



LATINO POLICY & ISSUES BRIEF

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AN ASSETS VIEW OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE FOR LATINO STUDENTS

by

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A few decades ago the academic performance of Latino students was viewed as a notable problem. Today, because Latino students compose a majority of California's student population and three-quarters of the population in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), their underachievement threatens the welfare of the state and the region, and the notable problem has become an urgent issue.

In prior decades, a belief prevailed in educational practice, research, and policy that the solution to Latino underachievement was to rapidly assimilate Latino students into mainstream culture by forcing them to give up Spanish, abandon strong kinship values, and dissociate themselves from their countries of origin. Recent scholarship suggests that this approach is not the answer and that such practices may actually impede academic development and limit Latino students' chances to finish high school and graduate from college. A better strategy is for research and practice to take an assets view of educating Latino youth, which values and builds on the rich language and culture that these students bring to the classroom.

LATINO UNDERACHIEVEMENT

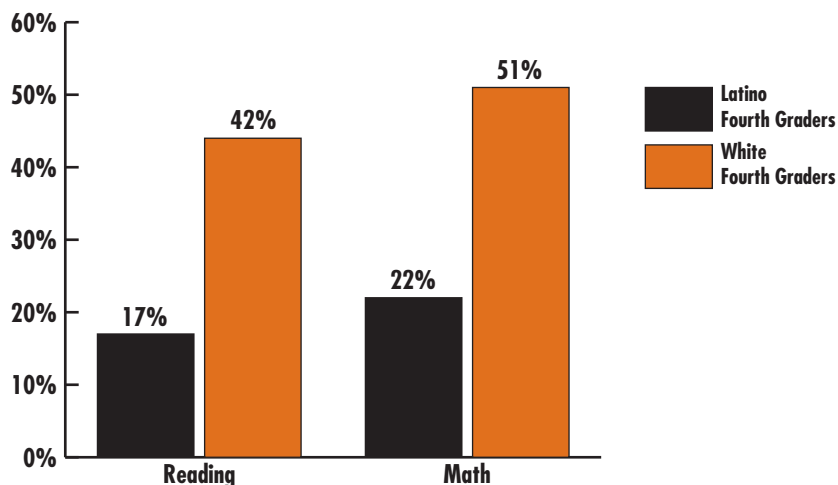
Enormous discrepancies exist between the achievement of California's Latino and white students on national tests, as figure 1 shows. Scores on the California Standards Test tell a similar story over time, where only 30 percent of Latino eleventh graders reached proficiency or higher in English language arts in 2009, compared to 58 percent of white students (California Department of Education 2009). (It is important to note that gaps between white and Latino students shrink significantly when poverty is taken into account.)

Dropout rates are also much higher for Latino students than for others (Jammal and Duong 2007), but perhaps the most compelling disparities emerge when college completion rates are assessed. In 2008, nearly 40 percent of white and 60 percent of Asian students had completed a bachelor's degree by age twenty-nine. Degree completion for African American students was much lower, at 20 percent, yet the completion rate for Latinos was just 12 percent (NCES 2010). Even more troubling is the stagnation of progress for Latinos over the last three decades, as shown in figure 2.

ADVANTAGES OF BILINGUAL INSTRUCTION

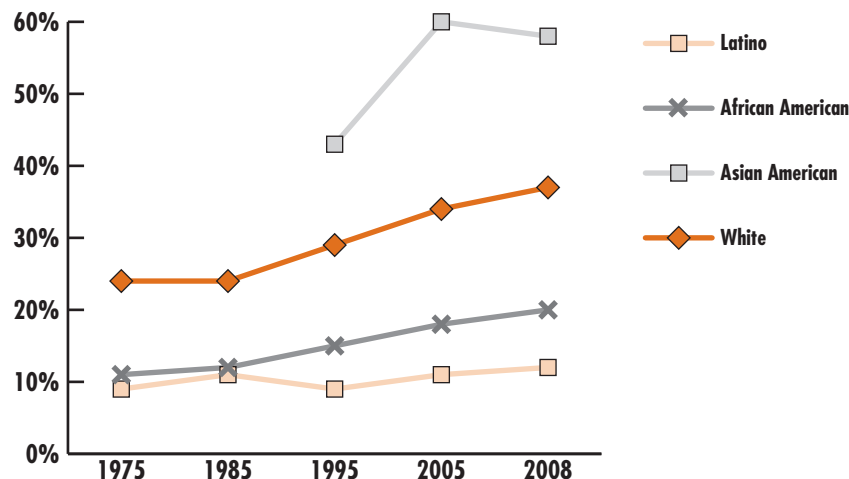
Even though more than 40 percent of LAUSD's Latino students are English learners (ELs), most are in English-only settings with teachers who do not speak their language

Figure 1. Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Above in Reading and Math, by Ethnicity, 2009



Source: Adapted from NCES 2010.

Figure 2. Percentage of Students Who Completed Bachelor's Degrees, by Ethnicity, 1975–2008



Source: Adapted from NCES 2010.

Note: No data are available for Asian American students in 1975 or 1985.

(Gándara et al. 2003). Moreover, the passage of Proposition 227 in 1998 eliminated most bilingual programs in the state. Although proponents promised that this policy would yield higher achievement for ELs, two major studies have shown that the gap between ELs and native English speakers has remained virtually unchanged (Parrish et al. 2006; Wentworth et al. 2010).

Where strong and consistent bilingual support is provided, there is

convincing evidence that outcomes are superior to those produced by English-only instruction (Genesee et al. 2006). Being bilingual also appears to enhance a number of cognitive abilities, including greater cognitive flexibility and a greater ability to focus on and use language productively (Bialystock 2001). Moreover, if students are able to draw from the literary history of more than one language, their perspective and knowledge base are greatly amplified.

Individuals who are educated bilingually have also been found to experience enhanced family cohesion (Portes and Hao 2002), and immigrant students who report Spanish as the primary home language have been shown to suffer less depression than those who report English as the primary home language (Harker 2001). Several studies also show that students who have confidence as bilinguals tend to have stronger self-concepts and more global outlooks (see August, Goldenberg, and Rueda 2010).

Additionally, the multilingual and multicultural environments of dual immersion programs can reduce prejudice and promote cross-cultural awareness and friendships. Research shows that children who are taught in these programs tend to more readily choose friends from the “other” language group and to hold that group in higher esteem (Reyes, Laliberty, and Orbanosky 1993). Of course, the ability to communicate and form relationships with people from other cultures is a critically important advantage in our increasingly global society.

ASSERTING AN ASSETS VIEW

Latino students are apt to feel more connected and engaged—a critical predictor of academic achievement and high school graduation (Gándara and Contreras 2009)—when instruction incorporates their language and cultural knowledge. Researchers have discovered that one way to accomplish this is for teachers to draw on a community’s “funds of knowledge” (González and Moll 2002) by going into students’ homes, assessing the knowledge assets that exist there, and bringing these into the classroom. This not only stimulates learning and

often offers students a “hands on” way to grasp a concept (by exploring how a carpenter uses math, for example) but also increases students’ self-esteem, and their peers’ esteem for them, by openly acknowledging the skills and practices of family and community members.

The capacity to build on Latino students’ funds of knowledge is increased when teachers share their language and culture. Recent research demonstrates that bilingual teachers use pedagogical practices that incorporate students’ language and experiences more often than do teachers who are not bilingual (Hopkins 2011). Additionally, teachers and counselors who value Latino students’ culture and language can build on these strengths to support their success in high school and transition to post-secondary education (Aldana et al. 2011).

Current educational practice too frequently demands that students leave behind their primary language and culture. The research outlined in this brief suggests that incorporating an assets view of language and culture into instruction offers a better way to engineer a quantum leap in academic engagement and superior social outcomes for Latino students. To achieve this, educators and policy makers must take these steps:

- Actively support federal and state legislation that encourages the use of bilingual instruction.
- Develop multicultural dual-language programs for students across the K-12 continuum.
- Provide rich professional development for all teachers that builds on Latino students’ cultural and linguistic assets.
- Promote the development of bilingual educators by offering incentives.
- Secure college-counseling positions at schools with high Latino populations and train counselors to utilize the skills and resources of Latino students and families.

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FUNDERS This project is supported in part by a grant from The Ford Foundation.

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An assets view of educating Latino youth values and builds on the rich language and culture that these students bring to the classroom. This policy brief shows how incorporating Latino students' home language and aspects of their culture into instruction can improve academic achievement.

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ISSN: 1543-2238.

Editor: Chon A. Noriega

Senior Editor: Rebecca Frazier



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