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COMMENTARY

Access for English Learners—Part 3

Revising Identification and Reclassification Policies

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This blog post is part 3 of 3. For part one click here; for part two click here.

When my family immigrated to the United States and settled in Southern California over 20 years ago, I was identified as an English Leaner (EL) when I enrolled in elementary school. As a fourth grader, I and about a dozen other students sat in the back of the class and worked with a Spanish speaking teacher's aide, while the rest of the class focused on the teacher at the front of the class conducting the lesson in English.

My first two years in the California school system are a blur. I have scattered memories of flashcards with a picture and a descriptive sentence that the teacher's aide would make us recite daily. I remember seeing a long string of C's and D's on my progress report cards at parent-teacher conferences. I also remember having to walk to school early in the morning and arrive one hour before the rest of the children to take an ESL class with 30 other sleepy English Learners. I recall being asked by my math teacher in fifth grade to translate for the kid sitting next to me and getting in trouble for talking too much in class when I struggled to explain the lesson to the new arrival.

After I made my way through California's public school system, I returned as an educational researcher. To my dismay, many of the educational practices I experienced in ESL had not changed much, except the EL track was now called ELD. When I asked English Learners about their experiences in those courses, they expressed the same feelings I had as a student, they hated them and couldn't wait to get out of them.

Unlike many U.S. born ELD students I've surveyed and interviewed over the years, as a recent arrival, I was not an "overly" identified EL. As the research studies I discussed in parts one and two of this blog entry have emphasized however, my reclassification to English Proficient in sixth grade allowed me to access the college-prep curriculum during early middle school which eventually led to my attending college and graduate school.

My intent is not to generalize my personal experience to all English Learners. I realize that identifying and reclassifying ELs are complex tasks, and a simple solution may not work. Goldenberg (2008) has noted that there will probably never be a formula for educating ELs, just as there is no formula for educating students who already know English. I've described some of my experiences as an English Learner to highlight the lack of progress in identification and reclassification policies, ELD instruction methods, and the critical need for ELs to access the college-prep curriculum.

Recent studies strongly suggest that EL classification practices may not produce valid and reliable classification decisions. The Home Language Survey (HLS) is used to identify language-minority students and the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) is administered to determine a student's EL or FEP status. Derived from the Lau Remedies, the HLS aims to identify if

a student is speaking a language other than English at home.

In practice, schools often operate under the assumption that a student's "home language" is a sufficient indicator of their level of English proficiency and ability to function in English language mainstream classrooms. This assumption, however, ignores the possibility that bilingual or multilingual students may have a similar level of English proficiency compared to monolingual English speakers. Requiring only bilingual or multilingual students to demonstrate their English proficiency creates an undue burden and an unfair barrier to enter mainstream curriculums. Similarly, a lack of English proficiency does not necessarily mean a student cannot function effectively in English language mainstream classrooms.

The HLS is poorly constructed to discriminate between potential EL and non-EL students due to ambiguous wording and insufficient items. Over-identification of EL students can occur, leading to additional testing before it becomes clear that a student should not have been classified as EL. To improve the validity of the EL classification system, policies and guidelines need to be based on the strongest research about effective practices for teaching ELs. Efforts could focus on using assessment data available from different sources in the state assessment system to augment knowledge of students' English proficiency levels.

While establishing academic standards is important, it is problematic to impose a particular set of standards to language minorities at a level that may not be achieved by some English-only students. The current structure of placing EL students into non-mainstream curriculums in California's public schools inherently disadvantages language minority students. The non-mainstream ELD curriculum slows down their academic progress, leading to a significant gap in other academic outcomes.

The current identification and classification system disproportionately disadvantages certain groups of students, such as Mexican, Central American, Hmong, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotian students. These students disproportionately come from low SES families and have parents who are recent immigrants with poor English proficiency, low levels of educational attainment, and low literacy skills in their native languages. Policies about state-mandated classification and selective testing of language minority students, its criteria for reclassification, and the often arbitrary tracking of these students require substantial changes.

Providing resources to ELs should begin early and continue through elementary and middle school since early reclassification is associated with improved academic outcomes. Efforts must also focus on why so many U.S. born EL students remain in the system so long without being reclassified. Since the goal of public schools is to provide a quality education to all students, regardless of their home languages, then EL students must be provided with viable opportunities to be placed in the mainstream curriculum.

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