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Empowering Culturally/Linguistically Diverse Students

by

Lorraine S. Taylor and Ann V. Dean

Students from diverse cultural and linguistic groups are faced with two major challenges: developing a healthy and positive sense of self, and managing the transitions among environments that may differ in culture and language from their own (Phelan & Davidson, 1993). When the worlds of home and school are very different, students may not feel a sense of belonging in the classroom. These students are at-risk for failure and dropping out of school. The extent of incongruence between cultures/languages may erect impossible barriers for many students who presently lack the means to overcome them (Phelan & Davidson, 1993). For students who may be caught in this "culture clash" between home and school, the school then becomes a place of alienation in which they must struggle with the imbalance of power and the dynamics of inequality (Delpit, 1995). It is necessary to empower these students which involves helping them to become aware of the barriers to their progress and the means for overcoming them (Spindler & Spindler, 1993). Empowerment provides students with knowledge and understanding for self-advocacy and cultural/linguistic pride.

The following case study of a student who remains at risk, verbally threatened by his teachers with referral to special education, allows us to consider the major issues in his underachievement and the need for empowering him, his family, and teachers so that they may positively influence his education and become advocates for his school progress.

A Case Study

José, 14 years old and in the 7th grade, is a Mexican-American student in a middle school in upstate New York. He has attended this school district since arriving from California four years ago. José presently receives English as a Second Language and remedial math as special services at his school. However, he is not classified as a student with a disability, although frequently threatened by his teachers with this possibility. According to medical records, José has had no health problems other than minor ear infections. All of his developmental milestones were reached at an appropriate age.

Presently, José lives with his stepfather, mother, a brother, 16, and two half brothers, ages 5 and 8. His father died when José was only one year old. Both his mother and stepfather were born in Mexico, and the primary language at home is Spanish. Their home is located on an apple farm where both parents are employed as migrant workers.

The children must walk about a mile to the road each day to take the school bus. José has sometimes missed school when the bus was late or did not arrive. Sometimes he must miss school in order to assist his parents in taking care of their affairs and translating for them. The location of the house also makes it difficult for the children to participate in the life of the community around them.

It is difficult for José to find space to be alone at home. When he needs time to himself he takes a walk around the house. Upon his arrival home from school, he usually watches TV, eats dinner, and then does his homework. His mother reported that she does not feel comfortable

checking her son's homework due to her limited education and English skills. In addition, she is often busy with household chores. José frequently stays at his aunt's house until his mother arrives from work at 5:30 p.m. While there, he helps his older brother to baby-sit the younger children.

During school vacations, José and his older brother usually help their stepfather in harvesting the seasonal crops. Every summer the extended family migrates to New Jersey to pick blueberries.

When José talks back to the adults, argues with his brothers, or uses profane language, discipline practices at home include scolding or a lecture. There is no consequence for poor academic performance. When asked to describe their son's most enjoyable qualities, his parents mentioned his sense of humor and respectful manner. However, due to their long working hours, the parents rarely share any special activities with him or their other children.

Communication is rare between school and home. The school usually sends messages in English, and conferences are also held in English. Periodic school communications sent in Spanish have ignored the parents' dialect.

Mrs. M. expressed that she feels intimidated and unable to voice her concerns and interests during school conferences. In the rare instances when they have attended a school activity, both parents reported feeling uncomfortable, impatient, out of place, and ignored. The impatience was explained by Mrs. M. as a result of "just sitting there, unable to comprehend and participate in what goes on." Thus, José's parents are not familiar with their son's educational program. However, they hope that he will become a professional person or undertake a vocation that he likes.

Both parents expressed concern about his current education. They believe that he lacks dedication, and his sense of humor and playful manner are misunderstood by others when they don't take him seriously. They also fear that he may be the target of prejudice at school.

Mrs. M. referred to a recent incident in 1994 in which José's older brother, pressured by his peers, brought an unloaded gun to school. Since that incident, José has been teased, mistrusted, and viewed with skepticism. In another incident, a student in gym class pushed José, who pushed back. José was suspended while the other student was not. After learning the details of the incident, Mrs. M. went to the school with a community advocate. The principal apologized. However, the other student involved in that incident continues to tease José, who has received in-school suspension for one of these responses.

While conducting school observations the first author of this paper noted, during the forty minutes of gym, José engaged in both positive peer interactions and negative ones that included pushing and shoving other students. Within the time frame, the observer noted three distinct instances when several students mocked José's walking, talking, and body language.

In mathematics class, José was one of the culturally different students. No evidence of multicultural content was seen in the curriculum or graphic displays in the classroom. When given oral directions by the teacher, José appeared confused, began to write, and maintained a puzzled expression. He then made a joke and entered conversation with several peers. The teacher intervened to redirect him to his assignment. José continued his work, but was easily distracted. His behavior was then ignored by the teacher, although his distraction continued. With the

exception of time-out, there was no other concrete consequences for students' negative (or positive) behavior observed.

The teacher does not plan differently for José. When interviewed, the teacher explained that José "knows what he must do. Therefore, it is up to him to do what he is supposed to do." José expressed that he has difficulty participating in the class and is discouraged when he finally decides to raise his hand only to learn that his answer is wrong. His most recent grade in math is "F".

In an interview with the first author, José expressed that "school is sometimes important and sometimes not." He wants to get a job right away. "Besides, school is boring," he reported. He enjoys basketball, and he spends leisure time listening to rap music, watching TV, or drawing. Reading materials and newspapers are not always available at home.

José expressed that during his first few years here in the school, he felt inadequate. "Classmates used to make fun of the way I spoke," he said. Presently, he feels more comfortable at school, now that he has become "popular." He explained that people are still afraid of him because he is different; however, through the encouragement of a tutor in 1994, he joined the school's football team. José would also participate in other school activities such as dances, but he does not always receive notices of the specific time and date.

José's favorite class is science because they do projects. His least favorite is math, which he finds "too difficult." He feels more comfortable working in groups at school because he gets answers from other students. He feels a little uncomfortable about asking for help in class and has no favorite teacher. José explained that when he does good work at school, teachers often don't believe that he did it. He is accused of cheating. When asked what makes him happy, he responded that one day soon he'll go back to Mexico and study there.

In order to empower this student, his family, and community, it is essential to provide training for the parents at a convenient time and place for them, support for Jose through a peer buddy or group, tutoring, information for both José and his family concerning school regulations and the referral process, and identification of José's strengths and interests and access to services to develop these. If possible, José's teachers should also be provided with opportunities for empowerment. Exploring their own values and possible biases through autobiographical reflection and critical analysis will empower them to become empowering educators. They also need to understand the limitations and constraints of a school system set up to serve students from the dominant, white middle class culture so that they can make changes in the way they deliver curriculum and relate to students like José.

The Empowerment Process

Empowerment is "to give power or authority; to authorize; to enable or permit" (Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, 1994). Empowerment has also been defined as enabling an individual to acquire knowledge, skills, and capacities to become more capable and competent. When one enables culturally/linguistically diverse students, the enabler identifies and builds on the strengths of the student and family, promotes self-advocacy, promotes individual and family control of their child's education, fosters and encourages informed decision-making by the student(s) and family, and teaches the above skills when necessary. Self-advocacy is a critical aspect of empowerment. It involves teaching students and their families to understand the essentials of

how schools work so that they can learn how to assertively seek the accommodations that serve their needs and interests.

Students who are empowered respect their culture and language and view them as equal in status to those of other groups. In order to empower students, Cummins (1986) urges a redefinition of roles for teachers in their relations with students. His redefinition involves helping teachers to view their role as adding to the culture and knowledge of students rather than replacing the students' culture with that of the dominant group (Cummins, 1986). Power relations are the focus of Cummins' concern. He points out that status and power relations between groups are important factors in the school failure of minority students. When educators from the dominant culture view other cultures and language as inferior, the academic progress of culturally/linguistically diverse students can be impeded.

In contrast, the incorporation of students' language and culture into the school program facilitates their transition from the world of home to that of the school. Congruence between those worlds eases that transition. The multiple worlds in which students must live and function can be so different as to make transitions unbearable (Phelan & Davidson, 1993). José experienced this difficulty in his transition from the home and community of the migrant world to that of a white middle-class school environment. Cultural and linguistic differences created barriers in the transition such that José is at risk for school failure and placement in special education.

In a discussion of students' multiple worlds, Phelan and Davidson (1993) point out the barriers that may exist and difficult choices that students face. They refer to the barriers that students may encounter in making transitions as "borders." Borders may be: (1) psychosocial—created by anxiety, depression, apprehension, or fear that interferes with the ability to concentrate on learning tasks or establish positive peer and teacher relationships; (2) sociocultural—the result of the student's culture/language being devalued in the school setting; (3) socioeconomic—generated by economic circumstances of the student that create severe limitations; (4) linguistic—when communication is negatively affected by a view that the student's language is inferior or unacceptable; (5) gender-related—the result of differences in the treatment of males and females in the curriculum, pedagogy, expectations, and attitudes of the school; and (6) structural—elements in the school environment that "prevent, impede, or discourage students from engaging fully in social or academic learning" (Phelan & Davidson, 1993, p. 59).

Structural borders result from several types of conditions in the school: inadequate resources and support to meet students' needs; lack of information for students concerning programs, opportunities, or resources available to them; or a mismatch between the needs of students and services available. Empowered students and their families can make their needs known and advocate for themselves to obtain the services, modifications, or arrangements needed for a successful social and academic school experience (Phelan & Davidson, 1993).

Programs are available to teach self-advocacy. In the *Tools for Transition Program*, for example, a unit is devoted to "Understanding my learning style." In this, students identify their strengths and weaknesses, describe their disability, and learn to relate goals to their perception of their strengths and special needs (Kovach, 1992). Students learn, through role playing, how to seek help, ask an instructor for help, and how to request accommodations to their difficulties. These are very important skills for empowerment. Units in interpersonal skills and self-advocacy are also included in the *Tools for Transition Program*.

In order to fully empower students, it is also necessary to empower their families and communities. Parental participation in the school has increased achievement for students from low-income families (Clark, 1983). While middle-class families and communities may not face difficulties in participation, parents and communities of color, white lower working class families, and single and gay parents may experience barriers due to language, prior experiences with discrimination and prejudice, perceived intimidation, and the results of other biases that impact their lives. Although these families, too, are interested in the education of their children, schools will need to reach out to them and their communities to facilitate participation and establish a partnership. As partners, the families and communities can support the school in its efforts to effectively educate all of its students.

While it is crucial that teachers learn multiple strategies to establish partnerships with families and communities of diverse cultural and linguistic groups, teachers also need to learn how to empower themselves. Empowering education has been defined as a [critical-democratic] pedagogy for self and social change (Shor, 1992). This is an empowering education that approaches individual growth as an active, cooperative, social process that impacts the community. Teachers learn to orient subject matter to students' culture—their interests, needs, speech, and perceptions—while creating a negotiable openness in class where the students' input jointly creates the learning process (Shor, 1992). For this interactive pedagogy to be implemented, teachers often need to explore their own beliefs and attitudes about non-white, non-middle-class, or people with disabilities. Many teachers—black, white, and “other”—harbor unexamined prejudices about people from ethnic groups or classes different from their own (Delpit, 1995, p. 179). Teachers need opportunities to explore their own identities through examining their own class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. This process enables them to identify possible biases and negative assumptions they may hold about others who are “different” from themselves. Learning to interpret across cultures is accomplished by reflecting on our own experiences, analyzing our own culture, and examining and comparing varying perspectives (Delpit, 1995). Autobiographical self-critique and critical analysis (Dean, 1992) allows teachers to explore their own life histories, to claim their own identities, to develop empathy toward their students, and to increase their understanding of the different cultural worlds from which these students may come. Becoming an empowered educator may also require teachers to unlearn racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic habits (Kohl, 1994), for in order to truly get to know the different cultures of one's students, one may be required to identify and to challenge one's own deeply held cultural assumptions and possible biases attached to those beliefs.

There are critical, reflective, autobiographical questions that teachers might ask of themselves to begin the empowering process:

1. What specific memories do I have of my family cultural background, school cultural background in terms of accepted language?
2. Were there “cultural clashes” between my home culture and my school culture?
3. Did I feel an “outsider” or an “insider” in school? Did I ever feel I was a “stranger”? What experiences defined me in this way?
4. How did I learn about my class position in my home, neighborhood, and school?
5. Have I realized that my race has social consequences and that race, in part, determines my identity? (Do I experience certain privileges because I am white?)
6. What cultural messages about gender have I internalized? Do I reproduce these messages in my classroom?

7. Where do I position myself in relation to students in my school? Do I favor one group over another for reasons such as race, gender, language, class, ability? Do my students *have to have* a similar identity to mine for me to teach them impartially?

Teachers committed to empowering students need to be empowered themselves. Autobiographical self-critique and self-analysis (Dean, 1992) is a way to encourage teachers to ask critical questions that may provide a path to empowerment for teachers and for their students. Through understanding how they have constructed their own identities, teachers empower themselves to deeply respect the identities of their students and to begin to meet their needs. Thus, empowerment begets empowerment.

Teachers who wish to promote the empowerment of students, their families, and communities can also benefit from drawing on the approaches that are currently available in the literature on multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 1995). It is helpful to envision the desirable characteristics of empowered students from diverse cultural/linguistic groups. These characteristics might include the following:

1. These students find pride in their culture and language.
2. They have a sense of control over what happens to them in the school setting.
3. They are well informed about laws and regulations which govern their education, and are able to advocate for needed services, modifications, and accommodations.
4. They are able to participate in the decision-making process concerning their educational goals, objectives, and programs.
5. They can make a successful transition to the world of the school without denying or degrading their home culture and language.
6. They are supported by parents/families and communities.

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