

Culture, Language, and Learning in the Age of the Diversity Explosion

M. Beatriz Arias, PhD

The Minority Has Become the Majority

Educators today serve in settings where all aspects of diversity—linguistic, socioeconomic, racial, religious, ethnic, and cultural—weave together the fabric of the classroom. To be an educator in the 21st century requires an awareness, respect, and appreciation for the diversity of students. In *Diversity Explosion*, renowned demographer William Frey expanded on the profound implications of the current demographic shift. He asserted that the United States is “on the cusp of great change—toward a new national demographic transformation in the twenty-first century.” He noted that this diversity is “already ubiquitous in schools, on playgrounds, and in other civic arenas that young people inhabit” (Frey, 2018, p. 171).

A key challenge for educators is understanding the social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of the children they serve and creating the conditions of trust and respect necessary for effective instruction.

The change has arrived. As of 2014, minority students began outnumbering majority students enrolled in U.S. schools. Enrollment projections to 2022 indicate that there will be a significant increase in the enrollment of students who are Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, or of two or more races, and there is a projected decrease of students who are White or American Indian/Alaskan Native (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). White native English-speaking students are the minority in public schools in five states with the largest public student population: California (23%), Texas (28%), Florida (38%), New York (44%), and Illinois (48.5%).

This transformation affects K-12 education, with over 50% of students in pre-K to 8th grade and 48% of high school-aged students in public schools representing minority groups. “Today, white students comprise just 49.7 percent of the 50 million students enrolled. . . . The ethnic and cultural shift of American public schools is occurring in every corner of the nation, in both rural and urban districts large and small” (Chen, 2018,

paras. 2 and 6).

In 2015, the American Community Survey reported that over 60 million people speak a language other than English. The most recent U.S. Census data show that there are about 12 million school-aged children who speak a language other than English, and 22% of children aged 5 to 17 reported speaking a language other than English at home (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2013). This means that many children are emergent bilinguals and are ready to access the curriculum in their home language and in English.



A recent report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NAS) (2017) noted:

Given the steady increase in diversity among DLLs/ELs [dual language learners/English learners] in the United States, a key challenge for educators is understanding the social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of the children they serve and creating the conditions of trust and respect necessary for effective instruction. (p. 3)

Importance of Culture

Coupled with the growth of student diversity is a growing understanding of and appreciation for the role of culture in learning. A recent report from the NAS (2018) on how people learn underscores the importance of culture in every aspect of learning. The NAS took a broad view of culture from a macro perspective: “All settings for learning, including schools, are socially constructed contexts shaped by culture” (p. 23). It also took a micro perspective:

Culture is reflected in the behavior and beliefs of a single individual, but it is also fundamentally social. Culture is a product of the way individuals learn to coordinate desirable and useful activities with others, and it is expressed in many ways, including through the actions, expectations, and beliefs of individual persons; physical elements such as artifacts, tools, and the design of physical spaces; norms for interacting with others, both verbally and nonverbally; and beliefs and ways of looking at the world that are shared with others. (NAS, 2018, pp. 22-23)

The report emphasized that all students have culture; all students have been shaped by their cultural environment, and it is essential to attend to the cultural nature of learning to enhance the quality of every learner’s educational experience. “Within classrooms and in all learning contexts, the learner may embody and express the culture of his own family and group in many ways, for example by using particular speech patterns or gestures, or averting his gaze from the teacher out of respect” (NAS, 2018, p. 23).

The NAS report warned of the pitfalls that can occur when cultural features are ignored:

Culture shapes every learning environment and the experience of each learner within that environment: learners who find the classroom environment unfamiliar, confusing, unwelcoming, or unsupportive will be at a disadvantage. It has been well established elsewhere that attention to children’s and adolescents’ opportunity to learn—which is in large part determined by their educational environments—is critical to addressing disparities among population subgroups. (p. 138)

The increase in student diversity in light of the recent NAS report emphasizes how critical it is that educators understand the role of culture in individual learning. Thus, both the growth in the enrollment of diverse student populations and the importance of culture as part of the learning process require that all educators re-examine and modify the existing sociocultural educational context.

What Does This Mean for Schools and Teachers?

Well-informed educators embrace the concept that language, culture, and learning are interrelated. To maximize learning opportunities for all students, educators must build on the prior knowledge and learning ability of all students enrolling in schools. This means enhancing their language resources, using their existing knowledge as a springboard to move them through Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development, and utilizing what is known about the science of learning:

Learning in school may be facilitated if the out-of-school cultural practices of students are viewed as resources, tools, or assets. If the cultural practices recognized and accepted in one context are recognized and accepted in another, that consonance will facilitate engagement and learning. (NAS, 2018, pp. 140-141)

In 1995, Gloria Ladson-Billings introduced the term *culturally relevant pedagogy*. She defined it as teaching “that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp. 16-17). She described a framework for culturally relevant pedagogy that included cultural competence and helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture. The following are examples of culturally relevant pedagogy.

1. Culturally relevant educators use constructivist methods to develop bridges connecting students’ cultural references to *academic skills and concepts*. Culturally relevant educators build on the knowledges and cultural assets students bring with them into the classroom; the culturally relevant classroom is inclusive of all students.
2. Culturally relevant educators engage students in *critical reflection* about their own lives and societies. In the classroom, culturally relevant educators use inclusive curricula and activities to support analysis of all the cultures represented.

3. Culturally relevant educators facilitate students' *cultural competence*. The culturally relevant classroom is a place where students both learn about their own and others' cultures and develop pride in their own and others' cultures.
4. Culturally relevant educators explicitly unmask and unmake oppressive systems through the *critique of discourses of power*. Culturally relevant educators work not only in the classroom but also in the active pursuit of social justice for all members of society.



According to Ladson-Billings (2017), the culturally relevant classroom is a place that incorporates and honors student diversity so that all students “remain firmly grounded in their culture of origin (and learn it well) while acquiring knowledge and skill in at least one additional culture” (p. 145). She emphasized that “developing a multicultural, multilingual perspective or competence means that all students (including White, middle-class students) broaden their cultural repertoires so that they can operate more easily in a world that is globally interconnected” (Ladson-Billings, 2017, p. 145).

As a result of continuing demographic change toward a majority multilingual society of color, Alim and Paris (2017) identified “asset pedagogies” where fostering linguistic and cultural flexibility has an instrumental purpose for both students of color and White students; multilingualism and multiculturalism are increasingly linked to access and power in U.S. and global contexts. A culturally sustaining pedagogy “seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). A culturally sustaining pedagogy asks us to reimagine schools as site where diverse, heterogeneous practices are not only valued but sustained.

Cultural Competence Across Districts, Schools, and Classrooms

Here are a few examples of the growing adoption of cultural competence in educational settings.

In Texas, the Carroll Independent School District is developing a cultural competence action plan that teaches students how to understand and appreciate individual differences, value the different abilities that people have, and respect and learn from each other (Yan, 2018).

In Colorado, Summit School District is helping students become global citizens through its dual language program (Dutta, 2018). In this program,

Students and parents get to develop relationships with people they otherwise would not be able to. Students get to know students, not just from other cultures or ethnicities, but also different socio-economic backgrounds. That’s really useful to becoming global citizens. (para. 15)

In classrooms, New York teacher Lakisha Odlum stated, “For me, culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) is the inclusion of diverse texts in my classroom that honor the unique experiences of today’s children of color” (Ferlazzo, 2016, para. 21).

There are many ways for educators to attend to the sociocultural and learning aspects of all students through their instructional and curricular practices. According to Diller and Moule (2005), to begin to be sensitive to the role of culture in learning, educators need to engage in self-reflection on the following issues:

A culturally sustaining pedagogy asks us to reimagine schools as site where diverse, heterogeneous practices are not only valued but sustained.

- **Valuing diversity.** It is important to accept and respect differences—different cultural backgrounds and customs, different ways of communicating, and different traditions and values.
- **Being culturally self-aware.** Culture—the sum total of an individual’s experiences, knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, and interests—shapes educators’ sense of who they are and where they fit in their family, school, community, and society.
- **Dynamics of difference.** Educators need to know what can go wrong in cross-cultural communication and how to respond to these situations.
- **Knowledge of students’ culture.** Educators must have some base knowledge of their students’ culture so they can understand student behaviors in their proper cultural context.
- **Institutionalizing cultural knowledge and adapting to diversity.** Culturally competent educators, and the institutions they work in, can take a step further by institutionalizing cultural knowledge so they can adapt to diversity and better serve diverse populations.

Resources for Developing Culturally Responsive Schools and Classrooms

The following list provides an array of recommendations for developing culturally responsive teaching practices.

[Diversity Toolkit: Cultural Competence for Educators](#) from the National Education Association provides an introduction to several aspects of diversity, including class, linguistic, gender, race, and ethnicity. Culturally responsive teaching is defined, and several strategies for implementation are provided.

[Guiding Principles for Dual Language Education](#) this resource provides rubrics for developing sociocultural competence in six areas: program structure, curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional development, and family and community. An example of a rubric is “The curriculum is culturally responsive to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of all students, and teachers use a variety of strategies to promote the sociocultural competence of all students”.



[Teaching Diverse Learners](#), a Brown University website, is dedicated to enhancing the capacity of teachers to work effectively with English language learners. Access to publications, educational materials, and the work of experts is provided.

[Create a Welcoming Classroom Environment](#) by Colorín Colorado offers suggestions for helping English language learners and immigrant students feel welcome in their school community. It addresses culturally responsive instruction, social and emotional support, and the discussion of immigration in the curriculum.

[Checklist for a Welcoming Classroom](#)

Here's a list of recommendations from Colorín Colorado for making your classroom more welcoming.

- **Use project-based activities.** Encourage students to use their existing and prior knowledge in acquiring new concepts and skills through project learning strategies.
- **Assure that signage in the classroom and around the school is multilingual.**
- **Create a multilingual print-rich environment.** This includes having anchor charts, word walls, posters, visuals, and materials on the walls that display important language and concepts related to the unit of study. It should be obvious to students and the community what is being studied, as well as the academic language that is related to that topic.
- **Provide opportunities for students to engage in collaborative learning experiences.**
- **Acknowledge and celebrate students and their cultures.** Provide opportunities for all students to make connections to the various social and cultural backgrounds represented in your classroom.
- **Arrange the room** so students are seated in pairs or small groups for collaboration and communication.

- **Showcase materials that reflect a variety of cultures and perspectives.** Include pictures, literature, and other texts that represent the cultures to which your students belong.
- **Display student work.** Exemplary work from students should be displayed in the classroom and, if possible, throughout the hallways in a school. Because students have differing language proficiency and ability levels, exemplary work for each student should be displayed.
- **Ensure that rules, procedures, and protocols are clear.** Students may come to school with various ideas of how to show respect, when to speak, how to take turns, etc. Provide opportunities for all students to learn about acceptable classroom practices, while ensuring they learn that acceptable behaviors are context determined and that they need to be sensitive to all contexts.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that integrating culture and language in instruction is a journey, not a destination. Learning is not a one-shoe-fits-all process, and we should not aim to change all feet to fit one shoe. Communities change. We discover new layers of our own cultural assumptions, and so the work of bridging cultures, language, and learning is a continuous process.

To learn more and access free downloadable resources, visit our website at www.cal.org.

References

- Alim, H. S., & Paris, D. (2017). What is culturally sustaining pedagogy and why does it matter? In D. Paris & H. S. Alim (Eds.), *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world* (pp. 1-21). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Chen, G. (2018, September 4). White students are now the minority in U.S. public schools. *Public School Review*. Retrieved from <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/blog/white-students-are-now-the-minority-in-u-s-public-schools>
- Diller, J. V., & Moule, J. (2005). *Cultural competence: A primer for educators*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Dutta, D. (2018, December 5). Summit School District's dual language program is helping students become global citizens. *SummitDaily*. Retrieved from <https://www.summitdaily.com/news/summit-school-districts-dual-language-program-is-helping-students-become-global-citizens/>
- Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. (2013). *America's children: Key national indicators of well-being*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Ferlazzo, L. (2016, May 17). Response: Culturally sustaining pedagogy 'increases student engagement & learning' [EdWeek blog]. Retrieved from https://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2016/05/response_culturally_sustaining_pedagogy_increases_student_engagement_learning.html
- Frey, W. (2018). *Diversity explosion: How new racial demographics are remaking America*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

- Hussar, W. J., & Bailey, T. M. (2013). *Projections of education statistics to 2022* (NCES 2014-051). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, 43, 159-165.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2017). The r(evolution) will not be standardized: Teacher education, hip hop pedagogy, and culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0. In D. Paris & H. S. Alim (Eds.), *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world* (pp. 141-156). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English: Promising futures*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. [doi:10.17226/24677](https://doi.org/10.17226/24677)
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). *How people learn II: Learners, contexts, and cultures*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. [doi:10.17226/24783](https://doi.org/10.17226/24783)
- Yan, R. (2018, December 5). Carroll ISD sets framework for diversity council at district and campus levels. *Community Impact Newspaper*. Retrieved from <https://communityimpact.com/dallas-fort-worth/grapevine-colleyville-southlake/city-county/2018/12/04/carroll-isd-sets-framework-for-diversity-council-at-district-and-campus-levels/>

About the Author

M. Beatriz Arias, PhD, is a senior research scientist at the Center for Applied Linguistics. She previously served as the vice president for development at CAL from 2011 to 2017. Dr. Arias is an emeritus professor at Arizona State University. During her tenure at ASU, she directed the Center for Bilingual Education and Research, served as the principal investigator for several U.S. Department of Education grants, mentored doctoral students, directed teacher preparation programs, and worked extensively with teachers and administrators serving emerging bilingual students in local school districts. Dr. Arias' latest book, *Profiles of Dual Language Education in the 21st Century*, was published in 2018 as part of the CAL Series on Language Education with Multilingual Matters. She can be reached at barias@cal.org.

About CAL

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) is a nonprofit organization founded in 1959. Headquartered in Washington, DC, CAL has earned an international reputation for its contributions to the fields of bilingual and dual-language education, English as a second language, world languages education, language policy, assessment, immigrant and refugee integration, literacy, dialect studies, and the education of linguistically and culturally diverse adults and children. CAL's mission is to promote language learning and cultural understanding by serving as a trusted resource for research, services, and policy analysis. Through its work, CAL seeks solutions to issues involving language and culture as they relate to access and equity in education and society around the globe.



CENTER FOR APPLIED LINGUISTICS

www.cal.org

*Promoting Access, Equity, and Mutual Understanding
for Linguistically and Culturally Diverse People Around the World*