

## CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND LITERACY:

### Teaching a diverse student population

Janice Crawford

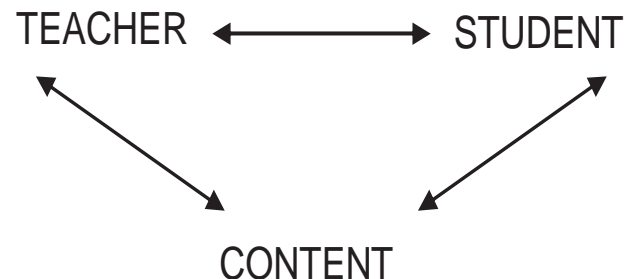
The Ball Foundation believes that the development of high levels of literacy, especially for culturally and linguistically diverse students, is not simply dependent on the mastery of technical literacy knowledge and skills. Since the publication of "A Nation at Risk" in 1983, the American education system has devoted massive amounts of time and money to the technical components of helping all students become proficient readers, writers, and speakers. Yet no school system in the nation has achieved these goals for all students even though the technical skills of its staff are more highly developed than ever before.

Thus, technical knowledge and skills are necessary but not sufficient for culturally and linguistically diverse students to meet these literacy goals. The foundation staff believes, and research supports, the premise that the process of becoming literate is also highly contextual and dependent on trusting

relationships between culturally and linguistically diverse students and their teachers.

The traditional model of teaching is a linear one: Teacher–Content–Student. Teachers interact with the content to help students interact with the content. However, many researchers have consistently found that the relationship between the teacher and the student is particularly critical to the academic success of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Therefore, the instructional model for these students needs to be:



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## CULTURAL COMPETENCE... (Continued from page 1)

The teacher must mediate the relationship with the student and the content before the student can successfully master the content. This non-traditional instructional model is particularly significant for the teaching and learning of literacy since it is highly contextual and relational. The foundation believes that cognitive-based strategies will only result in higher levels of literacy achievement for the majority of culturally and linguistically diverse students when these strategies are integrated with knowledge and practices that build on the experiences and meanings that students bring with them into the school setting.

### Goals: Cultural Competence/Literacy

The goals of the foundation's cultural competence in literacy strategy are as follows:

- To enable principals and teachers to identify and master effective literacy strategies and adapt them to meet the needs of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse
- To enable principals and teachers to develop an appropriate level of cultural competence for them to integrate the context of the learner and the academic content to ensure that all children achieve high levels of knowledge and skills
- To enable principals and teachers to develop an appropriate level of cultural competence to create productive student-teacher relationships and supportive academic environments which result in all students reaching high expectations

- To develop an appropriate level of cultural competence within district and school staff to ensure that policies, practices, and processes at all levels system wide promote educational excellence and equity for all students

### Operational Definition of Literacy

Literacy is not only a multifaceted act of reading, speaking, writing, and thinking but also the act of constructing meaning from print in the way that equips one to function as a participant and worker in a particular culture. Literacy is the ability to think and reason according to the norms of a particular society. (Adapted for the Diversity Kit, Brown University)

### Guiding Principles: Cultural Competence/Literacy

**1. Reading and writing are related to oral language development.** Successful reading in any language depends on seeing print, hearing speech, and associating these with stored experiences (i.e. making meaning). Language development, therefore, is essential for proficient reading. Culturally and

#### The Ball Foundation

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linguistically diverse children often enter school unfamiliar with pre-reading skills and also with the habits, norms, behaviors, expectations, and experiences of American middle class society. Non-middle class children experience difficulty in certain school literacy events (reading/writing) that draw on areas of knowledge that are not part of their early interactions with literacy materials.

**Implication:** Schools must explicitly teach, create experiences, and provide opportunities for culturally and linguistically diverse children to expand their oral language vocabulary, including becoming familiar with the activities, beliefs, and concepts that words critical for success in school and mainstream American represent. The development of high levels of oral language skills for culturally and linguistically diverse students is essential to their being able to become proficient readers and writers.

**2. Cultural norms are encoded into language.** Children acquire a worldview as they acquire a language. Language structures are socially organized and carry information about the social order. They are culturally organized and as such are expressive of local conceptions and theories about the world. (Elinor Ochs)

**Implication:** Every interaction, sound, touch, odor, and experience has a cultural component that is absorbed even when it is not directly taught. The meanings of all of these things are embedded in the language children learn. If children learn language forms that do not include the meanings of those interactions and experiences needed to succeed in school, then both the language and its cultural meanings must be explicitly taught to them. Students who are culturally

and linguistically diverse often do not understand what their teachers' words and actions mean, and they spend much of their class time trying to decode what the teacher is saying and doing and make sense of her words and actions so that they can respond appropriately. While they are doing this, they miss much of the content knowledge the teacher is trying to present.

**3. Cognitive skills** (those mental processes through which information is stored, retrieved, and processed to make sense of daily life) **are the outcome of using language for particular purposes associated with different activities.** It is these differences that lead to the development of different cognitive skills. Children develop social and cognitive skills through participating in structured cooperative interactions with more mature members of society [such as parents and teachers.] (Lev Vgotsky) Thus children are engaged in activities that lead to the development of those cognitive skills required for survival and participation in their particular culture.

**Implication:** Success in school requires the development of certain cognitive skills such as sorting and retrieving information, organizing space, summarizing data, and considering two sources of information. However, cognitive skills and patterns of thinking are not primarily determined by innate factors; they are the products of activities children practice with the adults in their world. If adults have not guided children through activities that lead to the development of these kinds of skills prior to coming to school, schools may need to explicitly teach them to students from non-middle class backgrounds.

**4. For students who are culturally and linguistically diverse, connections must be made from one situational context to another for them to understand how to apply learnings from one situation to a totally different situation.** (Barbara Rogoff)

Students are not personally engaged in literacy activities when they are unable to make a connection between the text and their own lives. In these cases, students do not develop into mature readers. (Braunger and Lewis)

**Implication:** Students do not automatically make connections across differing contexts. Their ability to generalize from one cultural context to another must be explicitly taught. Successful teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse students understand the culture of their students well enough to be able to draw upon students' prior experiences and make connections to classroom literacy activities and events. Students do not usually make these connections without the assistance of the teacher. (Lisa Delpit)

**5. Affective constructions** (processes related to feelings) **vs. cognitive constructions** (processes related to the intellect) **may be particularly salient to the language-(dialect) acquiring child.** (Ochs) When children are acquiring a new language or dialect form, the part of the brain that controls feelings can prevent the part of the brain that controls skills and information from functioning properly. This affective filter operates when students are not motivated, do not identify with the speakers of the second language, or are over-anxious about their performance. This causes a physiological block that will prevent information from reaching those parts of the brain responsible for language acquisition.

**Implication:** Schools must recognize that cultivating trustful relationships and creating supportive environments are as critical as intellectual information and skills if culturally and linguistically diverse students are to become proficient readers, writers, and speakers of Standard English. The development of an integrated instructional literacy approach that combines research-based literacy strategies with knowledge and strategies about cultural competence is the next phase of the foundation's work. ■

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## **PARTNERSHIP TRANSITIONS**

*Anne-Marie Bracken*

### **Cindy Baugher**

From 2001 until recently, Cindy Baugher served as the Ball Partnership Coordinator in Springfield Public School District 186 and was responsible for school and district level partnership activities. Among her many duties, she functioned as a facilitator, trainer and coach of school teams, district teams and principals. She also served as a liaison between The Ball Foundation's Education Initiatives (EI) team and the SP186 district.

Starting in July of this year, Ms. Baugher will serve as the principal for Wilcox Elementary School. Her long-term relationship with faculty and staff will prove to be extremely valuable as she provides leadership for Wilcox. Fortunately EI will not be saying "Farewell." The team will still have the opportunity of maintaining an active relationship with Ms. Baugher as the foundation's partnership with Springfield continues.

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Ms. Baugher taught 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades in Springfield for 13 years, has been in education for 18 years, and has been a union leader. She received her post master's certificate from the University of Illinois at Springfield, which included her superintendent's endorsement, in August of 2004. Future plans include completing her doctoral degree in organizational dynamics.

### **Carla Colmenarez**

The Ball Foundation is thrilled to welcome Carla Colmenarez to the Education Initiatives (EI) team. She will be functioning as the Ball Partnership Liaison with the Chula Vista Elementary School District (CVESD) partnership. Part of her duties will be to facilitate and support (with EI staff and external strategy providers) the development and ongoing work of EI's communities of practice, continuous improvement, cultural competency, evaluation and partnering strategies.

Ms. Colmenarez taught both 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades at Harborside Accelerated School. She cites her most important accomplishments as a teacher as being the relationship she estab-

lished with her students. Many of those students were challenged by their social circumstances, and Ms. Colmenarez provided some constancy and nurturing their lives. As a bilingual teacher, she helped many English Language Learner (ELL) students adjust to a new way of life as they entered the CVESD school system.

Ms. Colmenarez received her BA in International Relations at UC Davis and her credentialing from CSU / Dominguez Hills in Carson and Cal State in San Diego.

Motivating passions for Ms. Colmenarez include learning about different cultures, languages and change in developing communities. Her goals and dreams in her current work are to be a part of and learn from change, serve as an active facilitator and participant in communities of practice in which teaching practitioners share knowledge, learn from each other and ultimately develop capacity in students. "My experience with The Ball Foundation has changed my life starting with the first Partnership Learning Network meeting I attended," she stated. ■

## DESIGNING AN EVALUATION:

### What differences are the partnerships making?

Rex Babiera

The mission of the Ball Foundation is to release the power within educators to improve student achievement and create highly productive schools. To achieve this mission, the foundation accelerates the building of sustainable organizational capacity in its school and district partners by delivering professional development, coaching, consulting, and engaging in organizational learning. We believe that building sustainable organizational capacity can transform schools and districts into learning organizations that will make positive changes in literacy instruction so that all students achieve at high levels.

What difference are the Ball Foundation's partnerships making in aiding system transformation to promote literacy? Foundation staff members have been developing an evaluation design to answer this very question for the foundation and its partners. Before we can look for evidence of building sustainable organizational capacity and progress toward transforming schools and districts into learning organizations, we had to describe how we believe foundation activities explicitly connect to desired outcomes.

By creating models that make these connections explicit, the foundation developed a working hypothesis about systems change (see figure A). In a partnership, Ball Foundation strategies interconnect with the core competencies of a school district to build sustainable organizational capacity. This capacity leads to a system becoming a highly productive learning organization.

We found that we could categorize all the specific outcomes of foundation activities as either organizational capacity or organizational learning outcomes.

#### Organizational Capacity Outcomes

The Harvard Change Model (culture, competencies, and conditions) provided an additional filter for the organizational capacity outcomes. The evaluation design will answer the following questions about organizational capacity:

- To what extent and in what ways has the school system undergone a change in culture (i.e. beliefs and values)?
- To what extent and in what ways has the school system undergone a change in competencies (i.e. knowledge and skills)?
- To what extent and in what ways has the school system undergone a change in conditions (i.e. relationships, policies and processes)?

#### Organizational Learning Outcomes

In order to design an evaluation for the foundation's organizational learning outcomes, we first had to be clear about what a learning organization is. Borrowing from Professor David Garvin of the Harvard Business School, we define a highly productive learning organization as a school or system of schools skilled at creating, acquiring, interpreting, retaining and transferring knowledge to achieve desired outcomes. A learning organization uses its vision to purposefully

adapt its behavior based on new knowledge and insights in service to consistently performing at high levels. The evaluation design will answer the following questions about organizational learning:

- To what extent and in what ways does the school system acquire, interpret and create knowledge?
- To what extent and in what ways does the school system share knowledge?

- To what extent and in what ways does the school system use knowledge to achieve its desired results?

The foundation is now ready to pilot evaluation instruments at selected schools in our partner districts that will begin to enable us to answer the above questions. Pilot testing will take place this May and June in Springfield and Chula Vista. ■

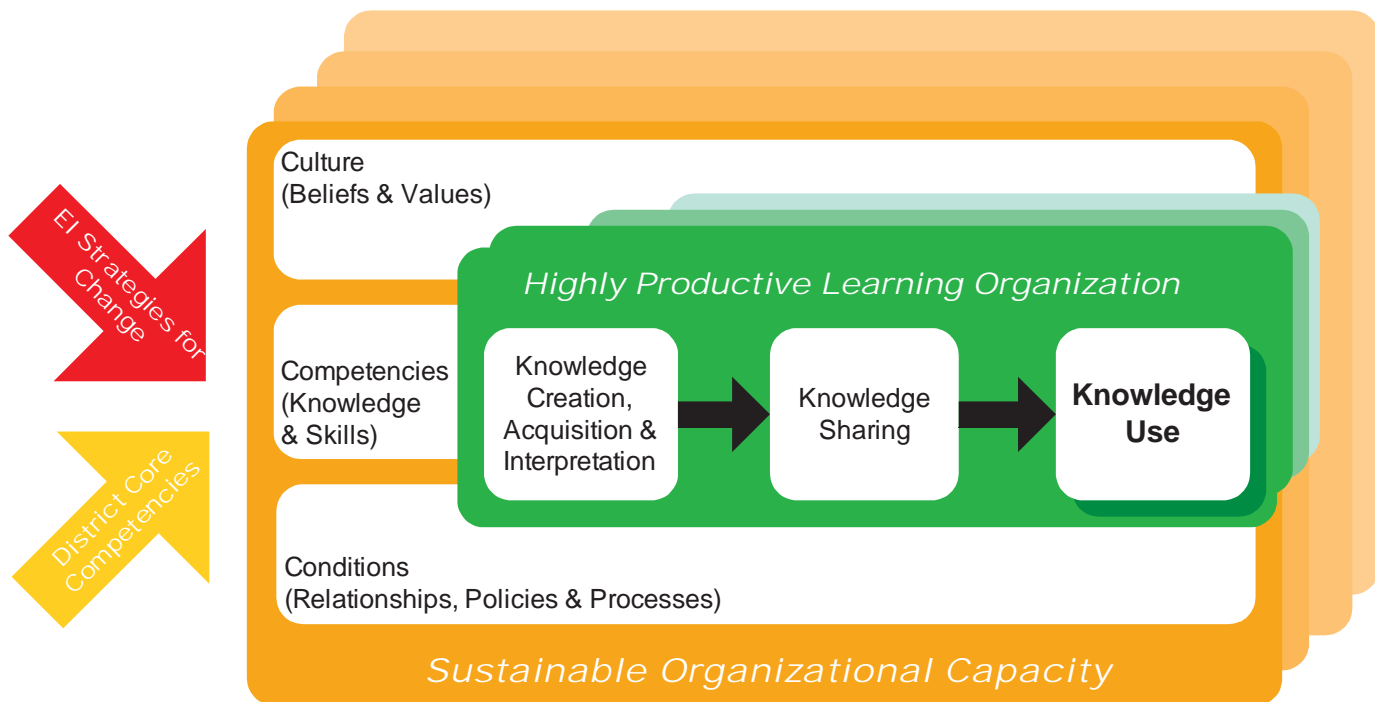


Figure A: A Working Hypothesis About System Change

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## CULTURAL COMPETENCE SELF-ASSESSMENT

Rate your school's/system's level of cultural competence using the statements below. Place a **3** beside the statement if it **Always** applies; a **2** if the statement **Sometimes** applies; and a **1** if the statement **Rarely or Never** applies to the school/system.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Continuous feedback mechanisms are in place to ensure that formal policies and formal / informal practices ensure educational excellence and equity for all students.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Families know and share academic and behavioral expectations, and each school effectively engages, all parents in support of their children's success in school.
- \_\_\_\_\_ High expectations are held for all children; specific supports are in place; and their effectiveness is monitored to ensure that every child reaches them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Professional development is designed to intentionally increase teachers' capacity to build on the knowledge and experiences that all children possess, to connect academic content to familiar contexts.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Formal and informal assessments demonstrate that all students are mastering high level content, regardless of racial / ethnic, language / dialect, or socio-economic differences.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Total**

(The higher the total score, the higher your school's / system's demonstrated level of cultural competence.)