



Evolving Demographics: English Language Learners in the Classroom

North Carolina is fortunate to have the expertise of Dr. Michael Matthews in its midst. Dr. Matthews is an assistant professor in the department of special education and child development at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. He is well-versed in the issues and needs of linguistically diverse gifted students, and his insight will be highly valued in the state as this population grows within schools. Following are Michael's responses to a series of questions posed by NCAGT on the issue of gifted Latino and ELL populations. His thoughts should be of great value and interest to those working with these students.

In comparison to other states, discuss the characteristics of Latino and ELL populations in North Carolina? What are the general demographics of these populations?

Because Latino and English language learner groups overlap by as much as 80 percent, I will talk about them together. North Carolina has had the fastest-growing Latino population of any state in the U.S. between 1990 and 2000¹. As recently as 1990, approximately one percent of the NC population was classified as Latino², while today some 10 percent of NC residents are members of this group. Because this influx is still relatively recent, many of these new residents do not speak English in the home setting. North Carolina is one of seven U.S. states that saw their ELL populations grow more than 300 percent from 1995 through 2005³. At the national level approximately 8 in 10 English language learners speak Spanish, although an individual school may have as many as several dozen different home languages represented among its ELL population.

Although most Latinos in North Carolina are not currently U.S. citizens, the great majority do reside here legally as students, guest workers, or other documented resident aliens. Approximately 65% of our Latino population is of Mexican origin, while just over 8% hail from Puerto Rico and approximately 2% trace their origins to Cuba. The remaining quarter of the Latino population come from other Spanish-speaking

countries. North Carolina's Latinos are slightly more likely to be Mexican American rather than Puerto Rican or Cuban, in comparison to Latinos in the overall U.S. population.

Some very general trends can be identified among the Latino population in NC. Latinos traditionally have settled primarily in the central region of the state, with relatively few initially settling either in the mountains or in the northern coastal region (although this has begun to change). Latino birth rates tend to be slightly higher than those of other U.S. populations, which corresponds to a younger median age for the Latino population as a whole. This pattern is most striking in the younger age ranges; nearly twice as many Latinos in NC are under age 5, compared to the proportion of this age in the general population in our state. This means that schools can expect to see continued growth in the school-age Latino population over the next several years. Many of these new students will have been born here, and therefore they are U.S. citizens regardless of the residency status of their parents⁴. Our larger proportion of recent immigrants also means that many Latino students in NC will be coming to school from Spanish-speaking homes. Latinos in NC are more likely to be employed than members of other North Carolina populations are, but the generally low level of formal education (particularly among Mexican immigrants, and much less so among Cubans) often restricts their earning ability. Therefore, many Latino children in North Carolina come to school from low-income households.

What are some of the issues that gifted (identified and not identified) ELL students face in schools/the classroom? Where do they excel; where do they typically struggle?

Beyond potential cultural differences, the English language is (not surprisingly) the largest issue that English language learners face in the classroom. Few U.S. teachers are themselves bilingual or bicultural, so it often can require substantial individual effort to develop an understanding⁵ of the strengths and needs of ELL students. Because gifted identification measures typically rely heavily on linguistic skills in English as well as on nomination by teachers, very few ELL students end up in programs for the gifted. To complicate matters further, some of the characteristic stages in the second language acquisition process may easily be confused with characteristics of students with learning disabilities. This confusion can be a problem for ELL students, especially if they show difficulty in learning to read⁶, as it can be very difficult to determine where the cause of such difficulty may lie. We also know that non-ELL students who are twice-exceptional often are not identified as gifted once they have been placed in special education settings, so it seems likely that this also is the case for ELL students. When we look at the numbers, and this applies here in North Carolina as well as to everywhere else I've

looked, students classified as ELLs are the single most under-represented group in gifted programs, period.

Many issues faced by ELL students are strikingly similar to those we face in gifted education settings. There is no federal definition of ELL, so states or districts develop their own criteria; a student classified as ELL in one school may move to another and not be eligible for services. There are few if any measures that are universally agreed upon as valid for measuring the English language proficiency of ELL students. Students classified as English language learners bring to school extremely varied educational backgrounds, and because their level of background preparation varies, both their language abilities and their academic abilities often cover a wide range within the same classroom setting. As we have seen in gifted education programming, trends favor inclusion models over special classrooms, yet many general education teachers say that they feel unprepared to meet the needs of ELL students in their classrooms.

Although we must remember that each individual case is different, students learning English in many cases may also have characteristic strengths. Often, ELL students have traveled widely by an early age. Approximately 5,000 students in North Carolina schools have parents who are migrant farm workers⁷, who may travel across several states during the course of a year. These students risk being forced to repeat courses or even whole grade levels due to gaps in their educational record, and these gaps in some cases are due to their prior schools' failure to forward the appropriate paperwork. Other ELL students may have parents who were forced to leave their home country for political reasons, or even simply for economic reasons.

The experiences some ELL children have gained through travel represent a strength that often goes unrecognized in the classroom; we rarely consider that by comparison, traditional students may never have ventured outside of the county where they were born. I recall seeing an outstanding mapping project created by a gifted elementary-age ELL student, in which he chronicled in detail his family's travels from their original home in South America to his elementary school in Georgia. Interdisciplinary, individualized projects such as this one can be appropriate for many learners, but with careful attention to individual needs, these options can be especially well suited to the gifted ELL student.

What are the most important things that teachers can do (tomorrow 😊) to nurture the potential in gifted ELL? Where can we get the biggest bang for the buck?

Focus on student strengths. One of the broader issues we need to be aware of is that most of us have a natural inclination to want to help others; this often is why we went into teaching in the first place. Most educators therefore naturally tend to focus first on students' weaker areas, and the risk in this tendency is that our instructional efforts can become mired down in remediation. In gifted education, we strive instead to focus on students' strengths. This change in emphasis is crucial in the development of effective teaching practice with all gifted learners, but especially so with gifted English language learners. Teachers should constantly ask themselves, "In today's lesson am I teaching to the top or to the bottom?" Some amount of remedial instruction may be necessary, particularly when student progress requires demonstrating a particular minimal level of performance on standardized testing, but we need to keep in mind that in the adult world our students' success ultimately will depend more *on what they can do well* than on the skills they do less well.

Be attentive to linguistic skills. We have anecdotal suggestions (although little hard evidence) that gifted English language learners may acquire English and other languages more rapidly than their non-gifted peers, so this is certainly something to watch for among our ELL students. For all students, the study of word origins and linguistic roots⁸ can help bring English vocabulary to life while potentially providing the added benefit of better scores on standardized tests. ELL students who speak a language in the Germanic or Romance language families, which are closely related to English, can be asked to express their unique background knowledge in the gifted classroom by providing cognate words in their first language. For example, the word *manual* shares common Latin origins (*manus*) with the Spanish *mano* (hand) and French *main*, while in German both *mann* and *hand* are found. Related words such as *manufacture* and *manuscript* can be used to extend the discussion. Talking about grammatical differences across different languages, as for example in verb forms or word order, can simultaneously extend the education of native English speakers while reinforcing English language development among ELL students in the same classroom.

Collaborate with ELL staff. Students classified as ELLs usually have access to resource teachers in this specialty area, but it is rare to see close collaboration taking place between gifted education and ELL staff or programs. Collaboration between teachers working with gifted and with ELL students would help not only in making the gifted identification process more equitable; it also could help develop the abilities and strengths of our ELL students. If you don't know your colleagues in the ELL program area, work to develop these relationships. Teachers who work with ELL students often have a good sense of which of their students show gifted potential, but they may be less

familiar with the procedures and regulations surrounding gifted program eligibility. Working together, you can help each other as well as help the children in your care.

Take a long-term view. Being bilingual and bicultural clearly are strengths in the adult world, given the demands of the global economy for skilled workers who can interact competently with businesses and individuals from other cultures. We strive to develop these skills among mainstream gifted learners at the secondary level through offerings such as AP language coursework and IB magnet schools, yet the development of these linguistic and cognitive capabilities among our primary-level ELL students is only rarely seen as a priority. Most ELL students lose academic proficiency in their home language as they gain proficiency in English, and this represents a tremendous loss of human and economic potential. At the same time, our foreign language education programs begin rather late in the K-12 pipeline and they generally have only limited success in developing high-level foreign language communication skills among our native English speaking students. Language immersion magnet school programs such as the one at Smith Academy of International Languages in Charlotte⁹ are a step in the right direction, and the consistently high demand to get into this program suggests that more programs like this one should be made available. Heritage language classes and programs offer another promising approach that has received very little attention¹⁰¹¹. These types of programs require a long time to develop, but they are well worth the effort. We also should encourage greater foreign language proficiency among staff in all types of schools; because the firsthand understanding of the processes and the difficulties of second language acquisition are the primary benefit, learning *any* language will be beneficial.

What final thoughts would you offer for teachers who work with ELL students?

Keep in mind that you do not have to be bilingual or bicultural yourself to work effectively with students who are English language learners, although it clearly will not hurt if you are. As a teacher of the gifted, your specialized training in how to differentiate instruction already puts you well on the path to becoming an effective teacher to ELL, gifted, and gifted ELL students alike, and your ability to advocate for individual learners' needs also is relevant to each of these groups. As educators, we must model the lifelong learning that we would like our students to emulate. There will always be more for us to learn about effective teaching practice, and if you've read this far you probably also have the necessary motivation to do so. Our state's evolving demographics are just one of the many challenges that keep our careers interesting.

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- ¹ National Council of La Raza (2005). North Carolina State Fact Sheet. Retrieved April 24, 2009 from http://www.nclr.org/files/33347_file_NC_final.pdf
- ² North Carolina Institute of Medicine (2003, February). *NC Latino Health, 2003: Final Report of the Latino Health Task Force* Durham, NC: Author. Retrieved April 20, 2009 from <http://www.nciom.org/projects/latino/latinopub/C2.pdf>
- ³ See <http://www.nea.org/home/29914.htm>
- ⁴ Passel, J. S., & Cohn, D. V. (2009, April 14). *A portrait of unauthorized immigrants in the United States* (No. 107). Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center. Retrieved April 21, 2009 from <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/107.pdf>
- ⁵ The idea of *cultural competency* is a relatively recent yet promising way to conceptualize this understanding. For more, see Shaunessy, E. & Matthews, M. S. (2009). Preparing Culturally Competent Teachers of the Gifted: The Role of Racial Consciousness. *Perspectives in Gifted Education* [monograph series]: *Diverse Gifted Learners*. Denver, CO: The University of Denver, Institute for the Development of Gifted Education.
- ⁶ Klingner, J. K., Hoover, J. J., & Baca, L. M. (Eds.). (2008). *Why do English language learners struggle with reading? Distinguishing language acquisition from learning disabilities* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- ⁷ North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (n.d.) Student Profile-Migrant Education Students in North Carolina. Retrieved April 24, 2009 from <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/mep/reports/meprofile.pdf>
- ⁸ The Online Etymology Dictionary at <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php> is one useful resource for planning this type of lesson
- ⁹ <http://pages.cms.k12.nc.us/smith/>
- ¹⁰
- ¹¹ Matthews, P., & Matthews, M. S. (2004). Heritage language instruction and giftedness in language minority students: Pathways toward success. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, 15(2), 50-55.