According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Latino students accounted for 18 percent of our school population in 2003 (U.S. Census Bureau 2005a), and the larger Latino population had reached 41.3 million as of 2004. With a yearly growth rate of 3.6 percent, Latinos continue to be the fastest growing population group in the nation (U.S. Census Bureau 2005b).
The key to success for Latino students is a school environment that regards their language and culture as assets rather than deficits.

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They are a multifaceted population. Some Latino families are newly arrived immigrants, while others have been in the United States for several generations. As Latinos continue to shape the diversity in our schools, many elementary school principals are beginning to consider what they can do to strengthen their academic success.

The good news is that there are many successful practices that have been proved effective for Latino students. Here are some proven strategies that can help principals create conditions for success in schools with significant Latino populations.

**Know Your Students and Their Families**

The minimum requirement for a successful school experience for any student population is a welcoming environment for the students and their families. Latino students are no exception. Knowing the Latinos you serve will help you make your school more welcoming to them.

Latinos come from more than 20 different countries, speak different Spanish dialects, and have different sociocultural histories and traditions. They come to the United States for a variety of reasons, including social or political instability and violence in their countries, and professional and unskilled job opportunities in the United States (Nieto and Rolón 1997).

Don’t assume that because your students have Hispanic surnames that Spanish is their dominant language. Although 72 percent of first-generation Latinos are Spanish-dominant in their speech, 78 percent of third and older generations are English-dominant (Pew Hispanic Center 2004).

When parents are mostly Spanish-dominant or bilingual, successful schools try to maintain a significant number of bilingual administrative and professional staff to ensure effective home-school collaborations (Lucas et al. 1990).

**Replace Failed Strategies**

The educational history of Latino students in the United States has been characterized by a pervasive misunderstanding of the role of language and culture in learning. In attempting to address Latinos’ low academic achievement, policymakers and educators have consistently defined their language and culture as disadvantages that hinder their learning. Therefore, school interventions have focused almost exclusively on how to overcome such limitations. For example, as early as the 1920s and 1930s, school officials used IQ testing in English to “scientifically assess” Mexican students’ lack of academic progress. The test results were then used to label thousands of Mexican students as “culturally deprived” and “educable mentally retarded,” and to prescribe remedial education in segregated schools that included English-only instruction and even corporal punishment for speaking Spanish (Halcón 2001).

Although these practices are seen as deplorable after decades of civil rights progress and mounting research evidence indicating the advantages of native-language instruction, many continue to operate in today’s schools. Studies show that Latino students still are seen as “disadvantaged” because of their language and culture (García and Guerra 2004), are inadequately assessed by using a variety of “scientifically based” standardized tests in English (Valenzuela 2005), and are immersed in English-only programs (Ramírez 1998).

Conceptualizing the culture and language that Latino students bring to school as assets rather than deficits is probably the single best strategy to improve their learning experiences in school. With this perspective, and using a constructivist approach to teaching and learning, schools can accommodate Latino students from the standpoint of strengthening those assets and building on them.

One such accommodation is dual language programs. If the number of Latino students in your school is high, dual language programs can increase their academic achievement while also developing their biliteracy and bilingual skills (Reyes and Halcón 2001; Gómez et al. 2005).

These programs require a reorganization of the school, beginning in pre-kindergarten or kindergarten, so that English-dominant and Spanish-dominant children are grouped together and taught in both languages. Studies show that well-implemented dual language programs produce positive results, as demonstrated by standardized test results and biliteracy development for both groups of students (Gómez et al. 2005; Christian et al. 2004). With the expanding global economy seeking workers with multilingual and intercultural skills, dual language programs are the best promise for building your students’ future marketable skills.

**Reach Out to Latino Parents**

The benefits of parent involvement in the academic achievement of elementary school children is well known, and the role of Latino parents in their children’s education also has been well documented (Bermúdez 1994). However, many well-intentioned programs targeting low-income Latino parents have failed because they misunderstand the difference between the parents’ commitment to their children’s education and the kind of support their socioeconomic conditions allow them to provide (Rolón 2000).

You can be successful in reaching out to Latino parents by following these proven practices:

- Maintain a significant number of bilingual administrative and professional staff who are able to communicate with them (Lucas et al. 1990).
- Organize meetings with Latino parents to discuss school issues relevant to them (Lucas et al. 1990).
Increase the number of Latino parents in your school advisory committees and parent-teacher organization (Lucas et al. 1990).

Engage Latino parents in the development of classroom curricula. Studies have shown that they are excellent resources for information and resources relevant to their culture, history, and way of life (Berriz 2002; Keenan et al. 1993).

Enhance the Curriculum

The cultural and linguistic mismatch between home and school hinders the academic achievement of Latinos and other ethnolinguistically diverse students (Au and Kawakami 1994). One way to overcome this and provide Latino students with an environment where their identities are acknowledged and integrated into their school life is to enhance the curriculum. As a first step, you can increase the library and classroom collections of both bilingual and Spanish children books.

Provide Training for Teachers

Elementary classroom teachers need a lot of support and training to accommodate their English language learners. Successful schools promote staff development programs that help them implement the following strategies:

- **Identify the students’ English language proficiency.** Some may speak little or no English; others have different levels of bilingualism and biliteracy (Reyes and Constanzo 2002). Teachers must be able to adapt classroom activities accordingly. For example, students at their early development of English can be integrated into class discussions by asking them questions that can be answered with nods or other physical responses (Herrell 2000).

- **Use a variety of literacy methods.** Because each Latino student is a unique individual with different academic strengths and learning styles, successful teachers in the primary grades plan a variety of literacy activities, including phonemic awareness, vocabulary development within context, and use of different authentic types of reading texts (Echiburu and López 2001).

- **Use dialogue journals.** In dialogue journals, the teacher carries on a written conversation with students. These journals allow the teacher to model correct written English language forms and gauge the students’ English language development (Brisk et al. 2002).

- **Use cooperative learning methods.** To assist Spanish-dominant students in developing content knowledge, create frequent opportunities for them to interact with their English-dominant peers in project-based and problem-based group activities (Herrell 2000).

- **Provide contextual support.** When presenting new material, provide as much visual support as possible (Herrell 2000), including pictures, PowerPoint slides, and handouts. Be attentive to students’ nonverbal expressions signaling their understanding of concepts and directions.

- **Use a variety of assessments.** English language learners must be assessed using a variety of tools. For example, portfolios have the advantage of showing final products and the process to complete them, thus offering a better portrait of what these students can do.

These are some of the strategies that have proved successful for Latino students in the United States. Centering instruction and school change on what Latino students bring to our schools and classrooms might seem excessively demanding of our resources and energy. But to offer less is to shortchange their abilities to develop bilingualism and intercultural communication skills in an increasingly global economy where such skills are in high demand.

References


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WEB RESOURCES

The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELTA) collects, analyzes, synthesizes, and disseminates information about instructional programs for English language learners.

www.ncela.gwu.edu

The Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE), part of the Center for Applied Linguistics at the University of California, Santa Cruz, identifies and develops effective educational practices for linguistic and cultural minority students.

www.cal.org/crede

The Center for Applied Linguistics also offers downloadable publications about dual language programs, links to dual language schools, and technical assistance to principals interested in implementing a dual language program in their schools.

www.cal.org/twi

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), part of a national network of educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education, provides a collection of resources focused on bilingual education, including many available online in PDF format.

www.nwrel.org/comm/topic/biling.html
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