

Research on the Latino and English Language Learner Student Achievement Gap

Latino students consistently perform at lower levels than their counterparts in school. Dropout rates for Latinos are alarmingly high and persistent. Factors contributing to this achievement gap are discussed here, as are research-based strategies for addressing the gap.

Factors Contributing to the Latino Achievement Gap

There are three overarching factors to consider when identifying strategies for closing the achievement gap between Latino students and their peers. First and foremost, large numbers of Latinos live in poverty. There is a well-established inverse relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and student achievement that is confounded with culture. Second, American schools are largely traditional institutions. There are many aspects of the American education experience that may very well be at odds with Latino culture. Third, there are large numbers of Latinos who do not speak Spanish and are not achieving at high levels. This means that that English language learners (ELLs) really have to do two things to meet challenging standards: master the English language and learn the content and skills necessary to be successful on achievement tests.

Socioeconomic Status and Culture

Lara-Cinisomo, Pebley, Vaiana, and Maggio (2004) conducted a study of Los Angeles children's school readiness, establishing ways in which home literacy environment, parenting behavior, and other social characteristics impact children's behavior problems and their basic skills in mathematics and reading. Young children who had someone read to them at least three times a week and children who visited the library at least several times a year scored higher on normed tests of reading and math skills. However, compared to other ethnic groups, Latino mothers in the study were least likely to read to toddlers at least three times a week. Compared to African-American toddlers, Latino toddlers were second-least likely to have someone else read to them at least three times a week.

Language

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), the number of children in the United States aged 5-17 who speak a language other than English at home doubled between 1979 and 2003. It was estimated that 9.9 million children speak a language other than English at home. About 6.4 million of these children were Hispanic. Moreover, ELLs were the fastest growing population in United States schools (Consentino de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005).

Research-Based School Interventions

Creating school structures for Latinos and assisting ELLs are two prominent strategies being used to close the achievement gap. Selected research-based strategies are described here.

School Structures

Fashola and colleagues (1997) conducted a review of the research on effective Latino elementary and middle schools. They found that these schools had:

- Clear goals;
- Methods and materials linked to those goals;
- Progress measures of goals;
- Well-specified components and professional development; and
- A focus on the quality of implementation.

In a study of middle schools for Latinos in poverty, Jesse, Davis, and Pokorny (2004) found several common themes across a sample of nine high achieving sites in Texas. They discovered that these sites had the following characteristics:

- Effective building leadership (visionary, collaborative and collegial);
- Specific organizational structures (daily common planning time, extracurricular activities);
- Teacher knowledge and expectations;
- Coherent curriculum and instruction; and
- Some level of community and parent involvement.

In an evaluation of three programs found to be effective at helping secondary California Latino students stay in school, Gandara, Larson, Rumberger, and Mehan (1998) found five strategies were found to be commonly used:

1. Heavy monitoring of students throughout their secondary education experiences;
2. Having at least one adult who takes personal responsibility for every students in the school setting;
3. Situating students in supportive peer groups;
4. Construction of programs that are sensitive to student and family circumstances; and
5. The creation of safe places for students to interact in the school.

Instruction of English Language Learners

Krashen (2004/2005), Ramirez, Yuen, and Ramey (1991), and Thomas and Collier (2002) found that bilingual instruction was effective if it is delivered properly. A recent meta-analysis found that bilingual education was more beneficial for ELL students than for English as a second language (ESL) and Sheltered Instruction students (Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005). However, Rossell, (2004/2005) reported that an English only approach was at least as effective as other approaches. A recent study of the implementation of Proposition 227 (California's English Only law) revealed that the achievement gap between ELLs and native English speakers remained relatively constant since the passage of the law (Parrish et al., 2006).

Vocabulary acquisition was found to be an important strategy for helping ELLs develop reading skills in English, yet teaching vocabulary presented unique challenges (Ajayi, 2005). Proctor, Carlo, August, and Snow (2005) found that second language vocabulary knowledge was predictive of second language listening comprehension, and both were related to second language reading comprehension. Proctor and colleagues also found that low SES bilingual Latino students had the capacity to learn English at high levels. The authors suggested that

effective strategies were needed for helping ELLs learn English vocabulary that does not rely heavily upon learning words in context.

Strategies for helping ELLs were also emerging in mathematics and science (Hampton & Rodriguez, 2001; Krashen, 2004/2005). Interactive activities, hands-on learning, and higher-order thinking skills were effective strategies for helping ELLs acquire language proficiency. Cooperative groups, graphs and charts in assignments, pictures, Web sites, and videos also were suggested as ways to help ELLs master science content.

For both English speakers and English learners, brain research revealed that similar reading difficulties emerge (Pugh, Sandak, Frost, Moore, & Mencl, 2005)—difficulties which can be remediated with early intervention. It was difficult to determine whether ELLs were having reading problems because of a disability, because they did not know English, or both (e.g., Graves, Plasencia-Penado, Deno, & Johnson, 2005). Measuring phonological processing and rapid naming of letters, numbers, and common objects was suggested as a useful way for early identification of ELLs with reading disabilities (Gersten, 2006).

References

- Ajayi, L. J. (2005). A sociocultural perspective: Language arts framework, vocabulary activities and English language learners in a second grade mixed classroom. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 32(3), 180-195.
- Consentino de Cohen, C., Deterding, N., & Clewell, B. C. (2005). *Who's left behind? Immigrant children in high and low LEP schools*. Washington, DC: Program for Evaluation and Equity Research, The Urban Institute
- Fashola, O. S., Slavin, R. E., Calderón, M., & Durán, R. (1997). *Effective programs for Latino students in elementary and middle schools* (Report No. 11). Washington, DC: Howard University, Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk.
- Gandara, P., Larson, K., Rumberger, R., & Mehan, H. (1998, May). *Capturing Latino students in the academic pipeline*. California Policy Seminar Brief Series. Larson Rumberger & Mehan, 1998). Retrieved on March 18, 2006.
- Gersten, R. (2006, February 22). Learning disability, or limited English? Letters to the Editor. *Education Week*. .
- Graves, A. W., Plasencia-Peinado, J., Deno, S. L., & Johnson, J. R. (2005). Formatively evaluating the reading progress of first-grade English learners in multiple-language classrooms. *Remedial and Special Education*, 26(4), 215-225.
- Hampton, E., & Rodriguez, R. (2001). Inquiry science in bilingual classrooms. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 25(4), 417-434.
- Jesse, D., Davis, A., & Pokorny, N. (2004). High-achieving middle schools for Latino students in poverty. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, 9(1), 23–45.

- Krashen, S. (2004, December-2005, January). Skyrocketing scores: An urban legend. *Educational Leadership*, 62(4), 37-39.
- Lara-Cinisomo, S., Pebley, A. R., Vaiana, M. E., & Maggio, E. (2004). *Are L. A. 's children ready for school?* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
- Lincoln, F., & Beller, C. (2004, September). English language learners in the science classroom. *Science Scope*, 28-31.
- Parrish, T. B., Merickel, A., Perez, M., Linqunti, R., Socias, M., Spain, A., et al. (2006, January). *Effects of the implementation of Proposition 227 on the education of English learners, K-12: Findings from a five-year evaluation*. Final Report for AB 56 and AB 1116. Washington, DC and San Francisco: American Institutes for Research and WestEd.
- Proctor, C. P., Carlo, M., August, D., & Snow, C. (2005). Native Spanish-speaking children reading in English: Toward a model of comprehension. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 97(2), 246-256.
- Pugh, K. R., Sandak, R., Frost, S. J., Moore, D., & Mencl, W. E. (2005). Examining reading development and reading disability in English language learners: Potential contributions from functional neuroimaging. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 20(1), 24-30.
- Ramirez, J. D., Yuen, S. D., & Ramey, D. R. (1991). *Final report: Longitudinal study of structured English immersion strategy, early-exit and late-exit transitional bilingual education programs for language-minority children*. Executive Summary. San Mateo, CA: Aguirre International. Retrieved on 2/14/2005 from <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/ramirez/longitudinal.htm>
- Rolstad, K., Mahoney, K., & Glass, G. V. (2005, September). The big picture: A meta-analysis of program effectiveness research on English language learners. *Educational Policy*, 19(4), 572-594.
- Rossell, C. (2004, December-2005, January). Teaching English through English. *Educational Leadership*, 62(4), 32-36.
- Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. P. (2002). *A national study of school effectiveness for language minority students' long-term achievement: Final report*. Berkeley, CA: Center for Research on Education Diversity and Excellence (CREDE). Retrieved March 21, 2006, from http://www.crede.org/research/llaa/1.1_final.html
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). *The condition of education 2005* (NCES 2005-094). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.