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Rethinking Constructivism in Multicultural Contexts: Does Constructivism in Education take the Issue of Diversity into Consideration?

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**Rethinking Constructivism in Multicultural Contexts:
Does Constructivism in Education take the Issue of Diversity
into Consideration?**

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to understand whether and, if so, how one particular prospective learning theory in education really deals with the issue of diversity. As a prospective learning theory, epistemology, and methodology, constructivism emphasizes non-transmitted ways of classroom instruction, and its conduciveness to student learning has been well documented. However, most research concerning constructivism has been conducted in relatively stable linguistic, ethnic, and cultural contexts; relatively few studies have critically analyzed the process of teaching and learning when constructivism is applied to contexts involving linguistic, cultural, or ethnic diversity. In the paper, the author discusses the major assumptions and the possible challenges to constructivism when it is applied to the students with limited English proficiency. In the final section of the paper, pedagogical implications related to multicultural education are suggested.

Introduction

Background: Limited English Proficiency Students in the United States

The recent dramatic increase in the numbers of linguistically and culturally diverse students in schools across the United States has affected school populations particularly strongly. According to Nieto (2000), the number of linguistic minority students—those whose first language is other than English—was 9.9 million by 1994. These students represent diverse levels of English proficiency and academic preparedness. Among them, the students classified as having limited English proficiency (LEP) were more than three million by 1996 (Nieto, 2000).

Accordingly, there has been a growing need for educational programs and approaches that will accommodate the new student population. In theory, LEP students are placed in special language instruction programs (e.g., English as a second language [ESL] classes) until they have attained the level of proficiency necessary to compete with native English-speaking peers in the mainstream classroom. In reality, however, these students are usually

placed in mainstream courses long before they develop the level of English proficiency required to take content courses in those subjects (Harklau, 1994).

As the number of LEP students in the mainstream classroom swells, the education of those students is now no longer the concern of just a few ESL teachers but of all teachers. It is not an exaggeration to claim that almost every teacher in the classroom serves as at least “a part time second language teacher” (van Lier, 1988, p. 7). Despite the increase in the number of LEP students, current U.S. classrooms are characterized by an “increasingly homogeneous population of teachers [who] are instructing an increasingly heterogeneous population of students” (Gomez, 1994, p. 320). This trend may continue for some time, considering that current teacher-education students in the U.S are largely female, white, and monolingual, and want to teach students “very much like themselves” (Liston & Zeichner, 1991, p. 192). This imbalance between teachers and LEP students in terms of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic background may contribute, to some extent, to cultural conflicts between majority teachers and minority students in the classroom.

Under such circumstances, LEP students are usually at a disadvantage due to the failure to understand academic, social, and linguistic standards at school. In other words, their lack of English proficiency, along with their different cultural orientations, prior knowledge, experience, and expectations, is reported to have negative consequences for LEP students’ academic achievement in monolingual mainstream classrooms (Delpit, 1995; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Glatthorn, 1993; Ogbu, 1987; Toohey, 1998). Delpit (1995) claims that language minority students are mismatched with certain school settings because of their different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Above all, these students do not have high enough levels of spoken and written English to interact with their English-speaking peers and teachers in the classroom. In describing patterns of exclusion and domination among students during classroom activities, Toohey (1998) points out that students whose language departs from accepted standards constitute a rank that requires normalization.

In addition to the problems associated with their limited English proficiency, LEP students have been mismatched with certain school settings due to “cultural discontinuity” (Glatthorn, 1993, p. 381) between school in the U.S. and school in their home culture. In other words, these students bring with them a particular set of cultural values and norms that are incongruent with those expected in the mainstream classroom. For example, Punjabi Indians come to the classroom with the cultural expectation that children should defer to adult authority by not defending their ideas even when they are in conflict with those of the adults (Ogbu, 1987). To take another example, Asian students may feel uncomfortable in a classroom environment where the teachers are informal and the students are encouraged to speak in front of the class (Nieto, 1992). Such cultural differences between students and teachers, along with the teacher’s failure to understand the students’ culturally learned behaviors may result in conflicts that obstruct student learning.

Statement of Purpose

LEP students' perceived difficulties in U.S. classrooms can be explained by their limited English proficiency and by their different cultural orientations, prior knowledge, experiences, and expectations concerning school. Such differences are sometimes mistakenly interpreted by teachers as deficiencies (Optitz, 1998) under "a tacit assumption about what is real [and] what is good" (Berlin, 1988, p. 492), which works, to a greater or lesser degree, to the benefit of socially and politically prestigious groups (Elasasser & Irvine, 1987).

It would seem difficult or even unrealistic to expect teachers or school personnel to adapt their instructional approaches to the needs of a relatively small minority population. In fact, teachers are not usually conscious that "rules are actually operating" (Lankshear et al., 1997, p. 34). It is even more difficult to provide an education that is completely compatible with the needs of all groups of students (Nieto, 1992), even though there is a pressing need to develop such a theory and practice (Richardson, 1997). In general, the effectiveness and values of an educational theory are assessed in terms of whether the theory works to the benefit of the majority of students, thereby potentially excluding other groups of students from comparable benefits.

A number of previous studies in education have dealt with the issue of constructivism and diversity, however few studies have dealt with these two issues in combination. For example, a considerable number of studies on constructivism have been conducted in relatively stable contexts in terms of language, student population, and subject area, while relatively few studies have critically analyzed the various aspects of teaching and learning when constructivism is applied to diverse contexts (e.g., multicultural classrooms, ESL writing courses).

However, actual teaching and learning in the United States take place in a broad range of school contexts, with teachers and students from diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, and these contextual differences may mean different consequences for applied theories. For example, teachers with little or no previous constructivist-based educational experience may be very reluctant to incorporate constructivism into the classroom because their prior understanding of teaching and learning needs to be adjusted or completely altered. Similarly, students who have been accustomed to traditional, teacher-fronted instruction and have been successful in such a situation may resist or have difficulty adjusting to constructivist approach. Therefore, more critical investigation into constructivism is needed in order to develop insights into the teaching and learning process when constructivism is applied to diverse contexts.

The main purpose of this paper is to discuss constructivism in conjunction with the issue of diversity, focusing on whether constructivism works to the benefit of students of limited English proficiency (LEP) in the United States. Of course, variability exists among minority students in terms of school achievement, depending on whether they are

autonomous (e.g., Jews, Mormons), immigrants (e.g., Chinese, Punjabi Indians), or involuntary minorities (e.g.; American Indians, black Americans) (See Ogbu, 1987). Likewise, there are countless individual differences within any LEP student group in terms of school performance. For example, not all Vietnamese students react in a passive way in the classroom (Nieto, 2000). Such cultural variability will not be dealt with in detail in this paper. Rather, the current paper is an attempt to illuminate the issue of diversity within constructivism, with the assumption that, regardless of the fact that a number of minority students do as well as, or sometimes better than majority students in terms of academic achievement in the long run, they may not stand in the same starting line under the current educational system.

The first part of the paper is devoted to an introduction to the major components of constructivism, in contrast with the traditional “transmission model” (Richardson, 1997, p. 3) of education. Then, these major assumptions of constructivism are reexamined in conjunction with possible challenges for LEP students when constructivism is applied to K-12 and/or university settings. Finally, pedagogical implications of constructivism, in relation to the issue of multicultural education, are suggested.

Contrasting Paradigms: Constructivism vs. Transmission Model

Recently, constructivism has greatly influenced the field of education. It has been at the forefront of academic debates among researchers and practitioners. Within the context of teaching, constructivism emphasizes non-transmitted methods of classroom instruction and has been contrasted in the literature with content-rich transmission model (e.g., Brooks, 1993; Driscoll, 1994; Duffy & Jonassen, 1992; Goldberg, 2002; Henson, 2001; Richardson, 1996; Wilson, 1996). The table 1 presents the major characteristics of constructivism in contrast with the transmission model, in terms of how knowledge is viewed (epistemology), how teaching and learning occur, and how assessments of learning are made.

Table 1. Contrasting Paradigms: Constructivism vs. the Transmission Model

	Constructivism	Transmission model
Epistemology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - personal & subjective (relates to prior knowledge & experience) - not fixed (multiple perspectives are valued) - impermanent - descriptive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - impersonal & objective (not related to prior knowledge & experience) - fixed (seeking one right answer) - permanent - prescriptive
Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - teacher as facilitator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - teacher as supervisor
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - collaboration/dialogue/group discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - individual work
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - not evaluative (judgment not involved or delayed) - given to community authority and negotiation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - evaluative (judgment involved) - given to individual expert/teacher

As seen in the above table, knowledge is viewed as personal, subjective, and flexible in constructivism, while it is considered objective and fixed under the transmission model. Under constructivism, teachers are considered facilitators who provide students with an authentic and student-centered learning environment, while under the transmission model, teachers are seen as authoritative transmitters of knowledge. In the constructivist classroom, learning takes place through a variety of group activities among students or through dialogues with peers or teachers, while under the transmission model, learning takes place mainly from the teacher's lecture or guidance. Finally, constructivism assumes that judgment should be avoided or, if necessary, given to community authority and negotiation, while the transmission model assumes that judgment is made mainly on objective criteria set by school authorities. Therefore, a constructivist approach is student-centered, focusing on how students make meaning out of experience rather than on how well they memorize already constructed facts and generalizations.

Assumptions & Challenges to Constructivism for LEP Students

There is no single constructivist theory of instruction, and researchers in various fields articulate the various elements of constructivist theory in varying terms (Driscoll, 1994, Richardson, 1997). However, they share several common themes, as presented on the previous page. In this paper, the discussion of constructivism in education is based on the following four assumptions, each of which will be re-examined in the light of possible challenges¹ when constructivism is discussed in conjunction with LEP students in the mainstream classroom.

1. Constructivism assumes that knowledge is personal and subjective; thus, multiple interpretations of events are valued and acknowledged.
2. Constructivism assumes that teachers serve as facilitators who provide students with an authentic, student-centered and problem-based learning environment.
3. Through reflection, group discussion, and all other forms of thinking and interaction, students in the constructivist classroom build an understanding of the subject matter. Therefore, a variety of group or peer activities are encouraged.
4. In the constructivist classroom, judgment is delayed or given to community authority and negotiation.

Assumption 1: Constructivism assumes that knowledge is personal and subjective; thus, multiple interpretations of events are acknowledged.

On an individual level, constructivism in education acknowledges the value of knowledge that is personal and subjective. The theory posits that reality resides in the mind of each person (Wilson, 1996) and that an individual makes sense of events according to “his or her own experiences, beliefs, and knowledge” (Wilson, 1996, p. 95). According to the theory, learning takes place when individuals are able to make use of their existing knowledge and experience to make sense of new material. Lessons are structured around problems, questions, and situations that may not have one correct answer (Goldberg, 2002). Accordingly, multiple perspectives on the subject are acknowledged and valued in a constructivist learning environment. In describing the benefits of constructivism in the classroom, Brooks (1993) contends that seeking multiple answers to a question promotes creativity in students.

¹ The examples of the challenges introduced in the paper may apply to the population other than LEP students, as well.

On a social level, constructivism assumes that individual students construct knowledge by looking for shared meanings within a particular social context (Richardson, 1997). Therefore, the same phenomenon can be interpreted differently in different contexts. Driscoll (1994), by emphasizing socially-shared meanings, claims that, in order to avoid partial understanding, the same materials need to be re-examined at different times, in different contexts, and for different purposes.

Challenges:

How about concepts that are far beyond students' prior knowledge or experience?

"Yesterday in social study session, we learned about Civil War. I kept silent during the class while my classmates spoke up about what they heard and what they read about civil war. I'm a Korean, and I know Korean War, however, never heard about Civil War. However, my friends seemed to easily understand the units by linking their own prior knowledge on civil war to the new lesson units."

"The project for the next class is to make a travel brochure for any travel attractions in Pennsylvania. My teacher told us to decide the place where we've traveled before, thus was familiar with us. I came to the United States a year ago and have not traveled anywhere yet. What place should I choose? I don't know."

Constructivism assumes that the individual student is not so much a passive learners of information transmitted by the teacher as an active processor of information, who makes interpretations by "[tying] newly acquired information to their own previously acquired understanding" (Henson, 2001, p. 413). However, the process of knowledge construction sometimes goes beyond personal empirical enquiry (Driver et al., 1994) because some concepts can be acquired only through conventional or abstract means. Matthews (2000) points out that there are limitations in applying constructivist principles to science education because many scientific concepts, such as propositions concerning atomic structure, viruses, and electromagnetic radiation, either have no connection with prior conceptions or are "in conflict with everyday experience, expectations and concepts" (p.179). Dick (1991) raises a concern about constructivists' lack of attention to the entry behaviors of students, claiming that some students have not yet developed the schemata, enough to understand the information provided by the teacher.

In a similar vein, LEP students come to the classroom with quite different inventories of knowledge, experience, and expectations from their mainstream peers, which may cause them difficulty in their efforts to link their prior knowledge with their newly acquired understanding. For example, some concepts such as "sharing" of individual experience in the classroom (Cazden, 1988) or "Civil War," which are very popular with mainstream peers, may be beyond their conceptual categories.

The language barrier often prevents students from gaining access to prior learning

“In the cross-cultural communication class, the topic was about cultural difference between America and China. The professor asked me to explain Chinese Buddhism. I explained this in English. However, the professor and classmates seemed not to understand what I meant because of my Korean accent and poor command of English.”

LEP students come into the classroom with different languages, experiences, and learning styles, which are often incongruent with those emphasized by the school. In particular, language may serve as a barrier preventing students from gaining access to the information provided. However, except for some bilingual or immersion programs, there are few classrooms where LEP students’ languages and cultures are valued and incorporated into the curriculum for teaching.

About a year ago, I had the chance to observe an ESL classroom. The teacher read a storybook and explained the meaning of “graveyard.” While most of the students seemed to understand what teacher meant by nodding their heads or expressing ideas, one newly arrived Korean boy kept silent throughout the activity. To me, he seemed not to grasp the meaning of “graveyard.” After I translated the word into Korean for him, he began to talk to me in Korean about what he knew about graveyards. Then, I suddenly stopped conversation because, I realized that our conversation in Korean, which sounded to both teacher and students like nothing more than strange noise, was interrupting the overall flow of the lesson. This time, a majority of people in the classroom was excluded from understanding, just like the Korean boy was during the English conversation. This personal episode is a very good example of a classroom environment in which LEP students’ native language could be prohibited in very subtle ways that deprive them of the chance to learn in the long run.

Assumption 2: Constructivism assumes that teachers serve as facilitators who provide students with an authentic, student-centered learning environment.

In traditional teacher-fronted classrooms, the teacher has the authority to design courses, prepare classroom materials and activities, lecture on certain subjects, and evaluate students’ performance based on a tightly planned curriculum. In the constructivist classroom, on the other hand, the teacher does not force his representation onto the learner (Wilson, 1996). Instead, the teacher serves as a facilitator who provides students with an authentic and student-centered learning environment in which shared meaning can be developed (Richardson, 1996). It is not uncommon in the constructivist classroom for the teacher to improvise the day’s lesson or modify the content or sequence of classroom activities depending on the needs and expectations of the students. Such flexibility is reported to be an important characteristic of successful teachers in constructivist classrooms (Henson, 2001).

Challenge:

What exactly is the role of the teacher in the constructivist classroom? This student-centered learning environment may give minority students a truncated image of constructivism.

“In fact, my teacher doesn’t teach us anything. What she did for the last two weeks were ‘showing us movie, asking us to discuss it in groups, and giving short comments on what we did in groups.’ I wanted my teacher to clearly articulate the basic concepts of health and administration rather than letting us figure them out!”

In talking about the contradictions and confusions of constructivism in teacher education, Richardson (1997) indicates that some teachers or teacher-education students might think that they do not need to know anything in order to teach because all they have to do in the constructivist classroom is allow students to figure things out for themselves. In a similar manner, the students might think that teacher does nothing in the classroom and that all they can do is figure things out themselves.

One of the major characteristics of the constructivist classroom is the student-centered learning environment; thus, the cognitive demands placed on individual learners in a constructivist learning environment are higher than in content rich classroom setting (Goldberg, 2002). LEP students may be overwhelmed when they have to make sense of concepts themselves because they are not prepared either linguistically or culturally to deal with problems in this way. However, this doesn’t mean that teachers are free, in the constructivist classroom, from cognitive demands placed on *them*. Rather, the teacher’s role is shifted from that of an “information provider, sequencer of information, and test creator (Nicaise & Barnes, 1996, p. 206)” to a “facilitator, guide, scaffolder, and problem/task presenter” (Nicaise & Barnes, 1996, p. 206). The issue is how to make LEP students understand this shifted role of teachers in the constructivist classroom without causing them to build truncated images of teachers. This should be accompanied by conceptual changes on the part of the students, which might take a considerable amount of time (Richardson, 1996).

Assumption 3: Through reflection, group discussion, and all other forms of student thinking and interaction, students in the constructivist classroom construct an understanding of the subject matter. Therefore, a variety of group or peer activities are encouraged.

In the constructivist classroom, learners construct the shared meaning of the subject matter through interaction with more competent peers (Vygotsky, 1978) rather than through a teacher’s lecture. Therefore, a variety of group activities with minimal teacher input are encouraged, in an attempt to promote communication among students and to facilitate the individual student’s self-discovery of the subject matter. Students in the constructivist

classroom will be engaged in a variety of group activities or tasks that are authentic and relevant to their actual lives.

The benefits of group or peer collaboration in constructing meaning in the constructivist classroom have been demonstrated in various fields (Brooks, 1993; Richardson, 1996). Richardson (1996) indicates that dialogues between students and teachers in science education helped the students come to understand alternative ways of thinking about the concepts and events in science. Henson (2001) reports that small-group activities help students enhance their development of social skills and increase their self-confidence.

Challenge:

Can group or peer activities provide LEP students with an equal opportunity to engage in meaningful interaction ?

“I usually do not talk much in groups, particularly with American peers because I’m afraid that my peers do not understand my English. While I was hesitating to say, other classmates usually took a floor and spoke up what I tried to say.”

“I usually sit with my Korean peers in the classroom. We sometimes spend most of time chatting rather than discussing the topic assigned. The teacher walked around each group but rarely interrupted us in the middle of talking. I still don’t understand the effectiveness of group work.”

In spite of the informed values/advantages of group/peer activities in terms of learning outcome, there are several limitations when these activities are applied to LEP students in the mainstream due to their limited English proficiency and their different cultural expectations and attitudes toward learning and teaching. It has been reported that LEP students in mainstream classes are generally characterized by “their reticence and lack of interaction with native speaking peers (Harklau, 1994)” due to their lack of proficiency in spoken English and to their lack of shared knowledge for group work. On the other hand, when these students are grouped with other LEP students, they would often rather spend their time chatting in their own language instead of working on the assigned topic. Even though the benefits of group or peer collaboration in the constructivist classroom in terms of promoting self-discovery have been demonstrated in various fields (e.g., Brooks, 1993; Richardson, 1996), “when framed by school curriculum, it may risk being perceived as idle chatter” (Morgan, 1997).

Assumption 4: In the constructivist classroom, judgment is delayed or given to community authority and negotiation.

Another characteristic of constructivism that may contrast with the transmission model concerns how assessments are made. It is common under the transmission model for evaluation of the individual student's performance to be made by the teacher based on objective criteria such as test scores. In the constructivist classroom, on the other hand, judgments are involved, but are given to community authority and negotiation rather than to the individual teacher. In addition, assessments are made using multiple authentic measures, such as observation, video-taping, dialogue journals, field notes, and portfolios, as well as test scores. Henson (2001) added that the use of authentic assessments, such as portfolios, exhibits, or journal entries in the constructivist classroom make students participate in lifelike problems rather than in school-like activities, which are not relevant to their life, thus are easily forgotten after the assessment.

Challenge:

How to provide students with non-judgmental feedback? Can students understand it?

"My teacher sometimes frustrates me. Her comments were usually very short, conventional, and positive, such as "yes," "well, maybe," or "O.K.," etc. However, I need more than that. Sometimes, I'm not quite sure if I'm going on the right direction. I need more explicit feedback from a teacher."

It is contended in the constructivist classroom that judgment should be delayed or given to community authority. However, problems may occur when the teacher must evaluate students (e.g., grading students' performance at the end of a semester). Brooks (1993) indicates that one of the most difficult tasks in assessing the work of others in the constructivist classroom is to find non-judgmental descriptors. In the constructivist classroom, the teacher usually responds to students' questions with additional questions, plausible contradictions, or responses such as "that's something I haven't studied" (Brooks, 1993). However, some LEP students, who are accustomed to clear instructions and explicit feedback from teachers, may have difficulty understanding such indirectness. In discussing power in the classroom, Delpit (1988) points out that attempts on the part of teachers to disguise their power, such as using indirect terms, may "remove the very explicitness that the child needs to understand the rules of the new classroom culture" (p. 289). This is another issue to consider in discussing constructivism in education in conjunction with the issue of diversity.

Implication for Multicultural Education

This paper is an initial investigation into the issue of diversity within a constructivist framework for teaching and learning. Several important issues need to be taken into consideration in discussing constructivism in relation to limited English proficiency students and multicultural education.

Above all, it should be noted that LEP students bring to the classroom quite different inventories of language, prior knowledge, experiences, and learning styles from those of their mainstream peers. These differences may prevent these students from effectively applying their prior knowledge or experiences to newly acquired information, as is expected in constructivism. In order to help them succeed in U.S. classrooms and in a constructivist learning environment, the classroom environment should acknowledge and value students' prior language, culture, and learning styles. This involves not only understanding differences but also making conscious efforts to incorporate the students' language and culture into the school curriculum.

In addition, LEP students lack the social and linguistic competence to participate fully in authentic, student-centered group activities with their mainstream classmates. For example, Asian students are more accustomed to learning individually by memorizing the subject matter (Nieto, 1992) than to working in groups or in pairs. They may feel uncomfortable in a classroom environment where teachers are informal, friendly, and do not talk much, where students are encouraged to pose problems and explore the concepts by themselves through collaboration with peers. It should be noted, however, that their passiveness and silence in class are sometimes mistakenly understood as a deficiency in the constructivist classroom regardless of their final products. McCarty and Schwandt (2000) point out the problems of constructivism's dualist attitude toward learners—as either active or passive—claim that the popular conception of 'active = high achievers' and 'passive = low achievers' is not adequate in explaining students' performance at school. They contend that learners who are passive in oral interaction can be successful learners in reading and writing.

How should a teacher judge a bright but shy student who never “actively” participates in class but presents excellent written work? Conversely, what of the student who compulsively participates in classroom conversation despite the fact that this very activity seems to impede the student's effective learning of writing?..... there are just too many varieties of student.

(McCarty & Schwandt, 2000, p. 80)

Therefore, teachers in the constructivist classroom need to take into consideration the conflicting values and expectations LEP students bring to the classroom and help those students to accept the curriculum “by modifying it to make it resemble the practical learning that happens outside the school” (Henson, 2001, p. 50). In other words, rather than

expecting LEP students to become assimilated into the mainstream, teachers in the constructivism classroom should be willing to accept the conflicting values and expectations of those students and to modify their own values toward “what constitutes good student.” This relates to the issue of multiculturalism.

In their discussion of the limitations and challenges of multicultural education, Serrano and Myers (1999) make it clear that multicultural education as “teaching awareness of difference” (p. 91) only results in students of the dominant culture seeing surface level racial, ethnic, and cultural differences. The authors claim that for multicultural education to be successful, both teachers and students need to go beyond an emphasis on “accepting differences” (p. 80) toward “learning about the self in the other and the other in the self” (Serrano & Myers, 1999, p. 95). In other words, multicultural education within a constructivist framework involves “understanding not only different cultures and their particular norms, values, attitudes, and forms of knowledge but our own... understanding differences as well as similarities” (Kanpol, 1994, p. 133).

In spite of the ever increasing number of LEP students in U.S. classrooms, and in spite of the pressing need to develop a theory and practice “that works to the benefit of all students,” (Richardson, 1997, p. 12), education in the United States does not seem to be changing that direction. As an example, a number of LEP students may experience ‘poor’ constructivist experience because constructivist pedagogies are cultural practices originating in Anglo American context, and in not fully recognizing that scholars generalize the practice as a ‘neutral best learning psychology.’ What is true for a majority students may not necessarily be true for certain groups of students (Clarke, 1994). Therefore, consistent efforts to promote mutual understanding between majority teachers and LEP students must precede the successful implementation of constructivism in the multicultural classroom.

Besides teachers’ lack of cultural knowledge concerning LEP students, another important factor that creates obstacles for LEP students in school, even after the problems associated with linguistic and cultural differences have been overcome, relates to structural constraints—“the norms and practices of institutions of schooling” (Liston & Zeichner, 1991, p. 105). Liston and Zeichner (1991) point out that such “institutional constraints, i.e., the predominant norms, policies, and recurrent practices” (p. 105), which work to the benefit of socially advantaged groups of students, create educational obstacles for LEP students.

Clarke (1994) indicates that a number of problems encountered by teachers are due to established procedures or advocated changes in the system. Change may not be easy. However, it is hoped that this paper will serve as an impetus for subsequent similar studies involving more in-depth critical investigations, with empirical data, of the issue of diversity in the U.S. classroom. Also, prior to the implementation of new theories in the classroom, it should be recognized that students do not necessarily fit into a behavior mold (Delpit, 1995). Instead, they bring to the classroom their own experiences and knowledge

concerning how they ought to act. As indicated by Crawford (1989), education that excludes minority cultures by providing only “fantasy” stereotypes is not helpful in terms of students’ academic achievement. Rather than striving to make students assimilate into the mainstream culture, multicultural education should be geared toward understanding and accepting differences as well as similarities.

In addition, factors such as domination and subordination, language and power, language and society, and language and culture need to be carefully taken into consideration in applying new educational theories in school contexts. Along with this, teachers should be aware of the fact that LEP students’ difficulties at school are usually due to differences not to deficiencies. Emancipatory constructivism (Richardson, 1996), which values such differences, is based on the assumption that the individual’s cognitive development is socio-historically situated, non-linear, and subjective. Thus, the everyday lived experiences of students and teachers should be used “as a base upon which to develop academic knowledge rather than to be replaced by academic knowledge” (Richardson, 1997, p. 31-32). In this way, mutual understanding develops, and both teacher and students can cooperate to make the classroom environment more friendly, collaborative, and multicultural.

It may take a considerable amount of time to change teachers’ teaching behaviors and students’ learning behaviors. However, it may take even more time and effort to make the current education system completely culturally inclusive. We, as educators, should be more sensitive to the issue of diversity and make every effort to provide an education that guarantees every student in the classroom equal access to the resources provided. In particular, we are in need of more critical analysis of educational theories as they relate to issues of diversity. In other words, instructional theories and approaches in the United States need to be more responsive to the needs of LEP students in the mainstream classroom. Toward this end, a diverse repertoire of teaching strategies appropriate for different students and contexts needs to be developed.

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