

Diversity in the Schools: Taking the Lead from Psychology

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The Dorothy Hill Symposium, part of the Section on Psychology in Education (SecPE) affiliated with the Ontario Psychological Association (OPA) - took place on October 30th, 2014 in Toronto. Drs. Geva and Wiener provided a very relevant and accessible workshop on how clinicians should integrate considerations of diversity in their assessment and intervention practices for both achievement and social/emotional functioning.

Dr. Geva presented research to highlight the different trajectories for the development of language in children who are monolingual and those who are English Language Learners (ELLs). ELLs take a long time to develop English language skills and continue to lag behind their monolingual peers even when not considered ELL officially. When assessing children who are learning a new language or have English as a second language, it is therefore, imperative to be cautious in interpreting their performance on language and reading comprehension tasks in relation to norms of standardized tests. Dr. Geva also stressed that when assessing language development it is important to consider the development of various components of language, including morphological awareness, phonological awareness, vocabulary, grammar and pragmatic aspects of language that are all important for academic achievement. Further considerations include the type of language the child has first learned and how specific language features may enhance or hinder their acquisition of specific aspects of the second language. Importantly, Dr. Geva explained that phonological awareness and word related skills (i.e., word recognition, decoding pseudowords, and spelling) are less dependent on proficiency in English. ELLs can learn to decode words and complete phonological awareness tasks even when they are not proficient in English, and the profiles of ELLs who have persistent difficulties on these skills are rather similar to those of monolingual children with similar difficulties. At the same time, reading comprehension and writing skills are highly dependent on having both well developed word reading skills and various language skills. Other factors that contribute to language and reading skills that should be taken into account include cognitive factors such as phonological short-term memory and contextual factors such as age, parental education, instructional strategies, prior schooling, and age of introduction to English. Finally, Dr. Geva pointed out that approaches to intervention that work with monolingual children also work with ELLs. It was therefore recommended not to delay assessment until an ELL is proficient in their second language because delay of assessment may hinder the timely implementation of effective interventions.

Dr. Wiener continued the second half of this presentation and began with a discussion of what culture is and how it can impact how we understand the individual and family context. Special consideration was given to stigma, attributions for academic difficulties, communication styles, time orientation, family values and parental involvement in school achievement. Dr. Wiener further discussed the process of acculturation as well as both risk factors and protective factors

that can impact it. Recommendation for clinical work with a client or family from a culture different from the practitioners included developing trust, establishing legitimacy, consideration of language and immigration history, and being attuned to ethical dilemmas that may arise in this relationship. Dr. Wiener emphasized the importance of learning about a culture independently so as to have some knowledge and context with which to help understand the client while remaining open to the differences that are often reflected within a single culture. This presentation was timely given the constantly changing demographic in Toronto and across Canada. Drs. Geva and Wiener presented work which provided clinicians with important findings and information for facilitating positive development in our students given this continual change in the diversity of our school communities. Drs. Esther Geva and Judith Wiener have an elaborated discussion on all of these topics and several clinical resources available in their new book published by Springer: *Psychological Assessment of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Children and Adolescents: A Practitioners' Guide*.