

GAINING GROUND

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE IN HIGH POVERTY SCHOOLS



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GAINING GROUND NEWSLETTER

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Increasing Diversity in America's Schools

Cynthia Reeves

Recently released data from Census 2000 show an increasingly diverse America. The number of Americans of Hispanic origin increased by 58 percent over the past decade to 12.5 percent of the total population, approximately the same size as the African American population. The Asian population has doubled and is now about 4 percent of the total population. Overall, minorities currently make up roughly one-third of the nation's population. Much of the increasing diversity is fueled by immigration. We are now experiencing the largest wave of immigration in the history of this country with new immigrants coming primarily from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean. It is projected that diversity in the US will continue to increase and by 2025 Hispanics/Latinos¹ and

¹Throughout this issue, we will use the terms Hispanic and Latino interchangeably.

Asians will constitute 61 percent of the nation's population growth.² Much of the increase in diversity is due to the dramatic rise in the number of Latinos. After 2020, the Latino population is projected to add more people to the US every year than would all other race/ethnic groups combined.

In 2000, nearly half of all Latinos lived in a central city within a metropolitan area compared with slightly more than one-fifth of whites.³ However, state census data indicate that the Latino population, once concentrated in large urban areas, has spread to the suburbs and small towns. Also, in every growing US county for which new numbers are available, the rise in Latinos has outpaced overall population

²Hodgkinson, Harold. (2000). Secondary Schools in New Millennium: Demographic Certainties, Social Realities. National Association of Secondary School Principals. Reston, VA.

³Ibid.

growth.⁴

Generally, the Latino population is still concentrated in 10 states - California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Massachusetts - but is spreading rapidly to all parts of the country.

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⁴The Christian Science Monitor, March 26, 2001. Hispanics Spread to Hinterlands. Laurent Belsie.

This continuing increase in the Latino population has important implications for the nation's schools. The US Bureau of the Census has projected that by the year 2030, the white population will be less than half of the US population under age 18.

As standards-based reform has taken hold across the country, educational institutions are under increasing pressure to ensure that all students perform to high levels. At the same time, recent student achievement data indicates that poor and minority students are performing disproportionately at low levels. Latinos are more likely than whites to be poor, live in urban areas and attend low performing schools. In 1999, 30.3 % of Latino children under 18 were living in poverty, as compared to 9.4% of white children. Latino children comprised 16.2% of all children in the U.S., but represented 29% of all children living in poverty.⁵ The latest analysis of NAEP data indicates that a substantial achievement gap still exists between whites and minorities and between poor and non-poor students.

From 1992 to 2000, fourth grade white students outperformed their black and Latino peers by 33 and 29 points, respectively, in reading. In 2000, of those fourth graders eligible for free/reduced lunch, 60% were below the *Basic* level in reading, as compared to 26% of those students not eligible.

⁵ Therrien, Me (2000) *The Hispanic Population in the United States: Population Characteristics*. Iissa and Ramirez, Roberto R. Current Population Reports, P20-535, US Census Bureau, Washington, DC.

Also, 47% of students in urban schools scored below *Basic*, as compared to suburban or large towns (32%) or rural and small towns (35%).⁶ Thus, students from low income backgrounds and who attend schools in urban areas are most at risk of not meeting more rigorous academic standards.

These changes and projected changes in the composition of the school age population pose significant challenges for educators. The future work force will be more diverse and increasingly comprised of the very students that are now disproportionately enrolled in underperforming schools. For student's to succeed in today's competitive economy they need strong oral and written communication skills and a mastery of mathematics. In addition, they must have problem solving skills and be able to adapt to a rapidly developing technology. The recent reports on achievement data indicate that Latino students lag far behind in these skills.

The good news is that we know a great deal about effective strategies for improving achievement among poor, minority and limited English proficient students. Unfortunately, policies addressing effective practices for these students have not been institutionalized at the district and state levels. Standards-based reform and its focus on **all** students holds great promise for improving the academic

⁶National Center for Education Statistics. (2001) *The Nation's Report Card: Fourth-Grade Reading*. US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

achievement of Latino students, but only if policies specifically address the needs of those students. Schools must be structured in a way that promotes achievement among Latino students and teachers must be provided with the training and resources they need to ensure these students have the same opportunities as other students to achieve to high standards. This issue of *Gaining Ground* provides a series of short articles regarding the implications of the Latino population growth. We are focusing particularly on the implications for education at the K-12 level, including early childhood programs, elementary education, and health education. The next issue of *Gaining Ground* will address the implications of Latino population growth for secondary and post-secondary and special education.

Early Childhood Education Implications of a Growing Hispanic Population

Ruth Gordner and Cynthia Reeves

Early childhood education, especially for children from low income families, enhances school readiness. Participation in quality early childhood programs helps to develop language, early reading, and social skills thereby contributing to later academic and life successes. The gains are the greatest for poor children.⁷ Yet, three and four-year old Hispanic children are the least likely to be enrolled in early childhood education programs. In 1996, approximately 28% of Hispanic three-year olds were enrolled in

⁷Ramey, Craig T. and Sharon, L. 1998. *Early Intervention and Early Experience*

early education programs, compared to about 49% of black children and 45% of white children; among four-year olds, the proportion rises to 49% of Hispanics, 79% of blacks, and 65% of whites.

There are several reasons for the lower enrollment rates of Latino children. Historically, Hispanic parents have been reluctant to place their young children with non-family member care givers. Nearly half of Hispanic mothers stay at home to raise their children. If they are unable to stay at home, Hispanic parents frequently prefer using relatives rather than a preschool program to care for their young children. In addition, private programs are often too expensive, few federally funded programs exist in Hispanic communities, and many parents are not aware of the programs or services they offer.

The low enrollment of Hispanic children in preschool is of concern because preschool can provide an educational boost to help children overcome the impediments of poverty and succeed in school. However, for preschool programs to address the needs of their increasingly diverse populations, substantial investments need to be made in designing and implementing programs that address the needs of these children and their families and providing professional development to help early childhood educators to deliver culturally and linguistically appropriate services.

There are several factors that need to be considered in designing programs for Hispanic preschool children. This article will address two of these issues: early literacy

development and the psychological and emotional well-being of the children.

Hispanic preschoolers whose parents are immigrants come to the pre-school programs speaking Spanish. This poses an immediate question for early childhood educators: What language should be used in the classroom? For a long time there has been debate regarding the use of children's primary language as the language of communication in a classroom. More importantly, what language should be used in early reading instruction?

Despite this continuing debate, there is considerable research suggesting that English language learners are more likely to become better readers when they receive initial instruction in their native language. This is because it is extremely difficult to read a language that is incomprehensible to the ear.⁸ The successful reader must have skills in analyzing language in order to understand how the alphabetic code represents meaningful messages. Typical native English speaking children have considerable prior knowledge available for analysis at the time they enter school (several thousand words in their vocabularies; some exposure to rhymes and alliterations; practice writing their own names and "reading" environmental print; and other sources of information). Non-English speakers have the same kinds of

prior knowledge, yet in another language. However, they are unable to build on their oral language skills when initial reading instruction is provided exclusively in English.⁹ Therefore, providing language instruction in the native language as well as in English increases the student's likelihood of academic success. This task need not be made burdensome by the establishment of policies that prohibit the use of the child's native language.

While it is obvious to educators that learning English is essential to academic success, few realize the importance of maintaining the primary language for success in life. Loss of the family language affects communication between adults and children making it more difficult for parents to stay informed of what is happening with their children. Most educators would also agree that the family plays a key role in a child's overall success in life through socializing children into the beliefs, values, and knowledge base of the family and cultural group. The family provides a feeling of belonging and self-worth. All of these functions of the family are carried out through language. As parents and children lose the ability to communicate, the ability of the family to provide psychological and emotional support to the children is diminished.¹⁰

The changing composition of

⁸ Burns, Susan and Snow, Catherine E. Snow, editors. *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press (1999)

⁹ National Research Council. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*

<http://www.nap.edu/catalog/6023.html>

¹⁰ Fillmore, Lily Wong. *Loss of Family Languages: Should Educators Be Concerned*. *Theory Into Practice*, Vol. 39, NO. 4 (Autumn 2000)

America's school age population presents new challenges to educators. If early childhood programs are to provide for appropriate development they must take into account the cultural and linguistic characteristics of all children. Some strategies for creating successful programs are:

Effective Outreach Strategies

- Recruit and support educators from the Hispanic community;
- Communicate in the parents' native language.
- Hold meetings in convenient locations.
- Provide support services like child care, transportation and snacks.
- Connect parents with early childhood programs that benefit the whole family, especially where English and other job skill development classes are offered. Programs that offer an even more comprehensive array of services such as health care, child development education, communication and study skills, and vocational training have been found to be especially appealing to Hispanic parents.

Effective Literacy Development Approaches

- Emphasize strengthening children's knowledge of various Hispanic cultures and the Spanish language as they are taught English. It is generally accepted that children learn better when instruction builds on what they already know from experience.
- Offer parents materials in English and Spanish with ideas about how they can help their children learn through engaging them in everyday

activities.

- Incorporate collaborative learning where small groups of children work together on a project or to solve a problem.
- Encourage story telling and writing, with a particular emphasis on students creating stories based on their culture and experiences.
- Inform parents about the importance of encouraging their children to do similar activities at home.

Implications for Elementary Education

Julia Lara

Latino students are at risk academically for a number of reasons including concentration in low resource schools, poor instruction, low levels of parental involvement, and unchallenging curriculum.¹¹ Moreover, they are overwhelmingly enrolled in schools where teachers not only lack strong knowledge of content, but also lack an understanding of how to help second language learners acquire proficiency in English. While many Latino students entering elementary schools are English proficient, a high proportion are limited English proficient (LEP) and need language support services. Specifically, Spanish speaking students comprise three-quarters of all students classified as LEP. However, in considering educational interventions for these students, a distinction needs to be made between Latino students who are

in need of language support services because they are classified LEP and those students who face challenges similar to those of other students enrolled in low performing schools.

School Level Practices

Providing Latino students with opportunities to learn rigorous content that prepares them to meet high academic standards entails the establishment of a broad school reform effort such as the standard-based framework, while paying attention to the unique needs and characteristics of these students. This means paying attention to both system level improvements and specific classroom based improvement strategies. Changing classroom practice without considering broader school level factors will produce benefits for only a small number of students which undermines a key goal of systemic reform - scaling up school improvement efforts. Moreover, improving the quality of bilingual/ESL programs in isolation of broader reform efforts will not improve outcomes for Latino and other language minority students. Hakuta has shown that in spite of the positive effects of bilingual education programs, the gap between the outcomes of ELL students and native speakers is wide and grows across grade levels.¹²

Hakuta summarized the attributes of a successful school for language minority students. These include a supportive

¹¹ERIC DIGEST. (No. 162, February 2001). *Latinos in Schools: Some Facts and Findings*. ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.

¹²Hakuta, Kenji (April 5, 2001). *Key Policy Milestones and Directions in the Education of English Language Learners*. Paper Prepared for the Rockefeller Foundation Symposium, Leveraging Change: An Emerging framework for Educational Equity, Washington, DC.

school-wide climate, effective school leadership, customized learning environment, articulation and coordination between and among schools in the district, school-wide coherence in academic offerings, rigorous standards for teaching and learning, a system of assessment and accountability, continuous evaluation and research of program effectiveness. These attributes are common in high performing schools serving all students, but particularly in schools serving poor and minority students.

Classroom Approaches

All students in low performing schools need to receive instruction from teachers that are knowledgeable of content and skilled in individualizing instruction. However, teachers who work with linguistically and culturally diverse students need to expand their repertoire of knowledge and skills. Bilingual and ESL teachers need to strengthen their knowledge of content and align their instruction to rigorous standards. General education teachers must become more knowledgeable of skills to promote the literacy development of second language learners. Strengthening the capacity of mainstream teachers to work with second language learners is important because large proportions of second language learners are served in these classrooms. Research evidence suggests that it takes more than three years to acquire proficiency in the second language.¹³ Yet,

¹³ Hakuta, K., Goto Buttler, Y., and Witt, D. (2000). *How long does it take English Learners to attain proficiency?* University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute. Policy Report 2000-1, available online at <http://www.ucsb.edu/RESDESS/hakuta.pdf>

three years is the average number of years LEP students receive language support services. Therefore, in mainstream classes, these students are still struggling to meet the linguistic demands of the classroom.

We know that general education teachers are unprepared to address the needs of Latino and other linguistically diverse students. In a study conducted by the United States Department of Education (USED) researchers reported that 70% of teachers surveyed felt moderately or not at all prepared to address the needs of diverse and linguistic background including LEP students. Thus, these teachers will not be able to promote the achievement of Latino and other linguistic minority students without additional training.

What skills do teachers need to be more effective with linguistically diverse students? Experts on the education of these students posit that teachers need to be more effective language teachers, provide Latino students with rigorous content, build on their linguistic and cultural strength, and improve communication with parents.

For example, those Latino students who are LEP need to be provided opportunities to access content knowledge through native language or sheltered content instruction. Research has shown that students who receive strong cognitive and

Thomas, Wayne., Collier, Virginia. (1997) *School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students*. National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, Washington, DC

academic development through their first language for many years (through grades 5-6), as well as through the second language (English) do well academically beyond the elementary school years.

In a recent article titled, *What teachers need to know about language*, Lily Wong Fillmore and Catherine Snow argue that knowledge of language will strengthen elementary teachers' practice, and aid them in teaching literacy and working with English language learners.¹⁴ The article focuses on teacher development across classroom context (bilingual, ESL, mainstream class).

They noted that basic knowledge of language and culture and how these systems can vary is fundamental to helping diverse students succeed in school. In addition, teachers should learn about the following: a) the basic units of language (phonemes, morphemes, words, phrases, sentences); b) the features of academic English; c) the difference between the vernacular varieties of English and standard varieties, and how to teach the standard form while respecting the dialects spoken by children in their communities; and d) the types of problems that second language learners might encounter in narrative and expository writing.

The Role of Cultural Background

In addition, teachers need to integrate the cultural experience of the students into the

¹⁴ Fillmore, L.W., & Snow, C. (2000). *What teachers need to know about language*. Available at www.cal.org

curriculum in a meaningful way. There is a body of literature pointing to the value of building on students' knowledge and strengths to enhance literacy development and deepen understanding of content. Reading research points to the importance of building on children's oral language skills to teach reading and connecting students' prior knowledge with new knowledge being presented.

Of equal importance is the infusion of knowledge about students' cultural background into the school curriculum. This enhances students' comprehension of content and reduces the cognitive load of the students.¹⁵ Teachers that are familiar with their students' home communities and build this background knowledge into their instructional process goals are more effective in engaging students in the process of instruction.

While the notion of background knowledge is important for all students, students who are linguistically and culturally diverse have greater challenges in accessing abstract content than mainstream students. Thus, it is essential that this approach be used when working with linguistically diverse students. However, the role of cultural background in the curriculum and in pedagogy is not a substitute for rigorous content.

Parental Involvement

Much has been written about the importance of parental involvement in their children's

¹⁵ Meyer, Lois (2000). Barriers to Meaningful Instruction for English Language Learners. *Theory into Practice*. *Children and Languages at School*. Autumn 200 vol. 39, No.4

education. Involvement of Hispanic parents in school activities has been a challenge for school staff for a number of reasons. As has been documented in studies and reports Hispanic parents, particularly immigrant parents, operate with a belief system based on the perception that schools and teachers are the best judges of students' educational needs and services.

Other parents are fearful and alienated from school authorities or are unable to attend meetings during the scheduled hours. These factors have created a belief among school personnel that Hispanic parents are indifferent to their children's education. However, there is evidence showing that when schools are deliberate in their attempts to involve Hispanic parents in schoolwide and classroom activities they can be successful.

The Hispanic Dropout Project identified several school sites that used successful strategies to draw Hispanic families into school life.¹⁶ These strategies included convening meetings during non-conventional hours and offering parent pot-lucks during the dinner hour, maintaining a parent room where parents could talk with other parents or school staff, and using bilingual personnel to make home visits or talk with the parents.

Similar strategies were used in a Texas school district highlighted in Education Week for its

¹⁶ Tumbaugh-Lockwood. *Transforming Education for Hispanic Youth: Recommendations for Teachers and Program Staff*. Issues Brief. National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, no.3, July 200.

success in working with Hispanic parents.¹⁷ The district has developed a year-round strategy of parent engagement that entails leadership seminars and weekly parent workshops focusing on a range of topics including academic expectations and performance of the students. The district provides transportation to the workshops and all communications to the parents are done in the native language. Every school has a parent center that organizes the activities at the school level including English language classes for parents. The efforts undertaken at both the district and school level have resulted in the district receiving "recognized" ranking on the Texas accountability system despite its high poverty status. These examples show that deliberate efforts to work with Hispanic parents result in not only better home-school relations, but also enhanced academic achievement for students.

¿Conversamos? A Program to Help Spanish-Speaking Parents Talk With Their Children About Sexuality and Healthy Relationships

Nora Howley

Many parents find it challenging to talk with their children about healthy sexuality and relationships. For parents who primarily speak Spanish, there may be additional challenges related to the differences in cultural outlooks between them and their English-speaking children. Yet Hispanic parents have the same need to

¹⁷ Education Week. *Parent Power*. Issues and Trends. (4/26/2001)

communicate effectively with their children as other parents.

One example of the particular challenges facing Hispanic families are births to teenage mothers. According to the National Center for Vital Statistics, despite an overall decrease in the rate of births to teenagers, birth rates for Hispanic teenagers continue to be higher than for all other groups of teenagers. In 1998, the birth rate for non-Hispanic White teenagers (ages 15-19) was 35.2 births per 1,000 while the birth rate for Hispanic teenagers was 93.6 per 1000.¹⁸ Researchers have suggested that teenage pregnancy contributes to the dropout rate.

The high school graduation rate for Latinas is lower than for girls in any other racial or ethnic group.¹⁹

¿Conversamos? is a Spanish-language parent-child communication program, adapted from the National Education Association Health Information Network's (NEA/HIN) successful program, Can We Talk? It is a four-part interactive workshop series for parents, designed to help them enhance their role in educating their children about difficult topics such as puberty, sexuality, peer pressure, self-esteem, and mixed media messages. The program is grounded in the belief that parents know what values they want to

¹⁸ *National Vital Statistics Report*, Volume 48, Number 6, April 24, 2000, "Variations in Teenage Birth Rates, 1991-1998 National and State Trends, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr48/nvsr48_6.pdf

¹⁹ Ginorio, Angela and Huston, Michelle. (2000) *Si, Se Puede! Yes, We Can: Latinas in School*. American Association of University Women.

teach their children, but may need help with the "how-to." The program uses the support of other parents in the workshop as well as whimsical cartoon characters to help parents initiate conversations with their late-elementary and middle-school aged children.

Since *Can We Talk?* was released in 1998, parents nationwide have participated in the program. ¿Conversamos? provides an extension of the program's reach to millions of Spanish-speaking parents in the United States. The Training Kit is available from the NEA Professional Library at 1-800-229-4200. To learn more about the program or to set up a training call Robert Kaiser at NEA/HIN (202-822-7723). Information can also be found at www.canwetalk.org

For more information about teen pregnancy and how schools can be involved in prevention contact Shannon Johnson, 202-336-7034 or Nora Howley, 202-336-7033 at CCSSO.

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