

The Attainment of Literacy by Minority Groups in the U.S.

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Introduction

As our economy shifts toward skilled labor with tremendous increases in the number of jobs in the technology and information sectors it is increasingly important for children to learn how to learn literacy skills that will allow them to process the boundless information around them. However, with more information at their fingertips than ever before, people of all ages in the United States are reading less than previous generations (Loes, Salisbury & Pascarella 2013). The most pronounced decline in literary reading occurred in the 18-24-year-old age group, with a 28% decline, and the 25-34-year-old age group, with a 23% decline. This decreased interest in literacy parallels a decreased interest in playing an active role in civic and cultural life. These trends are disturbing because research has shown that people who elect to read nonacademic sources of literature in their free time have consistently higher scores on measures of vocabulary and cultural literacy than their peers who choose not to read for fun. The tendency of some individuals to be drawn to recreational reading has been associated with higher scores on measures of reading comprehension, spelling, and verbal fluency, and with general improvements in individuals' writing skills, vocabulary, spelling, overall grammatical development, and grade point average.

It is vitally important that educators and parents address children's reading difficulties at an early age to provide them with a solid literacy foundation on which to build the content of their education. Children who are struggling readers continue to have difficulties with reading and writing as they get older, and they read less than peers who have stronger reading skills (Lonigan, Farver, Nakamoto & Eppe 2013). People who read more absorb

more content knowledge, vocabulary and additional language skills compared to those who do not read frequently. This puts them at a cultural and economic advantage in the workforce compared to individuals who do not read frequently. It is especially important for language minority students and immigrants to attain strong literacy skills in both their first and second languages so that they can perform well on measures of reading proficiency, excel in an academic setting, and so that they can attain the political and social capital necessary to advocate for themselves. A significant percentage of children in the United States come from minority language families, where a language other than English is the predominant language spoken in the home. The largest language minority group in the United States is Spanish-speaking, with a significant number of children being exposed to a great deal of Spanish at home (Goodrich, Lonigan & Farver 2013). Currently in the United States approximately 26% of the population of children under the age of five years old are of Latino descent, and this group is rapidly increasing in numbers.

People in minority groups that do not hold the dominant power positions in society are often ignored by the majority group, or the social capital that they have is not seen as valuable to the larger group. In many parts of the United States bilingualism is not valued, but rather seen as a drawback for young learners. Children who do not speak English at home are perceived to be slowing down their academic progress since they are dabbling in learning two full sets of vocabulary and structures, rather than diving deep into academic content. Contrary to the popular position among educators in the United States I propose that bilingual education solves many problems all at once. It allows language minority students to activate their prior knowledge and to develop a deeper understanding of concepts by learning how to explain them in both languages. It allows language minority

students to utilize the social capital of their first languages and their cultural knowledge in a formal academic setting, which boosts their self-esteem and enriches the diversity of everyone's learning experiences. It also allows children to preserve more of their culture and their history. Approximately half of the world's 6,000 languages will fall out of use within the next century (Shaeffer 2012). Languages express who we are as individuals, carry cultural histories, add to the sum of human knowledge and diversity in the world, and they are interesting in their own right.

There are several literacy trajectories that language-minority children and immigrant children can follow. Their paths are often shaped by socioeconomic status and sociocultural status, amount of language support and print resources available at home, the type of academic instruction and supplemental academic interventions they receive, the amount of parental and community support they receive in their instruction, and how open their institution of education is to the idea of diversity and multiliteracies in formal education. This paper will address some common factors which can alter literacy trajectories for language-minority and immigrant students and will propose ways to improve student outcomes, the most important of which is incorporating bilingual education into our educational system in some fashion.

Literacy Trajectories for Language-Minority and Immigrant Students

There are several literacy trajectories that are common among language-minority and immigrant students, many of which are negative if left unaltered. Even when language-minority and immigrant children begin learning English as a second language in preschool or kindergarten they often score in the below-average range on measures of reading skills (Lonigan et al 2013) unless they receive additional instruction such as explicit phonics

instruction. Language minority children who were born in the United States are often at an academic disadvantage when compared to immigrant children, because they have not had formal academic instruction in either their first language or in English, so they cannot transfer academic knowledge between contexts. These Generation 1.5 children often come from families that cannot help them in the traditional sense with completing their homework, because their family members often do not speak enough English to help them and the children do not speak enough of their first language for these adults to explain complex concepts to them in their first language.

Experts have argued for years about whether or not print knowledge concepts and literacy skills transfer from a child's first language to his or her second language (Goodrich, Lonigan & Farver 2013). The answer to this question should inform policy decisions regarding multilingual, bilingual or monolingual instruction in academic settings.

Development of Preschool Literacy Skills Among Language-Minority and Monolingual English Children

In a recent study Lonigan et al (2013) observed preschool children for one school year to determine how their literacy scores changed over the course of the year. These researchers found that measures of oral language skills and measures of code-related skills, such as phonological awareness and print knowledge, were lower for minority language children. However, growth for print knowledge and blending was similar for both language minority and fluent English speakers. Also, the language minority children experienced significantly faster oral language skill growth than did their English-speaking counterparts, although their oral language skills remained below the scores of the fluent English group as a whole. This study also found that children whose families spoke only Spanish at home

had lower language scores than children whose families spoke both English and Spanish at home.

Predicament of Generation 1.5 ELLs

One of the often overlooked groups in minority language group discussions is Generation 1.5 children (Schechter 2012). Many of these children were born in the United States and never had instruction in their first languages, but their parents do not speak enough English to assist them with their English-only academic curriculum. Sometimes Generation 1.5 children can be completely cut off from older relatives living in the same household because the children can only communicate predominately in English, and the older relatives can only communicate primarily in their native tongues. In these cases the parents must act as a bridge between generations. First language loss was more pronounced when the first language was neither taught at home nor at school.

These children are frequently lacking in vocabulary that their fluent English-speaking peers may have about everyday life in different settings in the United States. For example, a math word question asking for the perimeter of a pen would befuddle the English language learner, whereas the fluent English-speaker has probably learned about pens during discussions about farm life (Schechter 2012).

Generation 1.5 children are encouraged to leave behind their native language and to embrace English in the classroom setting, but recent research has demonstrated that students who develop literacy skills in two or more language and who remain biliterate through elementary school will experience linguistic, cognitive and affective advantages over monolingual students (Schechter 2012).

Do Literacy Skills Transfer From L1 to L2?

Various studies have indicated that the development of bilingual students' proficiency in their first language plays a positive role in academic development of their second language (Cummins 2011; Goodrich et al 2013). Goodrich et al (2013) found that phonemic knowledge and phonological awareness were correlated across languages, but that vocabulary skills were generally not correlated across languages. Cummins proposes that a transfer of skills between languages may be caused by the *developmental interdependence hypothesis*, which states that among language minority children, the development of language-related skills in the child's second language is dependent upon the child's proficiency in those skills in his or her first language. This hypothesis also states that these skills will only transfer if there is sufficient exposure to the second language and if there is sufficient motivation to learn it.

Possible Literacy Solutions to Improve Student Outcomes

There are several instructional strategies that can lead to improvements in literacy outcomes for language minority and immigrant students. This paper will discuss three of these possible strategies: explicit phonics instruction, pull-out instruction which reinforces concepts learned in the classroom, and an approach which combines experimental learning with enrichment-oriented activities to provide real-world experiences in both languages that can help to solidify concepts for young learners.

Explicit Phonics Instruction

Understanding phonics is a crucial factor in building literacy skills. Systematic phonics instruction, when begun early in a child's education, can enable that student to apply his or her knowledge of the alphabetic code and to read and spell words. In a two-

year study of kindergarteners who received explicit phonics instruction, Vadasy and Sanders (2012) found that simple treatment effects on long-term outcomes were found in the areas of spelling, reading and comprehension outcomes for language minority students. Treatment effects of this intervention on native English-speaking students was even higher, with effects detected on all outcomes, including fluency. The effects for both groups tended to be higher for students who received more word study in Grade 1 and more meaning instruction in Grade 2. It has been well-established that reading interventions for at-risk kindergarteners who are native English speakers is effective; this study also demonstrated that it is effective in language minority students as well. It was also found that oral language skills contributed to later reading achievement. Alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness are two of the most well-established predictors of reading outcomes of all early literacy skills.

Pull-Out Instruction and Reinforcement of Concepts

Pull-out instruction can be positive or negative for students, depending on the light in which it is portrayed to students. Pull-out instruction which has negative connotations among students or in which instructors have a negative view of their students and their abilities, and in which these instructors think of the supplemental program as remediation, is not likely to be effective in assisting students (Goodrich, Lonigan & Farver 2013; Ippolito & Schechter 2012) . One study analyzed whether the language of pull-out instruction had an effect on student outcomes, and found that children who received the intervention scored higher than the control group, and children in the intervention group which slowly transferred instruction from Spanish to English over the course of the study had higher Spanish-language skills at the end of the survey than the control group. The results suggest

that these children transferred specific linguistic information across languages, supporting the *common underlying proficiency* theory of language development which states that humans have an innate ability to learn language, and that this skill is not necessarily transferred across languages when we learn a new language, because it is inherent in our ability to learn language at all and does not need to be learned.

Experimental Learning Plus Enrichment-Oriented Activity

The researchers who were stumped with how to help their English learners who had never heard of a pen on a farm devised an enrichment program which combined experimental learning with enrichment-oriented activities to make vocabulary and concepts more salient for young English language learners (Schechter 2012). An example of a typical series of activities in this academic setting would include a field trip to a farm, where children would learn the words for animals and crops in both English and in their native languages (with parental assistance). Field trips were then followed by an enrichment activity, like cooking vegetable soup after the farm trip to enable students to use vocabulary terms in real-life settings with meaning behind them. Another component of this particular intervention that was found to be effective in improving student outcomes was a focus on meta-cognition about problem-solving strategies, and this was developed through the experimental learning and enrichment activities.

How Can Socioeconomic Status Affect Educational Outcomes for Language-Minority and Immigrant Students?

There has been a great deal of research linking both low socioeconomic status and language minority status as risk factors for low academic achievement. Oftentimes these risk factors coexist, with language minority families living in poverty conditions. Children

in poverty conditions tend to have less access to print resources and enrichment opportunities than children in more affluent neighborhoods, which leads to negative academic outcomes. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 30% of fourth grade English language learner (ELL) children scored above basic level in reading, and only 29% of eighth grade children managed to do the same (Lonigan et al 2013).

It can be difficult to assess whether low reading scores among language minority children are due to low socioeconomic status or whether they are due to language minority status (Lonigan et al 2013), but Krashen and Brown (2005) found that high socioeconomic status (SES) language minority students outperformed low SES fluent English proficient students on measures of math, and performed nearly as well as fluent English students on reading measures. Children from high SES backgrounds have advantages including material advantages and differences in school quality and orientation. Children who enter the United States with a high SES background generally received age-appropriate instruction in their primary language, which built up their first language enough that ideas can transfer from their first language (L1) to their second language (L2). Living in a higher SES environment also means living in a richer print environment, with more books in the home and more access to books in the neighborhood. This study showed that the effects of high SES showed up quite early in students' reading comprehension, but was not apparent until 5th grade for vocabulary. This finding makes sense because while reading strategies are easily transferable between languages, vocabulary takes longer to build and is largely non-transferable.

These findings may provide a solution for bridging the divide between low SES and high SES student groups. If schools invest more money in creating a print rich environment, then children will receive similar benefits to those living in a high SES household (Krashen & Brown 2005). Schools can also provide education for children in their primary language to supply them with literacy and background knowledge.

Ways to Improve Student Outcomes

Some possible ways to improve language minority and immigrant student outcomes include using institutional structures to promote educational equality and a multilingual approach to education, the use of complementary schools in children's native languages, involving parents and communities in the education of their children, and encouraging people to embrace diversity in their learning to create a multicultural academic setting where people from all backgrounds feel welcomed, included, and feel that they contribute in a useful way to the group.

Use Institutional Structures to Promote Educational Equality and Multilingual Approach to Education

Many of the world's languages are dying out, with 97% of the world speaking only 4% of its languages (Shaeffer 2012). This process is sped up when ethnic minorities are only allowed to participate in political and social discourse by leaving behind their ethnic and linguistic identities and expressing themselves using the culturally dominant language. It is our responsibility to preserve these languages in some form, in writing or recordings, so that it can be recognized by future generations. Using these minority languages draws attention to that language, giving it prestige and increased status within the community, increasing its legitimate power to enable speakers of that language to affect change.

For educators who work in multilingual settings, power can be additive and subtractive (Kenner & Ruby 2012). Interactions between educators and students form an interpersonal space in which identity negotiation and the creation of knowledge take place. If teachers and students work collaboratively, they may affect change in society at large. Key to this collaborative empowerment approach is the involvement of families and communities.

Complementary Schools

Children from language minority backgrounds learn in multiple settings: at home, within their communities, in mainstream school, and possibly in complementary school where they study their mother tongue and culture (Kenner & Ruby 2012). Too often these worlds remain separate and distinct, with no other world interacting with mainstream schooling to enrich students' experiences and to make learning more meaningful for them. In settings where multilingual interaction is accepted and even encouraged, bilingual children tend to make links between their languages, and children in one research study operated in 'simultaneous worlds' rather than separate ones, switching between languages and creating bilingual texts at complementary school and at home.

Complementary schools often have more freedom in their curriculum choice, which allows them to become flexible spaces for developing children's learning. These schools often understand students' multiple linguistic and cultural worlds far better than their mainstream instructors do and try to incorporate all of those worlds into the classroom to reinforce concepts for children in meaningful ways. Complementary schools are often far more approachable for parents, many of whom struggle to assist their children in mainstream education when often lacking sufficient English language skills to help with

homework. In the complementary school setting parents, grandparents and other community members can all contribute equally to the expression and celebration of culture and language.

Rather than existing as two separate entities, it would be wonderful if mainstream educators could combine resources with complementary school instructors to create a curriculum that is reinforced in both languages and which allows students to express their cultural and linguistic identities with pride rather than pretending that they are not different from anyone else in any way (Kenner & Ruby 2012). In one research study these collaborative thematic units included such topics as discussion of where clothes came from and the practice of child labor in some countries, connecting with families and family history, and learning about plants through gardening with parents and children.

Get Families Involved

One of the most successful aspects of the complementary schools is that they elicit such strong parental involvement. There are two ways of looking at the issue of the family-school relationship: if parents are more involved their children will do better; or these family-school relationships can be unequal in their balance of power and expectations, so they should be mediated to ensure fairness (Ippolito & Schechter 2012).

Family literacy practices are important to child outcomes; however, the level of print resources in the home is not related to family income, how the print resources were used was not related to income, and the level of use of print resources was not related to the number of print resources in the home (Grieshaber, Shield, Luke & Macdonald 2011). Therefore students from any SES could use the print resources they had well, or they could use them poorly, regardless of how many they had. It is important for families to reinforce

literacy in students' first languages because first language loss was more pronounced among families where children were not taught to read or write their first language at home or at school (Schechter 2012).

Encourage People to Take in More Diversity Experiences to Change Their Views of Literacy

Much as reading a wider variety of books leads to a more well-rounded individual with a greater and more varied knowledge base, so Loes, Salisbury & Pascarella (2013) thought that diversity experiences would foster change in individuals by creating a sense of disequilibrium with their previous worldviews. In this research study student attitudes about diversity did not change much after they finished their diversity courses, but their views on diversity did change after being exposed to non-curricular diversity-related experiences. These researchers stated that there are three particular conditions of a diverse learning environment which are necessary to produce the dissonance required to elicit student change: structural diversity, curricular diversity, and interactional diversity. Structural diversity refers to the percentage of minority populations, not necessarily to the frequency of interactions between groups. Curricular diversity refers to coursework, and interactional diversity is based on personal interactions with others.

Conclusion: Bilingual Education to Strengthen and Preserve Languages in Education and Development

Bilingual education has many benefits to students: it produces better learning, less grade repetition and fewer drop-outs (Shaeffer 2012). One of the most consistent research findings is that literacy skills in students' L1 and L2 are strongly related (Schechter 2012). In addition to the benefits for second language learning, becoming literate in one's home

language first leads to greater mastery, not only of both languages being learned, but also in other subjects. Bilingual instruction practices encourage students to use their L1 as a cognitive tool to activate their prior knowledge, affirm their bilingual and bicultural identities, and allow them to express their intelligence at a grade-appropriate level (Cummins 2011). Over the last 25 years evidence has grown to suggest that children who develop literacy skills in two or more languages experience linguistic, cognitive and affective advantages (Schechter 2012).

When children are in settings that encourage multilingual interaction they often make links between their languages, and freely switch between languages (Kenner & Ruby 2012). Students create bilingual texts in these settings that reinforce learning of new concepts in both languages. When bilingual children are allowed to share their native language with peers in mainstream education it enriches everyone's experience. Comparing word meanings in multiple languages, for example, can enhance learning and increase student interest in the content and in the culture of their peers.

On the other hand, a lot of recent North American and European research has downplayed the positive effects of bilingual education (Cummins 2011), or has dismissed it as being impractical or not feasible. Opponents of bilingual education argue that it is expensive to produce graded reading materials and teaching supplements for several different minority languages. Some languages do not have consistent orthographies and alphabets, or they include multiple scripts. However, if mainstream schools combined their resources with complementary schools I do not think that creating these texts would seem like such a substantial problem.

Opponents may also feel that their political dominance would be threatened if multiple languages were taught in school. This idea is not always explicitly discussed, but it is a major reason for the movement urging the United States to adopt English as its national language. Individuals who oppose bilingualism and who prefer one American cultural identity do not want to celebrate our diversity, but would prefer that their dominant cultural voice remain in charge of the policymaking in our country. If enough individuals refuse to hide their cultural and linguistic identities and pretend they do not exist, then these differences will be seen and acknowledged by an ever-growing group of people. Once these differences are seen and acknowledged they can gain power, which can ultimately lead to social change, and can give minority populations a voice in the mainstream political and social discussion.

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