Observational Tools to Inform Instruction for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners

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ABSTRACT
This article addresses the need for teachers to use observational tools to identify and understand their learners' cultural backgrounds and literacy skills, including the importance of preparing teacher candidates to become culturally responsive educators. This topic is critical because one of the new teacher certification exams in New York State, Educating All Students (EAS), assesses candidates' knowledge of instructional strategies and support for students of diverse populations. To that end, this article provides an observational framework that informs instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

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There is a growing population of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students and English Language Learners (ELL) in elementary classrooms within the United States. These students represent various racial/ethnic backgrounds, cultural traditions, and languages/dialects (Chu, 2011; Lim, Maxwell, Able-Boone, & Zimmer, 2009). New York State in particular continues to show an increase in diversity within student populations. For example, the number of schools that participated with ELL programs have increased over 21,000 from 2002-2011 (NCES, 2011). This increase requires a subsequent shift in how educators are being prepared to meet the increasing needs of this growing population. In 2005, the National Center of Education Information found that 87.5% of K-12 public school teachers had little or no training in teaching linguistically diverse students (NCELA, 2005). If current educators are not prepared to teach in diverse classrooms, how should we re-envision professional development for current teachers and better prepare future educators?

Challenges and Perspectives

There are challenges that students from culturally diverse backgrounds may face in schools and society. CLD students may experience incongruence between their orientation towards social interactions, learning, teaching practices, traditional classroom routines, and literacy practices (Alvermann & Qian, 1994; Lim et al., 2009). For example, teacher's unfamiliarity with students' cultural backgrounds may impact literacy

instruction. Many teachers may not be familiar with the multiple aspects and dimensions of their student's cultural background, yet they are faced with the challenge of aligning their instruction to meet the needs of their CLD students.

Cultural differences can also play a critical role in the interactions teachers have with students. Au and Mason (1981) focused on the positioning of teachers and students from Hawaii during reading instruction. Their study suggested that cultural differences impacted student's productivity. Two sets of participation structures were observed: volunteer structure and open turn structure. The results favored the open turn structure of participation, which allowed children to negotiate turn taking without teacher intervention. This approach consisted of multiple children overlapping in conversations where they were in control of whose turn it would be. Au and Mason (1981) noted that the volunteer approach placed the teacher in the management role of calling on students who raised their hands and waited for their turn. Students from different cultures, such as the students in this study may not be accustomed to the volunteer approach.

In a study on secondary students, the differences in language and culture also impacted instruction, specifically writing (Alvermann & Qian, 1994). Similarly to Au and Mason's (1981) conclusions students came into conflict with the dominant culture's school-based literacies and practices. Their findings suggest that teachers need to be aware of language socialization cues, beliefs of what counts as subject knowledge, and interest levels of diverse students (Alvermann & Qian, 1994). Both of these studies emphasized the need for educators to become more aware of cultural differences in how students learn, interact, and find balance between instructional practices of different cultures.

Teachers who are aware of cultural distinctions and the impact it has on student learning, can develop practices and materials to better meet students' individual needs (Garcia & Malkin, 1993). These teachers have been described as being culturally responsive (Chu, 2011; Gay, 2000). Culturally responsive teachers are characterized as: (1) involving all students in the construction of knowledge, (2) building on students' personal and cultural strengths, (3) helping students examine the curriculum from multiple perspectives, (4) using varied assessment practices that promote learning, and (5) making the culture of the classroom inclusive of all students (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In multiple study case studies on elementary classroom teachers, Ladson-Billings (1995) identified how cultural responsive teaching creates a collaborative classroom community that promotes academic achievement by celebrating the cultural identity and backgrounds of students. The findings resulted in an increase of participation from students and families, as teachers became culturally aware and responsive to their classrooms. Gay (2000) notes that culturally responsive teachers need to identify the strengths that students bring from their cultural backgrounds. Research has highlighted how observational methods and tools can support teachers with this process.

Teachers use observational tools to identify students' literacy growth over time. These methods have also illuminated information regarding students' cultural backgrounds. In her case study on bilingual students, Maguire (1999) observed the relationship between students, texts, and the contexts to which they write. Her findings suggest that teachers need to learn more about students' home lives and home literacy practices in order to develop meaningful instructional practices for these students. In a similar case study, researchers used observations to document and assess the learning

process and literacy learning of an English Language Learner over a three-year period (Huddleson, 1999). By understanding the cultural background and noticing rhetoric patterns in writing samples (e.g., writing organization and word choices), new instructional goals we developed to fit the immediate learning needs of the child. The results of both studies supported observation as method to improve teachers' insight into their students' literacy learning.

Observational Tools

      There is a need to assess both students' literacy skills and cultural knowledge if we are to recognize who they are as readers, writers and learners. Therefore teachers need observational tools that incorporate a focus on students' literacy skills and cultural backgrounds. Educators use observational notes in classrooms as a tool to record student learning. Researchers and classroom teachers developed this technique for taking notes on a child's natural literacy experiences (Patton, 2002). Teachers can use observation as an assessment tool to document activities and interactions, while sometimes engaging personally in those activities (Patton, 2002). The goal of using this form of assessment is to "fill in the gaps" and give teachers immediate information. Johnston and Rogers (2002) noted that observational data "explicitly depends on the human expert". The expert observer is described as a, "kid-watcher" (Goodman, 1985), or "sensitive observer" (Clay, 1993). While observation can increase teachers' attention towards the CLD students in the classroom, they still need to understand what information they should be looking for. It is important to think about how teachers are training their eye to gain specific knowledge about our culturally linguistic and diverse learners (Boyd-Batstone, 2004).

      Participant observations are a valuable resource for teachers in planning and teaching lessons. First, they help teachers to understand cultural differences in perceptions about the roles of students and teachers in learning. For example, a student may come from a culture with different ways of speaking and ideas about teacher-student interactions or student-student interactions that a teacher hasn't encountered (Delpit, 1995; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). Second, participant observations help teachers select literature that gives students the opportunity to bring their cultural knowledge into understanding texts (Alford, 2001). Additionally, they help teachers find texts that are engaging and responsive to students' backgrounds, not portrayals of inaccurate stereotypes about different cultures (Bradford, 2007 & Sano, 2009). Finally, when teachers use participant observations they notice differences in literacy practices within diverse cultures.

      These research studies and various perspectives suggest teachers need to increase and understand their cultural responsiveness to students. Previous studies have explored how teachers' literacy instruction is not aligning to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Alvermann & Qian, 1994; Au & Mason, 1981; Lim et al., 2009). There are multiple literacy skills and practices that can be challenging for CLD students. Some of these include: comprehension, writing, and conversations around text. Many of these challenges can arise due to choices in texts, topics, and prompts. Currently, the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010) addresses the need for students to come to know and understand

perspectives and other cultures, though criticisms have appeared about the needs of ELL within the standards framework. The standards also address the need for students to become critically and culturally aware. In order for students to build this awareness educators need a method to inform their literacy instruction for all learners.   Research has found that observations have become an important method of bringing awareness to CLD students (Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2001). Although observations can serve as a tool to record students' behavior, teachers may still need support to identify the various differences and dimensions of students' background and cultures.

Designing an Observational Tool

There is a need to assess both students' literacy skills and cultural knowledge if we are to recognize who they are as readers, writers, and learners. Therefore teachers need observational tools that incorporate a focus on students' literacy skills and cultural backgrounds. Research has supported the process of designing an observational tool that helps teachers to recognize students' literacy skills, and understand aspects of their students' cultures that will inform their instruction.

I developed an observational tool intended for teacher candidates and classroom teachers. The goal of this tool is to recognize dimensions of culture and inform their daily literacy instruction. This observational tool encompasses: (a) Patrick Moran's (2001) model of the five dimensions of culture (b) Fennes and Hapgood's (1997) Iceberg Model, and (c) Peregoy and Boyle (2008) multiple aspects of culture.   Initial construction of this tool was framed by Moran's (2001) model of specific dimensions of culture. These five dimensions include: products (e.g. tools, food clothes), practices (e.g. verbal and non-verbal language, actions and interactions, taboos), perspectives (values, beliefs), communities (race, gender, religion, etc.) and persons (individuals). These five dimensions capture specific information that addresses various aspects of culture, though many of these dimensions are often not visible in formal observations. To illuminate how these dimensions of culture are beyond the surface level of formal observations, I examined Fennes and Hapgood's (1997) Iceberg Model. This model helped to situate how an informative tool should be designed to focus on dimensions of culture below the surface.

These dimensions and models supported my rationale for including elements in my design that honored students' cultural diversity. The model included guiding questions that captured the positive aspects of students' culture, designed to extend beyond the dimensions of culture that can be observed. Peregoy and Boyle (2008) provided a guide to questioning multiple aspects of culture. Their work has focused on how learning about the identity of CLD students and how they assimilate within new environments. I extended their questions on assimilation and chose specific positive language to capture each dimension. The questions helped to create a portrait of the student that honors their diverse backgrounds.

The final product of my observational tool became a reflective guide for teacher candidates (Appendix A). I developed different approaches and what positive aspects of a student's cultural background should be focused on during a weekly basis. These approaches included: Dimensions of Culture, Global Literature, Interactions, and Uncovering. For each of approach a guiding question is posed with specific features/questions under each category. The implications for this tool are for teacher

preparation programs to support culturally responsive teachers by utilizing this observational framework.

Teacher Preparation

Current educational policy is readjusting the preparation of new teachers to become culturally responsive in today's diverse classrooms (Beare, Marshall, Torgerson, Tracz, & Chiero, 2012; Wang, Spalding, Odell, Klecks, & Lin, 2010). Under Race to the Top, many states are developing new and revised teacher certification exams and Teacher Performance Assessments (edTPA) for teacher candidates. These relatively new policies identified ELL and CLD student as one of the key groups in need of instructional improvement for closing the achievement gap.

In New York State one of the new teacher certification exams is the Educating All Students Test (EAS). This exam focuses on: Diverse Student Populations, English Language Learners, Students with Disabilities and Other Special Learning Needs, Teacher Responsibilities, and School-Home Relationships. For example, a performance indicator on this exam includes understanding appropriate strategies to enhance the knowledge of students from diverse cultural backgrounds (New York State Department of Education, 2013). In the practice exam questions offered on the State Department website, candidates will need to examine observational notes made by teachers on students to determine instructional strategies to fit the needs of these diverse students.

The goals of edTPA are now focused on improving teacher education programs to result in the improvement of teaching and student outcomes. In order to improve the outcomes of all students, emphasis needs to be placed on developing culturally responsive teachers. Future educators need to be prepared for the increase of CLD students in their classrooms. The observational tools we use in enacting these policies one potential means of improving the daily observation and instruction relative to being response to the needs of a culturally diverse student population.

Educational Importance

There is a need for well-designed observational methods to help us identify the linguistic resources of learners and their cultural knowledge in order to understand students' previous learning contexts. Critical analysis recognizes participant observational assessment tools as a means of informing teaching and instruction of cultural awareness. This topic is particularly important in terms of pre-service and in-service teacher preparation and professional development for teachers who are increasingly seeking information on the promise and challenges of a culturally diverse classroom. In order to support CLD students' academic success and outcomes, we first need to reflect on how we are preparing our future teachers to become critically and consciously aware. Observational methods can raise the awareness and consciousness to support and promote culturally responsive and reflective teachers.

Appendix A: Observational Tool

STUDENT LITERACY AND CULTURAL PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION NOTES				
For the Week of:	**Dimensions of Culture** **What dimensions were honored and celebrated?**	**Global Literature** **How were texts chosen or provided representative of global literature?**	**Interactions** **What conversations and interactions are occurring?**	**Uncovering** **New insight regarding students languages/ cultures/backgrounds**
Things to consider:	Surface Literature, art, music, dance, technology, appearance, dress, food Floating Customs, beliefs, traditions, religion Below Family, talk and silence, expressions of feelings, learning styles, life cycles (behaviors), roles and interpersonal relationships (status), discipline, time and space	Does the author have clear expertise on the topic? Is the author respectful of all cultures? Is additional information provided by author? Do the relationships between characters avoid stereotypes of racial, ethnic, and class dominance?	What do students say they want to work on in reading/writing? Describe the questions students are raising? What do students say about reading/writing outside of school? How/when/whom do students work with?	How will this knowledge support and guide my instruction? What information is important to share with the student's family? What information is important to share with other colleagues in supporting this student?
Student(s):				

Adapted by T. Yurkewecz (2013) from: Moran(2001); Fennes and Hapgood (1997); Peregoy and Boyle (2008)

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