



4-1-1999

Meeting the Challenge of Linguistic Diversity: A Comprehensive Approach to School Restructuring

Nancy L. Commins

Ofelia B. Miramontes
University of Colorado at Boulder

Adel Nadeau

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/edconsiderations>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Commins, Nancy L.; Miramontes, Ofelia B.; and Nadeau, Adel (1999) "Meeting the Challenge of Linguistic Diversity: A Comprehensive Approach to School Restructuring," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 26: No. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1347>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Considerations by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

...A decision-making framework based on a sound understanding of first and second language acquisition and interaction holds the key to successful planning for the academic success of linguistically diverse learners.

Meeting the Challenge of Linguistic Diversity: A Comprehensive Approach to School Restructuring

Nancy L. Commins, Ofelia B. Miramontes
and Adel Nadeau

The theme of this special issue attests to the growing awareness that to be truly prepared for the 21st century, educators must be ready and able to address the needs of the increasing numbers of linguistically diverse students. In doing so, they will discover that while the challenges are many, these students bring a new richness to the communities in which they live and have had a positive impact on the schools they attend.

The co-authors of this article share over 30 years of collaboration in the education of language minority students. We have worked individually and together as classroom and resource teachers, staff developers, building and district level administrators, university professors and researchers. In our work it has become clear that a simple "models" approach to school improvement is inadequate to address the variety of linguistic, cultural, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds of students entering schools across the nation. In response we have synthesized the lessons we have learned over the past three decades into a comprehensive process for thinking about and instituting school reform. (For a complete description of these ideas see Miramontes, O.B., Nadeau, A., & Commins, N.L. (1997). *Restructuring Schools for Linguistic Diversity: Linking Decision Making to Effective Programs*. New York: Teachers College Press.)

During our careers we have seen too many practices that undermine student success. Some examples we've observed across the country include the following:

- Classrooms and schools in which second language learners never interact with native English speaking peers and others in which students are never grouped by language proficiency in order to receive appropriate first and second language instruction.
- Expectations that second language learners of English should need no more than a year of any kind of support before they

are thrust into an all-English environment with no support for developing the academic skills they need to succeed.

- Stated beliefs that we should begin with where the child is, but schools rarely having systematic assessment procedures in place to document students' level of performance and progress.
- Goals that state students should achieve bilingualism over five years, but in practice teachers at each grade level are left on their own to determine their curriculum and how or even whether to use the primary language.
- Students who are prepared for writing in one language and asked to do the actual writing in the other.
- Secondary schools that rarely provide primary language instruction to newly arrived students, despite the cognitive benefits that can accrue.
- Lip service given to the importance of parents and community, but little accommodation made to reach out to and involve non-English speaking families who often work long hours so their children can survive.

Regardless of the capacity in which we are involved in education, each of us must take personal responsibility for these continuing practices and move forward to change the status quo. What can unify our efforts is our commitment to improving schools and a common understanding of the elements needed to do so successfully.

Presented below is a broad outline of the essential elements of school reform efforts aimed at improving academic achievement for linguistically diverse populations. They can be applied in any school setting, regardless of configuration or resources— in rural, suburban or urban locales; in schools where formal primary language instruction is easily achievable and in schools that will need to deliver all-English instruction; in an elementary building with a single second language population or in a comprehensive high school with students from 45 different languages and cultures. This approach reflects a decision-making process developed based on sound research and many years of practice in the field, regarding language acquisition, instruction, assessment, and school organization.

Four Fundamental Components of the Restructuring Process

The four fundamental components of the restructuring process— Vision, Basic Premises for first and second language instruction, Key Areas for Reform, and Decision Making— are each discussed briefly. To help understand the interrelationship of these components of school reform, it may be helpful to think of constructing a building solid enough to endure the test of time. The building needs a framework (vision) built upon a solid foundation (basic premises), with inner load bearing walls (key areas for reform) and a means to hold all the parts together (decision making processes).

The Vision

The Vision is the dream for the reform process. It guides the work and is grounded in beliefs and assumptions about language, learning, and bilingualism. The focus of the vision is the achievement of all students and its development should include all stakeholders.

Two assumptions are essential to a vision that embraces linguistic diversity. The first is that the primary language is fundamental to the thinking, learning, and identity of every individual. The other is that bilingualism is a cognitive, social and economic asset to the individual and to the nation. Regardless of a program's ability to foster academic bilingualism, these assumptions hold true.

Nancy L. Commins is the Director of Literacy and Language Support Services for the Boulder Valley School District. Ofelia B. Miramontes is an Associate Professor of Bilingual/ESL & Bilingual Special Education at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Adel Nadeau is a Humanities Curriculum Specialist for the San Diego Unified School District & San Diego State University.

The Basic Premises

The *Basic Premises*, which are derived from the assumptions, are the non-negotiable underpinnings of the restructuring process and provide the basis upon which to build programs. The Basic Premises encompass six general areas: the nature and quality of instruction, progress through programs, parents and community, cross-cultural interaction, and a schoolwide process.

The nature of instruction includes both the approach to learning and the primary language foundation. Successful programs for linguistically diverse populations cannot be left up to chance. Students need carefully crafted instruction in which teachers actively mediate information and knowledge. Students need opportunities for hands-on experiences that build upon prior knowledge and provide access to the complexities of the academic curriculum.

One of the most basic decisions that must be made in any school with linguistically diverse populations is whether students will receive instruction in their primary language. If some level of primary language instruction is possible, then it must be decided how best to deliver that instruction so that it contributes to students' underlying cognitive development and eventual academic achievement in English. The numbers of students from various language groups, the availability of qualified teachers and the access to appropriate materials all contribute to decision making regarding instruction in the primary language. Four different categories of programs can be identified, distinguished by the level of primary language support provided. Category I programs have the population, personnel, and materials available to deliver a full primary language foundation for students in both literacy and the content areas. Category II programs are those in which it is only feasible to provide a solid primary language literacy program. Category III programs are those that use the primary language for the reinforcement of the main ideas of the content area curriculum, while literacy development is all in English. Category IV programs are those in which all instruction is provided in English. In every category it is necessary to understand how the Basic Premises apply and to attempt to maximize student achievement given the realities of the particular school or setting.

Quality of instruction. While it may be possible for schools to move from one program category to another in a restructuring effort, they do not represent a simple continuum. Merely using the primary language will not automatically result in academic success. In order to make a strong Category I program there needs to be a clear understanding of the role, purpose and settings for primary and second language instruction. At the same time, it is possible to design an effective all-English program, though the acquisition of academic English is likely to be slower and students will most often become subtractive bilinguals— that is they will lose their primary language as they acquire English (Cummins, 1989; Lambert & Tucker, 1972).

The design of the second language program will also be different across program categories because of the varying access students have to conceptual development in their first language. In all program categories specific strategies that address the needs of second language learners must be utilized daily to assure the development of oral language, literacy and concepts in the content areas. In a program where students cannot learn new material through their first language, much closer attention must be paid to the instructional approaches used throughout the curriculum to assure that students can succeed.

Progress through programs encompasses both instructional assessment and the manner in which students are moved through

programs. Students' movement from one program to another or their redesignation as fluent in English must be tied to their performance and not simply the length of time they spend in a program. Instructional assessment needs to account for individual performance as well as school and program accountability. Assessment should reflect student progress in all aspects of instruction including language, literacy and content areas and should account for the varying skill levels across students' two languages. Specific criteria must be developed regarding when to transition students from primary language literacy to formal English literacy instruction and when they can handle all English instruction with no additional support.

Parents and community are a critical component in the design of programs. To effectively incorporate linguistically diverse populations, schools must be prepared to address issues of differences in ethnicity, schooling, class background, and perceptions of parents' role in their children's education. A comprehensive restructuring process demands that schools move beyond the traditional 'help out in the classroom and join the PTO' paradigm and into a community outreach paradigm. In some districts many strides have been made, but unfortunately in far too many schools the avenues available for parents to participate in their children's education are limited. Changes will result from affirming the value of home languages other than English and by providing parents with concrete ways they can help their children.

Consistent guidelines and clearly defined expectations are needed that fully inform parents who do not speak English about the opportunities available to their children and their rights to receive a sound and equitable education. Above all, personnel at every level in the school district must send a clear and consistent message that regardless of the level of education, income, or knowledge of English, parents can always play a critical role in their children's education by supporting primary language development in the home.

Cross cultural interaction. The presence of students from different languages will increase the cultural and, likely, the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of the schools they enter. Conscious attention must be paid to the ways in which students are grouped and regrouped and expected to collaborate with one another to assure that differences that might exist do not serve to isolate or marginalize certain groups of students. Respect must be demonstrated through the actions that adults take rather than just the words they utter.

Schoolwide process. We can no longer afford the outmoded view that in 45 minutes a day the ESL or Spanish-speaking teachers will take care of all the needs of second language learners. Linguistically diverse children need instruction tailored to their needs throughout the school day. Therefore, the education of language minority students must be viewed as the responsibility of every adult in the building. Strategies appropriate to the needs of second language learners should be used in all classroom settings and not just the designated second language class or room. Even if not every teacher in a school works directly with particular students, they should be aware of the organizational and instructional elements of sound programs, including the criteria that are used to decide when children are ready to transition from one type of service to another. In addition, they must be willing to modify their practice to allow for the kind of flexibility in scheduling, grouping, and instruction that will meet student needs.

In this kind of collaborative schoolwide process teachers may need to redefine for themselves what it means to be a teacher (Schlecty, 1991). In any reform effort, isolation is counterproductive. Teachers

need to be working together across the entire school with a view of themselves as decision-makers (Warren-Little, 1994). In the process of coming to a common understanding of the issues and practices associated with successful programs for linguistically diverse students, these discussions will necessarily touch upon core values. Therefore, they must be conducted in a manner that builds trust and invites openness through dialogue.

Key Areas for Reform

The Key Areas for Reform are the areas that must be targeted in any comprehensive restructuring process. They include teaching and learning, organization, assessment, and processes for decision-making. The area of *teaching and learning* requires a fundamental rethinking of the learning process. *Organizational structures* must be developed that provide for both equity and flexibility. *Assessment* includes an internal process of accountability and student assessment that must exist at the school site. *Decision-making* is what drives the vision. It is not enough to work on one area alone, but efforts towards reform must encompass all of these areas working in concert with one another.

As part of the process of aligning curriculum and standards, it is particularly important to develop appropriate assessments that will measure student progress and produce data needed for accountability. In some districts and states, efforts are already underway to create benchmarks towards standards that reflect the developmental process of second language learners and provide guidelines for the organization of instruction and documentation of their progress. These efforts must be broadened so that in every district it is possible to document the progress students are making and to assist teachers in designing instruction appropriate to students' level of first and second language development.

Decision-Making Processes

While the Decision-Making Processes constitute one of the key areas of reform, we have also designated them as an essential component of the restructuring process in schools with linguistically diverse populations. In order to move beyond the imposition of an externally created model to improve instruction, teachers and administrators need skills and strategies that will allow them to conduct needs analyses, develop appropriate goals, weigh alternatives and decide upon organizational structures that will best utilize their existing resources and personnel.

Major Aspects of Decision-Making

This approach to decision-making is predicated upon the belief that those who are responsible for providing the services within an organization should be part of the decision-making about what they do. It is impossible to sustain reform without a decision-making process that has ongoing action as its operative phrase. Four major aspects of decision making are establishing a vision, strategic planning, leadership and conflict resolution.

Establishing a vision. The fact that vision is a key element of school restructuring as well as a specific strategy for decision making highlights its importance. In the visioning process all aspects of the organization are examined. It incorporates pedagogical principles, comprises all practices critical to the reform and demands sufficient time for open and continuous dialogue. Questions include whether the vision is comprehensive; how it addresses the needs of all students; the implications for program design; and the kinds of reorganization necessary for service delivery, staffing and curriculum.

Strategic Planning. Effective strategic planning requires that processes be established to conduct a needs assessment, compile data, facts and materials that lay out the existing situation, and generate central questions for reflection and action. Strategies that are essential to long-range planning include brainstorming and consensus building. To be successful also requires that administrators have a firm understanding of group dynamics.

Leadership. In order to restructure schools so that they truly meet the needs of linguistically diverse students, there must be a shift in the role of the traditional leader from the top down manager to instructional leader. Only in this way can the vision or dream eventually become a shared responsibility among all members of the organization.

Conflict Resolution. Any change process and especially one that involves fundamental values about education will generate conflict. Because conflict is unavoidable, leaders need to be ready with strategies for determining the extent and sources of the conflict, as well as specific steps for mediating disputes. In all cases of conflict resolution the change should focus on students and what organizational strategies, instructional methodologies and staff organization plan will best meet their needs.

Implications at the District Level

While our approach to restructuring is focused mainly on school level efforts, to be truly successful educators must work at many levels within the system and in many interconnected collaborations to build sound programs for linguistically diverse students. Just as schools need to develop a vision and work from a set of premises grounded in research, so do districts need to have a vision and a plan for the success of ALL students, including those from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. At every level, these elements should become part of an ongoing dialogue among administrators, teachers, other staff and community members. In this way the work at individual sites becomes part of a larger effort towards improving education. In the same way that all people in a school site need to see themselves as equally responsible for all students' success, so too must all the key players in a district see that ESL and bilingual programs are part of a total integrated effort to meet all students' needs.

It is critical to be aware of the ways in which good decisions made at the school site can be supported or undermined by district policies. For example, after a period of study and analysis, the faculty of a school decides that the best way to serve the first and second language needs of students is to have a system of continuous progress. However, their district's policy is to measure second language proficiency based solely on standardized test scores. In this case, district policies run counter to sound principles of assessment. In order to best serve linguistically diverse students, it will be necessary to influence decision-making at the district level so that it results in new policies that will support their teaching and learning in the schools.

Across the country, districts are working to align curriculum with state and local standards and to respond to various statewide initiatives related to literacy. Political decisions are usually made by people far away from the classroom. As policies and practices are developed at the local level, the needs of linguistically diverse students must be brought to the center of the discussion and not addressed as an afterthought. For example, the fact that many students in bilingual programs receive their initial literacy instruction

in Spanish cannot be peripheral to the development and administration of literacy assessments at the state and district level.

Time can be allotted in existing discussions or regular meetings among principals and other administrators to discuss educational practice and how it relates to the needs of the students being served. Unless people are specifically talking about the key areas of reform—teaching and learning, assessment, organization, decision-making—any changes made will only be superficial tinkering and student achievement will not substantially improve over time. One step that can be taken when forming district committees and task forces related to any area of curriculum development, is to assure that teachers with expertise in first and second language acquisition are invited to participate and encouraged to take leadership roles.

In addition to existing venues for discussion, it may also be necessary to create special forums for administrators to come together to deal with challenges unique to particular kinds of programs. For example, in Colorado's Boulder Valley School District in addition to regular meetings of all elementary principals, the principals in schools with bilingual programs and the principals of schools with ESL programs meet regularly to dialogue with central office administrators. These meetings are forums for principals to express concerns, ask questions and seek solutions together to the challenges unique to their schools. In this way, they have begun to establish a common knowledge base about first and second language acquisition, identify areas of strength, and prioritize needed improvements in program delivery.

One of the major forums for implementing a comprehensive school reform process is Title I school-wide programs. The Title I schoolwide planning process is a perfect opportunity to put the needs of linguistically diverse students squarely in the middle of efforts towards school reform. Unfortunately, too many schools who go through a year of schoolwide planning come up with goals and strategies that addresses the literacy development of native English speakers and either ignore the instruction of second language learners or include it as an addendum to the plan. In a truly schoolwide effort the needs assessments will include the performance of linguistically diverse students in both their languages and the planning process will center on all dimensions of academic success for all the students in the school. Only then will goals and strategies emerge that are consistent with what we know are sound educational practice for second language learners.

Conclusion

Increasing linguistic diversity is a reality. Lessons learned from schools who have already experienced these demographic changes have shown us that with a comprehensive approach, reform efforts can be successful (Lucas, Henze & Donato, 1990; McLeod, 1996). In any reform effort the change process must remain focused on students and learning and not simply on the governance structure. Change must be aimed at improvement— not just a reorganization of personnel within existing structures. The kinds of changes that are needed will be systematic and pervasive, affecting all members of the organization. A decision-making framework based on a sound understanding of first and second language acquisition and interaction holds the key to successful planning for the academic success of linguistically diverse learners.

References

- Cummins, J. (1989). *Empowering minority students*. Sacramento: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Lambert, W.E. & Tucker, G.R. (1972). *Bilingual education of children: The St. Lambert experiment*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Lucas, R., Henze, R. & Donato, R. (1990). Promoting the success of Latino language minority students: An exploratory study of six programs. *Harvard Educational Review*, 60, (3), 315-340.
- McLeod, B. (1996). *School reform and student diversity: Exemplary schooling for language minority students*. Washington, D.C.: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.
- Miramontes, O.B., Nadeau, A., & Commins, N.L. (1997). *Restructuring schools for linguistic diversity: Linking decision making to effective programs*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Schlechy, P.C. (1991). *Schools for the 21st century: Leadership imperatives for educational reform*. San Francisco: Jossey Boss.
- Warren-Little, J. (1994). Teachers' professional development in a climate of educational reform. In R.J. Anson (Ed.), *Systemic reform: Perspectives on personalizing education* (pp. 105-129). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. Office of Educational Research and Improvement.