

III. Successful Schooling for ELLs: Principles for Building Responsive Learning Environments

Guiding Questions

- What are the goals of schooling in general and for ELLs in particular?
- What roles do language and culture play in teaching, in learning, and in the assessment of learning?
- How do we measure the successfulness of schooling for ELLs?
- What factors besides the quality of classroom instruction impact the education of ELLs? How?
- In addition to research-based, age-appropriate literacy instruction, what more do ELLs need in order to develop good literacy skills?
- What is the importance of parental and community involvement in the education of ELLs?

While measurable academic gains in reading and mathematics are certainly central to the notion of successful schooling, we must not conceptualize success too narrowly. The famous educator John Dewey (1916) considered education a tool that would enable the citizen to “integrate culture and vocation effectively and usefully.” Dewey cautioned that assessing the success of such an education is not simple or one-dimensional.

...in dealing with the young...it is easy to ignore...the effect of our acts upon their disposition, or to subordinate that educative effect to some external and tangible result. (p. 7)

Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren’s 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* emphasized that test scores are only benchmarks, not ends in themselves. He asserted that our educational system should prepare students for “public responsibilities, awakening the child to cultural values...and...helping him to adjust normally to his environment.” More recently, Williams (1999) described the scope of the challenge that we face in successfully educating English language learners for the world of tomorrow:

[It is] an awesome challenge for society and educational institutions...to adequately prepare the diverse population of students we are not successfully educating with recognition and respect for their individual human rights...and to enable all students to participate in and contribute to the growth of the nation and the world community in a future that demands cross-cultural interdependence and new social interactions—global human opportunities. (pp. 89-90)

Mindful of these broader definitions of success, this section outlines several major principles of successful ELL education. Successful education for ELLs means that the academic and social development of each student is supported in culturally and linguistically responsive ways. A standardized test score may not fully or accurately represent school success. Other quantitative data, such as reduced dropout rates, improved attendance, continuation on to higher education, and rubric-scored portfolios and performance assessments, also offer direct and indirect evidence of success (Pellegrino, Chudowsky, & Glaser, 2001).

More fundamentally, however, the success of ELLs must be thought of in broader terms than their success at mastering the language, customs, and knowledge of the dominant culture (Miramontes et al., 1997; Halcón, 2001; Hamann, 2001). As Gibson (1997) wrote, “We must measure school success in terms of the ability of students to move successfully between their multiple cultural worlds” (p. 446). In a similar vein, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) argued that it is in the best interest of society and the individual ELL to allow students to acquire new knowledge without ignoring, displacing, deprecating, or diminishing existing linguistic and cultural knowledge. Portes and Rumbaut wrote:

In this new world order where multiple economic, political, and cultural ties bind nations more closely to one another, it is not clear that the rapid extinction of foreign languages is in the interest of individual citizens or of the society as a whole. In an increasingly interdependent global system, the presence of pools of citizens able to communicate fluently in English plus another language and bridge the cultural gaps among nations represents an important collective resource. (p. 273)

As Miramontes et al. (1997) pointed out, a student who becomes bilingual and biliterate is more accomplished than one who masters only one language.

Moreover, García (1998) wrote: “There is some evidence that assimilation may actually inhibit academic success. Studies of Mexican immigrants suggest that those who maintain a strong identification with their native language and culture are more likely to succeed in schools than those who readily adapt to U.S. ways” (p. viii).

Trueba (1999) echoed that sentiment, saying, “If children manage to retain a strong cultural self-identity and maintain a sense of belonging to their sociocultural community, they seem to achieve well in school” (p. 260). Both of these scholars are aware of troubling data that

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suggests second-generation students (i.e., children of immigrants) often do not fare as well in school as the immigrant generation did, despite their greater familiarity with “American” ways (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Maintaining a sense of pride in self aids the acquisition of new competencies and new cultural ways; thus, a definition of ELL success could incorporate maintenance of first language and culture for practical as well as pluralist reasons.

In her book *White Teacher* (1979), Vivian Gussin Paley discussed her realization that shared language and cultural knowledge make it easier to recognize intelligence in young children of one’s own cultural group and language community. Moreover, intelligence, learning, and good behavior are all conceptualized somewhat differently across cultures. Cultural assumptions determine whether a “good” student is expected to be talkative, inquisitive, and independent or, on the other hand, observant, cooperative, and a good listener. The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (2002) has identified the following cross-cultural differences as significant for schooling:

- (1) How children are expected to interact with each other and adults
- (2) How language is used by adults and children
- (3) How knowledge is acquired and displayed
- (4) What counts as knowledge (pp. 51-52)

“The small schools movement isn’t just about getting students from all backgrounds up to par in academic achievement. It’s also about collaboration, holistic human development, paying attention to the social, emotional qualities of development—what they call the ‘soul standards.’ These standards encompass community values. If we develop them, how do we measure them, and how does this factor into graduation?”

--Pedro Pedraza, Hunter College



School practices that disregard these cross-cultural differences or discount ELLs' first language, literacy, cultural identity, or self-esteem are not likely to create effective learning environments. First-language vocabulary, oral language, and literacy skills all support successful English literacy development (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Moll, 1996). At the same time, Delpit (1988) and Bartolomé (1998) caution educators that *not* teaching minority students mainstream ways or academic forms of discourse is doing them a disservice. ELLs' prior knowledge and first-language proficiency provide the foundations for achievement in U.S. schools. Success for ELLs means being able to function well in mainstream academic settings and in their home communities.

Given multiple criteria for ELL success, multiple measures may be needed to evaluate it. It is widely agreed that ELLs' scores on standardized tests of subject knowledge are often not valid (August & Hakuta, 1997; García, 2001; Hurley & Tinajero, 2001; LaCelle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994; Stefanakis, 1998). The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, National Council on Measurement in Education, 1985) state:

Every assessment is an assessment of language...This is even more so given the advent of performance assessments requiring extensive comprehension and production of language. For example, 'mathematical communication,' one of seven subtests,...requires the student to use appropriate mathematical terms, vocabulary, and language based on prior conceptual work. (p. 120)

This seldom-recognized linguistic dimension of (even math) tests often limits the ability of ELLs to fully demonstrate their content knowledge and understandings (García, 2001). Moreover, tests designed for native English speakers may lack the sensitivity to represent initial gains or incremental growth in English language acquisition.

August and Hakuta (1997) found that although ELLs can and should reach the same high standards as other students, they may need more time:

According to the law, the same high performance standards that are established for all students are the ultimate goal for English language learners as well. On average, however, English language learners (especially those with limited prior schooling) may take more time to meet these standards. Therefore additional benchmarks might be developed for assessing the progress of these students toward meeting the standards. Moreover, because English language learners are acquiring English language skills and knowledge already possessed by students who arrive at school already speaking English, additional content and performance standards in English language arts may be appropriate. (p.127)

It is important to understand that the label “ELL” encompasses diverse individuals and groups in a variety of school settings. A Chinese-speaking kindergartener born in a U.S. city has different needs, abilities, and attributes than a 17-year-old from a Central American preparatory school attending high school in a rural U.S. community. Clearly, recommended practices and educational challenges vary according to student characteristics and school/community settings. Despite this diversity, educators and researchers have identified some practices common to most contexts where ELLs experience effective schooling. From these research-based practices we have derived a set of principles for building responsive learning environments that support ELLs. The principles serve as guides for the development of teaching strategies, reform models, programs, and research questions in settings where ELLs are part of the school population.

“When a visitor asks, ‘How does lion dancing, drumming, and arts stuff improve the test scores?’ I want to answer, ‘They’ll be happy, they’ll be engaged, they’ll feel like humans....nah, that’s not what we want for our children!’”

--Deborah Wei, School District of Philadelphia

Principles for Building an ELL-Responsive Learning Environment

1. ELLs are most successful when.....

School leaders, administrators, and educators recognize that educating ELLs is the responsibility of the entire school staff.

- School leadership's support of the education of ELLs can be seen in the explicit inclusion of ELLs in a school's vision, goals, and reform strategies as well as in its promised accountability regarding retention and dropout rates, test exemption rates, and enrollment in special programs.
- ELLs are neither programmatically nor physically isolated; rather they are an integral part of the school and they receive appropriate targeted services such as ESL and/or literacy instruction.
- ESL and bilingual teachers have equitable access to all staff development resources and materials.
- All staff have access to appropriate professional development in educating ELLs.
- Linguistic and cultural needs of ELLs are included in decisions regarding comprehensive school reform. School reform teams include members who are knowledgeable about ELLs.

(Brisk, 1998; Dentler & Hafner, 1997; Grey, 1991; Hamann, Zuliani, & Hudak, 2001; IDRA, 2002; Lucas, 1997; Miramontes et al., 1997; Olsen et al., 1994; Stringfield et al., 1998)

Principles for Building an ELL-Responsive Learning Environment

2. ELLs are most successful when.....

Educators recognize the heterogeneity of the student population that is collectively labeled as “ELL” and are able to vary their responses to the needs of different learners.

ELLs differ greatly in terms of:

- Language background
- Place of origin
- Rural or urban background
- Previous school experience
- Home language literacy skills
- Proficiency in conversational English
- Proficiency in academic and written English
- Age
- Age on arrival
- Family circumstances and responsibilities
- Living situation
- History of mobility
- Employment and work schedule
- Immigration or refugee experience
- Trauma and resiliency
- Family legal status
- Family educational history
- Family social organization
- Birth order in the family
- Size and resources of the local ethnic enclave
- Identification with local ethnic enclave
- Religious beliefs and practices
- Continued contact with place of origin and language
- Gender roles and assumptions
- Aspirations and expectations
- Interests, talents, skills
- Funds of knowledge and community support

(Lucas, 1997; Tabors, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 1990; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995, 2002; Miramontes et al., 1997; Olsen, 1997; Yedlin, 2003)

Principles for Building an ELL-Responsive Learning Environment

3. ELLs are most successful when.....

The school climate and general practice reinforce the principle that students' languages and cultures are resources for further learning.

- Hallway conversations, displays of student work, and school activities are multicultural and multilingual.
- Adults from students' heritage communities play important roles in the life of the school.
- Teachers integrate students' first language and literacy and other "funds of knowledge," including their individual areas of interest and curiosity, into the learning process, helping them make connections between their prior and new knowledge.

(Au, 1980; Brisk & Harrington, 2000; Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000; Escamilla & Coady, in preparation; González, et al., 1995; Hammond, 1997; Miramontes, et al., 1997; Moll et al., 1992; Ruíz, 1984; Roseberry, Warren, & Conant, 1992; Um, 2003)

"A key resource is people. Doing a resource assessment, as opposed to a needs assessment, could be a first step. Identify people who have knowledge, sensitivity, interest in working with ELLs and in building on these levels. Consider the human resources—teachers are the main resources."

--Tamara Lucas, Montclair State University

Principles for Building an ELL-Responsive Learning Environment

4. ELLs are most successful when.....

There are strong and seamless links connecting home, school, and community.

- Educators foster family participation in ways that truly value parents' knowledge and priorities.
- Educators communicate regularly with families, exchanging information and points of view through newsletters, calls, interpreters, and presentations at ethnic, community-based organizations and houses of worship. Meetings are conducted multilingually.
- The school staff includes adults from students' heritage communities and speakers of their languages.
- Educators recognize the importance of family participation in education and, through family and community activities, reinforce connections among students' home, school, and the broader community in which the school operates.
- Educators understand that across different cultures and settings the roles of parents in their children's education vary. In some cultures parents' responsibilities center around the provision of necessities, protection, discipline, and moral guidance in the home and community. They may view schooling as the responsibility solely of professional educators.
- Educators have some familiarity with and show interest in learning about the cultures, languages, places of origin, demographic patterns, reasons for immigration or migration, naming patterns, and interactional styles of the communities they serve.

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Principles for Building an ELL-Responsive Learning Environment

- Educators make explicit to ELLs' parents the new opportunities and expectations that exist for parental involvement.
- Educators are aware of potential linguistic, cultural, economic, and logistical obstacles to the participation of ELL families in school-based programs and events.
- Educators try to address obstacles energetically, creatively, and in culturally sensitive ways. They provide ethnic community liaisons, interpreters, child care, and transportation.
- Educators understand that in some families the provision of necessities, protection, and moral guidance consumes all of the parents' time and resources.
- Educators do not disparage parents whose support of their children may not be evident because of its lack of alignment with local expectations.

(Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001; Delgado-Gaitán, 1990; Epstein, 2001; Epstein, et al., 2002; Heath, 1983; Henderson, 1987; Miramontes et al., 1997; Moore, 1992; Siu, 1995; Valdés, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999; Villenas, 2001)

Principles for Building an ELL-Responsive Learning Environment

5. ELLs are most successful when.....

ELLs have equitable access to all school resources and programs.

- ELLs have access to all programs and levels of instruction, including special education, gifted and talented education, or high-level courses such as calculus.
- Curricula, teaching strategies, grouping strategies, and other reforms are implemented in ways that increase their accessibility, comprehensibility, and meaning to ELLs.
- ELLs have access to prerequisites for acceptance into higher education.
- ELLs have access to all enrichment and extracurricular activities.
- ELLs have equal treatment from guidance counselors and equitable access to the full range of services they provide, such as planning for postsecondary education.

(Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University, 2000; Olsen & Jaramillo 1999)

Principles for Building an ELL-Responsive Learning Environment

6. ELLs are most successful when.....

Teachers have high expectations for ELLs.

- Particularly for ELLs with previous school experience, this principle means educators need a clear sense of what students have already mastered in a different language or in a different country.
- The need to adapt curriculum to match achieved language proficiency cannot be an excuse for denying ELLs access to challenging academic content.

(García, 1997; Stoops-Verplaetse, 1998; Valdés, 2001)

“I don’t think people really understand how critical that is [being taught in their native language]—that when you miss an opportunity for a child, and you’re not conscious of what you’re doing, the consequences stay with that child forever.”

--Anthony Colon, National Council of La Raza

Principles for Building an ELL-Responsive Learning Environment

7. ELLs are most successful when.....

Teachers are properly prepared and willing to teach ELLs.

- Teachers should have high-quality professional development experiences in topics pertinent to working with ELLs, including:
 - First and second language acquisition
 - Reading and writing in a second language
 - Methods for teaching content subjects to ELLs
 - Alternative assessment
 - Sociocultural issues in education
- Staff development is long term and job embedded.
- Teachers can differentiate among developmental issues in language acquisition, gaps in prior schooling, and learning disabilities.
- Teachers are culturally responsive, building on students' linguistic and cultural knowledge both for purposes of scaffolding new knowledge onto students' existing knowledge and earning learners' assent.
- Teachers foster meaningful relationships with students.
- Teachers understand and incorporate standards for ELLs.

(Cummins, 2001; Erickson, 1987; García, 2001; Gay, 2001; González et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Miramontes et al., 1997; Moll et al., 1992; Nieto, 1999; TESOL, n.d.; Wong Fillmore & Snow, 1999; Yedlin, 2003)

Principles for Building an ELL-Responsive Learning Environment

8. ELLs are most successful when.....

Language and literacy are infused throughout the educational process, including curriculum and instruction.

- Teachers explicitly teach and model the academic skills and the thinking, learning, reading, writing, and studying strategies that ELLs need to know in order to function effectively in academic environments.
- Teachers act as “educational linguists” and pay attention to uses and functions of language in their own classrooms and disciplines.
- Students are taught which styles of speaking, writing, reading, and participating apply in a given setting, genre, or subject area, including text books and story books, friendly letters and essays, personal narratives, and persuasive essays.
- Children are enabled to make overt comparisons of linguistic meanings and uses in one environment versus another, such as the playground and the reading group, or in English and their home languages.
- ELL students have opportunities to hear comprehensible language and to read comprehensible texts. Texts are reader friendly and make links to students’ prior knowledge and experiences.
- Teachers employ a variety of strategies to help students understand challenging language, texts, and concepts. These may include linguistic simplification, demonstrations, hands-on activities, mime and gestures, native language support, use of graphic organizers, and learning logs.
- Students have opportunities to interact with teachers, classmates (both ELL and English proficient), and with age-appropriate subject matter through instructional conversation, cooperative group work, jigsaw reading, writing conferences, peer and cross-age tutoring, and college “buddies.”

(Brumfit, 1997; Cummins, 2000; Kohl 2002; Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Yedlin, 2003)


Principles for Building an ELL-Responsive Learning Environment

9. *ELLs are most successful when.....*

Assessment is authentic, credible to learners and instructors, and takes into account first- and second-language literacy development.

- Multiple forms of assessment measure not only students' academic achievement but also their progress, effort, engagement, perseverance, motivation, and attitudes in the school and classroom setting.
- Because first-language development positively impacts English language literacy (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), tests assess literacy in the first language along with students' English language proficiency and content area knowledge.
- Assessment is used frequently and formatively, with results allowing the instructor—perhaps in direct consultation with the learner—to refine subsequent teaching strategies.
- Teachers include first-language competence in assessment of an ELL's overall academic accomplishment.

(Ascher, 1990; Escamilla & Coady, 2001; García, 2001; Hurley & Tinajero, 2001; National Research Council, 2000; O'Malley & Pierce, 1996; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Stefanakis, 1998; Yedlin, 2003)



The principles presented in this chapter are based upon practices identified in ELL-responsive learning environments. We suggest that you keep these principles and practices in mind as you read the review of research on school reform and ELLs in the next chapter (Chapter IV). You will find examples of their presence as well as of their absence. To help you design or strengthen your own reform program so that it is more responsive to ELLs, we have included Tools for ELL-Responsive Comprehensive School Reform (Chapter V), Resources (VI) and References (VII).

