A SOCIO CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE IN ESTABLISHING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM: SOCIAL CONNECTIONS LEAD TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Vicki Nilles Ph.D[1], Malinda Jones Ed.D[2].

[1]Metropolitan State University of Denver

[2]Metropolitan State University of Denver

Introduction

We are educators of future educators; and as such, we must address the unfortunate dilemma that too many students in the United States are dropping out of school before they graduate from high school. A staggering number of culturally and linguistically diverse students are represented in this demographic. It is our intent to take a closer look at what appears to be working and what is not working in classrooms in order to support all students and to keep them engaged and enrolled in school. We seek to learn what has been implemented in both culturally and linguistically diverse and monolingual classrooms that may be considered effective, and what changes still need to be made to more appropriately encourage the successful completion of a kindergarten through grade twelve, public education for all students.

Background

The premise of this paper is based upon doctoral research (Nilles, 2012) which identified several instructional practices shown to effectively support student success in secondary English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. For the purpose of this paper, we are focusing on one variable which was shown to have a significant impact and can be replicated with intention and success in classrooms but is often overlooked; the relationship between social connections and academic success and engagement.

Review of the Literature

Language Acquisition through Sociocultural Considerations

Vygotsky's Law of Cultural Development states that a child's cultural development, both social and psychological, impacts their ability to effectively learn language. For example, children are first introduced to new language and information on a *social level* as they interact with one another. However, when people internalize or think about that interaction, it is on a *psychological level* (Vygotsky, 1981; 1987).Researchers confirm that through social opportunities and interactions, children develop thebasic linguistic components of *communicative competence* such as vocabulary, grammatical structure, phonemic awareness, prosody, and comprehension(Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf&Appel, 1994;Toohey, 2001.) . Second-language processing is somewhat different, however. According to Wertsch (1985a), internalized social interaction moves thinking with and about the new language from an *interpsychological* level to one that is *intrapsychological*, a process called *microgenesis* which facilitates internalizing the critical components of the second language.

This sociocultural viewpoint of second language acquisition supports intentionally designing and providing opportunities for interactions within the learner's zone of proximal

development. Internalization of social processes occurs when learners are provided opportunities to interact with more capable others and to move beyond their level of current competence in order to complete a given task (Engestrom, 2006b; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf&Appel, 1994; Wertsch, 1985a; Vygotsky, 1981). It is through this learning experience that the second language learner can assume the roles of novice and expert interchangeably, allowing them to constantly re-evaluate the need for implicit or explicit levels of help as they move through the process of linguistic problem solving together (Donato, 1994; 2000. This opportunity for dialogic social interchange, as well as working from the perspective of both novice and expert, allows for the extension of comprehension. This learning structure naturally creates a dynamic social context in which knowledge can be constructed by both novice and expert learners and is therefore considered a socially mediated activity (Engestrom, 2008b; Lantolf &Appel, 1994; 2000; Letorsky, 2009; Pica & Doughty, 1986; Swain, 1985; Toohey, 2001).

Vygotsky's (1978) theory also contends that language, especially understanding of word meanings,will be affected undoubtedly through social *contexts* which include economic, historical and social relationships. Socioeconomic and power structures are directly reflected in the language utilized. Being cautiously aware of the dominance of one language in the classroom is an important consideration in evaluating language learning and in designing language experiences (Bryzzheva, 2002). Through respectful acknowledgement of the rich cultural and linguistic history of students, language learning opportunities are presented in an environment of acceptance where students are encouraged to experiment with language expression freely.

Social Connections Impact Academic Engagement and Achievement. Recent research would indicate that there is a positive correlation between the nurturing and caring social relationships that teachers create with students and academic achievement. According to Kessler

(2000), young people who thrive in school do so because they feel a sense of belonging and connection and feel that people know and care about them. Noddings (1984; 2002; 2003) indicates that feelings of acceptance and motivation to do well in school are the result of students' feeling connected and cared about within the school environment. In describing caring as a basic human condition in that all people want to be cared for in some way, Noddings (2002) identifies four key components recommended for implementing a caring perspective in the classroom: 1) *Modeling*, in which educators demonstrate what it means to care and to be concerned with the growth of students; 2) *Dialogue* which encourages educators to engage students in discussion about caring and talk directly about how the act of caring can be implemented consistently and in various ways; 3) *Practice* allows opportunities for students to demonstrate acts of caring and to reflect upon and discuss those acts; and, 4) *Confirmation* encourages educators to provide students the opportunity to affirm and encourage the best in others (Noddings, 1984; 2002; 2003).

Bergin and Bergin (2009), McLaughlin, Talbert, Kahne, and Powell (1990), Pallock and Lamborn (2006), Roorda and Koomen (2011), and Rutter, Maughan, Morimore, Ouston, and Smith (1982) have addressed the role that teacher caring plays in allowing students to feel accepted and valued in the learning environment. The connection has been clearly established that when students felt connected and supported by teachers and others within the school environment, students had regular attendance, better behavior and higher academic achievement. Ferguson (2007), Orellana (2009), Orellana and Eksner (2006) and Vasquez (1988) found that culturally diverse students were able to learn more effectively when they had relationships with their teachers that were mutually caring and respectful.

Coffey (1999) suggests that the facilitation of community building involves sharing power with students, encouraging tolerance for ambiguity, fostering empathy, facilitating cooperation, and building an understanding of cultural values and that these factors had a positive impact on academic achievement. Ferguson, (2007) reiterates that when high school students have positive perceptions of their relationship with teachers, they choose to attend classes on a regular basis and report that school is more meaningful to them.

O'Connor and McCartney (2007) found that teacher-student relationships considered to be of high quality had a positive impact on student achievement. They determined the quality of the relationships of students from pre-school to third grade by administering the Student Teacher Relationship Scale (Pianta, 1992) to the teachers when students were in pre-school, kindergarten, first and third grades. The quality of the student to teacher relationship was directly determined by the evaluation of the teacher's feelings and beliefs about the student's actions toward them as the classroom teacher (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). The implications of this study indicate that there is value, both social and academic, in establishing high quality relationships with all students. It was also determined that the quality of relationship between the teacher and student had a tendency to decline as the students grew older. This could imply that it is simply harder for many teachers to remain connected with some students as they begin to face the normal challenges of adolescence. It may also be the result of the organizational structure of middle and high schools. It may also be that adolescents tend to shift their important social relationships to peers.

This study carries implications for university communities, in particular teacher education programs, as well. Typically, pre-service early childhood education teachers are taught to effectively interact with and foster high quality relationships with and between their young

students. The focus quickly changes, however, from relationship-based pedagogy to curriculum-based pedagogy when teachers are trained to work with children at the middle and secondary school levels. Teacher education programs might do well to establish a strong pedagogical foundation based on establishing relationships with all students first and then moving to effective instructional strategies (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007).

In a meta-analysis of 119 studies, Cornelius-White (2007) found that students involved in positive student-teacher relationships had greater access to optimal and holistic learning opportunities. These studies showed that overall when students were consistently exposed to classroom practices that included the components of positive relationships, non-directivity (learner-centered instructional strategies), empathy, warmth, and encouraging thinking and learning, there was a positive correlation to participation, critical thinking, satisfaction, math achievement, drop-out prevention, self-esteem, verbal achievement, positive motivation, social connection, I.Q., grades, reduction in disruptive behavior, attendance, and perceived achievement. O'Connor, Dearing, and Collins (2011) found that high quality teacher student relationships provided *a protective factor* in preventing long term occurrences of behavior problems in early childhood and in adolescence.

Utilizing a learner centered model of instruction takes the individual learner's needs and levels of understanding into consideration and makes the student the center of the learning model. This particular approach to learning implements strategies considered to be metacognitive and cognitive, affective and motivational, developmental and social, and specific to individual differences (McCombs &Whisler, 1997a). According to McCombs and Whisler (1997a), learning is seen as:

> Non-linear, recursive, continuous, complex, relational, and natural in humans… learning is enhanced in contexts where learners have supportive human relationships, have a sense of ownership and control over the learning process, and can learn with and from each other in safe and trusting learning environments. (p. 7)

Various attachment theories also continue to support the idea that the nature of relationships has a long term impact on variables such as personality, in determining how well students will be able to engage in relationships with teachers, peers and subject matter, and in determining healthy self-concepts and a sense of well-being (Noddings, 1984; 2003; Walker, 2004).

In addressing the need for more positive relationships within the school environment, Poplin and Weeres (1994) approached the problems in four multi-ethnic school districts in California by seeking answers from all members of school society (students, teachers, cafeteria workers, parents and administrators). The question "What is the true problem with schools?" was posed to these subjects and they narrowed it down to issues surrounding relationships at school. Poplin and Weeres (1994) contend that many of the difficulties faced by schools are due to a lack of positive relationships within the school structure. They define positive relationships as those involving open honest communication and respect. Research supports the idea that everyone within the school community, especially students, benefit from the experience of having positive relationships with peers and other figures of authority in the school environment. Lee (2009), Koomen, Split, and Oort (2011), Wooley, Kol, and Bohen (2009), and Zimmer-Gembeck, Chipuer, Hanisch, Creed and McGregor (2006) support the view that positive relationships between students and teachers are an important factor in determining the academic success of students considered to be at risk of school failure. These studies supported the concept

that the higher quality of teacher student relationships resulted in the higher level of engagement and academic achievement for these students.

Methodology

Through approximately 180 contact hours in two ESL classrooms over the course of a seven-month period, various strategies and instructional practices were identified. Twenty students from various countries, all at a high intermediate to advanced level of English-language proficiency, were the participants for this study at Mt. Evans High School, a suburban school located south of Denver, Colorado. Interviews, focus group discussions, field notes and many informal meetings provided the information necessary to glean the various pedagogical approaches utilized by these teachers. Drawing from many of the empirically supported approaches to providing effective access to multiple literacies in the classroom environment informed this study and established the lens through which data was collected and analyzed.

Participants

ESL Teachers. These subjects were selected and determined to be effective based on specific criteria. The category of highly effective teachers was defined using the following criteria:

a. District nomination/recommendation by Title III or administrative personnel
b. Utilization of instructional strategies that are empirically proven to be effective with students acquiring English as a second language (based on Casteneda v. Pickard (1981) legislation).

The Castaneda v. Pickard (1981) legislation clarifies school districts' obligation to second language learners as follows:

- The instructional program pursued by a school district must be informed by an educational theory recognized as sound by some experts in the field, or at least deemed a legitimate educational strategy;
- The program and practices actually used by the school system are reasonably calculated to implement that theory; and,
- The program produces results indicating that the language barriers confronting students are actually being overcome (National Research Council Institute of Medicine, 1997, p. 371).

The research that informed the instructional practices of the two ESL teachers who would eventually become the primary participants was discussed during teacher interviews.

Mr. Erikkson.

Mr. Erikkson teaches the language arts ESL classes servicing students, grades 9–12. The language arts classes are designed according to the English language proficiency level of the students so that there are classes designed specifically for students who are at beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels of English language proficiency. The ESL language arts content closely aligns with the building and district curriculum for native English-speaking students with strategies embedded specific to second-language learning.Mr. Erikkson completed his undergraduate degree in English with a minor in Russian as well as a Master's Degree in curriculum and instruction. He holds teaching endorsements in the following areas: ESL; Social Studies; Russian; Spanish; Hindi; and Urdu. He is also fluent in Swedish but does not have a current endorsement for that language.

Mr. Marino.

Mr. Marino currently teaches various history classes designed specifically for professional development training for teachers. Grades 9-12 are serviced through these ESL social studies classes. These courses closely align with the mainstream social studies curriculum but also adhere to empirical recommendation for content courses for English language learners. ESL students are clustered together for some core-content classes such as social studies and language arts; these classes are referred to as sheltered classes due to the fact that an instructional format is utilized known as sheltering. This format aligns with the Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol (SIOP) supported by research to be effective for second language learners (Echevarria et al. 2008). Although second language research supports native language instruction concomitant with direct teaching of English as a second language, the resources were not available at MEHS given that many different languages were represented (Cummins, 1999; Krashen, 1985; Lantolf, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Mr. Marino originally received a marketing degree and later went on to complete a teaching program in urban education and history with an emphasis in special education. After teaching briefly in an urban district in Chicago, Mr. Marino came to Pleasantville, Colorado, where he began working exclusively with students who are second language learners.

ESL students.

During the first round of observations in the spring semester of 2008, ten ESL students were observed and considered to be functioning at the advanced level of English language proficiency or categorized as 3s or 4s on the Colorado English Language Acquisition (CELA) assessment. In the State of Colorado, second language learners are assessed on the Colorado English Language Acquisition assessment instrument, which then labels them with a number from 1 to 4. These same ten students had both Mr. Marino and Mr. Erikkson for advanced ESL

world geography and advanced ESL language arts. This group was observed in both of these classes for the entire semester. Most of the observations included all ten of these students.

The second round of observations took place in the fall semester of 2008, when a group of ten students were observed, some of them returning from the previous semester but most of them new to the advanced ESL classes. Many of the students from the spring classes had mainstreamed into regular content classes and were no longer receiving ESL instructional services except through a study skills class provided by the ESL staff.

Data Collection

An observational case study method of research wasutilized to determine how two English as a second language teachers implement instructional practices in a classroom setting. The exploration of how these ESL teachers verbally interact with students, in small and larger group settings, naturally within their classroom environments, as well as observing the instructional strategies utilized in the classroom, was the focus. The researcher approached the study as a participant observer in two secondary, ESL classrooms. Approximately 180 hours of observation were conducted in these two ESL classrooms. Formal observations began in January 2008 and included two visits per week for seven months. Classroom observations were conducted for a total of seven months, although there was a break for the summer vacation. Data was collected via interviews, journals, diaries, logs, field notes and audio-taping of classroom activities. All data was collected and transcribed as primary text for analysis.

Data Analysis

Guiding categories and overarching themes for effective ESL instruction. Main themes have been identified and supported in research (Gutierrez et al., 1999; Gutierrez et al., 2000; Gutierrez et al., 1995) when considering the characteristics of effective instructional

strategies for students acquiring English as a second language. These themes were used as the major lens through which to compare the instructional approaches implemented consistently by these two ESL teachers. Specific classroom strategies demonstrated by both Mr. Marino and Mr. Erikkson were analyzed while specifically looking for the characteristics of effective instruction described in these three themes. The following basic characteristics identify each of these themes:

I. Student access to joint participation and strategic assistance

- Dialogic instructional interaction with teacher and students and among students
- Academic and instructional goals are approached through cultural constraints, resources, and values
- Consideration of planes of analysis in learning specific to apprenticeship, guided participation and participatory appropriation

II.Joint Construction of new sociocultural terrain in the classroom

- Teacher and student local knowledge used to transform what counts as learning
- Infusion of teacher and student background experiences
- Creation of curriculum based on teacher and students' background knowledge
- Utilization of students' funds of knowledge in achieving academic and instructional goals

III.Instruction designed to provide participation that is symmetrical and heteroglossic

- The classroom considered multi-voiced learning environment
- Bi-directionality of linguistic and sociocultural exchanges between teacher and students and among students
- Adult not seen as sole expert but shares role of knowledgeable other with students

- Promotion of biliteracy and encouragement in use of L1
- Students and teacher depart from rigidly scripted and exclusive social spaces
- Potential for protest of monologic, transcendent script
- Struggle among competing voices
- Merging of various social and cultural perspectives; multiple scripts
- Disruptive form of underlife develops in the form of radical restructuring of teacher and student scripts
- It is within this space that instructional conversation develops a sociocultural conscience
- Creation of transformative dialogue through inclusion and critique of both teacher and students' stories at both inter and intra-psychological levels

Results

This study was specifically designed to look at the nature of instructional practices in ESL classrooms identified as effective. The results support the existing evidence that specific approaches to teaching are evident in ESL classrooms considered effective. Although these principles are not necessarily new to education, especially the field of second language acquisition or teaching English as a second language, they are representative of approaches to instruction that are not commonly observed in the ESL classroom (Freeman, 1998; Gutierrez, 2008a; 2009; Gutierrez et al., 1995; Moje, 2004; Nystrand et al., 2001).

The literature suggests that best practices in ESL classrooms would include: dialogic opportunity for interaction among students and with their teachers that is both social and academic; the use of both the native and second languages of each student, offering them as resources to accessing knowledge in the classroom; instruction that is naturally sociocultural, in which the unique life histories of all students are viewed as important components of what is considered meaningful in the classroom and recognized as important curricular contributions; the many student voices that must be heard for both social and academic purposes; access to information through scaffolded discussion and instructional delivery; the positioning of students as cultural and linguistic experts in their native language and/or culture, providing all students with an opportunity to act and interact as knowledgeable other in various classroom activities; multiple perspectives of student self-efficacy; and opportunities for students to work within the third space where student and teacher dialogue intersect, creating an atmosphere for authentic interaction. This study documents the incorporation of these factors in ESL education.

In recognizing the nature of instructional practices utilized in these two classrooms that could be considered effective, and are supported in research to be so, there was also evidence of questionable instructional practice. Instructional decisions implemented in a classroom are inevitably driven by the epistemological histories of the teachers who ultimately have the power to implement them. This becomes integral in determining the effectiveness of these instructional choices that are made for students, especially those acquiring English as a second language, given that the White, middle-class backgrounds of both of these teachers have an undeniable impact on their instructional perspectives, whether consciously or not. Many of these internalized viewpoints, which may be deemed as effective instruction by both of these teachers, may contain embedded ideology that may prove ineffective for students who are members of groups

considered culturally and linguistically diverse. Personal beliefs and values impact how teachers approach instruction in their classrooms (Beswick, 2006; Calderhead, 1996; Dee &Henkin, 2002; Ertmer, 2005). Even an exceptional curriculum cannot teach itself given that it is the mediation of the teacher that determines how these techniques will be implemented with students. This perspective is relevant in determining how effective instruction is identified, given that the sociocultural histories of each individual teacher determine how they personally define effective instruction.

Upon identification of the highly effective instructional practices utilized by both these ESL teachers, it was very exciting to receive news indicating that the sophomore and junior ESL students participating in this study in 2008 (20 students) had *all* graduated from Mt. Evans High School. Of that group, 30% went on to attend community college or a local university. When compared to national statistics, these numbers reflect the impact that effective teaching can have on students learning English as a second language.

Discussion

Learning and cognition are considered social phenomena, with that being especially true of learning a language (Vygotsky 1981; Wertsch, 1979b). Socially rich language learning environments value and provide opportunities for exposure to the local language while encouraging and empowering students to utilize all resources available through the native language (Cummins, 1999; Naiman et al., 1978; Norton, 2000; Norton &Toohey, 2001).

Welcoming Home Language and Culture.Mr. Erikkson created a curriculum that reflected the individual sociocultural histories of each of his students. He did this by first establishing social connections with his students in order to have access to their personal histories. He culminated this relationship with classroom discussions and activities that held

specific relevance and meaning for these students. Mr. Erikkson also positioned students as having choices in determining what instructional activity qualified as meaningful to them. The curriculum was consequently designed with the purpose of including the everyday funds of knowledge that students found interesting, such as music and specific songs that were popular in their native languages.

Connecting with Student Interests-Using Music to Connect. Mr. Erikkson was able to incorporate the academic literacies that the school and district deemed important and relevant into the activities that he had designed using everyday funds of knowledge such as the lyrics from students' favorite songs. This allowed him to act as the catalyst in bridging native language and culture with that recognized as important at school, so that students were encouraged to incorporate their native languages and cultures into every lesson implemented in the classroom (Moje et al., 2004; Moll & Greenburg, 1990). Although intentional consideration of students' home language and culture appeared to be a focus for Mr. Erikkson, it is with great difficulty that the linguistic and cultural intricacies of each student can be authentically recognized and incorporated as a consistent part of a classroom curriculum.

Great Start to the Day: Students Chat before Class. Mr. Marino invited students to use pre-instructional social talk in class. This was primarily shared through the native languages of each student. Most of the discussion took place in Spanish, as it was the most prevalent language of the class; however, other languages were utilized as well. Mr. Marino joined the conversations, sometimes in English and sometimes in his self-proclaimed limited Spanish. This provided an opportunity for all to be engaged in communicative and reciprocal interaction. Students were encouraged to share dialogue about events, ideas of personal interest and

relevance, and their social and cultural histories with others. It also provided them with the opportunity to play with language through good-natured teasing and banter.

Within the instructional framework of both of these classes, students are presented with many opportunities to access and utilize the many instructional resources that reflect the personal linguistic and cultural histories of the group. These opportunities are evident in the continual invitation to use the native language and referencing of the native culture in daily classroom practices; however, the question arises as to why these native languages and cultures may be perceived as second-choice options given that the main goal of instruction and final assessment as to student academic performance is only conducted in English. These contradictory messages of welcoming instructional practices specific to the native language and culture while still realizing that all academic direction leads to English acquisition can present the possibility of conflictive messages for students.

Implementation at the Higher Education Level – Metropolitan State University of Denver

Upon completion of this dissertation study,we were convinced that the demonstrated value of positive social interactions and connections within the secondary ESL classroom community had significant implications for our classrooms in higher education. Too frequently students in our classes appear disengaged from us, other class members, and the content of the course; hesitating to contribute opinions or to discuss practicum experiences.

To extend our hypothesis that this study could inform our own pedagogy, we implemented various instructional strategies to strengthen social connections with and among our students studying early childhood, elementary, and culturally and linguistically diverse education at Metropolitan State University of Denver. These include 1) dialogic opportunity for interaction among students and with their teachers that is both social and academic; 2) instruction that is

naturally sociocultural, in which the unique life histories of all students are viewed as important components of what is considered meaningful in the classroom and recognized as important curricular contributions; 3) the many student voices that must be heard for both social and academic purposes; 4) access to information through scaffolded discussion and instructional delivery; 5) providing all students with an opportunity to act and interact as the knowledgeable other in various classroom activities; and 6) multiple perspectives of student self-efficacy. We are currently pursuing opportunities to study the data formally in order to further examine the relationships between social connections and positive academic outcomes for students at the higher education level.

Sample activities shared with MSU students

1) **Welcoming Home Language and Culture-Great Start to the Day**
    a. **Cultural Identity Puzzle:** Students are given a task of compiling their cultural history, from language background, to socio-economic context, and other culturally relevant areas. Students examine themselves holistically and the various components of their identity.
2) **Connecting with Student Interests**
    a. **Student interest surveys:** Students are given an interest survey at the beginning of the semester where they share personal information regarding various interests such as favorite movies, musical selections, vacation destinations, etc. This information is synthesized into a class" play list" that is used to facilitate higher level thinking about the class curriculum and used during group activities, assessments, and other assignments.

b. **Learning style assessments:** "True Colors", is an informal learning style assessment instrument that allows students to metacognitively identify their learning "comfort zones" within various learning modalities. Instruction can then be addressed within learning style groups based on the outcomes of the assessment.

c. **Designing curriculum based on personal interests:** Students' identify personal areas of interest which serve as curricular topics of exploration. Curriculum design is modeled and guided within cooperative learning groups.

3) **Teachers Make Mistakes Too-Bridging the Social Gap between Students and Teachers**

a. **In-class discussions, presentations, assessments**: The professors consistently assume the role of active learner in the classroom moving from theory of professor as expert or conveyer of knowledge exclusively, to one of life long learner, creating a parallel learning model with students.

4) **Engaging in Controversial Discussion-Nothing is Taboo**

a. **"Debate It" Activity:** Students are given consistent opportunities to present both sides of any topic covered in class. They are encouraged to apply their personal background experiences to create a rich debate environment coupled with the research utilized in class creating an academic forum for creative discussion.

5) **Instruction Builds on Social Connection**

a. **Build Community Daily:** Activities that require both social and academic conversation is implemented intentionally during each class session. This is an important opportunity for students to make connections to each other as well as to content by sharing background experience specific to the topic being covered.

b. **Save the Last Word:** Students respond in writing to a quote or passage from their assigned text. During class they read the quote and other students who have either responded to the same passage or wish to comment share a personal connection, opinion, or perspective. The original student comments last, hence s/he has "the last word.

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