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# Soleado

Promising Practices from the Field

## *Sheltered Instruction: Affirming our Students' Cultural, Linguistic, and Personal Identity*

by Ruth Kritekman—Dual Language Education of New Mexico

As caring and committed educators, we like to believe that our efforts within the school's walls—focused on what happens within our classrooms as well as the environment we create within the school community—can reverse some of the negative effects of our nation's social and political realities on students. This sociopolitical context includes laws, policies, practices, and traditions that impact every decision made about education (Nieto, 2011). The truth is that educators can do little to change the impact of student socioeconomic levels, levels of parent education and involvement, societal discrimination and stereotyping, difficult living circumstances, and racial or ethnic stratification.



*A culture of caring, respect, and high expectations promotes student engagement and achievement.*

students in developing a positive identity as an active, capable, and developing bilingual and biliterate member of a community of learners. One way to accomplish this affirmation is *Bridging the Two Languages*, the last of DLeNM's components of sheltered instruction. This refers to the intentional and careful development of metalinguistic awareness—an awareness of the nature of language and how language forms can be manipulated and changed to convey meaning.

Strategies developed in one language can then be bridged to another. In this way, we, as teachers, identify the linguistic assets students bring to a learning task and help them develop those same strategies and strengths in the second language.

Students need to feel that they are accepted and valued by others. How can we ensure that these needs are addressed? One essential way is to recognize who these students are. They are not two monolinguals in one body. They have a bilingual identity that is unique and important and deserves to be affirmed. Research on the complex conditions that affect school achievement has identified the need for an "ethic of care" (Noddings, in Nieto, 2011). This ethic of care goes far beyond simply adopting a caring attitude toward students. It involves showing students care by developing a close and affirming relationship with them, adopting high expectations for their capabilities, and showing respect for their families.

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What we can control is the context of school—our collaborative work to set standards and goals, the ways we communicate belief in students' capacity to achieve, the school culture we establish, and the support systems we enact that value and promote academic achievement.

The importance of this kind of affirmation—the affirmation of students' cultural, linguistic, and personal identity—is the topic of this installment in our ongoing series on sheltered instruction. We call this component *Affirming Identity*. It involves supporting

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Many of the stories we hear of students living in difficult socioeconomic, sociocultural circumstances who find success in rigorous school programs despite great obstacles all have one thing in common. Their instructional staff, their principal and teachers, believe their students can learn. The staff recognizes that success may hinge on putting into place intentional, structured scaffolds, but, with that support in place, the students can achieve. We need not be afraid of rigorous content, of Common Core or Next Generation standards. Our students are smart, capable, creative beings who can achieve what is expected of them. As teachers, we need to communicate that belief: *I believe in you. You are going to be successful someday. You're going to make it!* One popular quote on social media reflects this point in the voice of a 6 year old: *My teacher thought I was smarter than I was, so I was.*

We need not be afraid to help students look at their own data folders to both celebrate great progress and to develop a plan to address learning gaps. Students deserve to know where they are successful and where they aren't, especially when they are given a role in developing a plan to improve. How empowering is that? What student wouldn't rise to that challenge?

Affirming the families and cultural traditions of every student must go beyond a cursory celebration of cultural heroes and holidays. Far more effective would be assertively confronting stereotypes or other forms of racism and bias. I remember being called into a meeting attended by members of a middle school's administrative team, a counselor, classroom teachers, and a student and her mother. The meeting began with a stern lecture regarding the importance of regular attendance, the need to remain in the country in order to ensure better English proficiency, and the current "unacceptable" practice of heading down to Juárez every Friday after school. It wasn't until I asked the student and her mother why they were going to Mexico every week that we learned that the family's grandmother was terminally ill and they were spending as much time with her as possible. How could it be that these educators never bothered to ask the student about her reality? How could it be that the school's first response was to convene a meeting of an intimidating number of educators to lecture the family on attendance? The school's response was predicated on the belief, acknowledged or not, that this family didn't value school, didn't acknowledge the incredible

gift this student had available to her in the form of a free public education, didn't take seriously the need to use her English. That was not it at all—instead, what took precedence was the familial relationship and the need to honor and acknowledge an elder's place in the family.

### *Strategies to Support a Sense of Community*

Examining attitudes in the larger school community is one important step in affirming identity. There are also classroom strategies that can make a difference for students. The *T-graph for Social Skills* is a Project GLAD® strategy in which a social skill is identified and shared with students. Students each take their individual notions of appropriate and productive behavior in a group and negotiate a common understanding and set of expectations for that behavior. The idea is to support students in identifying and developing behaviors consistent with a positive classroom environment. The social skill becomes the focus for a period of 4 to 6 weeks.

For example, students focusing on *Collaboration* might identify *working together, sharing the work, and helping each other*. Under a semantic web of these initial thoughts, the teacher creates a T-graph. The left side is labeled with a sketch of an eye while the teacher asks what collaboration would look like if one were to pass by the classroom and look inside. What would that person see? *Students are working together to finish a project, kids are sharing their materials, kids' eyes are on the person talking*. On the right side of the chart the teacher sketches an ear and asks the students what collaboration would sound like. What might someone hear that could be recognized as showing collaboration? Again, students generate positive behaviors: *polite language like "please" and "thank you;" appropriate ways to disagree, such as "that's a great idea but have you thought of ... ;" or quiet voices of students taking turns*. These lists of behaviors that can be seen and heard then serve as behavior management.

The fact that this chart is created with students collaborating and contributing their ideas and expectations affirms their identity and place in the classroom. The power of this strategy lies in the fact that the students are given agency and voice in developing the class definition of the social skill. More information on this protocol is available via Project GLAD® training.

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Many teachers rely on regular class meetings that follow a particular protocol to model and support a positive classroom in which every student has a voice. Some teachers begin the class meeting with a quick whip-around of positive behaviors: *I liked it when Ben shared his pencil when mine broke.* Then, concerns and problems are discussed using a talking stick or some other method to ensure equity of voice and participation.

One highly effective way of acknowledging students' prior knowledge and experience is recognizing and building on the linguistic resources students bring to school. In many cases, that linguistic resource is a different language. In other cases it may be a different dialect or way of using language to express oneself. One example of this is the story-telling tradition of many cultures. Teaching and learning opportunities might take the form of a story that illustrates the key lessons. A literature selection may be previewed in story-telling format using pictures, puppets, or live action so students have a sense of the story line and vocabulary before they ever see the piece in written form.

### Strategies to Bridge Students' Languages

Karen Beeman and Cheryl Urow, in their book *Teaching for Biliteracy—Strengthening Bridges Between Languages* (2013), share many strategies that strengthen the bridges between languages in bilingual or dual language settings. One simple strategy uses *Total Physical Response* as a bridge. Vocabulary for a lesson in one language is reinforced with the use of gestures to illustrate the meaning of the words. When the language of instruction changes and lessons are extended (*not* repeated) in the new language, those same gestures are used to bridge the meaning of key vocabulary and provide students with the skills to convey concepts and learning in the new language.

Dr. Kathy Escamilla and her colleagues, in their book *Biliteracy From the Start*, describe several strategies designed to develop students' oracy, or the oral skills that contribute to the acquisition of

literacy. These skills include the ability to express oneself, to understand speech, and to bridge two languages. One highly effective strategy is called *Así se dice*; it provides students with an opportunity to negotiate meaning and experience the flexibility and subtleties of translation. In this strategy, the teacher selects a short passage, a poem, or an idiomatic expression in one language and gives it to pairs of students to translate into the other language.

I experienced this strategy with a short selection from Sandra Cisneros, *Pelitos*, that is written in Spanish and describes the hair of each of her family members, with special emphasis on her mother's hair. The language is rich and evocative. Translating it with my partner

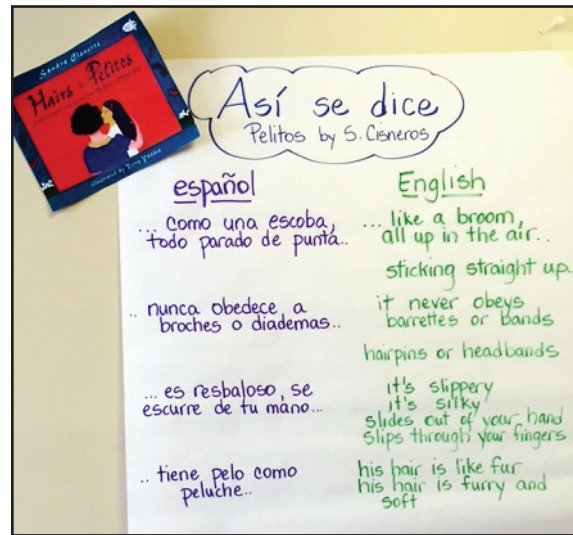
involved lengthy discussions about how to use English to express the same description and evoke the same emotions. When each pair shared out, we had even more opportunities to discuss word choice and other subtleties. It was great fun and it allowed us to use our skills as bilinguals. In other words, it acknowledged the very specific skills that we brought to the task and gave us an opportunity to flex and extend those skills and clarify how to best use our language to convey meaning.

Affirming identity, acknowledging who our students are, honoring their families and the traditions that give their lives purpose, teaching them new and important skills and expanding their knowledge base ... politicians, policy makers and community members can say what they will—we teachers know how critical our roles are in our students' lives, and we rock!

Escamilla, K., Hopewell, S., Butvilofsky, S., Sparrow, W., Soltero-González, L., Ruiz-Figueroa, O., & Escamilla, M. (2014). *Biliteracy From the Start*. Philadelphia, PA: Caslon.

Beeman, K., & Urow, C. (2013). *Teaching for Biliteracy—Strengthening Bridges Between Languages*. Philadelphia, PA: Caslon.

Nieto, S., & Bode, P. (2011). *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* (6th ed). Boston, MA: Pearson.



*Así se dice*

