

Understanding English Language Learners' Needs and the Language Acquisition Process:

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Two Teacher Educators' Perspectives

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ON POINT SERIES

Understanding English Language Learners' Needs and the Language Acquisition Process:

Two Teacher Educators' Perspectives

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Ahmad is a three-year old boy from Afghanistan. His family left the Afghan capital, Kabul, during the Taliban regime and came to the U.S.A. Ahmad entered an Englishspeaking classroom at the age of five with Afghan Persian (Dari) as his first language and since then he hasn't been a successful English language learner. At this point, Ahmad's parents cannot be much of help to their son because they also are still striving to understand the English spoken around them.

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WHAT IS THIS ONPOINT ABOUT?

This OnPoint tackles the complexity of English language learners' needs from our point of view. We are native Polish-speaking teacher educators who use our own experiences and knowledge as English language learners in methods courses that we teach in teacher education programs in the United States. We both were born and raised in Poland, and share our passion for our native language and culture with our students, who are either already practicing public school teachers or in the process of becoming teachers. We refer to both groups as teachers in this OnPoint. Both groups of teachers are earning their master's degrees to better serve students in multi-lingual classrooms in K-12 settings. In support of these teachers' educational goals, we provide them with opportunities to experience first-hand some of the key components of second language acquisition in focused instructional engagements-what Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm (2003) classified as more natural opportunities to develop an understanding of English language learners' needs. Finally, in our college classrooms, we provide our teachers with opportunities to develop a more formal framework for second language acquisition pedagogy for students in K-12 settings.

WHAT IS THE CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS AND THEIR TEACHERS?

English language learners may have begun their lives speaking any one of 6,500 living languages. Imagine teaching a group of students who grew

up speaking Korean, Somali, Chinese, Russian, Polish, Spanish, and Black English-all in the same class (Pang, 2005). Striking a balance between valuing language diversity and ensuring that each student has access to high quality academic instruction in their native language as well as English is complicated politically, socially, and academically.

English only amendments have been sponsored in several states and, as of 2006, passed in at least three states (Arizona, California, and Massachusetts). Other states, like Colorado, in highly politicized elections, defeated similar amendments, although the margin of victory was slim. Many business leaders, researchers, and members of non-English linguistic communities believe that embracing the rich cultural and linguistic resources of children who speak more than one language enriches the perspectives and understanding of monolingual students (Cochran -Smith, 2006; Kaplan, 1994; Pang, 2005). From this perspective, global citizenship is best cultivated when diverse languages and cultures are part of the lived academic experience.

The political and policy dimensions associated with English language learners represent only some aspects of this complex arena. Teachers and the schools that employ them need systems in place that support students who are second language learners in an English dominant context. When an English dominant school enrolls English language learners who speak a variety of languages, there is little likelihood that the school will have translators available who speak all the languages of their students. Further, like native

English speakers, English language learners who are academically proficient in their first or native language represent differing levels of academic experiences, abilities, and interests in addition to their language proficiency. Some students read above their grade levels; others struggle with daily instruction. Some have highly supportive home environments for language and literacy development; others live without any access to books or literacy rich environments.

The number of English language learners has increased considerably in the US. In the 2003-2004 school year, 5.5 million school-age children were English language learners—an increase of nearly 100 percent from a decade earlier (Leos, 2004). The number of public classroom teachers prepared to teach children like Ahmad, Shizuko, and Carlos remains consistently low. According to the US Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (2003):

Thirty percent of public school teachers instructing LEP (Limited English Proficiency) students have received training for teaching LEP students, and fewer than 3 percent of teachers with LEP students have earned a degree in ESL (English Second Language) or bilingual education.

Similarly, the needs of English language learners are not addressed in a systematic and programmatic manner in core curriculum requirements for teacher education candidates (Dalton, 1998). While the NCLB legislation requires K-12 teachers to be "highly qualified" to teach in the content areas of science, math, social studies, and English language arts, as

well as in physical and vocational education, it does not require teachers to be highly qualified to teach English language learners. Short and Echevarria (2004, December/2005, January) speak to this matter:

Although No Child Left Behind calls for highly qualified teachers in every core academic classroom by 2006, few states require that the teachers of core content areas have any background or training in second-language acquisition, English as a second language (ESL) methods, or cross-cultural communication. (p. 10)

Many English language learners spend most of their academic life with teachers who speak only English and who are not prepared to fully understand their varying needs as English language learners. In order for today's teachers to meet the challenge of educating a richly diverse generation of children, they need to learn a great deal about second language acquisition and effective pedagogy for English language learners through pre-service teacher education programs and in-service professional development opportunities (August & Hakuta, 1997).

TEACHING TEACHERS ABOUT SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION PROCESSES

One way of increasing teachers' knowledge about the process of second language

U.S. Department of Education terminology



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Shizuko is a Japanese teenager who is also a fluent speaker of Chinese and Vietnamese since her parents had traveled extensively to China and Vietnam during her early childhood. Unfortunately, when she arrived in America, her English communication was very limited. Since then, she has improved her spoken English significantly. However, her reading and writing skills in academic English are still very poor. She often seems to be totally lost in the complex language of most of her high school textbooks and she is unable to complete successfully even simple written assignments. Few people have asked her why.

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Because his mother was deported as an illegal immigrant, Carlos lives currently with his grandmother in Florida while his father moves from one place to another in search of manual labor. Carlos had been mainstreamed into English-only speaking classrooms since his arrival, but he has not vet been a successful English: language learner. Carlos is currently a fifth-grader, reads at a third grade level and he is not successful on written tests. He fails to attend school on a regular basis. He misses Cuba, and his family and friends there.

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acquisition is through second language acquisition simulations. In designing such simulations in our teacher education courses, we follow Krashen's (2005) advice to immerse our teachers in first-hand experiences of the second language acquisition process. While Krashen may begin a lesson speaking German to help students experience the emotional and intellectual challenges that English language learners experience in a classroom where teaching and learning is conducted in English, we begin in a similar vein. For instance, we begin one of our methods classes by speaking Polish, our native language, and reading aloud Szymborska's poem, Advertisement (1997, p. 14). Szymborska is a native born Polish poet and the recipient of the 1996 Nobel Prize award in Literature.

Not surprisingly, the most typical responses to our reading aloud of Szymborska's poem in Polish are nervous laughter and confused faces. No one understands what we have just read. In response to the students' discomfort, we reread the poem, this time a little louder, or provide a written version of the poem in the Polish language. After several of these reiterations of the poem in Polish, we ask in English a simple question: "Did it help?" Our college students still continue to laugh and shake their heads not only because they indeed did not understand much of what was read to them, but also in the acknowledgment of the most typical mistake that they as teachers do to English language learners: a failure to realize that mere-rereading of the

text, speaking louder, or even writing words on the board will not increase English language learners' understanding of the content in a new language that is beyond their level of comprehension (Krashen, 1985).

We go on to provide our students with both the Polish and English versions of the poem. and ask them to first read the Polish version of the poem line by line and make intelligent guesses as to the meaning of the words. In doing so, we give our teachers the opportunity to test, in an unfamiliar context, the skills of meaning making, such as context and other cue analyses, reference to prior knowledge and experiences, prediction, and hypothesizing. Such learning encourages a careful study of language features at the sentence and word levels. In addition students hone their skills at risk-taking, posing questions and offering solutions, as well as collaborative learning. At the same time we teach them the vocabulary necessary to understand the poem, using bilingual Polish-English flash cards and a bilingual tape-recorded version of the poem read slowly line-by-line in both Polish and English. Only then do we ask our college students to consult the written English version of the poem for verification of their interpretations. Once the poem's meaning is established with the support of the English text, we proceed to discuss the more abstract meaning of the poem and its further implications for their lives and pedagogy. With this, and similar simulation activities, teachers in the our college classrooms learn an important lesson about the second

language acquisition process-- that we acquire language naturally only when the context becomes meaningful for us as learners. There are many strategies for making linguistic input more comprehensible for English language learners in general education classrooms.

ADDRESSING THE SOCIAL COMPLEXITIES OF TEACHING IN A MULTI-LINGUAL CLASSROOM

Based on the experience with Szymborska's poem in our college classrooms, we draw our students' attention to one of the most common characteristics of English language learners-their silence and lack of participation in the English classroom. This is because they are afraid of being ridiculed and humiliated if they make errors in front of their peers and teachers. Like many other language learners, the teachers in our college classrooms were afraid of making mistakes in interpretation of Szymborska's poem, experiencing a mild version of what Krashen (1985) defined as "a mental block caused by affective factors" (p. 100).

Many English language learners struggle with feelings of inadequacy, fear of failure, low self-esteem and isolation. These feelings are associated with issues such as heavy accents that are mocked or ridiculed, grammatical errors in their oral speech, limited vocabulary, and lack of information about the social morays and behavior patterns in the classroom. A set of

recommendations from the New York State Association of Foreign Language Teachers provides strategies for teachers to use to reduce the affective issues that complicate the process of language acquisition. This set of recommendations was adapted by one of our in-service teachers, Nash (2005), in her Spanish classroom and is cited below:

SMILE WHEN YOU SEE ME Every

day, I smile and greet my students in Spanish as they enter the classroom. This practice has allowed me to better understand my students and recognize when they have a day with low self-esteem. Creating rapport with my students facilitates a meaningful conversation with them; this exchange of ideas can be vital in increasing their self-esteem.

CALL ME BY NAME During the first week of school, my main objective resides in getting to know my students and remember their names. Just by listening to the teacher or their classmates calling their name fosters in a child a positive feeling, a feeling of being alive, and of being important to someone because that someone has actually taken the time to learn, pronounce, and utter their names.

LET ME KNOW THAT YOU MISSED ME WHEN I WAS ABSENT I let my students know that I missed them when they

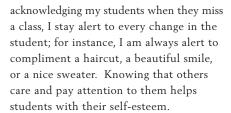
were absent. Many times, during their absences, I call the students by phone, or send a "get well soon" card. In addition to











RECOGNIZE MY OWN SPECIAL TALENTS, EVEN IF THEY DO NOT SHOW UP ON MY REPORT CARD

I believe that every person has something beautiful inside; I look for this beauty in each one of my students, and I make sure they know how special they are. I praise students for having an impressive handwriting, for their creativity, for their good memory, for being good classmates, and for having a positive attitude among other qualities they reveal.

PRAISE ME WHEN I DO SOMETHING

RIGHT All children, especially English language learners need encouragement and praise. We must be honest and sensitive and, every time they convey a valid answer or input, we should share these with the class and give them credit for their views. We must pay specific attention to these students and value their ideas; this will help them increase their confidence.

IF YOU DO NOT LIKE SOMETHING THAT I DO. HELP ME UNDERSTAND THAT YOU STILL LIKE ME AS A PERSON Students need to know that we care about them. Attentiveness.

expectancy, attitude, enthusiasm, and evaluation are characteristics that significantly influence the self-esteem of the student. "All of us need to convey to our students ... every day that 'you are important to me as a person' (Wong & Wong, 2001, p. 65). (Nash, 2005, pp. 6-7).

We encourage our teachers to create opportunities for interactive and recreational reading for their own students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. For example, younger readers can be motivated to read voluntarily with the help of a multi-sensory (see, touch, hear, and learn) early literacy tool such as the Language First Program. The program combines interactive technology "with 36 leveled books to develop oral language skills and essential vocabulary at all levels of English proficiency ... Native language support allows students to hear instructions in their primary language" (Educational Leadership, 2004 December/2005, January, pp. 81-82). While English language learners are engaged in recreational reading activities offered by the Language First Program, they acquire new vocabulary and spelling as well as new foreign language structures. syntax, and grammar in a risk-free and supportive English language environment.

We also provide teachers with the research that supports a positive correlation between free interactive reading and increased second language literacy competencies. Krashen (2004), for instance observed that second



language learners improved English proficiency simply by reading novels written for young or teenage girls, such as Sweet Valley Kids, Sweet Valley Twins, and Sweet Valley High. Krashen also noted that English language learners in his study responded well to small doses of voluntary and light reading, as opposed to large doses, which tended to make such reading distasteful, rather than a pleasant experience. Similarly, Ujiie and Krashen (1996) observed that light reading helps to bridge everyday conversational language and academic language in the classroom.

Additionally, in our college classrooms, we promote field related experiences such as, book clubs where we ask our teachers to pair up with English language learner children at the primary and secondary school levels in order to provide them with voluntary and light reading activities as well as allowing them to listen to their voices and ideas as English language learners. Reeves (2004 December/2005, January) had this in mind when she called on the need for researchers and teachers to be active listeners and "student teachers" in the journey of learning how to teach English language learners. She wrote:

I wondered why those of us who discuss and research the best ways to help students learn English as a second language don't routinely make students' ideas and perspectives part of the conversation. Why not make a place at the policymaking table for the voices of those most directly affected by instructional policies?... Teachers and researchers need to be gentle, encouraging, and patient in that listening. (p. 72)

As part of the field experience, teachers and teacher candidates are asked to create weekly journal entries that focus on observations of and interactions with students including English language learners in public school settings. Students are to connect their knowledge base about English language learners to these observations and experiences so that they can strengthen their own teaching practices. Here is a sample of such a reflective journal entry written by one of the teachers, Sehic (2005), who was in a high school setting and learned that humor is a good motivator that is well received by English language learners. He wrote:

In one ESL class that I observed during my fieldwork study, the teacher tried to teach the students who do not speak English language the general view on the history of civilization. Instead of using books and other written documents, she showed them a comedy movie about historical figures and events that were presented in a funny way. Some other ways that I have observed during my fieldwork study is that some teachers tend to tell something funny that happened to them during the week. Also, they would use appropriate jokes during the instructions, like imitating the voices of some famous people or rewarding the students with a joke at the end of the class. The ESL students found this type of instruction very interesting and they were motivated to learn the required lesson by the humor that the instructor used. (p. 15)







WHY DO TEACHERS NEED TO MAKE CONNECTIONS WITH FAMILIES OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS?

In our experience of preparing teachers for working with learners from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, we also emphasize the need to understand patterns of family language literacy. We believe that the habits and practices acquired in the classroom should complement the literacies that are maintained in English language learners' homes..

To practice this philosophy, we ask our teacher candidates and in-service teachers to design activities to help English language learners identify their home literary patterns and facilitate their writing or storytelling by sharing stories about their daily activities during family leisure time. Taylor (1993) suggested that such activities provided natural opportunities for valid literacy experiences. Composing and talking about family daily activities also encourages a collaborative learning language experience, in which families of English language learners share meaningful literacy experiences with their own children. Furthermore, such projects can give public classroom teachers insight into familial literacy patterns and second language proficiency. This, in turn, can inform their daily instructional design so that it is both realistic and easily accessible to all children and their families. For instance, in one lesson plan designed by a teacher candidate,

8th-grade English language students were asked to conduct a survey on their most and least favorite food in the school cafeteria. Then they wrote a persuasive essay to the principal requesting a menu that included some of their own culture's culinary preferences. In another lesson plan for 6th-graders, English language learners were asked to complete their own family picture book depicting their family life. They not only had to list their own family traditions and celebrations, but also discuss the individual family member's contributions to the family unit.

Integrated learning centers are further examples of skillfully orchestrated language instruction for promoting nurturing and productive family traditions. For instance, the learning center, Homes: Where People Live, invites young students to explore various kinds of housing (e.g., townhouse, pagoda, duplex, farmhouse, and trailer) and design and construct a replica of their own home. Within this learning center, students can also compare the cultural and aesthetic aspects of different types of homes in the United States with those of other countries. They thus learn how differently people live across the world, while at the same time acquiring new vocabulary to talk about where people live.

The key in teaching second language acquisition, however, is in infusing students' culture of origin into the language curriculum in a thought-provoking and planned manner, because, as Peterson and Coltrane (2003) argue:





The culture associated with a language cannot be learned in a few lessons about celebrations, folk songs, or costumes of the area in which language is spoken. Culture is a much broader concept that is inherently tied to many of the linguistic concepts taught in second language classes (p. 1).

One of the ways to incorporate culture in a more meaningful way for English language learners is a multimedia case study approach. We engage our teacher candidates and inservice teachers in an analysis of multimedia case studies. We may feature a single teacher's use of picture books to develop concepts. For analysis purposes, we ask our college students to respond to questions such as the following:

What type of linguistic resources and cultural references does the teacher use to support English language learners' subsequent learning of teacher- identified concepts?

What types of instructional strategies does the teacher use to activate students' prior knowledge, and to engage them in follow-up activities?

How do students respond to the teacher's linguistic resources, cultural references, and pedagogy?

After our teacher candidates and in-service teachers engage in a reflective analysis of the selected multimedia cases, we invite them to watch a video in which the teacher explains the rationale and the goals for the lesson they observed. Reviewing this post reflection allows

our teacher candidates and in-service teachers to compare their own responses with the ones provided by the teacher in the featured video. Such learning also provides teacher candidates and in-service teachers with concrete suggestions for further improvement of their own teaching of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

WHY DO TEACHERS NEED TO PROVIDE AN EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION ON VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER STUDENTS?

In our college classrooms, we also emphasize that English language learners do not only need to increase their spoken language proficiency; they also need to become familiar with the unspoken cultural behaviors and communication patterns of a second language speech community. Often, both verbal and non-verbal communication patterns within a second language community culture may be drastically different from those English language learners are familiar with as members of their own social group and speech community. Eva Hoffman (1989) reflected upon these differences poignantly in books and essavs describing her individual journey into English as her second language as well as the ways the two languages and cultures, her home language and culture and the new language and culture she was acquiring, were impacting her own identity construction as a teenager:







I learn my new reserve from people who take a step back when we talk, because I'm standing too close, crowding them. Cultural distances are different, I later learn in a sociology class, but I know it already. I learn restrain from Penny, who looks offended when I shake her by the arm in excitement, as if my gesture had been one of aggression instead of friendliness. I learn it from a girl who pulls away when I hooked my arm through hers as we walk down the street—this movement of friendly intimacy is an embarrassment to her.

I also learn that certain kinds of truth are impolite. One shouldn't criticize the person one is with, at least not directly. You shouldn't say, "You are wrong about that"—though you may say, "On the other hand, there is that to consider." You shouldn't say, "This doesn't look good on you," though you may say, "I like you better in that other outfit." (p. 146)

To increase our teacher candidates' and inservice teachers' awareness of such cross cultural differences in behavior and communication patterns, in our college classrooms, we use a suggestion from Pang (2005) to show clips from the film, Shall We Dance? (Masayuki Suo, 1996). The main characters in the movie are three middleaged Japanese accountants, who, by taking lessons in ballroom dancing, violate the stereotypes of Japanese as overly reserved, serious, and workaholic. The selected episodes from the film allow us to begin discussion about the values and emotions that Japanese culture and body language may

convey. We further discuss some of the similarities and differences among Polish, American, and Japanese cultures, focusing on issues such as female/male relationships, the work ethic, and family roles. We are careful to acknowledge within culture differences since neither people within cultures nor their cultural practices are homogeneous.

Because the film has subtitles, if we are fortunate, we invite students who speak Japanese or have visited Japan as tourists to comment on the dialogue and the underlying cultural values that they see expressed via body language and non-verbal communication patterns in the film. In utilizing our Japanese students' cultural capital, we provide them with opportunities to teach us about aspects of their culture in a more direct and personal way. When we are not fortunate enough to have a Japanese student in our college classrooms, we invite a Japanese guest speaker to act in that role Our local offices of international students and faculty have always been wonderful suppliers of such speakers.

WHY DO TEACHERS NEED TO DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN CONVERSATIONAL AND ACADEMIC LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY?

We also sensitize our teacher candidates and in-service teachers to another common misconception about English language



learners: if the learner is fluent in conversational language he or she is equally proficient in academic English, and that he or she is equally knowledgeable about language nuances. Right? Wrong, wrong, and wrong again. Cummins (1984) differentiates between two types of language proficiencies: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS proficiency encompasses the language needed for social situations, which typically occurs in highly contextualized and relatively low cognitive demanding settings. Success in school is dependent of the students' ability to acquire CALP. It may take a child approximately two years to develop BICS, but the level of proficiency needed for CALP can take from five to seven years to develop (Ovando & Collier, 1998). We make our college students aware of these facts and as a result, sensitize them to the need to give English language

learners in their classrooms time to grow and develop. To reinforce this concept among our teacher candidates and in-service teachers, we refer to Pang's (2005, p. 297) stages of second language development. As Figure 1 shows English language learners often initially experience a silent or non-verbal period, during which they absorb the information in the second language, even though they may not be proficient yet in producing the linguistic output, spoken or written.

In our college classrooms, we also draw attention to the fact that at the intermediate fluency stage of language development, English language learners need concrete and frequent feedback from their teachers, to be able to develop the ability to self-monitor errors, especially the errors in transfer resulting from cross-linguistic influence. Errors in transfer occur when English language learners bring linguistic features

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If the learner
is fluent in
conversational
language he or
she is equally
proficient in
academic
English, and that
he or she is equally
knowledgeable
about language
nuances. Right?
Wrong, wrong, and
wrong again.

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FIGURE 1 STAGES OF SECOND-LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT Individuals are listening to the sounds and ways people put words together. They listen for PREPRODUCTION patterns. This is also known as the silent period because the language learner has a much SILENT STAGE larger receptive vocabulary than speaking vocabulary. **EARLY** Individuals learn to answer some questions that can be replied to with a yes or no answer. **PRODUCTION** They may be able to produce short sentences such as "How much?" **SPEECH** Individuals convey basic ideas and create short sentences. They are becoming more comfortable speaking to others and can correct some of their errors in sentence structure. **EMERGENCE** INTERMEDIATE Individuals can convey more complex ideas although they are still having trouble creating **FLUENCY** correct complete sentences. They are speaking more naturally and confidently. Pang, V. Ooka. (2005). Multicultural education: A caring-centered, reflective approach (2nd. ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.







such as grammar, syntax, and punctuation of their native language into the English language, be it written or spoken. For example, some of the typical problems in writing that Polish students face when learning English as a second language are due to the fact that in Polish, you need to apply gender not only to people but also to objects. Thus, the writing 'errors' in the following sentences: "Please pass me that book. She is there on desk," or "I was so hurried today that I forgot to make bed" are neither careless nor random, although they might appear so to someone who had no knowledge of Polish. They have logical and semantic validity in Polish grammar, which lacks definite articles, and identifies gender in inanimate objects.

Finally, in our college classrooms, we encourage our students to educate themselves about the errors in transfer specific to the native languages spoken in their present or future K-12 classrooms, to be able to identify errors in transfer in their students' work and speech and, more importantly, to be able to give their English language learners more precise feedback on how to eradicate such errors in their future communication in English.

With such feedback from their teachers, second language students in K-12 English classrooms are more likely to be motivated to write more and better, because instead of hearing

for years, 'Your writing errors are fatal,' they will realize that their problems in writing are not because of 'being dumb,' but because of their transfer of native language features into English writing. With such an understanding, English language learners are also better prepared to take ownership of their learning a second language and to monitor such errors in spoken or written communication.

CONCLUSION

To close, the overarching message is that the increasing population of English language learners in our public school classrooms obligates our teacher candidates and in-service teachers not only to become aware of English language learners' tribulations regarding English, but more importantly, to experience some aspects of this process themselves in their own education. In this way, they can more fully understand the challenges that their English language learners face in the typical US K-12 classroom. We also hope that the strategies discussed in this article will help other teacher educators in teacher education and professional development programs model the language acquisition process and ELL pedagogy. A grasp of each of these is crucial for teachers to meet the needs of our increasingly linguistically diverse public school students.



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NOTES



Student Art















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Shape their practice based on evidence of what results in successful learning of each student.

Foster relationships based on care, respect and responsibility.

Understand that people learn in different ways throughout their lives.

Respond with learning opportunities that work.



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