Panel discussion: Being a 21st century teacher in a linguistically and culturally diverse classroom

A Session of the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Education’s WORKSHOP FOR TEACHERS OF ESL STUDENTS

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[Lucy Williams, workshop coordinator, introduces panel members.] [Our panel members today are, beginning on my far left, Sashi Rayasam, the ESL director for the Durham Public Schools.

Dr. Joanne Dowdy, a professor at Kent State University in Ohio] who just received an email [telling her that] she had a book accepted for publication.

Alisha Das, a lead teacher from Harnett County.

And our own Suzanne Gulledge at UNC, who heads the Middle School program.

And Ivanna Thrower. You’ve all experienced her wonderful presentations.

Here’s Bobby.

[Bobby Hobgood] If you expect me to wear one of those cheesy suits and hold a mike ... I’m not going to do that. Has this been a good day for you? [Audience replies affirmatively.] Yes, and it’s not over yet, and we promise a very good discussion this afternoon.

We recognized in putting together this day that we would be remiss if we didn’t take the opportunity to have some dialogue and to take advantage of the collective genius of the ladies that you see here in front of you. I noticed none of you wrote “collective genius” on your paper this morning, but I will tell you that we’re in the presence of just some very gifted ladies and though I haven’t had the opportunity to work and interact with Joanne, just via email it’s amazing how much you can glean from a person. Although I make no assumptions, okay? But I would like to think that our email interchange conveyed that she is in the right place.

So we wanted to take the time this afternoon to talk about something of course related to ESL — working with English Language Learners — and at the same time calling upon a very hot topic and that is 21st century teaching and learning. I know we hear in standards left and right, “21st century skills,” and I’m still trying to get in my mind what they are. I’m not sure if you’ve figured that out yet, but we hear that label over and over again and so we wanted to talk about what we believe to be important in 21st century learning but with respect to English Language Learners. So the title of this session, if we gave it a title, would be “The 21st Century Teacher in a Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Classroom.”
So what does it mean to teach in our classrooms in North Carolina that have become increasingly more diverse, both linguistically and culturally, while at the same time paying attention to the fact that we are trying to move students farther ahead, maybe at a pace that is unlike any we’ve known historically in this country, capitalizing on advances in technology, capitalizing on what we know today about teaching and learning that we did not know 10, 15, 20 years ago? So the convergence of so many things.

What we’re going to do here this afternoon is, I’ve prepared a series of questions and I might ask all the panelists if you’ll individually say something about them, or then some of the questions just say, “Who would like to address them, as you see fit?” And then too we’d like for you to weigh in on the discussion as well, if you have thoughts or questions for any of the panelists here.

So the first question then is, “What’s the most important technique you can use on a regular basis to incorporate all students into the classroom culture? If you had to choose a single technique or behavior that you would incorporate on a regular basis, what would you say that is and why?”

Can we start with you, Sashi?

[Sashi Rayasam] Smile and welcome your students — every age, kindergarten-12th.

[Joanne Dowdy] Ditto. And I would say, when you ask a question, ask your students to turn to a buddy and share their answer, and then share it in a group that’s twice that size, and then be ready to talk to the whole room. People need time to warm up, and they might find that what they have to say they prefer the way their buddy says it and they want their buddy to say it to the big group. So that makes a much more inclusive classroom.

[Bobby Hobgood] And if I might play off of that, Joanne, just to say sometimes students can translate for one another. And I don’t mean translate language, I mean meaning for one another, better than we can interpret or translate ourselves as educators.

[Audience member] Can I just add really quickly to that too, a lot of times it will be that same student that calls out all the time and has the answer first, that gives others and opportunity to participate as well.

[Alisha Das] I think for me it has to be the “glass half full.” And that is that I’m constantly seeing what my students can do, and I’m only focusing on that. And what they can’t do, I see as my lesson plan for tomorrow. But it’s throwing what they can do in their face constantly because so many kids who are not successful don’t even see their intelligence. So it is literally reminding them, telling them, freaking them out with their own intelligence. Setting them up for success and building every child, especially those links to successful on their own, to a level of expertise so that they can share with others. That would be my number one, is, “They can” and “Glass half full.”

[Bobby Hobgood] We talked about in the last session, the idea of, “What if you could make an expert out of every student in the classroom?”

[Several panel members reply] No, you can’t. [Laughing and agreement from panel members and audience.]
[Bobby Hobogood] Strike that! How do we remind ourselves to make an expert?

[Suzanne Gulledge] I have two responses; I’ll reverse the order. I was going to save them because what you just said [points to Alisha Das] was so provocative I think that acknowledging that there are assets that every child brings to the classroom. And if we think of culture as an asset, and if we start with the assets and sometimes it’s just what they love to do, and if you make that the spark that you fan to kindle the flame of their effective learning. So I think, start with an “assets building model” assuming and acknowledging that every child has assets on which you can build.

And the other is to never fail to be aware of your own power you have, your disposition, the way you approach learning, your enthusiasm for learning and the throw-away words that you say, the eye rolls. Those things matter to children because they are watching you all the time and at every brain level. So your own power to control the climate in your classroom is never to be underestimated.

[Ivanna Thrower] And I echo very much what they say. You’ve got to believe in the students and I was excited in the presentation that one of the participants said, “I felt like you believed in me in the second part.” It’s really believing in the students, and like what you said, everybody is special, everybody brings something to the table. And I’d written on my card today “explorer” as one of the things that I am. When I say “explorer” it’s also exploring the kids; what is it that turns them on? What is it that hooks them into what it is they’re learning? So believing in them and then helping them find that path is a very important part. And it doesn’t matter how great everything else you do is if you don’t have these pieces in place.

[Bobby Hobogood] Nice. Reactions?

[Robin Heyward] I think you need to be very consistent. I think consistency with children is very, very important. I know that one of your presenters said being smiley [is a good idea] but I’m not a bubbly person so I’m not going to smile every day. However I’m consistent. I’m very consistent with my children. They know that I’ve got their back. I’m their advocate, okay? But my standards are always going to be high even when I’m tired, even though I’m knocking my head against the wall, even when they’re knocking their head against the wall trying to get the concepts that we’re trying to teach. I always consistently tell them and make them feel that the standard is high, you will meet my standard. However we need to meet it there so the consistency is always there.

[Bobby Hobogood] Nice, Nice. Over to you.

[Maria Rangel] I just wanted to say that [having] high expectations is critical. Not just for ELL students, but for all students. And sometimes I hear people say, “Well, he doesn’t or she doesn’t speak English; therefore the expectation is lower.” But it’s like, wait a minute, do not treat them [differently]. You can still have high expectations and utilize an intervention or strategy or model or something to make it work for that student. It could be SIOP, it could be Sheltered, it could be whatever it takes, but high expectations. [That’s the main thing].

[Audience member] It’s interesting because you hear so much more about delivery rather than, “Be prepared,” “Know your lesson,” “Know the vocabulary.” It’s almost like that is a given. But those that can do that, if they don’t have the delivery, if the kids don’t feel loved, if they don’t feel like the teacher
cares, like you said [points to Robin Heyward] you’re their advocate. It’s for nothing. Essentially that’s what everybody said.

[Audience member] Well we have to be careful with each other, too. As an ESL teacher I have to be careful with my core teacher. Students should not know how I feel about the core teacher, and the core teacher [should not know how I feel about the students]. [Audience laughs.] Because the kids eat that up. They play with it. It’s like, “Oh, they don’t like each other so I’m going to play them the whole year.” So I think that’s really good that you brought that up about we all kind of like need to find a happy medium.

[Audience member] As an addendum to the point of having students work in a small group and then address the class – this was actually something that one of the English teachers I worked with last year did. She would have the entire group come up to the front of the class, even if only one person was delivering the question. That was so great because there were ELLs who were terrified to be in front of the class and terrified to open their mouth in class but by the end of the year as they got used to just standing there, actually got to the point where they would volunteer to deliver an answer.

[Bobby Hobgood] You bring up a very good point and that is, I think, not just with the ESL, but with all students, that we expect them to go from zero to perfection right away rather than thinking it’s enough, isn’t it, just for that student to stand here. That, in and of itself, is an accomplishment.

Let’s move on if we can and then we’ll continue to take other questions and thoughts. Thank you for this.

You know, as teachers we — despite the fight that we have people teaching beside us and across the hall — we tend to teach in isolation. And we don’t think about the supports that we have around us who can really not only make our lives easier, but enhance our teaching. So the next question is, “How do we go about enlisting the support of other as we endeavor to meet the needs of our ESL students?” “How do we enlist others to help us in this work?”

[Ivanna Thrower] Relationships. Relationship. Relationship. Relationship. Even if I’m the one who has what I think what the other person needs, if I go to them and need something and value them for that they have to offer me, it’s a great way to start building that relationship. As an ESL teacher in the school system, I often would see that a teacher might need something and I thought, “I could help them with that, I could really give them some pointers on that.” But they don’t want us to come to them and give what we think they need. But if I can go to that teacher and say, “I’m working with your student so-and-so, can you help me understand this? Can you help with that?” Not in a fake way by any means, but genuinely looking for what they can offer to me, often opens the door even with a very resistant teacher to them then asking in return, “What are you doing with them that’s working?” in order to open that door. And being able to do things as simple as — because I was a spoiled ESL teacher — I had minutes here and there where if I saw a teacher in a hallway with her class going somewhere I would say, “Do you need a bathroom break? I can watch your class.” Something as simple as offering a bathroom break to a teacher can open the door to an amazing relationship where you can then really get inside lots of those kids and work with that future closeness. So for me, it’s relationships.

[Alisha Das] If I could piggy-back off of that word “relationship,” this might sound very strange but something that you’ve heard in most sessions, I don’t know if we knew it explicitly or not, is expert level
for the child. Taking them and we’re having a paradigm shift here from where we’re going, from
teacher-dictator to facilitator. So if we look at it in that framework, the thing that has opened the most
doors for me personally and my student’s personally is taking them to a level of expertise and then we
go and we teach the whole school, or we teach a classroom that is smarter, you know, or that is older
than our group. Or we involve the principal, “Please come and see our performance. Let us ask you
some questions.” And be the teacher, put the principal in the seat of the student. I will tell you there is
nothing more phenomenal than that. And we know that our ESL learners need to learn in an
environment where they are talking, where they are using English, where it’s meaningful — all the things
that Bobby shared with you today, and Ivanna. That is going to open doors — if we are sharing it with the
public and with other people in our community, they’re going to see the intelligence of [an ESL student]
finally. Some may have not even seen that there was even a possibility for [the ESL student]. But when
they see him teach them something that no one else knew, then that opens the door and they want a
part of that, because that’s magic. If you’ve got [the ESL student] to know about the seven continents,
then that’s magic, I want some of that. And it is about relationship and that intrinsic motivation grows in
the child which is what Bobby was talking about. That intrinsic motivation we can be responsible for
that, for helping [do that for others]. So a piggy-back, but still the relationship, building a relationship.

[Sashi Rayasam] Well, one thing that goes with everything that was said just now, when I was in the
classroom as a middle school teacher — I only worked half-time at that school — so, you know, you have
to do a lot of schmoozing to get everybody on the same page. And you give a lot to get something. One
of the things that … that year I had students who came form all over the world. Now, you know,
primarily 90 percent Hispanic in our district. So when the middle school social studies curriculum lends
itself to, you know, you’re talking about Latin America and Europe and Russia and Uganda, I had kids
pretty much from most of those countries. All we did was go back to the 1965 edition textbook that the
teacher was using, and you know lots of things have changed! But they used to go back and invite the
kids to the class and the kids would go and buy these and then be able to kind of share things about
their country. But this is how schools were or whatever. Those 15 kids became the most popular in the
school after those sessions. And then everybody was willing to help them, everybody thought they were
fascinating. So it’s again going to show them in a positive light, as not something that they don’t have,
they don’t know enough English, but what else do they have that probably everybody else doesn’t? So
just cash along your students by getting them to do that and getting people, other teachers, to know
them, to start maybe after-school tutoring for some of them. I mean, it’s just, you know, inching it there
and leading for academic success.

[Joanne Dowdy] I’m just thinking of one thing that’s really successful with our visiting scholars. Every
year we bring in about 18 Second Language teachers from Morocco, Croatia, different countries. We
focus on the Middle East. And one thing that’s been very successful is finding out their interests and
getting them hooked up with people on campus who share the interests. So someone who is really into
music got hooked up with one of the music professors. And it absolutely made that six months in Ohio a
completely transforming experience, which means he had something to take back to his ESL class that
was informed by his personal experience. But I think that it is really important, again, figure out what is
this person bringing to the table. It’s not just academics because they’ve got a big circle that represents
their life. You have to figure out now, what’s the passion, how can I get that hooked up? So there’s more
language learning and all kinds of things spinning off of that.

[Suzanne Gulledge] Bobby, we can take your question and make another question of it simply because ...
[Audience interrupts jokingly.] I’m echoing a question I get from my student teachers [who] assume that
all parents are as involved as their parents were. Then they become first- and second- and third-year teachers, and you go, “How’s it going?” [And they respond], “Well, fine, but the parents just don’t seem to care.” And too often they’re talking about the parents of their students who are English Language Learners. And so if they assume that those and essential others in the question of, “How do we enlist their support?” I expect that people in the room have better ideas than I, because I work at a University, about how they involve parents. So, you know, I’d appreciate the chance to get some ideas.

[Audience member] Wow. I could give you a whole workshop on that! [Audience laughs.]


[Several panel members joke] I want to know what works.

[Maria Rangel] Every school district does different things. One thing that we have done for the past five years for the Latinos is we do educational trainings. We go into the communities, we go into the schools, go into anywhere that allows us to do that. And basically we put together a curriculum [on] the very stuff that we take for granted. [Like] how to understand this crazy educational system and breaking it down to their district. What is a parent-teacher conference? What are my rights as a parent? What is my expectation? Because to me, just the fact that my child goes to you, that’s all I need to know, that’s my role as a parent. But also, what is it that we’re expecting of them? And many times, it’s common sense, you know, they don’t know it but when they know it you see that academically the kids are doing better.

The teachers are starting to see parents more involved. They are there, they are asking questions because we teach them what questions to ask. We teach them what are the rights that some parents have and how to get involved, what resources. And also we answer all the questions and bring in folks from the schools so they get to know the schools, who is who, if I have a complaint who do I go to, you know. In Wake County we have 20 schools, 20 [unintelligible], too many of everything. So we teach them because we also want them to understand it’s a different way of business every year, especially in Wake. Also, we are starting to do that now with Chinese, Korean, Arabic, French and hopefully we can add Japanese and Vietnamese and whoever. But with those languages, we are going to be doing it once a month and it’s going to be systematic because we don’t have enough to go into a school and do trainings per se. And these trainings we need, it could be three times, we’ll say give time once a week, it could be five times, it could be one shot — just let us into the school and we tailor the training according to your needs. But that’s the parent perspective. Parents do care, they just need to know how.

But now can I add my point to the other stuff? [Audience laughs.] Support from others. From a central service perspective, we are here to help teachers. And many times you probably think that you find a call on so-and-so and they’re going to think I’m not an expert in so-and-so. But we don’t want you to think that. We are here to be your resource, to help you. If you are having issues with literacy, call on the literacy folks. If you have an issues with let’s say, ESL, call on the lead teachers, you know. Parent involvement, call on them. There are a lot of resources available that we could give you so that you could give to your parents so that you could share with your students. I don’t know if you guys, as you know, North Carolina, I know Wake is very big on PLTs [Professional Learning Teams]. In fact I don’t know if you’ve heard about the Wacky Wednesdays that we’re going to be doing now where, it’s called Wacky Wednesdays, students that want to leave early, early release, so that teaches can come together and work in collaboration, sharing data, sharing best practices, sharing concerns. It’s time for teachers to actually come together and work as a team. Now think about this, ESL teachers, whoa! I know they love that because its gives them the opportunity to come and meet with the regular classroom teachers and
exchange ideas, interventions, best practices and just share concerns. You know, if [student name] or whoever is not doing well, okay, what can we do to better help this child? And then you get perspectives from all the teachers versus from just you and the ESL teacher, and then you welcome more input. Anyway, that was my piece for central services, or whatever you want to call it, the district level.

[Alisha Das] And quickly, on her last point, you can, if you are able to instigate stuff where you are like, if you even have this much power or non-power. We did informal task forces at several of our schools. People who cared about kids got together – counselors, nurses, social workers, one principal representative, and teachers who cared. We came together and we talked about students at risk and we came up with really off-the-wall strategies but we brought people together who typically wouldn’t be piled together because we love kids. We saw kids who were saved, who had a good year for the first time in their life. So you can do that even informally, even if your district doesn’t know about it. You can set up a task force at your site for at-risk kids or LEP kids or whatever.

[Audience member] We learned a lot of this in the RTI workshops this summer and all that about the Wacky Wednesday, and it seemed like a great idea. I just want to share briefly something else that was insightful from that was that, because people have thought about it, we’ve thought about, okay, just give them what they can in the small things rather than, I mean I’m just putting it down, let’s say there’s 10 spelling words and they get five or eight, or something, as the years progress through the grades, the other students are learning so that gap is getting bigger. So all the teachers are going, “What were they doing last year in this class? Or how can they be so far behind?” It’s that the intensity of the intervention needs to be stepped up on them through those years to get them up so that they’re not with this big gap at the high school level and all that. Thanks for letting me put that in. I’m mean, it was like an epiphany for me.”

[Bobby Hobgood] Any other thoughts about enlisting the support of others?

[Audience member] I think, I’m sorry, I think it takes some vulnerability on your part just to let your ego go by the wayside and your pride just kind of take a back seat for a little bit. And remind yourself that you’re still a good teacher, but the teachers, you know, work together with others; two heads are usually better than one. So it just makes sense to reach out and not just stay in your little kingdom, to ask for help. So I think being vulnerable is sometimes a good thing.

[Bobby Hobgood] So let’s move on to another question, changing directions here. We’ve recognized that our classrooms are changing so much in many different ways and we are asking ourselves the question today, “Are we changing to meet those needs and how are we evolving and changing?” So this question actually looks at higher education and the preparation of not just ESL teachers, but teachers in general. So the question is, “How has teacher preparation changed? How is it changing to prepare educators who can meet the challenges of these increasingly diverse classrooms?”

[Suzanne Gulledge] I can take that one. I looked just yesterday at a book that was used to prepare teachers in the late 70s and the first chapter on teaching culturally different students referred to the different students in your classroom and the assumption, of course, is that the culture, the primary culture, the dominant culture, is the culture and they are different. And so I think we’ve changed to acknowledge that we all have a culture, as we were told this morning, that we all have a culture, that the way we do things around here is culture. I have a culture as a white woman in predominance. I have a culture and those things are no less founded on sometimes folklore and shaky ground than anybody
else’s culture. So to the question, I think we’re teaching that now. We’re trying to look at culture as an entity with a different set of definitions. Culture though, when you try to hold it in your hands, it’s kind of Jell-o and you kind of squeeze it and try to define it and it gets to be something else. It can be, you know, everything from the way we do things around here to something with some more substantive background. So I think we’re changing to acknowledge that we all have a culture and that it’s an amorphous entity and that it is a dynamic road rather than static entity.

And the other thing I think to say where we’re going, I brought a little handout that has usefulness I think on two levels and I want to just let those go around if you want. But where we’re going with this is to start suggesting, and this comes from those of you in SIOP. It’s a checklist for teachers to say, “How am I doing in teaching?” and I give this to pre-service teachers to help their awareness of whether or not they’re meeting their goals more than in working in the content areas with the diversity of cultures that are in their classrooms. And I think where we’re going is, if you look at the first page: I know the cultural background of each of my students, and on the second: I know that the culture of my classroom. [unintelligible]. Then you start thinking, “Do I know the assets?” or, “Do I know the strengths?” If you think of their culture, what they bring to the classroom as a strength or as an asset and you build that way you could substitute the words, their “assets” or their “advantages” or their “strengths” and it ought to instill worth. And it is predicated on the idea that the culture they bring can be an advantage but then also the knowledge that culture is something that you can create in the classroom and so that what we’re trying to teach our pre-service teachers is to first of all acknowledge that their children have come from a variety of cultures, respect those cultures. And then the next thing is to support their translation or transition into the culture of school and to acknowledge that schooling and my classroom has a culture. Then to expect them to have success in it, not a deficit model, but an expectation so that that A.R.S.E. is what I teach my students, but it has the unfortunate acronym. [Audience laughs.] To be more explicit, we’ve inserted an “I” in the middle that we not only acknowledge and respect, but that we identify the expectations for that classroom very explicitly [A.R.(I.)S.E.: Acknowledge, Respect, (Identify), Support, Expect success]. Say that, “I know that you do different things in different places, I know that in one classroom you may do this but here, in this place, because we are a community, here’s how we do things in this room.” And if you want that you say, “I think that if we look at each other I can read what you’re feeling if I look in your eyes. So in this classroom we’ll try and look at each other so we can see if we’re getting clues about ...” Whatever those expectations are, be very explicit and as the woman said, consistent, about those and create a culture that is positive and explain things like the difference between equity and equality and fairness and good examples, like saying, “If I gave each of you, if we all wore the same jacket I passed out, would that be equal?” Yeah, it would be equal. But the jacket that fits, you have to look for someone really tiny and really big, and you say, “But that’s not right to make this person wear the jacket and that person. That’s not equitable. So we’re going to do things differently among people for a very important reason in here.” So be very explicit. So I’ve added the “I” into the middle of that to suggest that we’re all going to arise and meet those things that are high leverage practices for successful learning. And that’s how in the course of my time in teacher education and in my own teacher preparation there were some differences, I think.

[Audience member] And that was acknowledge, respect and...?

[Suzanne Gulledge] Let’s see. Acknowledge, respect and then identify the culture that we have. Identify something that are going to be the way we do things around here, the way we’re going to do things in Ms. Gulledge’s class. And that doesn’t mean that it’s better or worse, no more than this culture or that culture is better or worse.
[Audience member] And the “S” is for?

[Suzanne Gulledge] It’s support. Support what they need to do. For example, in the same way you would say, I know you say, “Ain’t nobody gonna...” and that’s okay when you’re talking to your buddies, but in order to do academic language in here you would want to translate. So we talk about code switching. And so that says you recognize the fact that children can and do code switch. They’ll speak differently to you than they do to their classmates and their friends. So children have that capacity and I think we can acknowledge that capacity and employ it to their advantage in the classroom by asking them to code switch in our classroom. I know maybe it’s okay to chew gum some other place but we don’t do that in here and here’s why we don’t do that, whatever it is.

And then the last thing is to expect success, [have] high expectations. The worst form of racism and bigotry, I think, is to have lower expectations. And so to expect success. And it’s not unlike the way many of us raise our children. We say, “In our family, we just don’t do that.” And it doesn’t mean that any other family is any worse than us, but for us ... And it has a way of making people feel like they’re members. If they understand how we do thing here, then they belong. And that works for, you know, ESL children. But anyway, that’s what we’re trying to do and we may be off track as we’ve been in education before. [Audience laughs.] But right now, that’s the train we’re on and we’re sticking with it.


[Joanne Dowdy] Higher ed., in the two places, the two states where I’ve taught higher ed., still, unless I am severely misinformed, Ebonics — African American English — is still not recognized as another language. Why do I call it another language? Its structure is not Germanic, which is the structure we use when we speak English. So that is a hot workshop where I am because everyone wants it. Our school is committed to working in urban environments, which means our teachers are usually the ones integrating the classrooms where they go. For them to be successful, they have to know the language that the students are using. Our hope is that they go in there with the same respect that they have for Japanese, Russian, Croatian, Appalachian — and use the expertise that the students know to take them to the next language, which is Standard English. It has been an uphill battle for my 12 years in higher education and I expect it will continue to be an uphill battle because we’re not offering the course as a standard part of preparation. Even as our country browns, even as our country browns, we continue to pretend this isn’t a legitimate language and therefore we do not have to pay any respect. And that’s damaging to our teachers because the most committed are the ones who are most desperate for truth. Tell me, tell me, please. I’m in the front lines, I’m in the trenches; what do I do tomorrow? And it’s hit or miss if they get the preparation.

[Audience member] Do you think part of the reason why it’s such a hot topic is because — I’ve read some documents recently this summer — they do not give English from other cultures a specific name? Ebonics belongs to black people, and [it’s] just a generalization. When I say Ebonics, you know what English I’m talking about. But when you hear people say that English spoken by a Chinese [person] is Chinese English, there’s some respect with that. Someone who speaks Spanish, well it’s getting kind of sticky with Spanish too because they call it Spanglish. You know who speaks that. Chinese English, I don’t see a negative with that I just see that’s okay, they speak English and they are originally from China. Or someone from India, they have an Indian accent, they speak English, English is not their first language, it’s Indian English. But with Ebonics and Spanglish, there’s some negative stuff with that. How do we
separate the negative in order to get the respect because once you get the respect, people will study it and try to understand it with respect.

[Joanne Dowdy] I think the order is now in education, it’s to influence those teachers who are educated. The teachers who you train and have a lens to approach the language are the ones who influence their classroom positively. And they influence the schools in which they teach positively. So unless you can get teachers in an educational setting, and do everything we’ve done here today from 9 a.m. looking at the history of African English and where it is today then, you know, what are we doing? We’re sort of putting our heads in the sand and throwing a blanket over ourselves because it’s not addressing the reality that we’re living. Okay? This is no longer a minority question. So if we want to be 21st century, we have to get 21st century mindsets and use what we know is successful. Why is this a trillion dollar seller [of] music? You can’t say only a third of the group of students are driving down the street blasting hip-hop. That’s not true, it’s a universal language. So if we tap into what’s universal and making sense to young people, we’re on the ticket to winning, getting them to the next language and the next way of looking at the world through this lens. But we’ve got to educate teachers, which is why I turned up. Who’s talking about this? [Audience laughs.] All right? So you’ve got to turn up and have a conversation and have people start doing what we do in ESL classes. So what do you know about that from ESL? [Audience laughs] You can’t leave it outside the classroom because it’s their language.

[Ivanna Thrower] Well, let me ask that too. Almost 20 years ago when I worked at UNC-Charlotte in the English Language Department at UNC-Charlotte, I worked for the Language Writing Workshop upstairs and they called me the ESL and Ebonics specialist. Almost 20 years ago, they recognized that and said, “You know, we need someone who understands languages to be in here working not only with our English and Second Language students, but with our Ebonics students.” And not six months ago, I mentioned to someone that when I was in that position they called me the ESL and Ebonics specialist, and — just so you’re talking about respect versus the [way some react] to [gasp] — “You said that word!” You know, even just saying “Ebonics” was seen as a negative. And so I think not only is it a matter of educating teachers but I think that [for] people in general, the word “Ebonics” has become negative in some ways [so] that even talking about Ebonics as a language to some people is almost seen as an insult. And so it’s even greater, but 20 years ago I think we were on the right track.

[Alisha Das] I was taught that it was a language and I was taught about the language and I loved it and I thought it was the norm, but obviously it’s not.

[Joanne Dowdy] And then you woke up! [Audience laughs]

[Audience member] This is kind of similar on the same topic, but in talking about how schools or how higher education is addressing cultural diversity, coming through the UNC program I thought there was a strong focus on cultural diversity. But the problem I saw within my class and classmates was the rejection of cultural diversity. Feeling as if learning about diversity, incorporating it into your classroom, you’re being beat over the head with it and so many people, I felt like I walked out of the program with this great understanding. I feel like it’s helping me as I’m teaching in Durham. However, I feel like other people left with like, “This isn’t as important. I’m tired of hearing about this. You know I feel like I’m being beat over the head with it.” So have you all recognized that in your field and what are you doing to, you know, kind of make people feel like, “No, we’re not trying to beat you over the head with this, but this really is serious and this is what you’re going to encounter in your classroom”?
[Joanne Dowdy] But what if I do want to beat you over the head with it?! [Audience laughs.]

[Bobby Hobgood] She’s the professor over here!

[Audience member continues] Which is fine, but you can beat someone over the head with it but then they don’t take that into their classroom. Then you’re working with them in vain. So I’m trying to get that to move from the mindset of, “You’re beating me over the head. No, you’re not” to, “Okay, I understand this; I didn’t see this before.” How do we create that consciousness of “No, we’re not beating you over the head. You really need to know this and you really need to implement this in your classroom!”?

[Bobby Hobgood] It’s interesting, just a quick thing to add — and there are a lot of people ready to jump in on this — I think that it’s part of what we were talking about earlier, that extrinsic motivation versus intrinsic. So how do we create a situation where someone knows and they feel on the inside that this is important versus feeling like, “Ok, I’m going to do this because it’s being beat over my head and she controls my grade”?

[Audience member continues] And when they were the student and now they become the teacher, all that stuff is kind of pushed to the side – “I’m going to do my own thing.” So I think that is an issue and I would like to see different school’s education programs addressing that in addition to teaching how you should receive this and not as a punishment, being beat over the head. I’m talking about diversity — oh, my ... — You know, I just felt like a lot of people complained about learning about it.

[Bobby Hobgood] Melissa, back there.

[Audience member –Melissa] You acknowledge, you acknowledge – I’m assuming that you were not of the predominant culture, so in other words most of your classmates were white.

[Audience member] Yeah.

[Audience member – Melissa] Okay, so you understand the need. So you’re open and receptive to diversity and I just think that what happens is that [for] those of us in the predominant culture — it takes some sort of a shock treatment or some sort of an experience outside of the culture [to] understand and acknowledge that this is important and I need to do this. And so getting them to that understanding ... Otherwise they just keep getting presented with it and they just don’t see a need. And, you know, you’re open to that need because of your cultural background.

[Bobby Hobgood] Sashi?

[Sashi Rayasam] I also think that it’s more of, you know, the typical teacher training had been — even back in my time — until a few years ago, it’s getting different. But it was basically to teach, “I teach.” It was all teacher centered. It’s what I teach, I teach the curriculum. I’m doing my job versus being student-centered. So if you can look at it as being student-centered and then differentiating maybe that relevance of why you’re teaching the cultural nuances, [it] would be more [openly] received. Because the reality is you’re going to walk into those classrooms and you’re going to have all kinds; whether it’s poverty, whether it’s children from other countries, but every kind of culture that you can think of. I mean this is a great country and everything is a culture so every single person can bring that culture in,
no matter where you’re from. You know, you could be growing up right here next door and I’m still of a
different culture than you are. So I think just turning it to be more student-centered would probably
help because I’ve always said — and we’ve had a lot of it from the professional development side — the
craving that teachers have is basically that they’ve been taught to teach the middle-class white
population over the years and so that differentiation doesn’t [keep teaching up]. Going down and
bringing them to where they need to be are now being addressed. We are trying to do it from the
district level, you know, in our professional development sessions and I think it’s — from the student
teachers that I’ve had over the years and maybe towards the end, before I moved into this position —
that is slowly changing. So that’s just my opinion.

[Joanne Dowdy] That’s really, I like how you said that. It’s a wonderful country, everything’s a culture
and the way that I have learned to identify with my students — I’m the one usually integrating my
classes so I feel like an expert on integrating. I call myself the chief integrator. But it’s only on two levels,
right? And this morning we dealt with not judging the book by the cover. So my students get to learn
that my ancestors are Chinese and Portuguese and African, but that’s the fourth week into the class.
They’ve taught me that I can’t call them white. How come? Their parents and grandparents are Croatian,
Russian, Czechoslovakian, Greek, Italian, German, Irish. But nobody asks themselves — until we get to
have our conversation — nobody ask themselves. So making a safe space where this conversation can
start happening leads you to the place where you understand why it’s important, when you go in your
classroom where children are using a certain language it represents a history. And you have to embrace
that if you are going to embrace the students and get them to travel with you where you think they
need to go. So if I refuse to accept all the diversity that my students represent, then I model a negative
way of being in my class. And that’s what they imitate, being beaten over the head. If they’re not in a
classroom where someone is saying, “I embrace all that you represent,” then that can’t be duplicated.
You have no experience of being appreciated. Okay? So I tell them, “How did I learn to be so brave to
walk into these all-white settings?” Because I’ve had experience where I’ve been embraced. I know
there are people in there who will embrace me and hear me and give me space. But unless I have it I’ll
always say, “I don’t want to be with those people.” And I transfer that to my students and they take that
to their students because it’s not safe. So most of teacher education for me is how to build that safe
space where I can say a word and if it sounds like “potato” where everyone knows it’s “potato” and they
keep going [audience laughs]. It’s not a slur on my family back to the twentieth generation because it’s
safe in here. We can figure it out and keep going.

[Lindsay Creech] Can I just say one final thing? You brought up a really good point about conversation
and I think — I’m at grad school right now at UNC and that’s been a big part of our whole process in
getting to know who we are and what we bring to the classroom as teachers and the importance of
dialogue and making room for that in the classroom. The only way that we’re going to change teacher
education programs or change people’s thoughts or attitudes or anything is just by sparking that
conversation and that dialogue and just keeping the communication open between, you know, your
colleagues and your friends and your family. I mean, you know, my family disagrees with a lot of the
things I’m learning now because they’re from a different culture and they’re from a different mindset.
So, you know, it’s like a war when I go home for Christmas and talk about certain things that I’m
learning. But I just think that the importance of dialogue in the classroom — and even with the youngest
learners, I mean I teach kindergarten and I feel like there’s a very big opportunity to expose children to
this complex society we live in — and that’s through conversation, it’s what we do as human beings.

[Maria Rangel] Can I just bring up a point that’s interesting to me? [Audience laughs.]
[Bobby Hobgood] I’m not going to shut you up, I would not do that! [Audience laughs.]

[Maria Rangel] You need to stop and think and look around at what’s happening. We are becoming a very multicultural race now. You have Latinas with African Americans, you have Filipinos, Indians, Jamaicans. And then you look at these children and you wonder, “What are they?” [Audience laughs and comments]. You try and figure it out, you know, are they Filipino or from India? They’re both. You know, are they African American and white or are they from the island? They’re all that plus a Latino piece in there. So you’re like, “Whoa! What’s happening?” I was reading some research that said pretty soon — I’m not sure if they said 2050 or what have you — it’s going to become very multiracial [so] that you’re not going to know what’s what. So sure, culture plays a big role, but also think about what these kids are bringing and then think about your perspective as a teacher. What are you bringing to the table? I don’t know if you have read Ruby Payne but you guys have been mentioning a lot of her stuff. Poverty plays another roll. A lot of these kids were coming to school and coming from poverty backgrounds and they don’t have to be African Americans to speak Ebonics, you know, they’re speaking it. So again it goes back to being sensitive to that culture and really just standing back as a teacher and looking at that child and saying, “Okay, am I here for all the children? Or am I just here for ‘fill in the blank’?”

[Bobby Hobgood] We’re going on to a final question today. I’m going to skip over one of the questions because for some reason I thought there wouldn’t be enough to talk about [audience laughs]. I can’t imagine why! [Panel members and audience laugh and joke.] There are a couple more questions; one of them was involving parents in the ESL classroom.

[Panel member interjects] We did that!

[Bobby Hobgood] Yeah, we talked about that but staying abreast with the current policy and guidelines is a biggie so I’m kind of torn, ladies, between the last two questions. [Panel members and audience talk.] The question is, “How do I stay abreast today of changing policy and curriculum that are being revised?”

[Ivanna Thrower] Can I change that question – the extent of “How do we stay abreast” but “How do we get involved and form it?” because I’m telling you guys there is so much that goes on at the state level that — I’ve only been there six months and there’s so much that I was not aware of even though I was at the central office level in CMS [Charlotte/Mecklenburg Schools] — there’s so much going on. We need to be in there. We need to have our fingers in everything that’s going on in the legislature. We need to have our fingers in what’s going on at DPI. We need to be involved, we need to be involved. And my question to you is, “How and when are you going to get involved?” There’s so much you guys — you guys are the future, you’re the ones who are going to make it happen, you in the classroom now are the ones who’ve got to be speaking out. You band together; you bring it on.

[Audience member] But we have so many other things, like Durham just changed to — we have to teach 150 minutes everyday of literacy and we’re only teaching math one time, one week for every six weeks. [Audience makes surprised comments.] Things have changed, things are being changed and like, I’m having to hear it through the rumor mill and then when I get to school I’m like, “Okay, I’m brand new in this school in this position” and everything is different from the same public system that I was in the year before. Then it’s like, “Okay, you’re now required to grade the writing tests and take the training
for the writing tests.” So it’s like we keep on getting more stuff put on us and it’s everybody, it’s not just, you know, Durham. Everybody is, you know, getting involved and we all want to get involved...

[Sashi Rayasam] But I think that’s exactly what it is. So much gets lost in second-hand information. Get to the source of it. Your information that you just shared, you’d probably hear a very different answer if you got to the right person because, you know, it’s still ... not even anything new. It’s just a different way of looking at it. So I think you need to get to the source of it.

[Ivanna Thrower] And if you get to the “right person” even at the state level, we’ve got things coming down from D.C. and sometimes we don’t know because we’re not being told either. So that fluctuation, that frustration...

[Audience member continues] You’re right, it’s so important that people that are working with it need to go up to the big people.

[Bobby Hobgood] I’m sorry, if I could, one final question for our panelists today and this is kind of bringing together bits and pieces that have been spoken earlier and throughout the day and various sessions, “How do we create a common classroom culture when our students represent so many different cultures?” And, as a part of that, when we’re not really sure what their cultures are, how do we create and effective learning environment that juggles all of these requirements that we’re hearing about and that get us very excited?”

[Ivanna Thrower] I think we’ve addressed a lot of that. I mean with what you just said, reflecting on that piece and with the whole respect idea. If you expect, if you share your expectations and you show your respect, like you said having the highest expectations, “This is what we do in this classroom; this is how it’s done” and it’s done in a respectful way that brings everybody into inclusion in that classroom, no matter what background they’re bringing in, I think building your own classroom culture is what unifies everybody. Because it doesn’t matter what you’re bringing in — you respect it, you appreciate it and you’re all building that new culture together.

[Alisha Das] Now I think I would like to say this one thing, and write this down. [Audience laughs.] But it is: It’s psychology not pedagogy; it’s psychology not theology, not theory. It is knowing how the brain works, knowing how not to make defense mechanisms go off. It’s all natural, it is in our brain. I mean, I don’t know if you’re relating to what I’m saying because I feel kind of freaky right now but I’m so serious. It is psychology and all of the best self-help books and all of gurus out there — they know that. It is, you treat others the way — what was it this morning? — the Platinum Rule. That is psychology, I mean it is! And so I would say learn as much as you can about the brain. Learn as much as you can about the defense mechanisms that go off because we are animals becoming more human, I guess you could say, in our cultures and in our classrooms.

[Sashi Rayasam] I can’t top that. [Audience laughs.] But just coming from where I raised kids, you know, me being raised in a different culture, then coming here myself, so we’re first generation. I didn’t have a manual on how to raise kids in America. Let’s not talk dating and all that stuff. [Audience laughs.] I’ve got an 18- and a 23-year-old and they have succeeded to this point but I didn’t know what I was doing! But I will say this: My nephew told me, when my children were really young, he said, “You know, I feel like I’m Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. When I’m at home there’s a certain expectation but once I get on the school bus and go to school, I have to be a different person.” And I think that is probably my biggest
lesson in trying to be sensitive, even to my own children. It’s helping them be comfortable in their own skin while they fit in at school and at home. Because I didn’t want — and I’m sure I did it if you ask my children they’ll probably give you a whole bunch of stuff that their mean old mom didn’t look at — but that is what a lot of your children probably feel. Expectations of what they do at home are very different from what to expect in the classroom. So again it goes back to getting to know your students and, you know, seeing what you can do to be able to bridge that gap.

[Joanne Dowdy] Food. Every class I teach, I take food. After four weeks, people start bringing food. At the end of the ninth week, we all have food; it’s a family. And I’ve done interviews with students after they’ve done the course and done the assessment and then come back and food appears in every, every … what makes that class work? Food. It sends a message. It says, “I recognize you, I welcome you and I appreciate you.” And it’s what you do with family. The minute you say “them, me,” the dynamic is wrong, in my psychology, okay? I love group growth; I facilitate it. [Audience laughs.] How can we be family in here? Now I have family I don’t like [audience laughs] but I tell you, they come to my house, I’m the perfect hostess. There are things you do when you welcome people to your space.

[Bobby Hobgood] If I could just say to that — In North Carolina I’ve heard some people say that we can’t bring food into schools which is a sad thing but a nice take away from what you’re saying, even though we can’t bring in food, we can cultivate that sense of family. And I will tell you, I have a colleague who graduated from UNC I’m proud to say, and in her dissertation she looked at school systems in the state that were low-performing yet managed to have one or two schools that were shining. And she found the secret there that they were a family of practitioners working together and they embraced that. So that’s a nice take-away from what you were saying. We can’t bring the food but we can still embrace that...


[Bobby Hobgood] Was that group growth? What did you say? [Panel members joke and laugh, audience laughs.]

[Suzanne Gulledge] I’m just going to say identify an objective. Know your stuff. Whether you’re a math teacher, these things they apply to everybody regardless of the content area you teach. This area of study is no longer just the purview of just ESL teachers and I think we’re trying to make sure that it’s integrated and it’s everybody’s responsibility. But for your classroom, knowing your stuff and identifying with your students what your goals are. There’s nothing like a shared, “We’ve got to get there. We’re going to get there together.” Every shoulder at the wheel and everybody has assets to bring to that goal. I think [that] is one thing that you can do — create a common classroom where you share an ambition as a class.

[Bobby Hobgood] All right, folks. This could probably keep going but we have things to do and miles to go before we sleep. [Audience laughs.] As the poem goes … But I think this has been a good experience that I hope we can recreate and before I turn it over to Lucy. I think we do owe some thanks to our panelists. [Audience applauds.]

[Sashi Rayasam] I have one last thing to hand out. It’s coming across and you see a grid. Lucy asked me if I would compile [unintelligible] into districts that some of you represent. I have to say for the smaller districts, I couldn’t find anything on the website [unintelligible]. So my suggestion to you would be to look at your own school district website and try and see who the director of your federal programs [is]...
Otherwise I’ll try to E-mail the additional information to Lucy so she can forward it to you. But I have [listed] intake centers in some of the different districts in our state and how they welcome our international families, in case you wondered what it was.