

Access and the Arts: Preparing Teachers to Support Multilingual Students in the Arts Classroom

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MAINSTREAM classrooms in the United States are increasingly multilingual spaces (Lucas et al., 2008), but teachers continue to feel unprepared to meet the needs of multilingual students (Hong et al., 2019). Efforts have been made to better prepare teachers of math, social science, English language arts, and sciences (de Jong et al., 2013); however, focusing on teacher preparation only in the core content areas ignores whether teachers in other subjects are prepared to support multilingual students in accessing the language and content of their subject. As teacher educators, we take the stance that training for working with multilingual learners should be inclusive of *all* teachers. In this article, we specifically focus on arts teachers, but a similar argument could be made for teachers of physical education, computer science, consumer sciences, world languages, and so on.

According to MA DESE (n.d. a), 80.4% of all students in Massachusetts were enrolled in arts courses (including music, visual arts, theatre, and dance) during the academic year 2018-2019, with music accounting for 62.6%. The trend was similar for classified English Learners¹: 81.6% of ELs were enrolled in arts courses. These numbers are encouraging because they show that, at least in Massachusetts, multilingual students have similar enrollment patterns as other students in arts education. However, the robust numbers of ELs enrolled in these

¹ In this article, we occasionally use the term “English (Language) Learners” (ELs), because policy initiatives like the RETELL Initiative were specifically created to ensure equitable education for classified ELs. We also use the term “multilingual learners” as a more asset-based alternative for students learning bi- or multilingually (see also Colombo, Tigert, & Leider, 2019).

classes further highlights the need for arts teachers to be trained to work with multilingual students.

SUPPORTING MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS: WHAT DO ARTS TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW?

Arts education is multimodal, interactive, and often positioned as “fun.” With these characteristics, it might also be assumed that accessibility in arts education is not as big a concern as in core academic classes. However, the assumption that multilingual students just “get” the arts without instructional scaffolding and linguistic support ignores the fact that the arts, also, have complex, subject-specific language and concepts that are necessary for students to gain a deep appreciation for and engagement in these subjects. Below we briefly outline some key considerations for arts teachers who are working with multilingual learners.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

The arts, in general, can be a space for multilingual learners to develop their overall English proficiency (e.g. Brouillette, 2012; Greenfader & Brouillette, 2013; Wellman & Bey, 2015). A visual arts class, for example, offers students a low-stakes environment for interacting with others and using language as they share and discuss the art pieces they are creating. In drama and theater classes, students are organically practicing reading, speaking, and listening as they prepare for and then deliver the performance. However, in order to build on and maximize these language learning opportunities, arts teachers, like their core academic colleagues, should have specific training in language development and instruction (Reeves, 2004, 2006; Walker et al., 2004). For example, arts teachers should be able to interpret students’ WIDA levels to tailor activities to their language abilities, learn how to elevate students’ discussions with strategies such as sentence starters, and encourage and scaffold participation with different grouping structures.

DISCIPLINARY LITERACY AND ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

Each discipline has particular academic language associated with its subject matter (Moje, 2015; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). For instance, a multilingual learner in the beginning stages of developing English might be able to participate in a drawing activity but might not be able to fully access the vocabulary the teacher uses to discuss drawing technique — terms like *abstract*, *focal point*, *perspective*, or *symmetry*. Similarly, in a music classroom, a student may be familiar with the general vocabulary to describe a musical piece (e.g.,

pace, slow), but not yet have the discipline-specific language (e.g., *tempo, largo*). Thus arts teachers need to know how to identify language objectives and address the language demands of their lessons through strategies such as word banks and word walls, visuals, and graphic organizers. They should also know how to create opportunities for students to use their home languages to make sense of their learning (Hamman, 2018), an option that can be especially helpful for newcomer students.

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CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

Even when teachers take language into consideration in their instructional decisions, multilingual learners may feel unwelcome or out of place in the classroom (Pappamihiel, 2002; Valdés, 2001), making them less likely to participate and engage. As classrooms become more diverse, it is important for teachers to have the skills to create classroom environments that are inclusive and welcoming for culturally and linguistically diverse students. For example, in the same way language arts teachers are encouraged to use texts that are representative of their students' backgrounds, arts teachers should consider including artists, musicians, and works of art that represent their students' cultural and linguistic heritages. This points to the need for arts teachers to learn to critically evaluate their curricular materials and use strategies such as background and interest inventories to get to know their students.

SUPPORTING MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS IN ARTS EDUCATION: HOW CAN WE DO BETTER?


The knowledge arts teachers need to support their multilingual students can be developed through teacher education. We close with two main ways this can be done.

Professional Development Opportunities

Professional development focused on culturally and linguistically inclusive and responsive instruction has been shown to improve academic outcomes and opportunities for multilingual learners (López & Santibañez, 2018). We suggest

that opportunities be found for professional development that specifically addresses the needs of arts teachers. Examples might include workshops on how to diversify the arts curriculum and build in more linguistic scaffolds and attention to language. Workshops like these could be offered by school districts, institutes of higher education, and professional organizations, who could join forces to ensure that professional development is built on a solid understanding of both arts and language education.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

In Massachusetts, all “core” content area teachers — namely, early childhood and elementary teachers, teachers of students with moderate or severe disabilities, and teachers of English language arts, reading, mathematics, science, civics and government, economics, history, and geography (CMR Title 603, Section 14) — are required to complete a state-approved course that leads to an endorsement in Sheltered English Instruction (SEI) and focuses specifically on supporting multilingual learners in content and general education classrooms. So far, about 60,000 educators in Massachusetts have completed the endorsement (Aguiar, 2018). In 2018, the SEI endorsement requirement was extended to include career and vocational technical teachers who work with ELs (MA DESE, n.d. b). While this is a step in the right direction, we believe that this requirement should be expanded to include *all* teachers, including arts teachers. All educators need specialized preparation to provide equitable access to multilingual learners, and in Massachusetts the SEI Endorsement training is a readily available source of such preparation. 

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