



Equity Dispatch

The Equity Debate:
The Power of Language in
Literacy Development

July 2014



IMPACT: Educate, Engage, Empower **- for Equity**

(Click each word to navigate sections)

" In the long run, denying the value of the native language deprives children of the linguistic and cultural heritage that will help them develop both a strong sense of identity and the cognitive basis for future learning.

~ Sylvia Sanchez, 1999

Educate

Framing the Debate

On November 12, 2013, a middle school principal in Hempstead, Texas, announced over the loudspeaker that students were not allowed to speak Spanish in class. This principal's decision provoked strong responses within the school community. Many families pointed out that in a school that enrolls more than 50% Hispanic students, such a policy might prove to be discriminatory towards Spanish-speaking children. Others asserted that the policy was meant to serve Spanish-speaking students, ensuring that

Meet the Authors

This edition of the Great Lakes Equity Center newsletter was written and edited by:

Kitty Chen
Juhanna Rogers
Marsha Simon
Seena Skelton
Kathleen King Thorius

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they learn to speak and write in English. The local school board quickly reassured families that the school embraces “all students of all cultural and diverse backgrounds,” but it continued to debate policy around Spanish language use for months afterward (KHOU-TV, 2013).

Such situations are not new. The Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 declared that “No state shall deny equal educational opportunity to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin by...(f) the failure by an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs,” reinforcing the importance of granting students full access to a school’s instructional program regardless of the student’s proficiency in English. That same year, in *Lau v. Nichols*, the U.S. Supreme Court interpreted “appropriate action” as a need to provide transitional bilingual instruction, and the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare later issued the *Lau Remedies* mandating that, at least initially, elementary schools provide academic instruction in a student’s strongest language (Cummins, 2014). These steps recognized the importance of meaningfully incorporating the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students into educational programming.

While research has since supported this inclusion (Shin, 2011), the post-9/11 U.S. has seen a “rapid and significant retrenchment” of multiculturalism – including support for bilingual education and/or heritage language preservation - in public policy, including education policy (May, 2014, p. 215; see also Iddings, Combs & Moll, 2012). In some states, funding for bilingual education has been cut while in others, English-only legislation has pushed the types of local policymaking that occurred in Hempstead Middle School (May, 2014). Opponents of bilingual education feared such programs would diminish the “Americanization” of new immigrants or impair their ability to successfully learn English (Cummins, 2014). What are the equity implications of this debate? And how can we best support literacy learning for all students – regardless of and responsive to whatever languages they speak when they enter the classroom?

Equity Considerations

English-only policies and policies that limit funding and resources for bilingual education can implicitly communicate to students that their home language isn’t important or valuable (Vazquez, 2013). Such messages can be damaging to a student’s self-concept (McMillan & Rivers, 2011). Research suggests that families typically want their children to preserve at least some elements of their own identity and culture; when schools work in the opposite direction, children struggle to negotiate a sense of self that

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is acceptable to both (Portes & Rivas, 2011). This, when paired with the discrimination that particular groups of minority language speaking students tend to experience can promote “reactive ethnicity,” or “reaffirmation of ethnic solidarity and self-consciousness” (Portes & Rumbaut, as cited in Diehl & Schnell, 2006, p. 793) among students (Portes & Rivas, 2011). Conversely, evidence for this phenomenon is mixed. While some studies show no relationship between heritage language integration in instruction (Cavazos-Rehg & DeLucia-Waack, 2009), others suggest a positive relationship between programs that maintain a student’s heritage language and self-esteem (Portes & Rivas, 2011; Potowski, 2004. It may be that the school personnel’s demonstration of respect for students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as opportunities to connect with students who share similar ethnic identities account for the instances of positive relationships (Cavazos-Rehg & Waack, 2009). Understanding that learners’ development of self-concept is tied to their understanding of how their primary languages relate to “larger and often inequitable social structures” is important (Potowski, 2009, p. 4).

Moreover, English-only policies or transitional programs that teach students in their heritage language initially, then switch to instruction in English, also deny students the benefits of bilingualism, which in an increasingly global society can be economically, socially, and academically valuable (Mehisto & Marsh, 2011; Proctor, August, Carlo, & Barr, 2010). Education stakeholders hold mixed views regarding the benefits of bilingualism. When the bilingual student is from a traditionally marginalized ethnic group, educators often view bilingualism as a detriment or a potential source of disruption in the classroom, particularly when students speak in heritage language other than English (Macedo, 2000). On the other hand, English-speaking students are frequently encouraged to learn a second language because it is considered enriching (Macedo, 2000; Shin, 2011; Zentella, 1998). Support for bilingualism may be with good reason; bilingualism is associated with increased attentional control, metalinguistic awareness, symbolic representation skills, and, depending on the task, working memory (Adesop, Lavin, Thompson, Ungerleider, 2010). Depending on the context, bilingualism can also provide economic benefits when individuals enter the workforce (Mehisto & Marsh, 2011).

Third, because native languages serve as an important resource for learning, the impact of English-only policies can impact significantly students’ opportunities to access curriculum and develop academically (Iddings, Combs, & Moll, 2012; May, 2014; Thomas & Collier, 2002). English-only policies are often based on assumptions that are not supported by research: namely, that young children learn English faster than older children and that immersion in English helps students learn English more quickly (Iddings, Combs, & Moll, 2012; Shin, 2011). In fact, use of students’

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Minnesota

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St. Paul, MN

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August 11, 2014
Community Schools Special
Education Administrators
Summer Institute
Columbus, OH

Wisconsin

October 8-9, 2014
Technology Conference for
Special Education 2014
Wisconsin Dells, WI

native languages, as well as visual representations and gestures, are important resources in learning both academic concepts and the English language (Carlos et al, 2004; Cval & Chavez, 2011). For example, research has repeatedly demonstrated that learning to read in the home language promotes reading achievement in a second language (Goldenberg, 2008). Relatedly, capacity issues concerning high quality teachers and instructional materials in diverse heritage languages inform the feasibility of implementing and bringing bilingual education to scale.

Conclusion

Linguistically diverse learners bring valuable assets to our school communities and are capable of high achievement with the proper support. Structuring our systems – whether through the support of dual immersion programs at the state-level policy or through changes to policy and practice that recognize the value of students’ heritage languages at schools like the one in Hempstead, Texas – to recognize and use these assets is an important step toward ensuring all students succeed in school and life.

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Engage

The logo for WIABE features the letters 'WIABE' in a large, blue, serif font with a subtle drop shadow. The letters are set against a light blue, textured background that resembles a map of Wisconsin.

Wisconsin Association for Bilingual Education

[Wisconsin Association for Bilingual Education \(WIABE\)](#) is a non-profit organization created to support language minority populations, especially school age children who have limited English proficiency. Grounded in the belief that bilingual bicultural education is valuable, they further committed to provide equal access and educational opportunity to language minority children. They consider “promoting bilingual bicultural education as the most meaningful, effective and efficient way of developing an appreciation of cultural differences and similarities”, and they respect all languages, diverse people, opinions, and cultures.

To put their mission into action, WIABE encourages bilingualism in schools and provides services to children in both the community and educational institutions throughout the state, by helping to ensure that bilingual/bicultural education is an integral part of the school curricula. They also sponsored several workshops, conferences, and meetings, aimed at facilitating the professional development

for stakeholders and increasing their professional competence in meeting effective standards in bilingual education.

As an Equity Center, we appreciate WIABE's contribution on promoting bilingual education. Their work created a platform for all stakeholders to learn the meaning of bilingual bicultural education and advanced educational equity for language minorities.

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Empower



Something to Read!

***English Language Learners:
Shifting to an Asset-Based
Paradigm***

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform released a special issue in [Voices in Urban Education, Summer 2013](#), focusing on [English Language Learners \(ELLs\)](#). Most of the articles highlight that increasingly individuals in society now view ELLs as valuable assets and advocate for language equality. Several bilingual/dual-language programs that are appropriate for different levels of students are also introduced. In addition, state policymakers and education leaders are urged to expand funding equity and opportunity for ELLs; teachers and principals are encouraged to increase their cultural competence and provide better learning environment for ELLs; and families and community members are advised to engage in the learning process and make the most use of their strength to support family's education.

Something to Watch!

***English Language Learners: Culture,
Equity and Language***



The National Education Association is a leading organization in preparing educators of English Language Learners (ELLs) to meet ELLs educational, cultural and linguistic needs. In [this video](#), several teachers, who were English Language Learners when they were young, talk about their experiences and strategies in teaching new ELLs. From their perspectives, ELLs come to class with funds of knowledge and bring a lot of diversity that enrich the classroom. Teachers in the video also mention that they try to create learning environments where ELL students feel welcomed and valued.

Something to Use!



A Diagnostic Tool for taking your Program's Pulse

This “Diagnostic Tool”—a well-developed questionnaire—is designed as a first step for self-evaluating English language programs in states, districts and schools. Through answering 12 primary questions and related sub-questions, educators can identify their language program and service’s strength and areas for improvement. This tool kit also provides some useful next steps following the initial evaluation.

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