On his first day of kindergarten, Juan (a pseudonym), a five-year-old English-language learning child, was administered a standardized test that assessed his ability to read. He was asked to identify letters and parts of a book, to independently “read” a passage in a story, and to discuss the main idea of a teacher-read passage. At the end of the day, according to his test scores, the teacher labeled Juan a nonreader. As a consequence, Juan was placed in a reading group comprised of all the lowest scoring children in the class, assigned a seat in the back, and labeled “at-risk.” Juan will eventually be called upon less than his classmates, who perform more successfully on tests and classroom assignments. He will also experience a disconnect with the activities his classmates are engaged in and the opportunities they are afforded. Juan has joined a rapidly growing population of children who are, in fact, being left behind.

There is an endemic number of minority children, like Juan, who are being labeled as “at-risk,” “developmentally delayed,” and “not ready to learn” according to academic achievement (as measured by standardized test scores and classroom assignments) in U.S. public schools today (Delpit, 1988; Gee, 2001). Juan watches from the back of the classroom as other students, well versed in the discourse (i.e., language in use) of school, move seamlessly through the curriculum. As the minority population in the United States continues to grow, the rapidly increasing epidemic of students left behind is one of grave concern for early childhood educators nationwide. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2005), the number of school-age children (ages 5–17) who spoke a language other than English at home grew from 3.8 million to 9.9 million between 1979 and 2003—gains representing 9–19% of all children in that age group. These individuals are English-language learners. English-language learners (hereafter referred to as ELLs) are defined as individuals who meet one of the following criteria: a person born outside of the United States whose native language is not English, an individual who comes from an environment in which English is not dominant, or a person who is an American Indian or Alaskan native from environments in which languages other than English affect their English-proficiency levels (Au, 1998; Fitzgerald, 1995). George, Raphael, and Florio-Ruane (2003) predicted that within the next two decades over half of the U.S. school population will be members of language, ethnic, and socioeconomic minority groups. Educational researchers are working on a way to affirm the diverse cultures and language interactions of ELLs within the context of teaching a prescribed school curriculum (George et al., 2003). By understanding the important role that language plays for ELLs during daily academic and social exchanges in school, early childhood educators will be better prepared to facilitate learning opportunities for children outside the cultural and linguistic mainstream.

For many ELLs, the Discourse spoken within their family unit and community (primary Discourse) varies greatly from those that dominate curriculums and assessment tools in public education (academic Discourse).

Discourses (capital “D”) are ways of combining and coordinating words, deeds, thoughts, values, bodies, objects, tools, and technologies, and other people (at the appropriate times and places) so as to enact and recognize the specific socially situated identities and activities. (Gee, 2001, p. 721)

The academic Discourse and culture of public education is, for the most part, familiar to the
mainstream (white, middle class) population and is thus easier for them to fluidly navigate. Due to disparities between academic Discourses and an ELL’s primary Discourse, a free and equal education, as claimed by the U.S. government, may, in actuality, be perpetuating an education for ELLs that is far from equal and costs them dearly.

While many schools implement curriculums designed from a white, middle class, “mainstream” model, ELLs attending school in an “English-only” environment face barriers that hinder academic success—evidenced by ELLs’ low standardized test scores and overall lack of academic achievement (Au, 1998; Gee, 2001; Truscott & Watts-Taffe, 2003). Heath (2000) further described the barriers ELLs face upon entering the classroom. Textbook questions that require straightforward answers often draw inappropriate responses from children whose primary Discourse has taught them to value metaphor, imagination, and hypothesized answers (Heath, 2000). “The ‘logic’ of these and other ‘nonstandard’ ways of telling stories, arguing a claim, or illustrating generalizations do not fit the ‘standard’ in the classroom discussion or answers called for in many tests and general end-of-chapter questions of textbooks” (Heath, 2000, p. 52).

This article presents information on critical issues relating to the ways in which ELLs’ primary Discourses serve as a barrier to school success—in part because of academic Discourses embedded within currently implemented school curriculums and assessment tools. This article also urges teachers to identify and acknowledge the significance of the role their own Discourses (both primary and academic) play in their approach to teaching ELLs, and it provides prevention and intervention strategies to link the primary Discourse of ELLs with the academic Discourse of schools.

Creating a New Culture in Early Childhood Classrooms

Children have the right to their own language, their own culture. We must fight the cultural hegemony and fight the system by insisting that children be allowed to express themselves in their own language style [discourse]. It is not they, the children, who must change, but the schools. To push children to do anything else is repressive and reactionary. (Delpit, 1988, p. 291)

According to Williams (2005), access to power and cultural capital is why academic Discourses that reflect the values of the mainstream culture are the foundation for most literacy pedagogy. Slavin and Cheung (2005), in their synthesis of research on the language of reading instruction for ELLs, found that there was a dearth of curriculums that provided superior academic benefits for ELLs. Gee (2004) noted that children cannot feel they belong at school when their valuable home-based practices...are ignored, denigrated, and unused. They cannot feel like they belong when the real game is acquiring academic Discourse, varieties of language, and they are given no help with this, as they watch other children get...assessed at school for what they have learned, not at school, but at home.” (p. 37)

It is through academic Discourse that children come to understand themselves as learners, understand teacher expectations, and understand teaching and learning through the types of Discourse they participate in throughout the school day (Buzzelli, 1996).

New Roles for Teachers

Teachers may benefit from creating a classroom environment with the goal of expanding learning through building on the languages and cultures that children bring with them (Barrera, Quiroa, & Valdivia, 2003; Dworin, 2003; Slavin & Cheung, 2005; Truscott & Watts-Taffe, 2003). However, educators need to understand their own primary Discourses and cultural identities, as well as those of their students, in order to effectively modify the curriculum to improve ELLs’ opportunities to learn (Au, 1998; Assaf & Dooley, 2006).

Teachers often struggle with how to “reconcile conflicts, regarding Discourse, that are constructive and ethical, respecting students’ community and home identities, yet teaching students the literacies that provide cultural capital in school and beyond” (Williams, 2005, p. 343). Building on the principles of Watts-Taffe and Truscott (2000), the following are intervention strategies and examples found in the literature that offer guidance to educators teaching ELLs.

Recognizing Children as Experts in the Classroom

By denying ELLs their own personal experiences and knowledge we are disempowering them (Delpit, 1988). Au (1998) suggested giving ELLs some ownership of the curriculum and valuing the experiences they bring with them. Knowing your students and fa-
miliarizing yourself with their culture will help you to modify your academic Discourse to more appropriately address and respect the primary Discourse of your students. Familiarize yourself with the culture of the community you teach in as well as the cultures of your students. Create assignments that allow children to share family and community experiences. Use the meaningful experiences conveyed by ELLs to inform future lessons. Or, you could implement book clubs to share personal narratives (life experiences) or home–school connection activities (George et al., 2003).

**Linking Primary Discourse to Academic Discourse Through the Curriculum**

Because many minority children acquire their first group learning experiences outside of the home in early childhood classrooms, using both English and the language of your ELLs may help children acquire language and literacy skills more fluidly (Buzzelli, 1996). You can label items around the classroom in both languages. When transitioning from one lesson to the next, if possible, speak the native language of the ELLs in your classroom or allow the students to address the class in their native language. Nonverbal cues, such as sign language or a “secret” language you could develop with your class, can facilitate a sense of community for all children.

**Embedding Reading Instruction and Materials in the Diverse Perspectives of ELLs**

“We are giving [students] the knowledge to make choices about why they read and write and to understand that the choices are theirs to make” (Williams, 2005, p. 347). Teachers can use classroom materials and resources that represent diverse cultures and empower ELLs (Au, 1998). Your classroom should be like a quilt—the patches represent the cultures and identities of each of your students. Provide ELLs with realistic, meaningful literacy activities and those literacy skills necessary for participation in mainstream society (Au, 1998). Using text to bridge the gap between the primary Discourse of ELLs and the academic Discourse of school is an important way to validate ELLs understanding. Check your school library for books with which all the students in your class can identify. Fill your classroom library with books of many languages and cultures. Also see the National Education Association’s website (www.nea.org/readacross/resources/50multibooks.html) for “50 multicultural books every child should read.” This book list is also broken down into age groups.

Try to represent the cultures and languages of ELLs in readings throughout the curriculum. Present readings to the class that teach students about other languages and cultures. Try to make connections between the ELLs’ cultures and the school culture. All children can associate with a story about a child going to school and meeting new friends. Allow time for peers to share their feelings about universal themes (e.g., losing a tooth, getting a haircut or a scraped knee, eating, laughing) in order to build classroom community.

**Implementing Culturally Responsive Management Styles**

Teachers should recognize the control an educator has over the structure and content of Discourse through their management and communication styles (Buzzelli, 1996) by respecting the cultural disparities of school and home life. It is important to familiarize yourself with the cultural beliefs and values associated with the discipline and management styles of your ELLs. As educators strengthen the school and community relationship, parents and community members may “increase the cultural and linguistic relevance of school situations” (Au, 1998, p. 312). Teachers should vary question types and mediums. Addressing each child the same way in the classroom rarely works, and ELLs often respond to discipline in varied ways. If your discipline style resembles that of white, middle class parenting styles, ELLs may become intimidated and feel inferior in the classroom.

Teachers should also try not to reject answers that appear to be wrong; instead, discuss with the child how they arrived at their answer (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000). This technique can serve as a tool to more fully understand how ELLs are thinking.

**Conducting Unbiased Assessments**

Assessments should be structured in a way that gives all children an equal opportunity to succeed and that reflects authentic learning, not rote memorization (Au, 1998). This is not the same as structuring an
assessment so that all children receive a perfect score. Keep in mind that ELLs may need pictures if they are unfamiliar with a text. Small-group or peer-group assessments, in which ELLs work in groups with other students, may help increase ELLs’ confidence and social skills associated with test taking.

Disseminating Discourse

For Juan, the lines between his primary Discourse and the school’s academic Discourse remain clearly defined and divided. Juan functions within his community as a bright child with much to offer, but in school his primary Discourse serves as a barrier to learning. For now, Juan will remain in his seat and left behind by his classmates. If the current curricula and assessment tools remain in play, unchallenged by all, the achievement gap between Juan and his white, middle class, counterparts will continue to expand exponentially.

The importance of acknowledging each child’s primary and academic Discourses, along with those embedded in the hidden curriculum and their influences on ELLs is imperative. As educators, we must not only ask ourselves how we can help ELLs find their own voices but also “coach those voices to produce notes that will be heard clearly in the larger society” (Delpit, 1988, p. 296). Williams (2005) emphasized the importance of teachers listening to what children have to say about their communities and to remember that they (the teachers) offer but one way that their students are being taught to understand the world. That opportunity, that chance, Williams referred to, has the potential to give a voice to these children who have been silenced for too long. Educators who take the time to learn the primary Discourse of their students are helping to close the achievement gap and value the voice of ELLs often stifled by the academic Discourse predominately used in schools today. Can you hear them? Each one has something to say.

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