

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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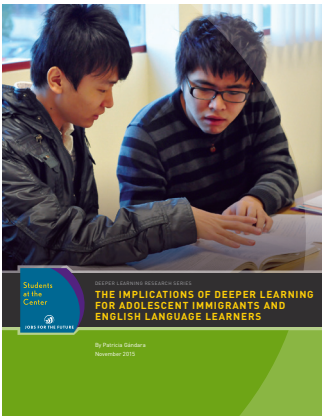


JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

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THE IMPLICATIONS OF DEEPER LEARNING FOR ADOLESCENT IMMIGRANTS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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For nearly half a century—ever since the passage of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968—the federal government has made a commitment to provide dedicated academic support services to students who are recent immigrants and/or non-native speakers of English. However, when it comes to deciding which *kinds* of services to provide, or precisely *who* should receive them, or whether students' bilingualism should be encouraged, policymakers have not managed to agree.

This report argues that students who are immigrants and/or “English language learners” (ELLs) often exhibit strengths that monolingual, non-immigrant children may not have, and that policymakers should view as important assets for individual learners and their communities. Further, the strengths that ELLs and immigrants bring with them to school tend to be well aligned with the goals of deeper learning—not only mastering high-level academic content and skills but also learning to work collaboratively, think critically, communicate effectively, and monitor and direct one’s own learning. Finally, this report offers recommendations for federal and state policymaking that could help educate ELLs to their full potential.

UNDERSTANDING, LABELING, AND TESTING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

WHO ARE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS?

The United States has always been, and continues to be, a nation of immigrants. Though immigration patterns and trends are complex and always in flux, it is possible to get a general understanding of immigrant students and students for whom English is not the primary language spoken at home.

First, it is important to note that English language learners and immigrant students are not one and the same. Most (though certainly not all) immigrant children spend a period of time as ELLs, but 90 percent of



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ELLs were born in the U.S. In the 2012-13 school year, nearly 5 million students across the U.S. were designated as ELLs—almost 10 percent of the total school age population. Today, the vast majority of these students speak Spanish, and the next largest group speaks Chinese.

DEFICIENT OR DIFFERENT?

When students arrive at school with limited English, educators often focus on the ways in which they are “deficient,”—i.e., lacking in English fluency—rather than focusing on the strengths they bring with them, which might include advanced academic preparation in their first language, unusual drive and motivation, a sophisticated understanding of cultural differences, and so on—not to mention fluency in another language.

When schools adopt a deficit-based view—often reinforced by district and state policies—they tend to focus exclusively on ELLs’ language needs, assigning them to English immersion classes without also giving them opportunities to study the regular academic curriculum. Researchers have found that in many schools and districts, ELLs tend to languish in such classes for years (even though their developing English skills might have enabled them to perform perfectly well in math, history, science, and other subjects) before reaching what the school considers to be a “proficient” level. Further, many schools neglect to conduct thorough assessments of new ELLs, in order to see what they know and can do in their primary language. Thus, they often mistakenly assign perfectly capable, even high-achieving, students to remedial courses they do not need.

THE CATCH-22 OF TESTING

At first glance, ELLs’ performance on standardized tests seems to support the theory that a limited facility with English translates into a limited academic ability overall. For example, on the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 69 percent of ELLs scored below basic proficiency in eighth-grade mathematics, compared to just 25 percent of non-English language learners, and their eighth-grade reading scores were similarly low.

However, these statistics are inherently misleading, since the highest-performing ELLs are redefined as “proficient” and are moved out of the ELL category—in other words, as soon as students begin to perform well, they lose the ELL label. By definition, then, “English language learners” will have low scores. In addition, nearly all states require all students to take achievement tests in English, even if they do not yet understand the language. Thus, while the tests ostensibly measure their skills and knowledge of the subject matter, it would be more accurate to see them as partial (and flawed) measures of students’ understanding of English.

BARRIERS TO ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

POVERTY AND MIGRATION TRAUMA

Many ELLs and immigrant students are, in fact, significantly disadvantaged educationally, but not necessarily for reasons having to do with language. Poverty is perhaps the greatest threat to any student’s academic progress, as the effects can be wide ranging and long lasting. Inadequate nutrition, poor health care, and mental health challenges can all affect a child’s cognitive development and cause high absenteeism from school.

While most ELLs are U.S.-born, their parents are usually immigrants, and many of these families have experienced great trauma, having left their home countries to escape war, gang activity, deep poverty, natural disasters, and other crises that take an enormous psychological toll. The stress of the migration experience can weigh heavily on children as they try to adapt to a new country, new language, and new expectations, with few if any support services.

ELLs AND IMMIGRANT STUDENTS: ASSETS AND OPPORTUNITIES

In spite of the many challenges that they face (and perhaps *because* of them), these students might also be viewed as *advantaged* in certain ways, possessing some important skills and dispositions that monolingual and mono-cultural students may not.

Multilingualism: The most obvious asset is the ability to speak another language (in most cases a major world language that is highly valued in the labor market).

Multiculturalism: Having an insider’s knowledge of another country, and having learned to navigate everyday life in more than one culture, may also help students to be more cognitively flexible—i.e., able to understand that problems can be assessed and solved in more than one way. Immigrant students can also be particularly welcoming of differences, skilled at intercultural communication, and comfortable working on diverse teams—characteristics that employers often describe as highly valuable.

Immigrant Optimism: According to researchers Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, the “immigrant optimism” of parents—the belief that opportunities are greater in the new country—often propels children to work harder to achieve the American Dream, even in the face of daunting obstacles.

Resilience: In spite of often traumatic uprooting from their homes, harrowing migration passages, and hostile receptions in their new country, students often arrive in the U.S. full of hope for the future and with a drive to succeed in school.

Having developed resilience, many immigrant students would seem to be well suited to the kind of engaged, critical, challenging school experiences that the deeper learning movement heralds. However, to the extent that these students are framed as deficient and in need of remediation, these strengths tend to be overlooked.

TOWARD DEEPER LEARNING

When assessing English language learning programs, it is important to understand that the data can mean different things, depending on one’s goals. If the only goal is for students to achieve rapid transition to oral English in the early grades, then it might indeed be preferable to provide an English-only instructional program. As Fred Genesee and his colleagues found in a review of research on the education of ELLs, “Evaluations conducted in the early years of a program (grades K-3) typically reveal that students in bilingual education scored below grade level,” outperformed by students in English immersion programs.

But if one takes a longer view—defining the goal as helping students to achieve at high levels over the course of their schooling, as well as becoming reclassified as English proficient—then bilingual and dual language instruction show the strongest outcomes.

CONCLUSION: MEETING THE NEEDS OF ELLs AND IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Ironically, as the research has converged on the many benefits of bilingualism, both for academic and other deeper learning outcomes, education policy appears to have moved in the opposite direction.

Much could be done to support better preparation and training for teachers of ELLs and immigrant students, whether in bilingual or English-only settings, but policymakers will need to reconsider some long-standing priorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDE:

- If students are to be tested, then provide more time for students to acquire English before testing them in that language; or reduce the high stakes associated with such tests; or provide bilingual testing for those students straddling two languages; or offer alternative assessments for students who are still learning English.
- Reorient federal policy to define immigrant children as a net asset to the nation and to highlight and celebrate their strengths. One way to do this is to create a national Seal of Biliteracy, an award given to all students who can demonstrate high levels of proficiency in two or more languages upon high school or college graduation.
- Provide federal support to help regions that have seen recent influxes of ELLs but which have no existing infrastructure to meet the needs of ELLs or immigrant students, either culturally or linguistically.

With these fundamentals in place, ELLs and immigrant students could take full advantage of the assets they bring to school and could share these assets with their native English-speaking peers. These students could even be a leading force in the movement for deeper learning.



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Students at the Center—a Jobs for the Future initiative—synthesizes and adapts for practice current research on key components of student-centered approaches to learning that lead to deeper learning outcomes. Our goal is to strengthen the ability of practitioners and policymakers to engage each student in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and expertise needed for success in college, career, and civic life. This project is supported generously by funds from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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