PACE

COMMENTARY

Access for English Learners—Part 1

Revising Identification and Reclassification Policies

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This blog post is part 1 of 3. For part two click here; for part three click here.

Last week, I attended two conferences that led me to give serious thought to the issue of educational access for English Learners. It started with a brilliant research presentation by Professor Kenji Hakuta at the California Association for Latino Superintendents and Administrators (CALSA) conference in Fresno, CA, followed by a series of engaging papers and symposia at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference in New Orleans, LA.

I noticed two major themes across all the research I heard: 1) renewed concerns about the validity and reliability of identification practices of English Learners (EL), and 2) the low reclassification rates of EL students to Fluent English Proficient (FEP) despite having been born in the U.S. and having spent most of their K–12 schooling in English Language Development (ELD) courses. My interest in this topic was further heightened after reading Laurie Olsen's recent report entitled, Reparable Harm: Fulfilling the Unkept Promise of Educational Opportunity for California's Long Term English Learners. According to Olsen, nearly 60% of EL students in California's high schools have failed to become proficient in English, even after more than six years of U.S. education.

EL students that are not reclassified as FEP before starting high school are unable to complete A–G courses and become ineligible to apply to a University of California or California State University school. Although early studies warned of the dangers of prematurely exiting ELs out of ELD programs, recent studies show two trends: the over-identification of students as ELs due to poor assessment tools and procedures, and the potential adverse consequences to EL students who remain in that status for extended periods of time. Findings also suggest that students who are reclassified by the end of elementary school fare better academically in secondary schooling than their non-reclassified counterparts.

California's EL Students In 1981, more than 376,000 students, or 9% of all enrollees in California's K–12 public schools were classified as EL students. Ten years later, that number increased more than twofold to over 986,000, constituting 19% of the total public school enrollment. During the 2004-05 year, the number classified as EL increased further to 1.6 million, representing about 25% of K–12 students in California. On average, ELs' academic achievement tends to be low. On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), fourth-grade ELs scored 36 points below non-ELLs in reading and 25 points below non-ELLs in math. The gaps among eighth-graders were 42 points in reading and 37 points in math. However, we do not know whether ELs score low because of lagging content knowledge and skills, or because of limited English proficiency, or because of other factors that interfere with their test performance—or some combination of these factors.

The rapid growth of this student population demands that we consistently and accurately determine which students require English language services. Concerns about Identification Procedures The Home Language Survey (HLS) is the tool that schools in

California use to determine students' primary language. If HLS indicates a language other than English via the official form, the student must be given a test (CELDT) within 30 days of initial enrollment in order to determine the student's English proficiency. If the CELDT scores indicate that the student is an English Learner, the student is assessed with the CELDT annually until he or she meets the state criteria to be Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP).

While the HLS is intended to identify a student's home language, California's Education Code does not actually define what "home language" means, nor does it address the issue of multiple home languages. Because the HLS is limited to four questions, schools may only use parent's primary language, or the language that adults in the home speak most often as an indicator of the student's home language even if a child resides in a home where his/her siblings speak, read, and write proficiently in English (which is often the case in many immigrant families).

The HLS unfortunately ignores these possibilities and makes it likely that students, despite being born in the U.S. and raised here for most of their lives, will be selected for testing on the basis of the their parents' language. The HLS does not recognize the student's actual potential as a native-born English speaker, resulting in practices across school districts where native and non-native born students, by default, become pre-identified as EL's.

In a recent report that heavily critiques current EL identification practices, Alison Bailey and Kimberley Kelly posit that the relationship between exposure and proficiency in a second language is made complex by factors such as socioeconomic and minority language status in wider society. They argue that HLS items, which focus on the first or native language of the child, may not be relevant if he or she has subsequently learned English sufficiently well to be a balanced bilingual or to have become more proficient in English than in the first-acquired language. They also note that items that focus on where another language is spoken or what languages other than English are spoken, do not yield any information about the child's proficiency in those languages, nor whether he or she speaks English. Parent reported exposure is not always predictive of student English language proficiency according to the research literature.

Moreover, studies have found that either parents do not accurately report language exposure because they are not aware of language behaviors in the family, or they may give conflicting information due to concerns related to legal status, to the lack of survey comprehension, and to worries about equal opportunities for their children. Other studies find that EL classification was applied too broadly.

A study by Kathryn Lindholm-Leary and Ana Hernández suggests that there is no simple association between the language(s) spoken in the home and students' language status in school. While 26% of EL students hear only Spanish in the home, contrary to expectations and stereotypes, students hearing mostly Spanish are not overwhelmingly EL students, but rather RFEP students. Even 16% of English Proficient (EP) students hear mostly Spanish in the home, even though overall they hear more English than Spanish. Only16% of EP's heard only English. Although EL students are "circumstantial bilinguals," who unlike elective bilinguals, need to acquire the majority language in order to succeed in school, Guadalupe Valdés and Richard Figueroa in another study caution against grouping these students using only one or two variables as criteria, such as first language learned or language spoken in the home:

> " . . . individual bilingualism that results from the real use of and experience with two languages is highly complex and variable. Although at the macrolevel one may be able to generalize about group tendencies or experiences, at the microlevel one cannot make assumptions about the relative strengths and proficiencies of a bilingual's two languages based on one or two factors about his background and experiences. Factors such as: (a) language spoken in the home, (b) age of arrival in the United States, (c) first language spoken, and even (d) language used most frequently can predict little about a bilingual's relative strengths in each language" (Valdés & Figueroa).

I'm compelled by the argument that we need to seriously question high-stakes decisions about the identification, assessment, and reclassification of EL students based on the premise that EL status is a valid dichotomy that distinguishes between those who are proficient in the use of the English language and those who are not. Recent studies call for a classification system more rigorous than the current one which primarily relies on the questionable reliability and validity of the HLS and CELDT. The most important prerequisite to provide appropriate instruction and fair and valid assessment for EL students is to correctly identify them. Inappropriate classification decisions may place students who are at a higher level of English proficiency into less rigorous courses. Poor placement decisions may affect promotion and graduation, which consequently affects students' academic progress and achievement motivation.

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