THE ACCULTURATION OF LANGUAGE MINORITY LEARNERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Portland Public Schools, like many urban schools in the United States, has an increasing number of students whose first language is other than English. These students were either born in a different country (hence a different culture) or were raised in a home environment in the U.S. speaking a language other than English and/or following the customs of their country of origin. Whether or not these students had the benefit of a bilingual education (instruction in English and another language) or English as a second language (ESL) program, many of them continue to be at risk in mainstream classrooms because they have not used English in the same ways or for the same length of time as native English speakers. In addition to language, there is also the important consideration of cultural adaptation, or acculturation. This Bulletin examines the acculturation of language minority learners and implications for teaching.

ACCULTURATION

Acculturation is an individual's process of adaptation and socialization to the host culture. The degree to which anyone acculturates to another culture depends on many factors such as desire to leave the home culture, psychological trauma or warfare, age, educational background, urban vs. rural orientation, and the similarities or differences of the individual's personal/cultural values and assumptions with those of U.S. culture.

Adapting to a new culture may or may not take much time for newcomers; conversely, having spent a great deal of time in any culture does not automatically imply strong adaptation to it either. Although children generally acculturate more rapidly and easily than their parents, it is important to note that there are varying degrees or levels of acculturation which students and their families may be experiencing at any point in time after arriving. The degree of acculturation can either accelerate or delay learning in school. It is equally important to note that there is no right or wrong with regard to acculturation; nor is there any fixed nature to any of the following descriptions. The labels simply describe a psychological and cultural condition experienced in the process of acculturation.

Bicultural. This level of acculturation is the maximum degree of adaptation to another culture while also maintaining a similar degree of acculturation to one's culture of origin. The condition is usually characterized by a facility with the first and second language, ease of interaction in most social contexts in both cultures, and a general comfort level and mobility with most aspects of the physical environment.

Assimilated. The maximum degree to which an individual acculturates to the host (e.g., U.S.) culture while resisting social, cultural, or familial ties with the home culture is known as
assimilation. A person who assimilates readily embraces most aspects of the host culture, attempts to use English in as many communicative contexts as possible, and, in general, physically and psychologically refrains from any contact with the home culture - in effect adapting completely to the adopted culture.

**Traditional.** A person whose acculturation to the host culture remains low, even after an extended period of time, while embracing the culture of origin can be considered traditional. Maintaining the traditions of one's culture while restricting participation in most aspects of U.S. culture, such as community organizations, religious affiliations, social clubs, etc., as well as minimizing the acquisition of English - all of these practices denote the actions of someone categorized as traditional.

**Marginal.** Losing one's cultural contacts and practices with the country of origin while simultaneously resisting acculturation to U.S. culture characterizes an individual who is marginal. In effect, anyone in this category is an outcast, culturally speaking. By not engaging in any aspects of the host culture and having lost connections with the culture of origin and/or with members of the same ethnic community, such individuals experience anomic, or a personalized disorientation, anxiety, and social isolation.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS**

1. Refugees, immigrants, ethnics, sojourners (see Bulletin, "Who Are the Language Minorities?") will, by their status, experience different tendencies towards acculturation; therefore, it is important to be sensitive to these tendencies. For example, refugees may stay at a traditional or marginal level of acculturation longer; immigrants may assimilate or achieve biculturalism in a relatively rapid amount of time; ethnics, by their very definition, may take on a more resistant attitude towards acculturation; and sojourners' acculturation may vary widely according to their willingness to culturally adapt in the temporary amount of time that they are in the host country.

2. In general, bicultural and assimilated learners will be the most highly motivated to learn, given their positive disposition towards many or all aspects of U.S. culture.

3. In general, traditional and marginal learners will be the least motivated to learn because of their ambivalent or negative attitudes towards U.S. culture.

4. Motivation to learn may be low while a language minority student experiences initial stages of acculturation; motivation to learn should increase among students as (and if) they acculturate.

5. All of the levels of acculturation - bicultural, assimilated, traditional, marginal - are conditions which help to lend insights on student motivation. It is important not to make any value judgments regarding these often temporary conditions and to try to understand why students embrace or resist learning.

6. Finally, it is important to remember that acculturation is a process which varies with each learner and is based on a multiplicity of factors connected with the learner's status upon arriving, home environment, and/or goals. Motivation to learn may vary while a language minority learner engages in acculturation.

**Sources:**

