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No more low expectations for English learners

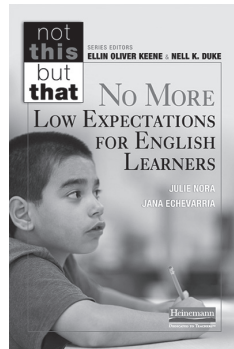
by Jennie Khalil

Nora, J. & Echevarria, J. (2016).
No more low expectations for English learners.
Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
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In *No More Low Expectations for English Learners*, authors Julie Nora and Jana Echevarria discuss the low expectations that are often set by general education teachers for their English Learners (ELs) and the ineffectiveness of this approach. Then, the authors present methods of instruction that have been implemented by teachers and found to be effective. These methods are premised upon setting high expectations and allowing teachers to view multilingualism not as a deficit, but an asset to academic learning.

This book is divided into three easy-to-follow sections, each with several subheadings. In section one, Nora describes in detail the specific procedures teachers commonly follow that result in setting low expectations for ELs. She also discusses why low expectations are set in some classrooms, such as insufficient teacher training both in how to teach ELs and in viewing students' linguistic diversity through an asset lens. Without this support, many teachers engage in tasks such as limiting teaching to basic skills, which are insufficient for goals such as college readiness. Other examples of practices that result from lack of training and low expectations include prohibiting ELs from using their native languages in the classroom, avoiding addressing ELs in the classroom during question and answer sessions or other academic activities, and not attempting to communicate with their families.

In section two, Echevarria opens with a discussion of the importance of teacher attitudes and behaviors in the



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classroom. She delineates how behavior on the part of the teacher makes a difference, either positively or negatively, in the academic learning of ELs. She also talks about the importance and positive effects of setting high expectations for ELs. She further discusses particular methods teachers may implement that support the academic learning of ELs, such as involving ELs with their native English-speaking counterparts in classroom discussions and activities. In addition, she addresses the importance of carefully crafting lessons using the SIOP model as a guide in planning and providing access to grade-level content. SIOP is an acronym for Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, which is designed to provide a framework for teachers to develop lessons that allow for the content to be accessible by all students. Finally, Echevarria talks about the importance of focusing on academic language in the classroom for all learners and providing the supports necessary to both use and understand it.

In section three, Nora builds upon the content of section two, presenting specific teacher behaviors for setting high expectations. She elaborates on actions that can be taken to make ELs feel a sense of belonging, including affirming students' identities, learning about their languages and cultures, and integrating both into classroom tasks and activities. This shows ELs, and all students, that speaking multiple languages is advantageous to academic learning. Nora recommends several instructional adaptations, such as extending response time, planning small group conversations with a focus on content vocabulary, and other tasks that promote the use of academic language.

Must Read Texts

One strength of this text is that it introduces approaches that teachers can use to learn about their students and how to adjust their methods and respective curricula to better serve the diverse learning needs of ELs. The book not only provides approaches but also gives explanations of each as well as specific examples. There are multiple visuals, including pictures of student work and outlined charts that break down concepts addressed in the text. This way, the reader has an understanding of why these procedures are important, how they reach the learning needs of ELs, and specifically what to implement in a lesson.

The authors also do a nice job of clarifying the content for the reader. There are side notes provided on where to go in order to find more examples of what is being discussed on that page and suggestions to “consider” particular aspect(s) related to what is being presented in that section. This allows the reader to critically ponder different perspectives and think about what is being discussed, providing a better understanding. There are also summaries at the end of each part that help bring together the topics of that section and serve as reminders of what was presented.

After reading this book, readers will likely want to delve further into topics that are referenced in the book, but not central foci. For example, the authors write that “most often the students for whom teachers had low expectations were students of color and those from disadvantaged backgrounds” (p. 11), but they do not provide an in-depth explanation of the basis for this conclusion. Readers will need to seek out additional resources to further explore why some teachers have low expectations for particular minority groups. Readers may also need to seek additional background information necessary to understand the heterogeneity of students identified as English learners. For example, some students have experienced interrupted schooling, while others have not; some students are refugees, while others are not. These distinctions are important because they impact teacher understanding of EL students, and therefore contribute to better and more responsive teaching of diverse learners, a key focus of this text. For example, many refugees fled their home countries due to war or

dangerous situations. They may suffer from the trauma of being separated from their families, persecution, and even witnessing horrific acts such as murder of loved ones (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). All of these are likely to effect school relationships and learning.

I would recommend this text to incoming, novice teachers and any teacher of diverse learners as an introduction or refresher to teaching English Learners; Nora and Echevarria’s book serves as an incremental guide to the knowledge and tools necessary to teach English Learners effectively. For those teachers that have had training and useful professional development regarding students that do not speak English as a first language, this text can serve to affirm their knowledge and provide additional ideas and activities to apply in the classroom. This book would also be ideal for professional learning communities, who might address questions such as: How does lack of preparation programs in teacher education, such as community-based learning and methods crafted specifically to teach ELs, contribute to low expectations? Also, why do teachers tend to set low expectations for the particular minority groups mentioned in this book?

References

Bia-Keating, M., & Ellis, B. H. (2007). Belonging and connection to school in resettlement: Young refugees, school belonging, and psychosocial adjustment. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 12(1), 29-43.

Author Biography

Jennie Khalil received a Bachelor of Arts degree in mathematics from Michigan State University with a second major in French. She received her M.A. from Michigan State University in Teaching and Curriculum with a focus in mathematics and science. She is a high school mathematics teacher, teaching in an urban setting as well as a course instructor at Wayne State University’s College of Education. She is a doctoral candidate at Wayne State University, studying multi-cultural education and best methods of instruction to teach English Learners at the high school level in mathematics and science classrooms. She can be reached at jennie.khalil@wayne.edu.