

Cal Poly Humboldt

Digital Commons @ Cal Poly Humboldt

Redwood Roots Videos and Resources

Open Educational Resources and Data

2022

Lesaya Howard Reflection

Lesaya Howard

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/rrv>

Lesaya A. Howard
April 29, 2021
LSEE 333

This semester I taught a fifth grade class of twenty six students, there are 12 girls and 14 boys. The majority of my students are Mexican American but I also have one Chinese student, one Russian student, and two Vietnamese students. All of my students except 10 speak another language other than English, for many of them English is their second language. My school has a population of 500 students so it's a moderately small school. It's in a small town settled in a very tourist part of northern California. My school has had a history of struggling to accommodate students who come from different backgrounds and cultures. Now, that more students from different backgrounds are coming to the school and area, there is a need for changes and accommodation which is why I chose to work at this school. After reading *Educating Emergent Bilinguals*, *Ofelia Garcia and Jo Anne Klefgen*, I realized how important it is to create a classroom environment that promotes social justice and human rights, have creative and challenging curriculum, and have a pedagogy that is collaborative and transformative. When setting up my classroom, I wanted to make sure that I had pictures, words, colors, and objects that created a positive and inclusive environment for all of my students. Being culturally responsive was high on my list of priorities. During the first week of school I opened my doors to my students and their families. I know how important and involved my family was in my schooling and I wanted that for my students as well. I decided to have a parent and family night where families were welcomed into my classroom to participate in fun activities and really get to know each other. I wanted them to feel comfortable asking me questions and being proactive in their child's education.

According to the department of education, there are a total of 3, 648,211 Hispanic emergent bilinguals in public schools that's a total of 78.14%. I knew that this was a statistic and fact I could not ignore and let slide. I needed to figure out what I needed to do in order to create lessons and curriculum that would benefit not just my English speaking students but also my emergent bilinguals. About 85% of emergent bilinguals students are able to communicate orally in English, but have difficulty using English for literacy and for completing academic tasks. Having this information in mind, I made sure that I had my handouts and whatever tasks were given, in different languages that the students spoke. I wasn't discouraging the learning of English but I wanted my students to know that their language is also valued in my classroom and they shouldn't be ashamed of that. Having a culturally sustaining pedagogy is very important to me and how I teach. Jeff Zwiers, the author of *Building Academic Language; Essential Practices for Content Classrooms*, highlights the importance of acknowledging cultural and linguistic differences. Some teachers may have a class discussion about the latest baseball game, movie, or song on the radio. All of these topics seem harmless and fun, but only for students who are immersed in the mainstream culture. There is a mainstream school system that I think isn't always acknowledged by many teachers because we take it for granted. If we have those kinds of topics and discussion in the classroom without any others, we are possibly excluding our other students who aren't familiar with those topics. Each morning I decided to have those warm up discussions where students are allowed to talk about anything going on in their lives or something fun that has happened to them the day before. This student lead discussion opens up more space and comfortability for my emergent bilingual students who may feel excluded from the western culture topics.

At one point in the semester I had another parent family night and we had some of the most wonderful discussions. I had each person who wanted to participate, draw a picture of their childhood home. I decided to use this topic because it was a great way for families to relate and draw upon each other's experiences and memories. It also gave the students an opportunity to get to know their parents and families better and have a sense of pride in their culture and where they came from. Again, I wanted my students to embrace their culture and languages. Their language is a strength and not a weakness, I want to draw on my students' strengths and what they can do, not what they can't do. There are a lot of educational programs for emergent bilinguals referred to as submersion or sink-or-swim programs that schools and educators provide. But there are problems that come with these programs, they neither provide alternative education services or use students' home languages to teach them. While there are wonderful opportunities and programs for students, I wanted to do the best I could while they were in my classroom. That started with my curriculum, I made sure to include scaffolding like; contextualization through body language, gestures, manipulatives, realia, technology, word walls, and graphic organizers. I also wanted to make my students' home language a part of our curriculum and classroom. Myself and other students got to learn new words and conversations in different languages, which the students really enjoyed.

Lastly, towards the end of the school year I had another parent family night where I told the parents how much amazing progress their children had made this semester and my hopes for them moving forward. The parents really appreciated me taking the time throughout the semester to make sure they were involved and that their voices were heard. By doing this I hoped to instill continued engagement from the parents in their children's education. During this last parent family night, we wrote poems. The prompt for these poems was the idea of the word 'famous.'

What does it mean to be famous? Money? Popularity? Notoriety? Parents and students were able to reflect on this and create their own poem from the examples I provided. It was very interesting because many parents showed discomfort and uneasiness because they felt they weren't good enough or capable of writing a 'good' poem. This translated into the children encouraging their parents to write and share their thoughts, it was a beautiful sight. After sharing their poems, there was a commonality amongst us all in our morals, beliefs, and perspectives. It united our class and group that had people from all ages, nationalities, ethnicities, and languages together.

I had a wonderful time this past semester, I am grateful for being able to witness my students' 'lightbulb' moments and overcoming adversity with resilience. The beginning of the semester was hard, seeing my emergent bilingual students doubt themselves and shy away from participating in class. But as time went on and I modeled what my expectations were, they started to come out of their shells and blossom right before my eyes. If there was one thing I could go back and change, it would be to do more research on my students' struggles and backgrounds. I am happy I encouraged parent participation but it would have helped to understand why my students are the way they are and so forth. I would also like to get my students more involved in the community. I think it's wonderful that we created a great school and class community but I would have liked to take it a step further and reach out to our community members and get the students involved in some way. The best way for students to gain knowledge and promote advocacy and social justice is to get them involved in the issues in the community and help in whatever way we can. My experience teaching this semester is one I will never forget, and will cherish for the years to come.

References:

Garcia, O., & Kleifgen, J. A. (2018). *Educating Emergent Bilinguals: Policies, Programs, and Practices for English Language Learners. Language & Literacy Series*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Zwiers, J. (2008). *Building academic language: Essential practices for content classrooms, grades 5-12*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Barbian, E., Gonzales, G. C., & Mejia, P. (2017). *Rethinking bilingual education: Welcoming home languages in our classrooms*. Milwaukee, WI: A Rethinking Schools publication.