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Implementing a Humanistic Approach Towards Educational Equity for English Learners

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Introduction

The goal of this article is to provide insight and information regarding teacher preparation, educational practice, and overall understanding of teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students. Schools from pre-K through grade 12 throughout the United States are trying to enforce policy that ensures that English learners are afforded equitable education, equal access to programs, and comprehensible instruction. Several of the mandates ensuring equal quality education include the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) of 1974, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI), and *Lau v. Nichols* of 1974 (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, n.d.; U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). One of the most effective and efficient methods to accomplish this is to implement a humanistic approach throughout the education system.

Clearly, educating students is multilayered and involves multiple stakeholders, which encompasses every aspect of education from the teachers, administrators, school districts, and states as well as publishers and producers of textbooks and assessments. Embedding a humanistic approach throughout each of these areas establishes a cohesive, culturally conscientious, and culturally responsive system for equitably educating all students. It is critical that all stakeholders incur responsibility for a practice of establishing cultural and linguistic equity; it is not just the responsibility of the classroom teacher. The U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.) declared that public school districts and public schools are legally accountable for establishing meaningful and equal educational opportunities and programs for ELs. To ensure equity and access, producing and practicing a humanistic approach that promotes global citizenship is the responsibility of everyone involved in the process of educating today's students.

The demographics of the nation's classroom has changed immensely with a significant number of immigrant students including students whose primary language is not English (Banks & McGee Banks, 2013). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2021) reported, "The percentage of public school students in the United States who were English language learners (ELLs) was higher in fall 2018 (10.2 percent, or 5.0 million students) than in fall 2010 (9.2 percent, or 4.5 million students)" (para. 2) Thus, English learners (ELs) are populating classrooms throughout the United States, and they share their culture and language while assimilating to the American culture and learning the English language. Indeed, in schools throughout the United States, students enter a new school not proficient in reading, writing, speaking, and/or listening to the English language and unfamiliar with the cultural nuances. Students also arrive with diverse experiences and some of their experiences are unimaginable to most U.S.-born citizens. Some newcomer students have experienced the trauma of war, prolonged poverty, refugee camps, displacement, national conflict and/or unrest. *Psychology Today* (2022) stated that trauma is an individual's emotional reaction to a traumatic event. These disturbing events have an impact on children, and they may suffer from a variety of emotions from insecurity, anxiety, anger, shock, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Perreira & Ornelas, 2013; Psychology Today, 2022).

Often, immigrant families are separated, choosing to send a parent to the United States while one parent remains with the children in their native country. According to Perreira and Ornelas (2013), this sequential family migration plan enables parents to immigrate safely, settle in, and save money to bring their children to the United States via safer methods of entry without authorization or through legal channels. Due to family separation, children may experience fear, separation anxiety, stress, and sadness (Perreira & Ornelas, 2013; Stringer, 2019). When teachers

and administrators are cognizant of the challenges and struggles of immigrant children and families, then they can be better prepared to offer appropriate support and guidance. Applying a humanistic approach requires that teachers are academically prepared, knowledgeable about methodology, and “recognize and respect the psychological and emotional states of their students” (Khatib et al., 2013, p. 50).

The dynamics of today’s classroom structure and environment must change to accommodate immigrant students, and second-generation immigrants in the United States whose native language is not English. Unfortunately, teachers, administrators, and district leaders often focus on academics with the primary goal of assisting the students with academic gains, yet overlooking the emotional and social needs of ELs, ignoring cultural adjustment, background experiences, and family dynamics. However, in order to fully support ELs, teachers and administrators must put into practice a humanistic approach to language learning and teaching specifically for ELs which entails incorporating cultural knowledge, instilling cultural competence into daily activities, implementing a multicultural curriculum, and employing research-based strategies and methods that support ELs while promoting high-level learning.

Humanistic Approach for ELs

The humanistic approach to language learning encompasses the theory that when students’ basic psychological and physical needs are fulfilled, students will learn. Maslow (1943) identified this in the hierarchy of needs by stating, “the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need” (p. 370). In addition, a humanistic approach ensures that teachers take into account the needs of the whole-student and incorporate the teaching methodology that involves the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual facet of each

student (Prabhavathy & Mahalakshmi, 2012). Understanding and empathizing with ELs can reduce the stress of learning a new language while in a new culture.

As part of the humanistic approach, empathizing and knowing each student's culture, educational background, and experience is an asset when teaching. In addition, offering social and emotional support as well as a welcoming environment aligns with practicing a humanistic approach (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). According to Bland and DeRobertis (2019), humanistic psychologists apply, “an intersubjective, empathic approach in their therapeutic and research practices to understand the lived experiences of individuals as active participants in the *life-world* - i.e., situated in sociocultural and eco-psycho-spiritual contexts” (p. 1). A humanistic approach applied to the classroom encompasses holistically understanding the student, teaching to the whole child, and seeing the assets of each student as an individual. A humanistic approach considers different aspects of the learner which include emotions, identity, self-esteem, comfort; thus, teaching is student centered, low-risk yet challenging, supportive, and differentiated. The classroom is a social environment that is welcoming and provides a sense of community and belonging (Khatib et al., 2013). Khatib and colleagues (2013) posited that the first item to understand is that every learning experience should be viewed in the perspective of helping the students develop a sense of personal identity and connecting it to practical future goals; in other words, learning should be as personalized as possible. Therefore, to fully promote equal education for ELs by incorporating a humanistic approach an analysis of cultural components, curriculum essentials and pluralism must be examined.

Cultural Knowledge and Cultural Competence

When ELs arrive in their new classroom, they are equipped with their own cultural background and knowledge thus maneuvering in the new classroom functioning with their

personal cultural relativism. Culture influences each person, and it represents the foundation and structure by which people view life; it also offers stability and comfort for people interacting within the culture (Diaz-Rico, 2014). Culture provides individuals with a way to organize and understand the world. Diaz-Rico (2014) addressed the need for teachers to possess knowledge of this concept as follows:

Teachers who have a deeper view of culture and cultural processes are able to use their understanding to move beyond the superficial and to recognize that people live in characteristic ways. They understand that the observable manifestations of culture are but one aspect of the cultural web—the intricate pattern that weaves and binds a people together. (p. 243)

Possessing knowledge of ELs deep culture encompassing values, religion, relationships, ceremonies, beliefs, and ethics will enable teachers and administrators to have a better understanding of ELs. In addition, teachers and administrators should recognize that a change in the surrounding culture will naturally be disorienting, uncomfortable, and potentially frightening for ELs. Therefore, when ELs encounter their new school environment, they come in contact with a different culture and to adjust to the new experience, they will proceed through stages of cultural adjustment.

Teachers must have knowledge of the process of cultural adjustment and be able to identify the stages of cultural adjustment, which would include honeymoon, hostility/crisis, humor/recovery, and home/adjustment (Berkeley International Office, 2022; Law & Eckes, 2007; MIT International Student Office, n.d.). A similar process of acculturation is described as euphoria, culture shock, acceptance, and assimilation. The honeymoon or euphoria stage begins with the student feeling excited about the new experience. Culture shock is the next stage, with

the student feeling resentment or anger due to the new environment, as well as the linguistic and cultural differences. Oberg (2016) described culture shock as an illness that people who move to a foreign country experience. Following the stage of culture shock, the student will gradually adjust and experience some acceptance by demonstrating some understanding and blending of cultures. This eventually progresses to the final stage of cultural adjustment, which is assimilation and biculturalism. In this stage, the student has fully adapted to the cultural surroundings and feels a level of comfort or feels at home (Colorin Colorado, 2007a, 2007b; Northwestern University, n.d.).

Anecdotally, teachers have observed and reported a slightly different process of cultural adjustment that non-English speaking immigrant students progress through. The following stages describe what teachers have observed: (a) Disorientation and Bewilderment; (b) Analysis, Inquiry, and Comparison; (c) Acceptance and Resignation; (d) Settlement and Adaptation; and (e) Home Away from Home. The first stage that is observed is disorientation and bewilderment, and this is when the non-English speaking students will be silent and observe the new culture. ELs appear frightened, disoriented, and are bewildered by their new environment. In the classroom, the teacher and students should be warm, welcoming, and respectful. The teacher should assign a support peer(s) who will be the EL's guide and the support peer(s) will assist the ELs with navigating their school. During this stage, one particularly frightening experience for ELs is the bus ride to and from school. In order to get to school the ELs leave behind their parents who provide support, familiarity, and protection; thus, getting on the bus means ELs are resigning themselves to a driver who is a stranger and they are surrounded by unfamiliar students who speak a language that they do not yet understand. At the end of a stressful school day, ELs once again get on the bus filled with voices that are foreign to them and hope that the bus will

take them home to the safe and familiar arms of their parents. This is an important time for a kind, friendly teacher to be present by the bus to assist ELs and assure ELs that they are going to be safe and they will be taken home.

During the second stage of adjustment called analysis, inquiry, and adjustment, ELs will continue to struggle with cultural adjustment, and they will cognitively make comparisons between their native culture and the new culture. ELs observe the difference and similarities and try to find comfort in the commonalities between their native country and the United States. Teachers and students should be open and available to acknowledge any information that the ELs can share during this stage because it is a learning opportunity for everyone. With this newly developed sense of comfort, ELs will begin to communicate in English and ask questions about culture and language. At this time, ELs will test their verbal skills with common greeting and/or test short phrases or repeat a word in English that was spoken to them.

The third stage is acceptance and resignation, and this is when ELs can communicate to an extent that others can understand them, and they can socially interact with their peers and explore their new country without reservations. ELs begin to make friends and have accepted the fact that they will have to make the best of their new surroundings. At this point, ELs accept and resign themselves to their new environment. After the acceptance and resignation stage, ELs progress to the settlement and adaptation stage, making the necessary cultural adjustments to assimilate and have a sense of belonging. They settle with a sense of comfort and continue to adapt with ease. Oftentimes, students will easily flow from one culture to another. For example, when ELs are in school, they will adapt their behavior to suite the school's culture, and when ELs are at home, they will adjust accordingly to accommodate their home culture. The final stage is home away from home where ELs completely comprehend that the United States is their

home or place of residence, but they will not forget their native country which will remain their true home, at least in their hearts and memory. They will readily share stories from their culture and native country and may think about visiting their native country. These stages of cultural adjustment do not necessarily have a definitive timeline; every EL progresses and adjusts at their own rate depending on their experiences and their current environment.

Understanding that ELs who have experienced trauma due to national conflicts, war, refugee camps, or displacement may suffer from emotional trauma and may have more difficulty adjusting to all of the changes that have occurred as well as all of the challenges that they have experienced is key (Perreira & Ornelas, 2013; Psychology Today, 2022; Shafer & Walsh, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Administrators and teachers must first get to know students and their experiences as well as gain an understanding of their background knowledge. Once administrators and teachers are aware of the trauma and challenges that ELs have experienced, administrators and teachers must be empathetic and meet the needs of ELs and their families. According to Schachner et al. (2016), psychological and behavioral issues decrease when a positive school environment is promoted, and when safety and complimentary interactions between students as well as among students and faculty are encouraged. It is recommended to allow ELs to have a safe place to go within the school; a place where they can relax and release the myriad of emotions that they may feel. A teacher and other faculty should be available to connect with ELs and assure them that they are being cared for, and that they are in a safe place. In addition, teachers and faculty should listen to the experiences of ELs when they are ready to share this personal information and experience. Once ELs feel safe and content in the classroom and are at ease with the routines, it is the ideal time for second language acquisition, and for excelling academically (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013).

Although these are just some of the variables that teachers must be prepared to confront in the multicultural classroom with linguistic and cultural diversities present, there are many other types of knowledge and skills that must also be obtained in order to effectively and successfully teach ELs. Teachers should be prepared to explore their ELs' cultural backgrounds, family relationships, and the overall dynamics of culture. Diaz-Rico (2014) described the intricacies of culture by stating, the key concept is that culture includes visible elements and abstract or deeper elements such as values, ideology, responsibilities, regulations, and tempo. Furthermore, teachers must possess and value cultural competence, which is described by the National Education Association (NEA) as possessing a positive individual cultural perception, being well-informed about cultural differences, and having the aptitude to expand upon the interwoven cultural diversity within the community, and among students and their families (2015). Cultural competence means that educators must empower students and their families by embracing and respecting the diversity within the classroom and in society.

Cultural competence also entails knowing and understanding the needs of the students and families and the impact of culture in their daily lives. When teachers and administrators are knowledgeable about each EL's culture, they can avoid making assumptions, creating cultural conflict through miscommunication, and finding themselves in situations that illustrate cultural ignorance. Other recommendations include sharing school rules, policies, and procedures with students and families in a comprehensible manner as well as inviting students and families to the school and have interpreters available to help explain policies and procedures. For example, explain lunchroom procedures, bus procedures, grading policies, and so forth. School policy and learning are an integral part of culture; thus, to facilitate an educational community that celebrates all families and their diverse cultures, value must be placed on intercultural

inclusivity.

Teachers and administrators have a responsibility to understand cultural pluralism and to develop multicultural competence, which also entails establishing a connection between the school and each ELs home. Not only is parental participation a rich resource, but parental involvement establishes a partnership between the parents and the school, thus solidifying a collaborative education for ELs. Connecting with parents of ELs assures an understanding of the educational system, the curriculum, and the family's roles in the education process. In addition, cultural insights offered by the parents will enlighten the teacher about culture specific learning. Hence, fostering a pedagogy that builds on the relationships developed in school and outside of school and facilitating a pedagogy that addresses acceptance of cultural pluralism will promote equity, communicative competence, and appreciation for the commonalities and differences in a global society. In the same manner, instilling a curriculum that is sensitive to diverse learners, free from bias, and address the diverse needs of multicultural students will inevitably prepare all students with a humanistic perspective.

Multicultural Curriculum

Multicultural education involves designing an educational environment that provides equal educational opportunities to all students and incorporates culturally responsive teaching practices that include the following: a multicultural curriculum free from bias and prejudice; a pedagogy that ensures equity; content that incorporates culture, ethnic groups and race; and a positive school environment that allows all students to succeed (Banks, 2015). Multicultural education emphasizes educational equity for diverse social-classes, gender, ethnic groups, diverse languages, and racial groups. It is a curriculum that enables students to have pride in their identity, heritage and language (Bouchard et al., 2019).

Similarly, reducing and eliminating a monoculture perspective and curriculum will lead to teaching practices that encourage respect, unity, and higher self-esteem; thus, the changes in the classroom will directly influence changes in society. Intermingling of cultures may appear congenial, but there may exist underlying conflicts consisting of prejudice, bias, and distrust; therefore, teachers must be culturally responsive and attentive towards mediation and conflict resolution (Diaz-Rico, 2014). In order to avoid issues within the classroom and in the community, teachers and administrators must conscientiously and concisely commit to ensuring cultural equity by eliminating stereotyping, racism, ethnocentrism, and discrimination, and develop awareness about different cultures.

Teachers are not the only ones responsible for ensuring multicultural education and implementing cultural equity. Even when creating assessments for students, producers of summative assessments such as standardized tests and interim assessments such as unit tests need to be wary of cultural bias within the test. These assessments should not contain idioms and should avoid overusing contractions. Additionally, using idioms and slang in summative and interim assessments only creates confusion and is, without a doubt, culturally and linguistically biased. For example, using acronyms such as DOE or ADA should not be written in summative and interim assessments unless they are defined and pertain precisely to the standards nor should idioms such as *wasn't cutting it* or *an arm and a leg* be implemented. For instance, an assessment might expect a student to define *permit* when referring to a learner's permit given at age 15; of course, this is knowledge to those who live in the United States and to older students, not necessarily nine-year-olds from a foreign country. Assessment criteria should distinctly correlate with what is being assessed. As explained by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WIDA, 2009):

While content assessment centers around students' declarative (facts) and procedural (skills) knowledge in a content area, language assessments concentrate on the discourse used to make meaning of the declarative and procedural knowledge. (p. 2)

Cultural bias must be eliminated also by the producers and publishers of interim and summative assessments.

There are many things teachers can do to support a multicultural curriculum. Favorable pictures, posters, and calendars exhibiting a variety of ethnic groups and races in the United States should be displayed throughout the classroom (Banks & McGee Banks, 2013). Books, music, maps/globes, and technology that contain information and material about diverse ethnic and cultural groups should be available and accessible to students. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to read and learn about a variety of cultures. Teachers should regularly incorporate a variety of ethnic and cultural stories, holidays, information about notable people and historical people, and cultural elements in their lessons. Additionally, debating, exploring different perspectives, and researching issues, facts, and concepts are all vital to implementing a multicultural curriculum. Knowing culturally specific gestures, greetings, mannerisms as well as linguistic differences will help to facilitate a better connection with ELs and help to build a trusting relationship with cross cultural understanding.

The school system must be a place in which prejudice and racism are not tolerated, and differences are accepted and are considered an asset (Diller & Moule, 2005). Teachers can modify a lesson to make sure that it is cohesive and culturally accepting. In addition, teachers can role model and assist students with finding commonalities as well as accepting differences. Facilitating a multicultural event that involves parents can enable students to learn about different cultures and offer a better understanding of cultural differences and similarities. For the

multicultural event, invite local businesses to share their cultural talent. For example, invite a flamenco dancer, karate professional, Chinese calligraphy artist, cultural arts center, cultural musicians, and so forth to the classroom or school. By including local businesses, the community and the school are united. While everyone enjoys learning about the diverse cultural artistry, families also learn about what the local community has to offer. Another benefit to learning about different cultures is that stereotypes are typically reduced with proper education about cultures.

Furthermore, language education can be broadened when teachers encourage ELs and/or parents of ELs to share their native language with the entire class. One way to do this is to label items in the classroom in both English and the ELs' native language(s). The teacher can also develop lessons incorporating and connecting information about the ELs' culture and language and learning centers can incorporate cultural elements and activities. Banks and McGee Banks (2013) confirmed that in order to incorporate ethnic information, experiences, and points of view into the curriculum, teachers must obtain in-depth understanding of ethnic cultures and experiences. In the same way, involving the parents of ELs will enhance the educational experience of the students. Parents can be encouraged to participate in a family literacy night where the focus is on folklore or cultural literacy, and the school can facilitate parent outreach programs that can be as simple as translating information from the school to the parents' native language. Additionally, parents of ELs should be informed about volunteer opportunities and should be encouraged to become an integral part of the school. Thus, parents will be better equipped to support learning at home because they will become familiar with the curriculum; as a result, expectations can be aligned.

Curriculum should be revised to ensure that educational equity is provided to students

from all racial groups, ethnic groups, social-class, and gender (Banks, 2015). Multicultural education as described by Banks (2015) encompasses: (a) content integration; (b) the knowledge construction process; (c) an equity pedagogy, prejudice reduction; and (d) an empowering school culture and social structure. Ergo, multicultural education is integrated into educational pedagogy, practice, and methodology. However, administrators and teachers can create a school culture that instills multicultural education into the content areas, broadening student awareness and knowledge of diverse cultural perspectives, values, behaviors, and attitudes. Instead of promoting assimilation, allow immigrant students to utilize their ethnic culture, identity, and language as an asset (Schachner et al., 2016). When effectively implementing a multicultural curriculum and incorporating an asset-based approach, all students should feel confident and valued. A multicultural curriculum also entails lessons that are differentiated; differentiation is applied to lessons that take into account diverse learning styles. There are numerous strategies teachers and school administrators can employ to make the necessary accommodations to the curriculum, classroom, and school culture in order to put into practice multicultural education and a humanistic approach.

In order to effectively and successfully teach all students, equity must be naturally ingrained in attitudes, beliefs, and practices. Teachers need to empower students by involving students in the learning process. This can be accomplished by providing hands-on, student-centered learning experiences that incorporate visuals and exploration. ELs are actively engaged when teachers utilize cooperative learning and when teachers provide comprehensible instruction that offers modifications and accommodations. Scaffolding is important when the teacher wants to expand upon prior knowledge. Connecting and embedding cultural and linguistic information into the content lessons will support the attainment of a multicultural curriculum and a

humanistic approach.

A Humanistic Approach to Equity

Humanistic education in today's diverse classroom encompasses the integration of concepts involving culture, linguistics, multicultural education, and the value of cultural pluralism. Clayton et al. (2008) stated the following:

Linguistic, economic, social, cultural, and political factors influence the environment and families and peers of second-language learners, facilitating or challenging the acquisition of English. Personal characteristics such as age, motivation to learn the second language, attitudes towards first and second language, level of schooling, and personality also influenced the process. (p. 28)

Teachers should create a learning environment that is healthy and conducive to second-language acquisition and student achievement. Accordingly, teachers can apply Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs to the classroom to ensure that the students' needs are provided for and that the classroom is a safe, nonthreatening place that promotes self-confidence and a positive self-esteem. Another way is to assist students by developing a sense of unity and belonging in a classroom where each student is valued as a contributor offering ample opportunities for all students to participate in the learning process. Teaching and modeling respect for one-another as well as demonstrating care exemplifies an effective teacher and builds a humanistic foundation of unity and pluralism that will result in effective and knowledgeable citizens in our global society. Valuing cultural pluralism enables the school climate and culture to be enriched by diversity; thus, promoting a welcoming school environment and a feeling of belonging (Schachner et al., 2016).

The learning environment and the teacher's methodology influence the learner; therefore,

the information conveyed by the teacher must be based on scientifically or pedagogically secure knowledge. Teachers must be able to involve students in the learning process and enable ELs to progress academically in the content areas and advance in English-language proficiency (Zehler et al., 2008) Developing students' knowledge in the academic areas and assisting students with language learning requires a sound pedagogy and an effective methodology. It is important to maintain high standards because with a multicultural curriculum, differentiated methodology, and humanistic approach, students will achieve success.

Teachers and administrators can do a lot to ease the transition to a new culture and a new language. One relatively easy initiative to instill is advocating for ELs and understanding the immense changes they are experiencing and also taking the time to obtain background knowledge about the ELs and their native country. The state department of education and district should be apprised of the trends and prepare to hire culturally and linguistically diverse teachers and/or bilingual/multilingual paraprofessionals who speak the language of the majority of ELs. Documents should be translated in the language of all students, not just for Spanish-speaking students and families. It is essential to offer equitable education and equitable opportunity to all students and their families. Everyone involved in the education of today's students has a responsibility to ensure that cultural and linguistic bias is eliminated and ELs are rightfully provided with equity in school. ELs have a significant amount of information to share about their culture and language, and are an asset to schools, classrooms, and community. Global knowledge and experiences can serve to enhance education. Therefore, a humanistic approach that establishes equity and pluralism facilitates a successful educational experience for ELs as well as every student in the classroom; thus, maximizing benefits for every student by broadening each students' global citizenship, and equitable opportunities.

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