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# BLAB: Changing the Way that We Look At Students

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BLAB: Changing the Way that We Look At Students

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### Abstract

Educational labels frequently impede student success rather than empower student success, as the labels become the defining attributes of each student and define the expectations of student failure or success. The classroom teacher must adopt a new paradigm that focuses on the whole child rather than on an educational label. The *BLAB* paradigm emphasizes that each child must be considered on the basis of social, educational, familial, & cultural heritages (B); proficiencies in English language and academic language recognizing that all students are on a continuum of language development in both dimensions (L); academic abilities that can differ from one content area to another (A); and behavior, whether that behavior is that of the perfect student or the disruptive student (B). The paradigm emphasizes that the interrelationships of these dimensions is dynamic and are influenced by both the content and classroom context of the classroom.

## 1. Introduction

Identifying the individual needs of each student in a classroom is the challenge facing any teacher. Multiple modifiers signifying specific academic or behavioral characteristics could accompany each name on the class roster. The modifiers reflect eligibility for special programs, performance on standardized assessments, language proficiency, or other variables that influence the student's performance in the classroom. The task of the teacher is to understand each variable and modify instruction to meet the needs of the individual student.

Federal regulations have intensified the task of adapting instruction to meet the needs of each student in the classroom. The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* required schools to disaggregate testing data based on economic disadvantage, racial or ethnic minorities, disability, and limited English proficiency. Teachers, and schools, are no longer evaluated on whole class performance, but instead on the achievement of subgroups within the class. The micro focus on each group sought to highlight the disparities with the result being increased achievement scores. However, the long-term trend data of the National Assessment of Educational Progress revealed significant growth in achievement among the subgroups and narrowing of the achievement gap from 1973 to 2012, but limited growth from 2004 to 2012; years that would have been affected by *NCLB* (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013).

Although the focus of *NCLB* and the *Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004*, accompanied by court cases requiring schools to provide adequate instruction for racial and language minorities, was to provide each student with access to quality instruction, the unintended consequence for many schools and teachers became that students were no

longer recognized as individuals, but as members of groups identified in federal regulations with specific characteristics and educational needs. The educational needs of the group, rather than the individual, became the target as specialists, teachers, school and district administrators sought to improve the percentage of each disaggregated group in meeting the standards as measured by the standardized test. With multiple instructional strategies and group characteristics being presented for each subgroup by specialists trained to teach that subgroup, the classroom teacher is easily overwhelmed as few specialists connect the instructional strategies for their subgroup with the needs of the other students in the classroom. The teacher is presented with the perspective of having to modify and adapt at the micro group level rather than recognizing similarities and needs among all students in the classroom.

The multiple labels identify each student's membership in a group. However, the individual student may not be the stereotypical group member for each student develops, constructs, and learns as an individual shaped by interactions with family, peers, school, and the community. Differentiation in the classroom is often focused on labels as teachers seek to answer questions focused on instruction for special education students, English language learners, talented and gifted students, mainstream students, non-majority culture students, and marginalized students as if each group was monolithic with all group members sharing the same characteristics.

This paper introduces a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962) that expands teacher knowledge beyond the multiple labels to consider each student as an individual. The intense attention on the disaggregated groups in the classroom has brought neither the desired student achievement nor successful differentiation in many schools and

classrooms. The paradigm (BLAB) emphasizes the wealth of knowledge that each student brings to the classroom through her interactions with culture, family, and community; the language strengths and connections between first and second languages; and academic abilities. The BLAB acronym stands for Background knowledge, Language, Academics, and Behavior; these four elements define the paradigm for individualizing student instruction.

## **2. The Labels We Give Students**

Mastropieri and Scruggs (2000) identified fifteen labels that have been applied to students. While twelve of these refer to the handicapping conditions under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the other three refer to the culture, language, intellectual, or at-risk characteristics of the students. Within the handicapping condition of learning disabilities, additional labeling is found when the student is identified as having a learning disability in mathematics, reading, or writing.

Deviance from the norm is inherent in the labeling that occurs (Tomlinson, 2004; Rist, 2007). Within *NCLB*, there is the mass of students representing the majority, while the various minorities are classified by their deviation from the norm: English language learner, low socio-economic status, racial minority, or disabled. Gender is included to separate the male and female students to enable the identification of achievement and ensure that the success, or lack of it, of the female students is not glossed over. The word *deviance* in this context has no moral connotation; rather, it describes difference from the norm. Within any characteristic that defines a human being, the majority or most powerful members will define the norm (average, typical) with members deviating from that norm being distinguished by a label; a label that represent cultural heritage, primary and second

languages, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, extroversion, introversion, athletics, etc. The label describes adherence or non-adherence to the norm.

Academic performance is measured against the average student at a specific grade level. The identification of a disability is based on whether the student possesses the abilities or skills of the average as defined by the normal curve. Gifted and talented students are those students whose abilities in specific areas are above the norm. Remedial students are those who are performing below the norm.

Cultural identities are often defined by how one culture differs from another with each culture establishing its own normative behavior (Clarke, 2008). Social class structures are seen in the socio-economic status of poor, middle, and upper classes of students. The plural pronoun *them* readily distinguishes a group of students from other students; the emphasis is on the difference rather than the similarities (McCray and McHatton, 2011).

The labels described by Mastropieri and Scruggs (2000) are designed to identify needs and provide additional resources so that each student experiences success. However, the use of labels often results in decreased expectations and possibilities. Perceived student inadequacies based on the applied label can lead to reduced performance as the student achieves at the level identified by the teacher on the basis of the label, regardless of whether that level is the student's actual potential or a false potential (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968; Brophy and Good, 1970). Indeed, this relationship could be described as a symbiotic relationship between the teacher and student in which the expectations and behaviors of the two are intertwined as each adjusts her responses based on her perceptions of what the other person wants and needs (Rist, 2007). Any label provides a glimpse into a student. Disability manifests itself in unique avenues in each student.

Disabled students can be found among any racial, cultural, socio-economic, sexual orientation, age, social, or other identifier in our schools (Broderick, Mehta-Parekh, & Reid, 2005).

Making the transition from a label to expected behaviors, abilities, and attitudes based on those labels is painless for the teacher, but endangering to the student. Labels can imply conformity; each member of the labeled group has the same characteristics with respect to the label. The label provides the lens through which the student is viewed. The lens determines the teacher's expectations and interactions concerning any labeled student; each student is viewed through a lens with its accompanying "checklist" that is based on deviance from the norm: academically or behaviorally (special education), heritage (culture, language), socio-economic condition (poverty, wealth), intellectual ability (talented and gifted), etc. While the checklist provides the description of a student at the macro level, it does dictate or describe the characteristics that determine who the student is on an individual level. Ginsburg (2005) described the tension that occurs between an individual's role in a group and the expected behaviors of that group. The group influences beliefs and values, but the implications of those beliefs and values can differ among the members of the group. An acceptable activity for one member may be unacceptable or uncomfortable for another. Individual differences within a group can be magnified when group expectations are not considerate of individual values. Although the author's specific focus was the multi-cultural preparation of pre-service teachers, Smith's (2009) cautionary note warrants attention: "Even though we are talking about culture, it is important to remember that children are individuals and cannot be made to fit into any preconceived mold of how they are 'supposed' to act" (p. 45).



The contradiction between the group label and the individual was powerfully presented by Metcalf (2008) in the description of Josie, a child that the author met in a homeless shelter. Josie's happiness contrasted with the depression Metcalf saw in other homeless children. Her academic achievement was above expectations for those in similar situations. Rather than being confrontational or withdrawn, Josie's interaction with others was positive.

The language of the InTASC standards requires each teacher to adopt broad lenses through which to view each student and plan the appropriate instructional practices. Each lens is designed to enhance a classroom environment that promotes the successful inclusion of all students whose issues emerging from poverty, second language acquisition, disability, racial and ethnic differences, socialization, and family background intersect within the confines of the classroom (Broderick, Mehta-Perekh, & Reid, 2005).

### **3. Proactive teaching through learning styles and intelligences**

Providing specific instructional focused on an individual student's needs often leads teachers to consider the theories of multiple intelligences or learning styles. Based on student self-reporting or observations by the teacher, differentiation occurs as the teacher adapts the lesson to the different modalities represented in the learning style. The role of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2004, 2006) as a proactive teaching strategy to meet each student's educational needs often dominates the discussion. Each student is presumed to possess one or more of the intelligences (linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic). Identifying the extent that each student possesses a particular intelligence is problematic unless the student has

exceptional abilities in a specific intelligence (i.e., a successful dancer, artist, or mathematician).

The work of Dunn and Dunn (1993) and Kolb (1964) was influential in the early discussions concerning how students learned with a specific emphasis upon individual styles and modes of learning. Dunn and Dunn (1993) identified five elements that could influence a student's concentration and learning: environmental, emotional, sociological, physiological, and psychological. Within each element, variations were noted which could influence the learning of the student. The theorists created a learning style inventory, but cautioned that teachers could not identify all elements and that there was also the possibility of misinterpretation. Kolb (1964) described four learning styles within his emphasis upon experiential learning: convergent, divergent, assimilation, and accommodative. The learning styles focused on how individuals responded to abstract and concrete experiences.

Measuring and assessing the degree to which a student possesses a specific learning style or intelligence is imprecise. Teacher observations and perceptions regarding learning styles and intelligences can be biased (intentionally or unintentionally) through the influence of preconceived ideas (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Brophy & Good, 1970). Student identification and demonstration of learning styles varies from context to context, influenced by prior experiences. Significant discrepancies occur when any theory is applied to a specific student, identifying that student has having a specific intelligence or learning style to the neglect of the other intelligences or learning styles. Rather than possessing one unique learning style or intelligence, students often possess an eclectic mix of learning styles depending upon the content and context of the classroom. An additional influence

upon the usage or non-usage of a learning style or intelligence is the student's previous experiences (Vygotsky, 1978).

Consideration of learning styles and multiple intelligences should be an element of the planning for instruction or for an instructional unit to ensure that the content is discussed through multiple approaches. Limiting the learning of a student to a specific intelligence or learning style, however, fails to recognize the diversity within each student.

#### **4. Proactive teaching through observation and study**

While recognizing the diversity of the groups of learners by the chosen label or descriptor can be effective; the unintentional consequence is that each group is seen as a monolithic group rather than as a heterogeneous group that can be as diverse as the classroom itself. Recognizing individuality in the classroom led to the development of three investigative strategies to understand each student within the perspectives of her own individuality: kidwatching, funds of knowledge, and case study.

Though initially designed to assess the language development and literacy of young students, the observational and interactional *kidwatching* (Goodman, 1978) emphasized knowledge of individual student learning far more significant than the numbers generated by an assessment. Informal observations and conversations with students occurred throughout the day as the teacher formulated and evaluated questions designed to assess the development of each student. O'Keefe (1998) described it as a systematic process that focused on authentic learning within the context of the classroom as students demonstrated their proficiency. Teachers were seen as co-participants with the students in the learning. Student voice and expertise was recognized as the teacher interacted with the students in conversation, teaching, journals, and notebooks. Professional practice for the

teacher focused on the actual learning of each student rather than the grade to be entered in the gradebook.

The focus on the individual student is expanded in the concept *funds of knowledge* that emphasized the familial and cultural strengths brought to the classroom by the children of working class Latino families (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Soto-Santiago, & Schwartz, 2013). Interviews with the families concerning family and labor history, household practices, and parenting roles enabled the researchers to identify the strengths these children brought to the classroom; strengths that differentiated Latino students from one another and from their classmates. Family experiences and practices highlighted the interculturality of the students as the families developed their abilities to function and adapt in multi-cultural systems.

Demos and Foshay (2009) presented the case study model as a means to differentiate instruction for a child who had been identified for special education services, but who needed additional support to be successful. The case study approach is modeled on the typical special education referral process, which includes the basic demographic information about the student, reasons for referral, interviews with the parent, teacher and student, a review of the student's school history, individualized and group assessments, and the insights of the professionals conducting the assessments and interviews.

The in-depth exploration into a child's life described by the case study model and the full implementation of the funds of knowledge approach is a daunting challenge for the classroom teacher. Pre-service and inservice teachers are expected to meet a standard that emphasizes knowing each student's needs while navigating classrooms where such individual knowledge is problematic. A new paradigm is required which integrates

elements of the specialties (special education, English language development, talented and gifted) with knowledge of the individual (cultural, psychological, social, academic) in a format that classroom teachers can use.

#### 5. **Proactive teaching through a new paradigm: BLAB**

The new paradigm is BLAB; an acronym that stands for these four domains: Background knowledge, Language, Academics, and Behavior. A visual image of the paradigm identifying the domains and the elements of each domain can be seen in figure 1. Each domain will be briefly introduced with more explanation to follow.

**Background knowledge:** Every student is influenced by the experiences of her life whether those experiences have been within the family, cultural, historical, spiritual, or physical. Additionally, characteristics such as gender, physical abilities, race, socio-economic status, and privilege have shaped and will shape how students respond and learn.

**Language:** Language dimensions of learning are often focused on the student who is learning English as a second language and these dimensions should be present in the planning of the classroom teacher. However, language concerns can emerge in any student, whether the student is learning new vocabulary, expressing ideas verbally or in writing, or comprehending what is being taught.

**Academic:** Ensuring that the student is ready and able to learn requires the teacher to assess not only whether the student has the prerequisite knowledge, but also whether there are any knowledge gaps that need to be addressed. Task completion styles and motivation are essential elements to consider.

**Behavior:** Difficulties in task completion, socialization, and attention often are at the forefront when behavior is considered. Challenges for the classroom teacher also emerge when teaching the "perfect" student or students who are like "Ramona" (Cleary, 1981).

The BLAB paradigm is a dynamic approach to the assessment of each student's cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical areas. It is not the static application of a label that defines every element of a student's life. Inherent in BLAB is the recognition that each student is continually changing and adapting as she encounters learning within the classroom and the world outside of the classroom. Labels identifying exceptionalities, learning styles, intelligences, and other characteristics are seen as perspectives into a child's life, but are not identified as the sole perspective into the child's life. The teacher continually assesses and interacts with individual students investigating their thinking and learning processes much like the *kidwatcher* in Goodman's (1978) literacy classroom. Identifying the strengths that each student brings to the classroom based on her life experiences requires the teacher to use the insights of family, culture, and society demonstrated in a student's *funds of knowledge* (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Soto-Santiago, & Schwartz, 2013).

Multiple interactions among the four domains occur daily as the student migrates through classroom experiences (see figure 1). Observations made, or strengths identified, in one content area are not assumed to be present in other content areas. Group or individual work may be successful on a particular day, but not another day. A student could competently verbalize and understand the content in one subject, but be unable to communicate orally or in writing in another. These observations enable the teacher to

develop a more holistic and realistic image of each student, adapting and adjusting instruction to respond to those changes. The interactional and relational aspects of BLAB reflect how one domain can influence another domain or domains for each individual student.

Background knowledge is the foundational element that continuously interacts with the other three domains of BLAB influencing the student's perceptions of language, academic, and behavioral expectations. The educational impacts of socio-economic status, gender affiliation, cultural and familial heritages, and societal status cannot be ignored as teachers develop proactive teaching strategies to enhance student success in language development, academic achievement, and behavior. This influence is reflected in the following discussion with its greater emphasis on background knowledge than the other three domains.

### **5.1 Background Knowledge**

Each classroom is comprised of students whose present lives have been shaped and influenced by the complex interaction of multiple and diverse systems involving culture, family, home, school, and society. This is the history that precedes each educational event (Vygotsky, 1978). The BLAB paradigm leads the teacher into an exploration of the background of each student. This exploration is not the in-depth approach of the case study (Demos & Foshay, 2009), but instead identifies essential qualities that overtly and covertly impact student learning. Knowledge is gained through listening, interacting, sharing, with the student following Goodman's (1978) *kidwatching*. Communication with parents, family members, teachers, and other caregivers provides additional information as the teacher seeks to develop a fuller understanding of each student.

### **5.1.1 *The Impact of Culture, Heritage, & Childhood Experiences***

Influential elements within a student's background include exposure to places outside of the immediate neighborhood or city, exposure to books and libraries, life experiences, cultural and ethnic heritage, gender or sexual orientation, family history and culture, funds of knowledge, and visual and hearing abilities. Each element will influence a child's success either positively or negatively; the content and context of the experience will determine its value to the student.

Expanding the concept of *funds of knowledge* (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Soto-Santiago, & Schwartz, 2013) to include all students requires the teacher to recognize the unique cultural expertise of each student, whether the student is Latino, Asian, African-American, American Indian, or Anglo. Each student's cultural expertise is unique because it has been shaped by individual and familial interactions within that culture; interactions that may or may not resemble the majority elements (or norm) of the culture. Within each culture there are subcultures whose structures and philosophies represent varying degrees of commitment and association with the continuum of the majority of the culture.

Broad subcultures are shaped by the region of the country, sports, religious affiliations or non-affiliations, political affiliations, occupational choices, philosophical leanings, prejudices, and other descriptors that identify connections to a larger group identity. While identified culturally or racially within a macro culture, the student could belong to any number of subcultures that further describe her preferences, associations, and habits. Within that subculture, there is another continuum that is influenced by the student's family, friends, and associates.



Recognizing the cultural influences on a student within the BLAB paradigm requires the teacher to not only consider the broad cultural or racial identity, but also the individual. The cultural and racial identity is recognized in a statement such as "She is a Latina," but the statement is extended to include those experiences, perspectives, ideas, and histories have established the unique character that she is. Thus the statement becomes "She is a Latina who enjoys mathematics, is active within her church, enjoys painting, watching and playing soccer, and working with others. Her family is important to her. Her father owns a business while her mother is a teacher. The family believes strongly in education. The parents want her and her siblings to attend college." Recognizing these strengths in the student requires the teacher to move beyond the label to see the individual, her worth and value rather than the label with its typically stereotypical view of each person who is thus identified.

The uniqueness of each individual does not eliminate the responsibility of the teacher to consider the cultural and racial identities that are present. Cultural identity and individual identity are not either/or propositions in the sense that one can be chosen while the other is ignored. Horne (2007) argued that it was important to see each student as an individual without recognizing the student's cultural heritage as he defended the elimination of ethnic studies in Tucson, AZ. The BLAB paradigm recognizes each student as an individual within her cultural heritage. Culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000, 2010) would be the result as the teacher acknowledges, values, and supports a student's cultural heritage while also making connections between that heritage and the teaching and learning that is occurring in the school.

Conflicts develop, and unresponsive teaching results, when dissonance arises between classroom expectations and cultural expectations that lead to the denigration of the culture and the student because her culture does not meet the norm which is determined by the dominant culture in the classroom. Differences regarding communication styles (direct vs. indirect), group processes (individual vs. shared), tasks (task-oriented vs. process-oriented), control (external vs. internal), time (fixed vs. fluid), and life goals (enjoyment vs. order and efficiency) must be recognized by the classroom teacher with adaptations made so that each child can be successful (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). These conflicts can be either intra-cultural or inter-cultural recognizing that no culture is monolithic as individuals are shaped by unique life experiences.

### **5.1.2 *The impact of poverty***

Socio-economic status (financial and class) influences student learning and success. Students from low socio-economic homes often enter school with significant language gaps, both in vocabulary and in verbal expression (Heath, 1982; Hart & Risley, 1995; Lareau, 1989, 2003). The lack of meaningful experiences with travel, museums, the arts, sports, and other extra-curricular activities and clubs enjoyed by the more affluent disadvantages these students further. Beegle (2007) described how people in generational poverty master the skills to live on the streets, but have difficulty in school due to the difference in expectations of the two environments. High socio-economic status, however, is not a guarantee of success for each student will bring a unique set of experiences into the classroom; language and extra-curricular development could be emphasized in one family while ignored in another.

The lack of access to books and reading materials is a significant predictor of student success in reading (Krashen, 1993, 2012). Children in poverty frequently lack access either to public libraries or to school libraries that have significant collections of fiction and non-fiction books. Perry and McConney (2010) found that students who are doubly disadvantaged by poverty and attending a low socio-economic status school had significantly lower rates of student achievement and success.

The impact of childhood poverty extends beyond language and literacy. Children in poverty are "children at risk" whose health, school success, and mental health is influenced by their family and living conditions (Robbins, Stagman, & Smith, 2012, p. 1). Additional risk factors complicate the growth and development (academically, socially, psychologically) of these students. Risk factors include living with a single parent or a teen parent, non-employed parents, residential mobility, large families, low parental education, and living in households where English is not the first language. Twenty percent of the children under the age of six are living in households impacted by poverty and three or more of the risk factors (Robbins, Stagman, & Smith, 2012).

### ***5.1.3 The Impact of Family Dynamics***

Familial dynamics demonstrate the interplay of societal, financial, and cultural influences on the social and emotional development of each student. The interplay occurs at the micro level as each child adapts to the specific situation in which he/she finds himself.

Absentee parenting due to either military service or incarceration impacts each family. While military service has a positive connotation, the children of soldiers, especially the National Guard, may or may not have a support system to provide assistance while the

parent is serving (Ellis, 2008). Incarceration of a parent in a state or federal prison affects 1 in 28 children. Few resources are available for these students (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Family idiosyncrasies reflect a micro culture influenced by parental participation in child rearing or school, marital status, race, educational attainment, employment status, occupation, monthly income, mobility, home ownership, and other observable dimensions impact student learning (U. S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Philosophical tensions and practices within a family emerge when decisions are made concerning the child's participation in extra-curricular activities, expected educational attainment, television watching, participation in family outings, desired dispositions, interest in schoolwork, and work ethic (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The availability of a support system (family, friends, and neighbors) is essential as the student progresses through the school system, especially if the student has a disability, is disadvantaged, has a non-traditional sexual orientation, or other challenges which can impact her learning.

#### ***5.1.4 Recognizing and Supporting Each Student***

Differences from the expected norm or tradition in the classroom must be recognized and supported to empower each student to reach her potential. Culture, race, and poverty status are factors that can create dissonance within the classroom and between the student and the teacher if the teacher's expected norm is different. Perspectives on gender and sexual orientation can create dissonance when those perspectives differ from the teacher's values. Recognizing, believing, and supporting each student requires the teacher to see the uniqueness and value the uniqueness of the student rather than focusing on the label with its accompanying expectations and stereotypes.

The analysis of a student's background and its impact upon learning requires a consideration of the myriad of factors that influence a student's education each day. Most factors are dynamic resulting from the continual interactions of the student with culture, peers, relationships, schooling, family, race, and other variables. Assessing the background of a student is a continual process as the teacher adds puzzle pieces of information learned through conversations, interactions, and observations with the student, her friends, and family. Current classroom sizes are prohibitive in seeking the in-depth knowledge of the case study, but the ongoing process of BLAB ensures that the teacher's knowledge of each student is continually developed. The dimensions presented above are neither all-inclusive nor all required for each student is a unique individual whose character and learning situation differs from his neighbor. Adapting the dimensions, or changing the dimensions, will occur as the teacher begins to know each student and her background.

## **5.2 Language**

Predominantly, language concerns have been identified primarily with second language learners; secondarily, students who have been identified as having a language disorder receive additional educational service for their language needs. English language development is crucial for the success of our second language learners. Different models have been developed for this process with the classroom teacher being wholly, partially, or not involved in the instruction depending on the model chosen. The speech language pathologist has served students with a language disability assisting them with their pronunciation, enunciation, receptive, and expressive language needs.

The language dimension of BLAB requires the consideration of the language needs of each student, whether identified or not identified as an English language learner,

especially within the realm of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1979). Each content area has a specialized vocabulary and language structure that must be understood; this understanding is required for the student to understand spoken and written material and to express processes, thinking, and observations in spoken and written forms.

### ***5.2.1 Applying the Continuum of Language Development***

Utilizing the typical language development continuum in which a student moves from a quiet period with little verbal interaction to fluent interaction with written and verbal expression, each student (whether an English language learner or a child who has English as the first language) is identified in terms of the language supports needed for success. The continuum should mirror frameworks that describe the English language development of second language learners. Failure to recognize that English language proficiency is not guaranteed for students who are learning English as a first language is reflected not only in oral language, but also in written language. The work of Heath (1982), Hart & Risley (1995), and Lareau (1989, 2003) identified the language deficiencies that were present in lower socio-economic students whose families have limited sentence structures, adult-child interactions, educational experiences, and high quality conversations. While the work of the four researchers investigated the impact of poverty and class on lower socio-economic students, these conditions are neither exclusive to this group of students, nor do the conditions describe all of the students in poverty situations.

Students who enter the classroom as second language learners, and whose families have had limited educational or academic language development in their first language, encounter significant challenges in the classroom. Cummins (2000) noted that proficiency

in the first language (both basic interpersonal communication skills [BICS] and CALP) influenced the development of communication skills in the second language. Recognizing the language abilities a student possesses, or does not possess, in her first language is crucial as the classroom teacher and others plan instruction, especially as they consider how family backgrounds influence language development.

Awareness of the instructional needs of the verbal and intellectually gifted child while also recognizing the needs of the shy or less verbal child is paramount in the classroom. The BLAB paradigm enables the teacher to consider the needs at both ends of the continuum recognizing that the verbal abilities of each student can, and will vary across the curriculum.

Consideration of the language needs of each student and adapting the instruction to meet those needs requires the teacher to understand the language development of first and second language learners. Development leading to proficient understanding and confident expression in academic language is not guaranteed, even for our first language learners. Through the BLAB paradigm, the teacher identifies the language needs of each student and intentionally plans for the language development in the four areas of literacy: speaking, listening, writing, and reading.

### **5.3 Academic**

Traditionally, academic differentiation has been the focus of planning for instruction with the resulting plans including changes in modalities, grouping, and assignment requirements. The BLAB paradigm asks the question, "What does this student need to be successful academically -- in this unit, in this lesson, on this assignment?" The proactive teaching focuses on both the student and the content recognizing that the academic

strengths and needs of any student are dynamic. The paradigm also recognizes that other students may have similar needs and strengths in the content area. These similarities become the basis for instructional decisions.

Assessments designed to inform instruction will focus on the prerequisite knowledge required for a series of tasks. Conceptual understanding is emphasized in both the common core standards (National Governors Association & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) and the next generation science standards (NGSS Lead States, 2013). Significant gaps in understanding are observed when students complete rote memorization tasks easily, but are unable to explain their processes or reasoning. Limited background knowledge or academic vocabulary is seen when the student is unable to comprehend the content-specific language of the textbook or classroom discussion.

Depth of understanding is crucial when considering the task completion of the fast worker and the slow worker. The fast worker could have mastered the process through rote memorization leading to surface level understanding, but lacking the critical understanding. While not completing as many tasks as the fast worker, the slow worker could possess a greater conceptual understanding. It is only through observation and conversation that the teacher will determine the cause of the slowness, whether that cause is academic weaknesses, slow processing, or a deliberate working style.

Students across the continuum of abilities from the TAG student to the low academic performer are held to high expectations of achievement. Working through the BLAB framework requires the classroom teacher to identify the essential areas of support and scaffolding enabling the student to meet the expectations. The lesson objectives are considered within the framework of empowering each student to be successful by adapting



the lesson to meet student needs on an individual basis rather than a boilerplate approach that emphasizes uniformity among all students or among those with a specific label. These adaptations can be minor or major; the degree is based upon the needs of each student for that specific lesson.

#### **5.4 Behavior**

The nature of uniformity is the expectation that each student will learn, look, believe, and behave in the same way as every other student. Ideally, those behaviors, beliefs, learning, and outward appearance would match that of the teacher. Fortunately, that is not the case. In contrast to the perspective of uniformity, the classroom teacher faces dissimilitude as students exhibit widely contrasting styles of behavior.

Those behaviors exist on a spectrum from the student who wants to please the teacher (the "perfect" student) to the student who means well, but unfortunately always makes mistakes (the "Ramona" student) to the students challenged by disabilities such as ADHD, conduct disorder, and emotional disturbance. In the midst of the spectrum are variations of each of these behavioral types as students respond to stimuli in their home lives, school environment, and friendships.

Student behaviors, particularly negative behaviors, are remembered more easily than student successes for many classroom teachers. The impulsive actions of any student that disrupt classroom processes and procedures can overshadow the positive behaviors of the other students in the class. That negative act can also overshadow any positive behaviors previously exhibited by the student. Attaching the label ADHD, conduct disorder, or emotionally disturbed to a student immediately change a teacher's perspective of that student. The negative perceptions associated with the label become the perceptions with

which the student is seen. The intentional thinking and planning process of the BLAB paradigm requires the teacher to consider the needs of the individual student within the context of her disability with the additional caveat that the label does not define who the student is. Information developed through understanding and knowing the student enables the teacher to see past the negative behavior to realize the potential and strengths of the student.

The term *social difficulties* describes students who have trouble interacting or working with their peers, have few friends, dominate conversations and groups, refuse to participate in cooperative groups, and exhibit negative behavior, verbal outbursts, and physical outbursts in the classroom. The term does not minimize the negative impact of the behaviors, but instead recognizes the social aspect of the behaviors. These students may or may not have a label attached to their name. The behaviors can be frequent or infrequent as the myriad of interactions in the student's life interferes with learning.

Occupying a space on the spectrum of behaviors is the student who exemplifies the character Ramona (Cleary, 1955), a student with good intentions, but whose social clumsiness leads to disastrous results. The student who desires to be a "perfect" student is another consideration for the classroom teacher as the teacher considers how to deal with possible social awkwardness and excessive dependence upon the teacher for social and academic support. Students have difficulties completing tasks, or who finish tasks too quickly, emerge on this behavioral spectrum. Anticipating and planning for successful interactions with these students requires the teacher to know each student within the four parameters of the paradigm.

Within any classroom, there will be an amalgam of positive and negative behaviors: students with ADHD or behavioral disabilities, social difficulties, impulse control, task completion difficulties, or social difficulties, and there will be students like Ramona or the "perfect" student. Each student exhibits behaviors that are challenging the norms of the classroom. Each student is also capable of positive behaviors that support the norms of the classroom.

Labeling the behavior, but not the student, is the focus of the BLAB paradigm. Behaviors are identified and examined with the concept being that behavior is communication; an act in which the student seeks to express her opinion, like, or dislike concerning a content area, classroom expectation, life, or other event. While labels such as ADHD, emotionally disturbed, or conduct disordered can result in the provision of additional services to the student, the labels describe the behaviors that are present rather than the whole student. The BLAB paradigm emphasizes the whole student recognizing that behavior alone does not determine who the student is; for the student is an individual who has also been shaped by her background, language abilities, and academic needs.

## **6. Application**

Implementing the BLAB paradigm requires the classroom teacher to be a continual learner as the teacher interacts with the students. Physical notes are made as the teacher learns about the backgrounds, language, academics, and behaviors of each child. Observations help the teacher to identify the stressors or strengths in each content area and instructional strategies that affect each child. The anecdotal notes are recorded in a class record that is organized by the four dimensions of BLAB.

Implementation of the paradigm occurs throughout the planning process for each unit, each lesson, and each subpart of a lesson. Culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000; 2010) requires the teacher to recognize how each child's cultural heritage could be used as a strength in the learning process. Awareness of each student's capabilities should influence how the students become experts and teachers in an interactive classroom. The analysis of student behavioral tendencies enables the teacher to choose the best grouping strategy for a specific lesson. Student proficiency in academic language shapes how the teacher intentionally includes language development processes so that all students become proficient. The four dimensions of BLAB provide the teacher with the knowledge to make intentional decisions about how to shape each unit or each lesson so that all students can be successful.

Rather than relying on a label to place students in learning groups, the paradigm empowers the teacher to place students in flexible grouping arrangements on a daily or weekly basis. For example, the following group of students could meet in a heterogeneous group: an average student, an English language learner, a TAG student, and a student with a learning disability. The decision to place these four students in a group could be based on an academic strength, an academic weakness, language needs, a behavioral observation, or other teacher-chosen reason. The educational rationale for the grouping would be based on the information that the teacher has collected in her BLAB classroom record through observations, conversations with each student, and informal and formal assessments.

In BLAB, the teacher becomes an investigator and learner who is a kidwatcher (Goodman, 1978) observing and interacting with each student. The observations are recorded across the four dimensions recognizing that an observation made in October may

not be accurate in December. The process is continual and dynamic adjusting to the development of the child. As the teacher plans units and lessons, the notes that have been made about each student become essential elements shaping how the teacher intentionally plans for the language development of each child, the structuring of cooperative groups, and the choice of instructional strategies and modalities, in addition to the academic and behavioral expectations for each child.

## **7. Conclusion**

The concept of proactive teaching is not novel. Educators have been presented with multiple models of how to differentiate within the classroom including multiple intelligences, learning styles, specialized instruction, leveled groups, programmed instruction, and fidelity to a curriculum that provides options for different groups of learners in the classroom. These approaches often take a static approach; once a learning style or intelligence has been identified, the teacher seeks to include that style or intelligence in the lesson. Unfortunately, this approach denies the growth and changes that occur in all students as each student interacts with the content in the medium and media of the classroom. Adding to the dilemma for the classroom teacher is that specific strategies are dictated for specific groups with little conversation about how those strategies might be beneficial for other students in the classroom. This ignores the micro differences that occur in each group member based upon her life experiences, prior learning, familial relationships, and the multiple interactions and intersections with others that have occurred. The desired academic success has not occurred for many of our students using either the differentiation approaches or the group strategies approach.

The process of proactive teaching must become dynamic and individualized. The BLAB paradigm emphasizes that the labels do not define the needs of the students, but instead the complex interaction of background knowledge, language ability, academic strengths and weaknesses, and behavior intertwine together to shape the being of the student. Student grouping and instruction should not occur on the basis of the label thereby eliminating the continual placement of pseudo-monolithic students in one group based on the label whether those students are English language learners, slow students, low students, special education students, behaviorally-challenged students, or TAG students.

The BLAB paradigm is dynamic. The assessment and learning about each student is continuous. A single dimension does not define the student whether that dimension is his background knowledge, language, academics, or behavior. Performance and behavior in one content area does not prescribe student performance and behavior in another content area. Teachers are encouraged to identify the areas of strength and weakness for each student as they plan and modify lessons to enable all students to be successful. The paradigm recognizes that what works in one subject may not work in another subject.

Through BLAB, students become individuals who are valued for their heritage, culture, strengths, and weaknesses from a multitude of perspectives. The labels that have been attached to students become one element among many rather than the one element that defines the student.

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Figure 1. The BLAB Paradigm

