

Limited English Proficiency Problem oder Gelegenheit? Problema u Oportunidad? Problem or Opportunity?

By Emma Case
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Professor Ruthanne Kurth-Schai
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Problem: Issues and Challenges Facing Limited-English Proficient Students and the U.S. Public Schools

For those concerned with improving and reforming education today, there is often a perplexing problem; where to start? Test scores, funding, school choice or lack thereof, privatization, special education and school violence are all issues which deserve and demand attention. In a small survey, community members, teachers and students in St. Paul, Minnesota highlighted the need for increased teacher preparation and compensation, equal funding and access for all schools and students, smaller class sizes alternative methods of evaluation, and greater community involvement in schools. These results are the distillation of just 60 responses by interested and involved citizens. A countrywide sample would doubtless bring up even more issues. In order to begin to change, to even start the process of changing, one must decide the direction in which this change is to take shape. Large, systemic, sweeping mandates? Or grassroots, issues-based advocacy?

How do we begin
To change, reform and improve
This future that we foresee?

In order to resolve the dilemma of how to begin any change or reform of the education system, I propose a reconciliation of these means. A "special interest" topic, specifically the education of limited-English proficient students (known as LEPs), will be tackled by advocating for a system-wide reevaluation and reform of the way in which this issue is addressed. Working within and improving upon the progress made by the No

Child Left Behind Act, while also attempting to rectify some of its more negative effects, the reforms I propose will benefit not only the large and growing population of LEP children, but their English-speaking peers, and their parents and communities as well. Addressing a specific smaller issue is one way to build the foundation for a larger movement of reform in the United States' public schools. This essay will first outline the reasons for choosing this particular issue, demonstrate its growing and pressing importance, and illuminate the challenges faced by schools, districts, teachers and students affected by limited-English proficiency. Secondly, it will define the three current strategies for educating LEP students, followed by an explanation of the effects of NCLB on the choice between these strategies and other effects of the legislation. Finally, it will outline concrete and theoretical steps toward a systemic change in the understanding of children with limited English skills, and explain how these can lead to the inclusion of all students in more global, multicultural and forward-thinking curriculum.

Why LEP?

Why choose limited-English proficient students as the basis for reform? Demographic trends and shifts in the United States have made this an issue that is impossible to ignore. One in nine U.S. workers is an immigrant, as is one in four low-wage workers. Of schoolchildren, one in 5 is the child of immigrants, and one in four low-income children has immigrant parents.¹ Growing immigration to non-traditional states, called new growth states, in the Rocky Mountain, Midwestern and Southeastern states is changing the country and affecting schools inexperienced in educating English as

¹ Fix & Passel, 7

a Second (or third, or fourth) Language.² Not only do these new growth states have limited infrastructure for educating LEP students (for example, teachers may not be trained in language acquisition theories or pedagogy nor be aware of special issues facing immigrants and their children), they are faced with a disproportionately large percentage of recently arrived or undocumented immigrants, factors which are correlated with higher LEP rates and lower incomes in general.³ These trends are likely related to several factors, but the prevalence of LEP in the parents of LEP students is likely one reason for this phenomenon.

Of all students nationwide, about 5% are classified as LEP in K-12. These are not just first generation immigrants. Of the total LEP population, 35% are recently arrived, or first-generation immigrants, 46% are second generation, and 19% are third generation, meaning they and their parents were born in the United States.⁴ These students make up 6.4% of secondary school populations and 3.8% of elementary schools, a problem in itself, since elementary schools are generally more prepared to teach the language skills LEP students require under current laws.⁵ Another important factor is that LEP students are on average more likely to be low-income than non-LEP peers and are more likely to live in urban areas than rural ones.⁶ In addition to learning a new language, LEP students are more often in urban settings, often associated with poorly funded schools and programs, less-prepared teachers, and more problems with violence and truancy.

² Ibid, 8

³ Ibid, 9-11

⁴ Fix & Passel, 22

⁵ Ibid, 22 and Capps, et al., 36

⁶ Capps, et al., 36

Immigration demographics and trends have led to the development of what researchers have called High-LEP and Low-LEP schools. This refers to schools with either a very high concentration of LEP students , often speaking one or two languages other than English, or schools where LEP students are few and far between, but they exist. Students in low-LEP schools are called “linguistically isolated.”⁷ In a study of elementary schools⁸, it was found that 70% of LEP students enrolled in just 10% of schools nationwide, and usually make up about half of the school’s population.⁹ Low-LEP school students typically make up 5% of the student body at schools they attend. High-LEP schools tend to be more urban, have more minority students, and have a much higher incidence of poverty and health problems. Because of these factors, High-LEP school students are much more likely to go to schools receiving greater Title I funding for remedial, enrichment, after-school and parental outreach programs. This funding, which is based on the percentage of low-income students in a school, is usually spread across the school for general reading or tutoring programs. High-LEP schools are “no more likely than other schools to offer targeted assistance Title I services” to LEP students.¹⁰ While High-LEP schools are more likely to be able to offer native-language programs, they are less likely to have qualified ESL teachers, forcing them to use substitutes or unqualified teachers.¹¹

Current Methods for Educating LEP Students

⁷ Cohen, 3-4

⁸ This study defined High-LEP schools as those with more than 23.5 % of students who were LEP. There are also No-LEP schools, who do not enroll any children who are LEP.

⁹ Cohen, 4

¹⁰ Ibid, 5-6

¹¹ Ibid

Though there is a lack of qualified and prepared teachers across the board, three broad strategies have developed for educating students whose English is limited or nonexistent when they enter American public schools: ELL, transitional bilingual and developmental bilingual. The first of these strategies is the most common, known as English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Language Learning (ELL). For our purposes, we will use the more inclusive term, ELL. The language of instruction for ELL classes is mainly English, and classes can include students whose native languages differ. ELL is usually taught as a stand-alone class during only part of the day, and students are sent into the mainstream classes, immersion classes or bilingual classes during the rest of the day.¹² Critics have sometimes equated ELL with “submersion,” a technique ruled in 1974 to be illegal by the Supreme Court along with segregation of LEP students.¹³ Another problem with ELL is that learning rates differ from about 9 months to several years, depending on factors such as age, native language, number of languages already spoken, parents’ primary languages, and their year in school¹⁴

Assimilation
For me? I don't understand.
Where do I fit in?

Volle Anpassung?
Für mich? Ich verstehe nicht.
Wo passe ich ein?

Another strategy for schools and students is called transitional bilingual education, also known as “early-exit bilingual.” As this name indicated, the emphasis is on the fastest possible integration into all-English classrooms, and also grade promotion and graduation requirements. The goal is to mainstream students as quickly as possible

¹² ECS, 2

¹³ Lau vs. Nichols (414 U.S. 563, 1974)

¹⁴ Capps, et al., 35

and promote a quick transition out of any “extra” programs, like ELL. In this strategy, ELL and the native language are used to varying degrees.¹⁵

A third, and rarely used strategy, known as developmental bilingual, is an innovative (for this country) strategy for educating LEP students. The curriculum is taught both in English and the target language of the LEP students. Developmental bilingual curricula typically encompass the entire school day, and classes are created with an equal number of English-proficient and LEP students. This is often described as two-way bilingual education, because all students are learning non-native language.¹⁶

No Child Left Behind and LEP Students

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has had both positive and negative effects on the education of LEP students. The legislation requires that schools provide native-language support, testing and accomodation to help LEP students meet the content standards that NCLB requires each state to have.¹⁷ Previously, students confined to ELL classes were often taught much less academic content than their English-proficient peers, and not tracked as they are now by standardized test scores. (Sometimes poor) language skills were the emphasis and students missed out on important concepts taught to their English-speaking peers. NCLB also requires that every classroom have a qualified teacher, and in the case of LEP students that means a teacher trained and specifically prepared to reach ELL students.¹⁸ Although this is only an ideal at this point, it is a huge step in the right direction, and its implementation will no doubt benefit LEP students.

Also required by the legislation, schools and teachers are expected to communicate with

¹⁵ ECS, 2

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Capps, et al., 1

¹⁸ Ibid, 2

parents in their native language whenever possible if the parents are also LEP (a common occurrence). This increases the likelihood that parents will know what is going on in their children's schools and possibly decreases the risk of dropping out.

A criticism of the NCLB legislation, however, is that it actually increases that risk by focusing on rapid English acquisition. For late-entry immigrants, this focus on immersion can be discouraging, as can high-stakes testing. The demand for meeting standards can narrow the curriculum and discourage students who are still in the process of learning English.¹⁹ Additionally, the testing is based on repeated evaluations of the same grade, meaning that a school receiving recently-arrived immigrants will test, for example, the new fourth grade every year. If, every year, several new students enter with LEP and take the test, it will appear as if the fourth grade is not improving. A test that followed a cohort might, however, demonstrate the great progress made from year to year for LEP students. This would entail tracking individual students' or grades' test scores and reporting progress from one year to the next, as opposed to reporting the difference in scores between successive grades in one class.

Opportunity: Proposed Initiatives for Systemic Change in Educating

LEP Students



Join the Global Teacher Corps!

19 Ibid 30

In order to infuse fresh ideas into the education of LEP students, we must start with fresh faces. Students would greatly benefit from the addition of more teachers who were LEP students at one time, the children of immigrants or both. I propose an alternative teacher certification route that will bring “native speakers” into schools as assistants, facilitators but also teachers of culture and language while attending part-time classes in education.

Modeled after the Teach for America program and Americorps, this program would provide education training to those willing to work intensively on the issue of inclusion of LEP students in public schools. The two-year program would result in a Master’s degree for each Corps member who completes both the coursework and the major commitment to service that is involved. As incentive, the graduate classes involved will be provided free and a stipend for living expenses will take care of other needs, such as housing and transportation, similar to financial commitments made by the Federal government for Americorps and Peace Corps members.

The Corps members who have committed to serving will be placed in communities in which at least a portion of the LEP students speak the member’s native language. For example, an immigrant who came to the United States from Somalia during high school or elementary school could work at Forest Hills Elementary school in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, where a growing minority of the students are recent immigrants from Somalia. In the first year, the Corps member would attend graduate classes in Education at the University of Minnesota, while observing and acting as an aide in classes with LEP students. While not to be used primarily as a translator, the Corps

member would sometimes have the ability to facilitate communication and make connections with very recent immigrants who speak no English.

In the second year, the Corps member will take on much greater responsibility for coordinating the activities and programs related to LEP education, and will be more involved with all LEP students, not just those speaking their native language. In addition to school-day activities, the Corps member will have the responsibility for creating an ELL program for LEP parents of the school's students. In order to bring schools, parents and communities closer, parents of LEP students (80% of whom are LEP themselves²⁰) should be able to take evening and weekend English classes at their children's schools. Part of the training for the teachers proposed above could involve teaching these classes, and being a resource for recent immigrants and LEP parents.

Teacher Training

There are other, less radical ways to begin to change the focus of LEP student education that should be considered and implemented as well. Teacher training (both pre-service and in-service) for all subjects should include instruction on educating LEP students, especially for teachers in secondary schools. Because LEP students are becoming more diffuse, and located often in linguistically isolated settings, ELL theory and pedagogy are vital skills for teachers that will soon become necessary for all teachers, not just a concentrated few. For new-growth states, in-service training for current teachers is a necessity, especially in low-LEP schools where ELL services and support are lacking.

²⁰ Fix & Passel, 22

Because the Global Teacher Corps involves a significant commitment to a Master's program, and will produce certified teachers with considerable experience and training, it is hoped that these teachers will continue their careers in education. This would help, to some extent, alleviate the great demand for teachers of ELL and also greatly diversify the teaching profession

But what about...



Funding for programs like the Global Teacher Corp are limited, however, and some important changes need to be made to the NCLB legislation to address these. Under NCLB certain groups are 'protected' and their presence in a school entitles the school to extra funding. Low-income students, for example, and LEP students are protected groups. Currently a student who falls under multiple protected categories only counts once for extra funding. Many LEP students fall under the low-income category, meaning schools with multiple protected students receive less money than they require to address multiple problems. An important factor should include taking into account multiple protected groups in Title I and Title III and adjusting funding accordingly. Currently, High LEP schools are likely to use their Title I money for programs that are not directly related to LEP (enrichment programs, reading programs, extra help for low-income students, etc.) because they tend to also have high numbers of low-income students. If funding were able to double for a student who was both low-income and LEP, for example, schools would have more room to create programs like dual bilingual education (in schools with

high concentration of one target language LEP students) or add extra staff to low-LEP schools to help students outside of and during classes.

Although being able to track the progress of a school is important, NCLB should also incorporate a measurement of the progress of cohorts. Instead of, or in addition to determining progress based on the improvement in one grade, testing should be scored to reflect the improvement made over several years for LEP students, and the time period should be increased from one year to a more flexible three to five years, the low end of estimates for new language acquisition. (CITE)

Promoting Developmental Bilingual Education

Language is an integral part of any culture, and the methods in which English is taught and learned are important representations of how we value other cultures, languages, backgrounds and our status as world citizens. The diffusion of LEP students to

“Most important, multiculturalism views culture as emanating from the home into the school classroom. The student is not viewed as an isolated being, and the school is not a laboratory where the student is infused (treated) with culture. The school becomes a place where learners arrive to clarify their presuppositions about themselves and others. They learn to question their ethnocentricity, and their radical stereotyping” [emph. added]
J.J. Chambliss, *Philosophy of Education: An Encyclopedia*

new-growth states means that in the future all schools will need to have strategies that encompass students at all levels of English and with a variety of native languages. In addition, this opportunity for cultural and linguistic development should not be limited to the LEP students alone, but extended to all students and their communities. Developmental bilingual education for as many students as possible

should be the ultimate goal of the United States public school system.

Looking to the Future: Creating Global Citizens

Diverse perspectives
Struggle with challenge, but see
Opportunity
Language doesn't handicap
Breeds tolerance and insight

While the challenges and proposed solutions herein are only a small start, the ultimate goal for interested parents, teachers, politicians and students themselves must be to create a system which recognizes and embraces multilingualism. Understanding other cultures and languages has always been important for all students, but is becoming more and more vital. Students across the globe learn to speak two, three or more languages at home, at school and in their communities. Although English is spoken around the world, students who speak more than one language will be much more likely to excel in all areas than those who do not. For this reason, English language learning should not be viewed so much as “problem” that needs to be solved, but as an opportunity that needs to be tended to, groomed and allowed to grow into skilled usage of both (or several) languages. At the same time, we must appreciate and address the challenges faced by students entering our current system of all-English education and provide the extra support necessary to ensure these students’ success. Only by listening, talking and learning new languages will this country ever be able to say it speaks its own language.

SOURCES AND RESOURCES for further study:

Capps, et al., "The New Demography of America's Schools: Immigration and the No Child Left Behind Act" The Urban Institute, Washington, D.C.: 2005

A helpful delineation of immigration trends in the U.S. that are changing American Schools. Also includes a lengthy section on the effects of NCLB's funding geographically, which although not addressed in this paper is an important resource, or lack thereof, for many LEP services.

Chambliss, J.J., Ed., *Philosophy of Education: An Encyclopedia*, Garland Publishing, Inc., New York: 1996

An overview of myriad topics in education using sources from Socrates to George H.W. Bush to explain accessibly and interestingly. A very useful starting point for anyone interested in philosophy or theory behind educational policies.

Christian, D., "Two-way bilingual education: Students learning through two languages." US Department of Education, National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, Washington DC: 1994

For more detail on two-way bilingual education, or developmental bilingualism as described in this paper, this article provides an in-depth look from the government's perspective pre-No Child Left Behind.

Cohen, et al., "Who's Left Behind? Immigrant Children in High and Low LEP Schools" Program for Evaluation and Equity Research, The Urban Institute, Washington, D.C.: 2005

A careful look at the demographics within schools teaching LEP students, and a very good resource for a "larger picture" of the issue.

ECS Educational Policy Issue Site: Bilingual/ESL: www.ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueID=16, 11/6/2005

This site provides some helpful overviews and summaries and many links to other sources for information on the mainstream views of bilingual education.

Fix, Michael and Jeffrey S. Passel, "U.S. Immigration — Trends and Implications for Schools" National Association for Bilingual Education, The Spencer Foundation, New Orleans, LA: 2003.

Similar to Capps, et al, but provides more detail and analysis as well as helpful visual representations of immigration trends affecting the different needs and demographics of LEP students across the country.

Other Resources:

Schmid, Carol L., "Educational Achievement, Language-Minority Students, and the New Second Generation" *Sociology of Education Extra Issue* 2001:71-87

Tinajero, J.V. and Ada, A.F. Eds., *The Power of Two Languages: Literacy and biliteracy for Spanish-speaking students*. Macmillan/McGraw-Hill School Publishing Co., New York: 1993