students can apply to their lives and future jobs.

English as a Second Language Taught Through Content

As can be seen in Figure 1, the most common program in the U.S. for English language learners, English as a Second Language (ESL) pullout, is the least effective. Students generally receive 1-2 hours of support per day from the ESL teacher for 1-2 years, focused mainly on learning the English language. The rest of the school day they are immersed in the mainstream classroom for their age group. Students initially make good progress in Grades K-2, whatever special program they are attending, but graduates of ESL pullout are not able to sustain the gains (with no cognitive development in first language at school) and those still in school at high school graduation as a group score at the 24th NCE (11th percentile). The largest number of LCD dropouts come from this program model of English-only instruction (Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2001).

A more effective form of ESL is to teach the new language through meaningful content, such as an academic subject, a technical skill, microcomputer use, or vocational knowledge. Students who have attended a quality ESL content program, and received all their schooling in the U.S. in English, are able to close the gap by another 10 NCEs (compared to ESL pullout), graduating at the 34th NCE (22nd percentile). Students who have received formal schooling on grade level in their home country for at least six years can in the host country reach the 50th percentile as a group after 4-6 years of schooling in the second language in which a quality ESL content program is provided. However, older students who have received no formal schooling in their home country, or are significantly below grade level for their age because of interrupted schooling, need schooling in both their first and second languages to have any chance of doing well in school or correctional education.

ESL content is also known as sheltered instruction (the term used in the west coast of the U.S.). Teacher training materials and textbooks are widely available (see Ovando & Collier, 1998, as well as the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education website-www.ncbe.gwu.edu-for many references). However, few textbooks have been developed for younger or older adults who have experienced interrupted schooling. For

correctional educators, the best strategy is to adapt the materials that are available, do hands-on instruction when possible making use of vocational training materials, and use students' life experiences to develop meaningful narratives for literacy acquisition. ESL content is also a very important component of all bilingual programs. Students in correctional education will need to expand their knowledge of their primary language in order to take coursework in that language; this can best be done by teaching language and content together. Thus ESL content techniques are applicable to instruction through any other language, especially when students are regaining their lost language. Teaching language through content is a means of accelerating students' growth, by teaching language and content objectives simultaneously. Language lessons focused only on language can be boring and cognitively less stimulating.

Literacy in Primary Language

For students who have never had the opportunity to attend school and develop basic literacy skills, first language literacy is a crucial base for acquiring second language literacy. The old notion that first language "interferes" with second language learning has not been supported by any research evidence (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Instead, linguists have found that skills acquired through first language are an extremely important knowledge base and foundation for second language development. Researchers have found that more than half of the skills acquired in the process of learning to read are universal skills, regardless of the written language system-such as general strategies, habits and attitudes, knowledge of text structure, rhetorical devices, sensorimotor skills, visual-perceptual training, cognitive functions and many reading readiness skills (Cummins, 1991; Thonis, 1981). For example, once a student has acquired the concept of directionality (script can be right-left, left-right, or vertical top to bottom) in first language, that student knows to look for the pattern of directionality in the second language. Hundreds of studies worldwide have shown that skills developed in first language literacy not only are easily transferred but also are crucial to academic success in the second language (Ovando & Collier, 1998). We have found that LCD students who have developed at least fourth grade literacy in primary language are three years ahead academically of those students who never had the opportunity to learn to read their native language (Thomas & Collier, 1997).

Older preliterate students present a special challenge to teachers. The most meaningful instruction for these students is intensive cognitive and academic development in primary language coupled with primary language counseling to deal with emotional issues. One-to-one literacy instruction for these students is almost essential for the leaps in concept development to occur. Initial oral work in second language can be followed by second language literacy development as soon as a solid literacy base is established in first language.

Conclusion

The U.S. (as well as other countries) has not made it easy for immigrants. Sociologically, we have forced many immigrant groups to lose their heritage languages and cultures as rapidly as possible. There is great sadness among the generations that lost so much as well as great passion to restore the lost knowledge. Together we are in the process of renewing and restoring bilingual/bicultural roots all around the globe; for the world is rapidly becoming one, with instant telecommunications and global travel and marketing. Most peoples of the world are expanding their knowledge of languages and cultures, to connect to others. Most students in correctional institutions will have the opportunity to begin life anew. Let us cultivate the gifts that prisoners who speak another language and have experienced life in multiple cultural contexts possess. Let us help these students expand their knowledge and life skills so that they are prepared for the global marketplace of the 21st century.

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