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Improving Education for All Children: Meeting the Needs of Language Minority Children¹

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There are upwards of 6 million school-aged children in the United States who live in homes where a language other than English is used, corresponding to roughly 14 percent of the entire school-aged population. About 45 percent of these children are Limited-English-Proficient (L.E.P., also called English Language Learners), and would not learn at their full potential without special assistance. This paper provides background for the roundtable discussion on strategies to improve education for these students.

Several facts are notable about this population:

- most of the students are in early elementary grades, although the numbers in middle and high schools are growing;
- about three-quarters are from Spanish language backgrounds;
- about three-quarters are poor and attend high-poverty schools;
- socioeconomic indicators such as income and parent background are much lower among students of Spanish-background than among those of other language backgrounds;
- the students are geographically concentrated in several states (California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois) and school districts—for example, 40 percent of L.E.P. students can be found in just 6 percent of the school districts nationally; Los Angeles County has 40 percent of California's total L.E.P. student population.

In short, most L.E.P. students are Spanish-background elementary grade students concentrated in high poverty schools.

Over the past 30 years, educators have used a variety of approaches to address the needs of L.E.P. students. Typically, the programs are classified with respect to the ways in which English language development and academic content development are coordinated. Some major approaches are:

English as a second language (ESL): Students receive specified periods of instruction aimed at the development of English language skills, with a primary focus on grammar, vocabulary, and communication rather than academic content areas. Academic content is addressed through mainstream instruction, where no special assistance is provided.

Structured immersion (or "sheltered instruction" in secondary grades): All students in the program are Limited-English Proficient, usually though not always from different language backgrounds. They receive instruction in English, with an adjustment made to the level of English so that subject matter is more easily understood. Typically, there is no native language support.

Transitional bilingual education: Most students in the program are English-language learners. They receive some degree of instruction through the native language; however, the goal of the program is to transition to English as rapidly as possible, so that even within the program, there is a rapid shift toward using pri-

marily English.

Maintenance bilingual education: Most students in the programs are English-language learners and from the same language background. They receive significant amounts of instruction in the native language. These programs aim to develop academic proficiency in English and the native language.

Two-way bilingual programs: About half of the students in these programs are native speakers of English, and the other half are English-language learners from the same language group. The goal of the program is to develop proficiency in both languages for both groups of students.

There is considerable local variation even within these types of programs, as might be expected since policies are set at state and local levels.

What We Know and Don't Know

Which programs serve what types of students, and with what degrees of effectiveness? These questions have been asked by Congress ever since the 1970s with each successive reauthorization of Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (now Improving America's Schools Act or IASA), and various large and small-scale studies have been conducted. Here are some broad conclusions that can be drawn:

- Most L.E.P. students are served through either ESL or transitional bilingual education programs. While the number of alternatives such as structured immersion and two-way bilingual is increasing, these types of programs are still rarities.
- Transitional bilingual education is offered mostly in Spanish, in the early grades, and in places where there are sufficiently large numbers of students to make it practical. Students from other language backgrounds and Spanish speakers in schools where they are not numerous receive ESL or other alternatives. In short, programs mirror the demographic composition of students.
- In comparison to students in ESL programs,

students receiving bilingual education are, on average, more socioeconomically disadvantaged and attend higher poverty schools. When comparisons between the effectiveness of such programs are made, the data indeed show faster exit rates and higher achievement scores for the students receiving ESL; but this is not separable from the effects of poverty.

- When strict comparisons are made that control for the background factors, children learn English at the same rate regardless of the kinds of programs they are in, i.e., instruction through the native language does not slow down student acquisition of English. It takes most students 2 to 5 years to attain a level of proficiency in English that does not put them at a disadvantage in regular instruction. Their rate of acquisition of English depends on the level of development of the native language—children with strong native language skills learn English rapidly. Motivation to learn English is uniformly high both among parents and the students.
- With respect to academic achievement, the best and most careful comparisons of program types show modest-sized benefits in favor of bilingual education programs. Two separate committees of the National Research Council have looked at the evidence. In characteristic National Academy of Sciences terseness, they conclude: “the panel still sees the elements of positive relationships that are consistent with empirical results from other studies and that support the theory underlying native language instruction”². The effectiveness of the intervention, however, does not fully address what it would take to close the gap in student achievement between poor and middle class populations. The typical program for L.E.P. students, regardless of program type, does not promote high levels of academic learning.
- Attributes of effective schools and classrooms have been identified that refer to school factors extending beyond the program types with respect to language. Typically found in

descriptions of good schools for language minority students are the following attributes: a supportive school-wide climate, school leadership, a customized learning environment, articulation and coordination within and between schools, some use of native language and culture in the instruction of language-minority students, a balanced curriculum that incorporates both basic and higher-order skills, explicit skills instruction, opportunities for student-directed activities, use of instructional strategies that enhance understanding, opportunities for practice, systematic student assessment, staff development, and home and parent involvement.

In sum, we know quite a bit, but it is also instructive to understand our limitations. We know a lot about the language variable: about program types defined in terms of the arrangement of language of instruction, and about English language development. The research has focused on these issues primarily because of policy and political reasons. Programs are defined and constrained by language, and much of the legislative debate has been over issues of caps on program types and limits on the length of time that students can remain in the programs. Civil rights advocates also rallied around the language variable because it was (and still is) the easiest way of identifying students in need and enforcing and monitoring programs. Another (albeit secondary) reason was basic science: the 1970s and 80s saw a revolution in cognitive science, especially in the area of language acquisition, and this provided the clearest window into our understanding of language minority students.

On the other hand, we don't know as much about the learning of academic curriculum by L.E.P. students, about strategies for school and program improvement for students, and about social relations among students. The long list of attributes of effective schools noted by research reminds us of the many issues beyond language that face these students, all of which need to be addressed in school improvement efforts.

What Policy Makers Can Do

The discourse about the education of language minority students needs to move from an understanding of language to the development of academic content and the improvement of schools. If we are to talk about language at all, it should be about innovations to tap immigrant languages as a national resource. Policy makers can help facilitate this in several ways.

Make use of what we know about language

It is time to acknowledge that we are at the point of diminishing returns in understanding the language variables for the purposes of program development and evaluation. We know that English language development takes 2 or more years; sheer amount of exposure to English (within the range of exposure in existing programs) is not an important factor in its development; bilingual education is slightly better than English immersion or ESL approaches, but won't fix everything. Policy makers can take these findings and make a clear declaration: We know enough about language. Immigrant children are learning English promptly. So let's move on with dissemination of these facts, and begin addressing the bigger problem of academic standards and school improvement.

Focus on the capacity for program improvement

The key decisions about education are made at the state and local levels, and it is the responsibility of Federal policy makers to provide the tools to develop local capacity. The common tools used for standards-based reform are the public articulation of standards, student assessment and accountability, professional development, and parental involvement. In each of these, the question of the inclusion of L.E.P. students arises, and legislators can take the leadership in demanding answers to how this is occurring.

The system for assessment and accountability around the standards demands immediate attention if L.E.P. students are to benefit from

current reforms. L.E.P. students are often assessed for their English proficiency, but not for content knowledge. Currently, most L.E.P. students are excluded from local, state and national assessment and accountability systems. In the National Assessment of Educational Performance (NAEP), for example, approximately half of L.E.P. students are not included because of their English proficiency. A common practice among states is to exclude L.E.P. students from state assessment for 2 or 3 years. I am not suggesting that new laws be passed on this, because existing provisions in Goals 2000, Title I of IASA, and the Department of Education Organization Act all speak clearly to this: standards and assessment are to fully include L.E.P. students and innovations are encouraged. But this is only slowly happening, in large part limited by the development of strategies to include L.E.P. students in assessment and accountability systems. This knowledge is well within reach, and legislators might demand a plan and progress reports from appropriate offices within the Department of Education or independent bodies, such as the National Academy of Sciences or the National Academy of Education, on how this is being accomplished.

The area of the professional preparation and development of teachers is another critical problem. The shortage is not just limited to bilingual education teachers, but also extends to teachers of all programs that serve L.E.P. students. The recently completed efforts of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards to develop standards for Bilingual and ESL Teachers should be applauded as the "deluxe" model, but the magnitude of the problem is staggering when we look at the other elements of professional preparation such as schools of education, state certificate requirements, professional development models, and Title VII incentives. In addition, current knowledge about the effectiveness of strategies for teacher education and the assessment of

teacher knowledge and skills is very limited. Lawmakers should demand a systematic inquiry into ways to understand, support and coordinate all of these efforts.

Encourage the Value of Bilingualism

One of my favorite quotes about bilingualism (not bilingual education) comes from the great scholar Joshua Fishman, who wrote: "many Americans have long been of the opinion that bilingualism is a 'good thing' if it was acquired via travel (preferably to Paris) or via formal education (preferably at Harvard) but that it is a 'bad thing' if it was acquired from one's immigrant parents or grandparents." Research shows that bilingualism, in the sense of a strong command of two or more languages, is a good thing regardless of whether you are a first-generation or seventh-generation immigrant. But we hold split standards that lead us to value bilingualism for people of privileged backgrounds, but not for people who are recent immigrants.

Legislators can play an important leadership role by acknowledging and promoting the value of bilingualism for personal growth as well as for the nation's security and economic interests. They could encourage local community leaders to develop mechanisms that would support bilingualism to its fullest potential, and use the linguistic prowess of immigrant bilingualism to set high standards for all Americans. These are not the current goals of programs (with the exception of maintenance and two-way programs). My own personal bias is that attention to the full development of the native language does not have to occur in the elementary grades, and that the middle and high school years could be used effectively for this purpose. Currently, innovation is limited because of what I consider an unwarranted fear that English is threatened, not strengthened, by bilingualism.

Footnotes

1. Paper prepared for the Aspen Institute Congressional Program meeting, "Education and the Development of American Youth", Charleston, South Carolina, February 13-16, 1998.
2. National Research Council, *Improving Schooling for Language-Minority Children: A Research Agenda*. (eds. D. August & K. Hakuta). Washington, DC: National Academy Press, p. 147.