PACE

COMMENTARY

English Learners' Time to Reclassification

An Analysis

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Approximately one in five children in the United States speak a language other than English at home (Ryan, 2013), and approximately half of this group are in the process of acquiring English (Boyle, Taylor, Hurlburt, & Soga, 2010). Current accountability systems require that states establish targets for students' English proficiency development. However, these targets are not always empirically grounded. In this study, I use 9 years of student-level, longitudinal data from the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to examine students' English proficiency development, estimating how long it takes students who enter the district as English Learners (ELs) in kindergarten to attain each of six separate criteria necessary to be exit EL services, a process called reclassification.

In this study, corroborating prior research, I find that English proficiency, when defined to encompass text-based literacy practices, does not develop quickly. Although a majority of students attain speaking and listening proficiency in English after only 2 years in the district, attaining proficiency on measures of reading and writing in English takes considerably longer. Specifically, the time necessary for at least 60% of students who enter LAUSD as ELs in kindergarten to score proficient on literacy-based measures ranges from 4 to 7 years (4 years for the content-area English Language Arts assessment, 4 years for the writing portion of the English Language Proficiency (ELP) assessment, 5 years for the writing portion of the ELP assessment, 5 years for all domains of the ELP assessment, and between 6 and 7 years for meeting all reclassification criteria simultaneously).

By the end of middle school, three-fourths of students who entered kindergarten as ELs have been reclassified and exited EL services. The likelihood of reclassification peaks at the end of elementary school. In fact, there appears to be a *reclassification window* during the upper elementary grades. Students not reclassified by this point in time become less likely ever to do so. Among the quarter of students not reclassified as proficient in English after nine years, over 30% qualify for special education services. This points to a pressing need for research and innovation in appropriate identification, placement, assessment, and services for ELs who may have disabilities.

The time necessary for students to be reclassified as English proficient varies considerably based on a variety of factors. For example, students' likelihood of reclassification varies based on their initial academic language proficiencies both in English and their primary language. I use the term academic language proficiency to describe students' use of the types of language valued and used in school contexts. Students who enter kindergarten with beginning levels of academic language proficiency in English and their home language are 24% less likely to reclassify after 9 years than their peers who enter with high levels of both.

These findings have a variety of implications at different levels of the education system. At the school level, the low probability that students will be reclassified in middle school may suggest that secondary ELs might need additional enrichment services and increased access to rigorous core curriculum. In addition, while findings about the increased likelihood of reclassification for students who enter kindergarten with high levels of academic language proficiency in English and/or their primary language are descriptive rather than causal, they are consistent with other evidence suggesting a need to expand access to high-quality preschool programs in students' primary language, in English, or in both languages (e.g., Cooper & Costa, 2012; Espinosa, 2013). At the federal and state level, as policymakers overhaul assessment and accountability systems to align with rigorous new college- and career-ready standards, it is vital that analyses of empirical data, including data on ELs' language acquisition trajectories, inform the design of these systems.

The full study is in Thompson, Karen D., English Learners' Time to Reclassification: An Analysis, Educational Policy.

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