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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

DEEPER LEARNING RESEARCH SERIES

THE IMPLICATIONS OF DEEPER LEARNING FOR ADOLESCENT IMMIGRANTS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

By Patricia Gándara
November 2015

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO THE DEEPER LEARNING RESEARCH SERIES

In 2010, Jobs for the Future—with support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation—launched the Students at the Center initiative, an effort to identify, synthesize, and share research findings on effective approaches to teaching and learning at the high school level.

The initiative began by commissioning a series of white papers on key topics in secondary schooling, such as student motivation and engagement, cognitive development, classroom assessment, educational technology, and mathematics and literacy instruction.

Together, these reports—collected in the edited volume *Anytime, Anywhere: Student-Centered Learning for Schools and Teachers*, published by Harvard Education Press in 2013—make a compelling case for what we call “student-centered” practices in the nation’s high schools. Ours is not a prescriptive agenda; we don’t claim that all classrooms must conform to a particular educational model. But we do argue, and the evidence strongly suggests, that most, if not all, students benefit when given ample opportunities to:

- Participate in ambitious and rigorous instruction tailored to their individual needs and interests
- Advance to the next level, course, or grade based on demonstrations of their skills and content knowledge
- Learn outside of the school and the typical school day
- Take an active role in defining their own educational pathways

Students at the Center will continue to gather the latest research and synthesize key findings related to student engagement and agency, competency education, and other critical topics. Also, we have developed—and have made available at www.studentsatthecenterhub.org—a wealth of free, high-quality tools and resources designed to help educators implement student-centered practices in their classrooms, schools, and districts.

Further, and thanks to the generous support of The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Students at the Center has expanded its portfolio to include an additional and complementary strand of work.

The present paper is part of our new series of commissioned reports—the Deeper Learning Research Series—which aim not only to describe best practices in the nation’s high schools but also to provoke much-needed debate about those schools’ purposes and priorities.

In education circles, it is fast becoming commonplace to argue that in 21st-century America, each and every student must aim for “college, career, and civic readiness.” However, and as David T. Conley described in the first paper in this series, a large and growing body of empirical research shows that we are only just beginning to understand what “readiness” really means. Students’ command of academic skills and content certainly matters, but so too does their ability to communicate effectively, to work well in teams, to solve complex problems, to persist in the face of challenges, and to monitor and direct their own learning—in short, the various kinds of knowledge and skills that have been grouped together under the banner of “deeper learning.”

What does all of this mean for the future of secondary education? If “readiness” requires such ambitious and multi-dimensional kinds of teaching and learning, then what will it take to help students become genuinely prepared for life after high school, and what are the implications for policy and practice?

We are delighted to share this installment in the Deeper Learning Research Series, and we look forward to the conversations that all of these papers will provoke.

To download the papers, executive summaries, and additional resources, please visit the project website: www.jff.org/deeperlearning.



Rafael Heller, Rebecca E. Wolfe, Adria Steinberg

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Students at the Center—a Jobs for the Future initiative—synthesizes and adapts for practice current research on key components of student-centered approaches to learning that lead to deeper learning outcomes. Our goal is to strengthen the ability of practitioners and policymakers to engage each student in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and expertise needed for success in college, career, and civic life. This project is supported generously by funds from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patricia Gándara is a research professor and co-director of the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). She is also a member of the National Academy of Education and a fellow of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center in Italy, the French-American Association at Sciences Po Graduate Institute, Paris, and an Educational Testing Service (ETS) fellow at Princeton, New Jersey. In 2011 she was appointed to President Obama's Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanics and continues to serve in that capacity. Her most recent books include *Forbidden Language: English Learners and Restrictive Language Policies* (2010) with Megan Hopkins, from Teachers College Press, and *The Bilingual Advantage: Language, Literacy, and the U.S. Labor Market* (2014) with Rebecca Callahan, from Multilingual Matters Press.

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INTRODUCTION

While there is no single, fixed definition of “deeper learning,” the term tends to be used to describe a mix of academic, personal, and relational capacities, including elements such as “collaborative learning,” “critical thinking,” “conceptual understanding,” and “learning how to learn.” Typically, deeper learning is said to have an affective dimension as well, touching on characteristics such as “persistence” and “self-motivation,” and advocates often argue that students should be taught to take responsibility for their own learning through active engagement in their education (Martinez & McGrath 2014).

In this paper, I argue that the nation’s immigrant students and English language learners are likely to benefit from such focused, critical, and engaging classroom instruction. In fact, one could argue that these children tend to be *better* equipped for such teaching and learning than monolingual, non-immigrant students. However, to the extent that English language learners are framed as deficient and in need of remediation, schools tend to overlook their affinity for deeper learning.

Our public schools have always enrolled significant numbers of immigrant students, though the numbers have varied over time. But Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) brought into being the category of “English Language Learners” (ELLs)—or, as they are still sometimes referred to, Limited English Proficient (LEP) students—in 1968. Title VII, also known as the Bilingual Education Act (BEA), was the first federal acknowledgment that immigrant students and children who come to school speaking a language other than English need special accommodations to ensure their academic success. This naturally led to the need to identify and label these students, for the purpose of targeting resources to them.

It is important to note that ELLs and immigrant students are not one and the same. Most (though certainly not all) immigrant children spend a period of time as English language learners, but today most ELLs are not immigrants. According to current estimates, almost 90 percent of all ELLs were born in the U.S. Overwhelmingly, then, the resources dedicated to educating ELL students support native-born U.S. citizens.

How to best to utilize resources to support ELLs’ learning has been an ongoing national debate. In 1967, U.S. Senator “Smilin’ Ralph” Yarborough of Texas, the chief sponsor of the BEA, went on record in favor of “the creation of bilingual-bicultural programs, the teaching of Spanish as a native language...designed to impart to Spanish-speaking students a knowledge and pride in their culture” (Schneider 1976, p. 22).¹ Many other education activists, heedy with recent victories on civil rights, advocated similar positions. However, because Yarborough and his allies were unable to win the support of the Johnson administration, they had no real hope of passing legislation that would privilege the language and culture of Spanish speakers.



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¹ The 1960s was a period of historically low immigration, and to the extent that speakers of languages other than English were acknowledged at all, it was generally limited to the pockets of Spanish speakers mostly clustered in the Southwest and the Miami area.

As Mehlman Petrzela (2010) recounts, passage of the bill depended on its ability to fit into the overall objectives of the ESEA, which focused on remediating the disadvantages of poor children, and to not challenge the popular notion of the “melting pot,” which demanded that immigrants relinquish their distinctive cultural characteristics. Moreover, as Moran (1988) notes, “[Yarborough’s] vague statement of purpose masked fundamental differences over whether the programs were designed to promote assimilation by overcoming a language ‘deficiency’ or were intended to foster pluralism by acknowledging a linguistic asset” (p. 1273). In the end, the former perspective—defining English language learners as having a deficiency that requires remediation—won out. Multiple reauthorizations of the ESEA have only furthered the emphasis on deficiency.

But the debate did not end there. Since 1967, countless educators, researchers, politicians, and others have continued to wrestle over how best to support immigrant students and English language learners. We now have

nearly 50 years of research on ELL students and classrooms from which to draw and almost 50 years of experience with deficit-based policies and practices upon which to reflect. Moreover, this is now a very different nation, demographically and politically, than it was 50 years ago.

In this paper, then, I return to the vision that Yarborough outlined in 1967, asking once again whether our students might be better served if we understood their linguistic and cultural backgrounds as *assets*, not deficiencies. I begin, in the following section, by describing the current educational status of the nation’s ELLs and immigrant students. I go on to describe the ways in which their skills have been denigrated, and I consider a number of ways in which linguistic and cultural diversity and immigrant experiences might be reframed as valuable resources for deeper learning. I conclude with recommendations for federal and state policymaking in this area.

FRAMING AND REFRAMING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND IMMIGRANTS

In the 2012-13 school year, nearly five million students across the U.S., comprising almost 10 percent of the total school-age population, were designated as English language learners (Zong & Batalova 2015; if one considers all students who come from homes where English is not the primary language spoken, the figure doubles to more than 20 percent; Ryan, 2013). Many students who today do not carry the label of ELL, were once ELLs and may still be on a continuum of learning academic English; most of these students go home every day to an environment in which English is rarely heard. Because there is no national test of English proficiency or even agreement as to what constitutes “proficiency” in English for academic purposes, any count of the number of ELLs is, in reality, a best estimate. And while these children are often referred to as “immigrant children,” as noted above, the truth is that very few English language learners are born outside the country. In 2013, 88 percent of children of immigrant parents were native-born citizens (Zong & Batalova 2015).

In the U.S. today, more than 17 million children under age 18 live with at least one immigrant parent, constituting one in four children overall (Zong & Batalova 2015). Contrary to popular perceptions, most of the 41 million foreign-born residents of the U.S. are legal residents; almost half are naturalized citizens, and only about one-fourth are unauthorized (Zong & Batalova 2015)—which still means that millions of children live in a household in which at least one person is at risk of being deported. This threat often places strains and restrictions on the entire family. Children can be distracted from learning due to fears that one or more of their family members will not be there when they return from school, or they may hesitate to become engaged in school, knowing they could be removed at any moment. This is not an exaggerated concern: according to recent estimates, roughly 450,000 U.S.-born children now

live in Mexico, most having returned with family members forced to leave the U.S. (Lakhani 2015).

Seventy-one percent of English language learners speak Spanish, and the next largest language group is Chinese (both Mandarin and Cantonese) at just 4 percent, followed by Vietnamese at 3 percent (Ruiz et al. 2015). Only 5 states claim a language other than Spanish as the primary non-English language spoken, but in 19 states, more than three-fourths of English language learners speak Spanish. Thus while there is great linguistic diversity in the U.S., with respect to both numbers and concentrations of students, a few languages predominate, with Spanish being overwhelmingly the primary non-English language spoken. This may begin to change, though, as Asians have overtaken Latinos as the group sending the largest number of immigrants to the U.S. (Jensen 2015).



While there is great linguistic diversity in the United States, a few languages predominate, with Spanish being overwhelmingly the primary non-English language spoken.



The five traditional immigrant “gateway states” continue to be home to nearly two-thirds of all ELLs nationwide, but the greatest growth in English language learner students has been in “new destination” areas.

The size and concentration of languages other than English has significant implications for how education systems can serve students. Trying to educate students from many different language backgrounds in a single school or classroom can be especially challenging and can restrict the programmatic options available to educators. However, where there are large concentrations of a single language, or just a few languages, and where there are teachers who speak those languages, there are more instructional options. For example, bilingual programs can be mounted in schools where there are many children of the same language group and teachers prepared to teach in that language as well as in English. However, where many different languages are spoken and trained teachers from those language groups are not available, other program models must be considered.

The five traditional immigrant “gateway states”—California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois—continue to be home to nearly two-thirds of all ELLs nationwide, but the greatest growth in English language learner students has been in “new destination” areas. In 2009, for example, South Carolina, Alabama, and Tennessee experienced the most rapid growth in immigration, mainly from non-English speaking countries (Terrazas 2011). This development presents major challenges, since states with no history of such immigration often lack policies and infrastructure to support these students. Also, the sudden influx of new immigrants can stimulate a hostile reception in areas where people feel unprepared to receive newcomers, exacerbating the trauma many immigrant students experience (Cornelius 2002).

Framing Students who are Speakers of Other Languages

Whether they are immigrants or native-born U.S. citizens, students who arrive at school with a primary language other than English are usually defined by what they lack: English language skills. Thus they have been dubbed “Limited English Speakers” (LES), “Limited English Proficient” (LEP), or “English Language Learners” (ELL), among other labels. This framing has resulted in these students being viewed as deficient, remedial, or lacking in fundamental skills that are critical for normal academic achievement. Thus, most programs that serve these young people are designed to fix a deficiency, and students are deemed ready to join the mainstream and have full access to a regular curriculum only once this is accomplished (Callahan 2005; Callahan & Gándara 2004).

Recent policy shifts away from supporting bilingual classrooms (where students can move more or less seamlessly from using their primary language to speaking more and more English) to a greater emphasis on Structured English Immersion (SEI) have led to surging rates of “reclassification.” Cited as a goal of No Child Left Behind, and built into its accountability system, the movement of students to English Proficient status has become the chief objective of most programs for ELLs. For example, Arizona created a statewide SEI program that consists of four hours of English language drills every day, to the exclusion of most other subject matter instruction, with the sole goal of reclassifying ELLs, “normally in one year” (Martinez-Wenzl et al. 2012). Of course, the great



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majority of ELLs do not gain proficiency in English in just one year, so their exclusion from the regular curriculum can last much longer.

In a 2006 study of California's program for ELLs, researchers found that the average student had less than a 40 percent chance of being reclassified to English Proficient within 10 years (Parrish et al. 2006). Since that time, pressure by the state to speed up the process has resulted in increased rates of reclassification, but even so, students rarely achieve this goal within a year or even two (Hill et al. 2014). In any case, one might ask why educators and policymakers don't pay more attention to the *quality* of the programs offered to ELLs, rather than simply focusing on the speed at which students *escape* them. To date, very little research has been conducted on the quality and appropriateness of the instruction in such programs, or on the preparation and skills of their teachers (apart from small qualitative studies that look at only a handful of schools). Currently, all we know is that there is great variation in programs and teacher preparation across and within states (López et al. 2015), and that states with specific policies for the instruction of ELLs have better outcomes for these students than those without (Rumberger & Tran 2010).

Unfortunately, by the time ELLs are considered proficient in English, they have often lost so much learning time that it becomes all but impossible to catch up with their native English speaking peers (Lillie et al. 2012; Gándara & Rumberger 2008), which puts many of these students at a disadvantage that continues throughout their schooling.

Of course, all students in the U.S. need to develop strong English skills. However, and as I will argue, building on English language learners' linguistic strengths as *they acquire English* makes better sense than holding them back on the (unsupported) assumption that they will "catch up" later. Finally, it should be noted that this insistence on a sequential approach—first learn English, and then gain access to the regular curriculum—begs the intent of the 1974 Supreme Court ruling in *Lau v. Nichols*, which found that English language learners must be given access to the same curriculum as English speaking students.²

FRAMED BY THE TESTS

The poor performance of ELL students on standardized assessments fuels the belief that they are fundamentally deficient and in need of remediation above and beyond all else. On average, English language learners score lower on academic achievement tests than almost any other subgroup except special education students. This remains true throughout the grades. For example, the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that 69 percent of English language learners were below basic proficiency in eighth-grade mathematics, compared to just 25 percent of non-English language learners. Eighth-grade reading scores were similarly dismal, with 70 percent of ELLs scoring below basic, compared to 21 percent of non-ELLs (NAEP 2013). Scores at the fourth-grade level were similar.

However, it is important to note that since the highest performing ELLs are constantly being moved out of the ELL category (reclassified as English proficient), such reports include only lower-performing ELL students, which is to say that "English language learners," *by definition*, will have low scores. This has prompted many researchers (e.g., Hopkins et al. 2013) to argue that, for purposes of monitoring the performance of former ELLs, and for making appropriate comparisons between ELLs and non-ELLs, data should be collected and reported for the category "Ever ELL," which would include students who have been reclassified.

Nonetheless, comparisons over time should reflect whether ELLs are gaining ground, losing ground, or maintaining the same level of performance relative to non-ELLs. On that score, it appears that the education reforms of the last couple of decades have not closed gaps. For example, nationally, since 1996 (the first year for which the NAEP shows gap trend lines for English language learners), the gap between English language learners and all others in eighth grade math has not narrowed, and in fact has begun to widen: in 2003, the gap between English language learners and English speakers who scored proficient was 20 points; in 2013 the gap had grown to 24 points. Eighth grade reading proficiency showed a similar widening of the gap (3 points) over the same period. At least from the perspective

² The *Lau v Nichols* (1974) decision was based on Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which found that not providing English learners with access to the same curriculum that all other students receive is a violation of the non-discrimination clause regarding national origin (and interpreted to include language). The Court did not provide a specific remedy, only affirming that the ELL students needed to be provided with a means to access the regular curriculum as quickly as possible.

of math and reading score gaps, educational achievement has not improved nationally for English language learners, who, across the grades, remain significantly behind their native English-speaking peers.

BARRIERS TO ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Language difference is just one—and perhaps not even the most important—of many reasons for these achievement gaps, although the way schools *treat* language difference certainly plays an important role in sustaining them. For example, many schools insist on teaching academic classes in English from day one, even though students may not yet understand what their teachers are saying. Further, many schools neglect to assess what their ELLs know and can do in their primary language, and thus often assign perfectly capable, even high-achieving, students to remedial courses solely because their English is weak.

With a few exceptions (including New York, Texas, and Illinois), states require students to take achievement tests in English. In some cases, the state has the capacity to test students in their native language but chooses not to because it has adopted English-only instructional policies, which educators take to require assessment in English. Other states, however, simply lack the capacity to offer tests in other languages and have not dedicated resources to developing them. Whatever the reasons, when schools test students in a language they do not fully comprehend and make educational decisions based on these invalid scores, they contribute to ELLs' low performance.

That said, many immigrant students and ELLs are significantly disadvantaged educationally, but not necessarily for reasons having to do with language. Rather, their struggles may result from a history of weak and interrupted instruction, or from the effects of poverty or other challenges. Some educators or policymakers may be tempted to blame students for their poor performance

or attribute it to their lack of English proficiency, when in fact other variables (that are out of the students' control) constrain their achievement.

Poverty is perhaps the greatest threat to all low-income students' academic achievement because it can directly affect cognitive development through inadequate nutrition, poor health care, mental health challenges, distractibility, insecurity, and other factors (Berliner 2006; Carter & Welner 2013). Chronic health problems associated with poverty are also related to high absenteeism from school, putting students even further behind (Berliner 2006).

More than 40 percent of children of Latino immigrants are born into poverty (Lichter et al. 2015). Further, this population is especially likely to fall into deep poverty—in 2014, more than one in eight of these children lived below 50 percent of the poverty line (less than \$12,000 a year for a family of four), compared to about 6 percent of all other children (U.S. Census 2015). Since Latino immigrants make up about half of the nation's immigrants (Zong & Batalova 2015), that means that a significant portion of the nation's immigrant children and English language learners are living in poverty, many of them below subsistence level. To make matters worse, many social services are not available to immigrant families (even those who are legally authorized to be in the country) because of punitive federal and local laws (Hagan & Rodriguez 2002). Additionally, Latino children of immigrants are less likely to attend preschool than any other subgroup (Murphey et al. 2014), so the ameliorating effects of early childhood education are not available to nearly half of these young English language learners.

Barriers to effective learning continue into the secondary grades, where these young people are often lost in the shuffle, placed with teachers who may not know they have English language learners in their classes. Overall, middle and high school students identified as ELLs are roughly twice as likely to drop out as their peers (Callahan



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2013). Thus, it should come as no surprise that Latino youth, approximately half of whom begin school as English language learners, are the least likely to complete a college education compared to the other major racial/ethnic subgroups (Gándara & Contreras 2009).

For most immigrant students and for those classified as ELLs at the secondary level, two-year colleges are the only viable option because of weak preparation in high school and the costs of postsecondary education (Martinez-Wenzl 2014). Unfortunately, most who enter two-year colleges will never complete a degree, and end up simply incurring college debt without seeing the increase in earning power that a college degree provides (Huelsman 2015).

THE TRAUMA OF THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

While most ELL students are U.S.-born, their parents are usually immigrants. Many of these families have experienced great trauma, having left their home countries to escape war, gang activity, deep poverty, natural disasters, and other crises. Often, this means leaving everything behind, including close friends and relatives, which can take an enormous psychological toll on family members (Falicov 2002, Suárez-Orozco et al. 2001), adding to the stress of the migration experience and weighing heavily on children as they try to adapt to a new country, new language, and new expectations, with few if any support services. Once they arrive in the U.S., immigrant families are often isolated from the mainstream and segregated by ethnicity, language, and poverty (Orfield 1995; Orfield & Yun 1999). Further, they tend to lack knowledge of how to navigate the educational system. Frequent residential moves (as parents seek employment) can mean frequent changes in school enrollment, putting these students at increased educational risk (Ream 2005).

Of course, there are enormous differences in socioeconomic status among the children of immigrants in the U.S. For example, two-thirds of Taiwanese immigrant mothers hold at least a Bachelor's degree, while only slightly more than 3 percent of Mexican mothers have a college degree; similarly, less than 20 percent of Taiwanese immigrant families live at or near poverty, but more than two-thirds of Mexican immigrant families fall into this category (Hernandez et al. 2006). Indeed, many Asian immigrants enter the country with higher levels of education, and often greater ability to navigate the educational system,

than the native U.S. population (Lee & Zhou 2014). Such examples notwithstanding, the great majority of children of immigrants come from low-income families with relatively low levels of formal education.

Further, the many undocumented young people known as “Dreamers”—those who were brought to the country at an early age and may have discovered only recently that they aren't U.S. citizens—live in constant fear of being apprehended (Gonzalez 2011). Unable to apply legally to work or drive a car or (in most states) pay in-state college tuition, Dreamers often struggle to find the motivation to work hard in school and prepare for a career. The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, launched in June 2012 by the Obama Administration, has provided some relief for more than half a million young people who meet its very strict criteria. However, it is estimated that at least another half million meet the criteria but have not come forward, perhaps because they fear identifying themselves to government officials, lack information about the program, worry that they cannot provide the necessary documentation, or are simply unable to pay the \$465 application fee (Kasperkevic 2014). They may worry, also, that DACA protections could disappear overnight, as has been called for by some politicians. Thus, the specter of deportation still hangs over many of these young immigrants, casting a shadow over every part of their lives, including education.

Reframing ELLs and Immigrant Students: Assets and Opportunities

In spite of the many challenges they face (and perhaps *because* of them), these students can also be viewed as *advantaged* in certain ways, possessing some important skills and dispositions that monolingual and mono-cultural students may lack. Their most obvious asset is the ability to speak another language (in most cases a major world language that is highly valued in the labor market), but there are others. Often, ELLs and immigrant students have complex, multinational perspectives on history, culture, and politics; belong to a culture that prizes collaboration (which is now seen as a critical 21st-century skill); display greater motivation to learn than many native-born peers; and have become strongly resilient and self-reliant (Garcia et al. 2012; APA 2012). What these characteristics all have in common, of course, is their association with key features of deeper learning.

MULTILINGUALISM

Multilingualism has been shown to be associated with a series of cognitive advantages, including a greater ability to invoke multiple perspectives in problem solving (Bialystok 2001). The multilingual student knows intuitively that there is more than one way to get to the right answer or define a concept because she does this routinely. Research also shows that multilingualism is related to less distractibility and greater ability to focus attention on a task (Bialystok 2001), another prerequisite to engaging learning in a deeper way. In fact, Guadalupe Valdés (2003) has argued that young immigrant children who function as interpreters for their family members exhibit a special kind of giftedness in moving back and forth across languages and cultures, as they extract and represent meaning for others.

A recent analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education's *Education Longitudinal Study*—which has followed the progress of more than 15,000 young people since 2002, when they were in tenth grade—offers further evidence that bilingualism confers a strong advantage. Lucrecia Santibañez and Stela Zárate (2014) found that students from immigrant families (both Asian and Latino) who maintained their primary language at high levels, and thus became balanced bilinguals, were more likely to go to college than those who lost their primary language; among Latinos, they were more likely to go to four year colleges. The researchers hypothesized that the bilinguals' greater success in getting to college was probably due to having more extensive social networks. That is, they had greater social capital than the monolingual children of immigrants and therefore more support and access to knowledge about enrolling in higher education. Ruben Rumbaut (2014) has found similar advantages for balanced bilingual adolescents with respect to high school graduation, perhaps due to greater social networks or perhaps, as others have theorized, because adolescents who maintain the family language communicate more intensively with parents and

extended family, and therefore are more likely to receive and heed advice about completing school and going on to postsecondary education (Portes & Hao 1992). Certainly, the development of sophisticated cognitive skills coupled with greater social assets paves the way for equally sophisticated learning.

MULTICULTURALISM

Having an insider's knowledge of another country and having learned to navigate everyday life in more than one culture may also help students to be more *cognitively flexible* (Bialystok 2001)—i.e., to understand that problems can be assessed and solved in more than one way. Cognitive flexibility is also related to creativity, the ability to imagine alternative ways of representing ideas and experiences, also known, in psychological parlance, as divergent or novel thinking (Sternberg 1999).

The biological concept of “hybridization”—bringing together two or more varieties of an organism to create stronger, more resilient progeny—may be a useful analogy here: a hybrid cultural identity can be a powerful asset for individuals and groups. For example, Scott Page (2008) has shown through a variety of novel experiments that diverse groups tend to be more creative and better at problem solving than homogeneous groups. Thus, by bringing greater diversity to classrooms, the inclusion of immigrants and ELLs can benefit all students, prompting them to think differently about concepts and problems presented in the curriculum.

Further, by virtue of having learned to live and study within a new cultural environment, immigrant students can be particularly welcoming of differences, skilled at intercultural communication (Genesee & Gándara 1999), and comfortable working on diverse teams—characteristics that employers often describe as highly valuable (Forbes Insight 2013).



Immigrant students can be particularly welcoming of differences, skilled at intercultural communication, and comfortable working on diverse teams—characteristics that employers often describe as highly valuable.

IMMIGRANT OPTIMISM

Research on adolescent English language learners has found that motivation is the key prerequisite to educational success (Meltzer & Hamann 2003). Students from immigrant backgrounds can be especially motivated by their parents' strong belief in the "American Dream" for their children. In examining the educational trajectories of immigrant students, Grace Kao and Marta Tienda (1995) famously observed that this contributes to what they called the "immigrant paradox." They found (and this has been confirmed by several other studies) that the children of immigrants, as a group, often attained better educational outcomes than subsequent generations—i.e., the opposite of the classic immigrant paradigm, in which each generation outperforms the one that came before it.

In a more recent study of four generations of Mexican immigrants in Texas, Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz (2009) found that the children of immigrants completed more years of education than third- and fourth-generation members of the same families. Telles and Ortiz offer structural explanations (e.g., weak schooling) for the failure of post-immigration generations to prosper, but other researchers suggest a psychological explanation: to a large extent, the success of first-generation immigrant students may be due to their belief that success *is in fact possible*, combined with a strong appreciation for their parents' sacrifices. According to researchers Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (1995), the "immigrant optimism" of parents—the belief that opportunities are greater in the new land—often propels children to work harder to achieve the "American Dream," even in the face of daunting obstacles. And in contrast to the limited options available in the old country, the American Dream may seem all the more tangible.

Further, confronting the challenges associated with the immigrant experience (learning a new language, adapting

to a new culture, perhaps having to cope with the hazards of a difficult neighborhood or contending with peers who are disengaged from school) can also lead adolescents to develop certain dispositions that psychologists have found to be far more important than sheer intelligence (Duckworth et al. 2007).

Disillusioned with the limited ability of measured intelligence alone to predict life outcomes, researchers have looked increasingly to affective variables to help explain young people's varying levels of success in school, work, and other settings. Especially important seem to be characteristics such as stress management, adaptability, interpersonal skills, and persistence, each of which is highly relevant to the experience of trying to make one's way in an unfamiliar country and new language, often with few resources. As Birgit Leyendecker and Michael Lamb (1998) attest, "Successful immigration demands enormous resourcefulness and flexible adaptation to new and changing circumstances" (p. 251).

COLLABORATIVE ORIENTATION

It is important to keep in mind that Latinos and Asians comprise the overwhelming majority of immigrant students in U.S. schools. Of course, not all members of an ethnic or racial group can be presumed to share the same values and beliefs. That said, however, some patterns of socialization do tend to be broadly shared within cultural groups, which can have important implications for teaching and learning. For example, consider Uri Triesman's work in mathematics education at the University of California, Berkeley, four decades ago, which served as the foundation for his well-known Emerging Scholars model of instruction (Asera 2001). Observing the study habits and academic outcomes of Chinese and African-American students, Triesman noted that the Chinese students naturally formed study groups and helped each other to figure out problems, while the African-American students tended to study alone, without



The children of immigrants, as a group, often attained better educational outcomes than subsequent generations.

the help or support of peers. Reasoning that this difference in study habits could help explain why the Chinese students were outperforming the African-American students, Triesman incorporated their model of peer teaching and support into his math program for minority students at Berkeley, and he quickly saw a dramatic increase in their academic achievement. Although Triesman did not use the term “deeper learning,” what the Chinese students were doing was entirely consistent with its tenets—they were figuring out collaboratively how to make sense of and solve complex mathematical problems.

Similarly, psychologists have long noted a preference for cooperative versus competitive peer interactions among Latino students, especially those raised in traditional Latino cultures (Knight et al. 1995). This preference is believed to be linked to socialization in the home, particularly to Latina mothers’ greater emphasis on cooperative and respectful family interactions, relative to Euro-American mothers’ tendency to encourage more individualistic behavior and independence (Leyendecker & Lamb 1998). While an emphasis on individualistic behavior serves students well in settings where they are expected to study alone and compete with their peers for the right answer, preference for cooperative behavior would seem to lend itself to the kinds of shared inquiry and teamwork that are cornerstones of the deeper learning model.

RESILIENCE

Psychologists have been keenly interested in the topic of resilience for more than 50 years, and a number of leading researchers have dedicated themselves to exploring its role in human development (e.g., Rutter 1979; Werner 1995; Masten 2001). Defined as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et al. 2000, p. 543), its relevance to the lives of immigrant children is readily apparent.

In spite of often traumatic uprooting from their homes, harrowing migration passages, and hostile receptions in the new land, immigrant children often arrive in the U.S. full of hope for the future, with a drive to succeed in school. There is no consensus as to what, exactly, leads so many young people to develop such positive outlooks in the face of such adversity. However, such resilience does appear to be common. Indeed, some researchers have found that immigrants, in spite of their travails, actually demonstrate

better mental and physical health than the native-born population (Tienda & Mitchell 2006; APA 2012).

Bonnie Benard (2004) argues that four “personal strengths,” or manifestations of resilience, can be observed in resilient children: (1) social competence; (2) problem solving; (3) autonomy; and (4) sense of purpose—virtually all research studies of resilience have associated it with characteristics that fit easily into these four categories (though the terminology may vary). In order to survive and prosper in an alien environment, immigrant children must attend carefully to the behaviors that constitute social competence, must learn to solve problems in novel situations, and often must do these things with little peer or adult assistance because they do not speak the same language—literally or figuratively—as their classmates and teachers. A sense of purpose, the fourth strength, is often provided by parents who embody the notion of sacrifice for the chance at a better life, a lesson their children learn daily (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 1995).

Having developed these forms of resilience, many immigrant students would seem to be well-suited to the kind of engaged, critical, challenging school experiences that the deeper learning movement heralds. However, to the extent that these students are framed as deficient and in need of remediation, these strengths tend to be overlooked.

This is not to say that the performance of immigrant students would greatly improve if only their teachers came to recognize the assets they bring with them to school. As the researcher Gordon Allport (1954) hypothesized more than 60 years ago, in order to reduce the prejudice and negative stereotypes that affect the performance of minority students, conditions would also need to be created that allow those students to engage *in equal status interactions* with individuals from majority groups.

Three decades later, Elizabeth Cohen (1986) demonstrated how this theory can be applied by creating instructional contexts in which students of minority and majority backgrounds have opportunities for equal status contact, allowing them to break down their negative stereotypes of each other. In these classrooms, non-mainstream students are also viewed as purveyors of knowledge with commensurate, albeit sometimes different, skills as mainstream students. Such classrooms level the educational playing field for minority (in this case ELL and immigrant) students. However, Cohen has also shown that this “complex instruction” requires considerable skill

and diligence on the part of the teacher, and interactions must be carefully planned and choreographed. Students must be organized so that each can make an important contribution to the group, and groups must be mixed often so that students do not acquire fixed labels (e.g., the smart kid, the dumb kid). Thus, teachers must be both amenable to extensive training and committed to the goals of equity in education. With those conditions in place, ELL and immigrant students could exploit their advantages to lead the way to deeper learning for the whole class.

What Would Truly Effective Secondary Schooling Look Like for ELLs and Immigrant Students?

Over the last several decades, policymakers have debated the most effective way to educate English language learners and immigrant students, but virtually all of those debates have centered on how best to *achieve rapid transition to English* and assimilation to the dominant culture (Martínez-Wenzl et al. 2012), without real consideration to other goals.

If the only goal were for students to achieve rapid transition to oral English in the early grades (and concomitant assimilation in the mainstream culture), then it might indeed be preferable to provide an English-only instructional program. As Fred Genesee and his colleagues (2006) found in a massive review of research on the education of English language learners, “Evaluations conducted in the early years of a program (Grades K-3) typically reveal that students in bilingual education scored below grade level,” (p. 201), and were outperformed by students in English immersion programs.

But if one takes a longer view—defining the goal as helping students to *achieve at high levels over the course of their schooling, as well as becoming reclassified as English proficient*—then bilingual and dual language instruction show the strongest outcomes (Umansky & Reardon 2015; Valentino & Reardon 2015). Genesee and his colleagues go on to note:

Almost all evaluations of students at the end of elementary school and in middle and high school show that the educational outcomes of bilingually educated students, especially those in late-exit and two-way programs, were at least comparable to and usually higher than their comparison peers (p. 201).

For example, Ilana Umansky and Sean Reardon (2015) followed a large cohort of ELL students from kindergarten to high school. The students had been in English-only, bilingual, or dual language programs in the same large district. Carefully controlling for all observable characteristics that could influence educational outcomes, the researchers found that the bilingually educated students outperformed the English-only students on all outcome measures: proficiency in English, reclassification as English proficient, and achievement in English language arts.

Further, if the educational goals for ELLs include preparing for and going to college, then there is additional reason to support bilingual and dual language instruction. As noted earlier, an exhaustive analysis of federal data found a significant relationship between balanced bilingualism and going to college (Santibañez & Zárate 2014). Using another U.S. Department of Education data set (NELS), Orhan Agirdag (2014) found that once students “with immigrant roots” who maintained their primary language entered the labor force, they earned several thousand dollars a year more than students who lost their primary language abilities. A study of yet another merged data set, which focused on adolescence and early adulthood in Southern California, found a similar earnings advantage for balanced bilinguals, in addition to higher rates of high school graduation (Rumbaut 2014).

Finally, the host of personal and interpersonal benefits that accrue to speaking more than one language provide yet another reason to choose a program of study for ELL students that includes development of the primary language. For example, evidence suggests that a strong identity plays an important role in school success for ethnic

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minority students (Portes & Hao 1982), and families that maintain strong ties with a native culture are more likely to reinforce this identity and sustain the primary language in the home, thus providing critical support for bilingualism.

It is commonly believed that most English language learners enter kindergarten or first grade not speaking English, and they can quickly become fluent English speakers because “they are little sponges.” In truth, however, ELL students enter the education pipeline at all grade levels. Significant numbers of ELLs attend middle and high school, either because they have recently entered school in the U.S. or because their prior schooling has been so weak or interrupted that they have not acquired the academic English that allows them to advance. In California, for example, as many as 30 percent of ELLs are found in secondary schools, and immigrant students are scattered across the grade levels.

Regardless of the strength of the education they received before entering the U.S., schools assess relatively few of these students in their primary language to determine what they know or are actually capable of doing, and provide few of them with a rigorous curriculum, including a full complement of college preparatory courses (Callahan 2005). Notable exceptions to this pattern include International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, offered at various schools across the country, that focus on developing the linguistic and academic skills of immigrant

and secondary ELL students. Aldana and Meyer (2014) report that these programs often spring up in response to intense dissatisfaction with local schools serving ELL students, and they provide rigorous, college preparatory courses in both English and a second language. They require competence in at least two languages (one being English), but do not privilege any language, so students can learn in their strongest language while developing the other. These and other two-way dual language programs also have the benefit of increasing the prestige of the school and thus attracting more middle-class and high-performing students from surrounding communities, breaking down the cultural isolation that ELLs often experience, and increasing the benefits of diversity for all students in the program or school.

Project SOL (Secondary Online Learning) is another innovation designed to provide rigorous, college preparatory mathematics, aligned with the Common Core State Standards, in an online and Spanish/English bilingual format that can be accessed by secondary students who are not yet ready to read textbooks in English, and by teachers who lack the materials to teach those students in Spanish. In recent years, Project SOL has allowed hundreds of immigrant students in California to take and pass the courses they need to graduate from high school and prepare for college. Because the format is totally bilingual, students are able to use and build on both languages (Gándara 2013).

CONCLUSION: STATE AND FEDERAL POLICY RECONSIDERED

When discussion turns to legal and political matters, it is important to note some key differences between English language learners and immigrant students. While most immigrant students are English language learners at some point in their lives, relatively few English language learners are immigrants. Today, an estimated 88 percent of ELLs are native-born citizens of the U.S. (Zong & Batalova 2015). Thus, they enjoy the same legal protections and should receive the same access to education provided to every other U.S. citizen.

While unauthorized immigrant students do not enjoy the privileges of citizenship, the Supreme Court's 1982 decision in *Plyler v. Doe* did accord them free access to public education through high school. Inadvertently, this also created the predicament that now faces the "Dreamers," those students brought to the U.S. at a young age by their parents, without legal authorization, who lack educational rights or even opportunities to work, once they leave high school.

Ironically, as the research has converged on the many benefits of bilingualism, both for academic and other deeper learning outcomes, education policy appears to have moved in the opposite direction. The Bilingual Education Act was already being undermined at the law's first reauthorization in 1974, and for the most part continued to move, in subsequent reauthorizations, away from instruction in the primary language. Finally, in 2001, with the last reauthorization of ESEA—No Child Left Behind (NCLB)—the BEA disappeared altogether. The office of Bilingual Education was renamed the Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement. The term "bilingual" was nowhere to be found.

In recent years, Arne Duncan—U.S. Secretary of Education from 2008 to late 2015—has touted the importance of bilingualism many times, asserting, for example, that, "[It] is clearly an asset that these kids are coming to school with," which should be "maintained," and, "The fact that our kids don't grow up [bilingual] puts them at a competitive disadvantage" (Maxwell 2013). However, the federal government has no policy to foster bilingualism, maintains no office dedicated to bilingualism, and has made no effort to promote biculturalism. Rather, policymakers have focused on the rapid acquisition of English only. Moreover, the NCLB's approach to accountability embodies this focus on English-only instruction: scores on tests given in English (often before students actually know the language) determine the academic progress of ELLs.

As of the present moment, Congress is debating the reauthorization of ESEA, and the specifics of the new law have yet to be decided. However, indications are that ELLs and immigrant students will be no better served in the proposed law than in the current one.

At the state and local levels, the original Bilingual Education Act served as a strong impetus for the creation of policies to guide the education of ELL students. Prior to 1968, no



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state had a pro-bilingual education policy on the books (Moran 1988), but by 1983, all fifty states permitted bilingual education and nine states had laws requiring some form of dual language instruction (Ovando & Collier 1985). However, attacks on primary language instruction continued to pick up steam over the 1970s and 1980s, and by mid-1990s, with immigration reaching exceptionally high levels, California led the way in anti-immigrant legislation, beginning in 1994 with an extremely punitive law that eventually was found unconstitutional. The state outlawed affirmative action in 1996 and culminated its attack with an anti-bilingual law—Proposition 227—in 1998. Other states and regions followed California’s lead, resulting in a steep national decline in primary language instruction. The last study commissioned by the federal government found that between 1992 and 2002, English-only instruction (allowing no use of primary language for any purpose) increased from 34 to 48 percent of all ELLs (Zehler et al. 2003). That figure is likely to be much higher today, given increasing restrictions at the state and local level.

The advent of the Common Core State Standards, currently being implemented across forty-three states in one form or another, could be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. While the Common Core holds great potential for moving instruction towards the goals of deeper learning and placing a greater emphasis on language use and conceptual learning, indications are that teachers in general are not sufficiently prepared to undertake the kind of instruction it requires, and teachers of English language learners are even less prepared (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center 2013). Preparation and training for teachers of ELL and immigrant students, whether in bilingual or English-only settings, remains a major policy issue that has received inadequate attention.

How Should Federal and State Education Policy Change to Better Meet the Needs of ELLs and Immigrant Students?

➤ While the federal role in education policy has traditionally been restricted by the Constitution, and consisted of little more than setting a tone and providing modest specific funding for disadvantaged students, in recent years the Department of Education has increasingly encroached on territory once reserved for the states. NCLB’s heavy emphasis on accountability through testing set a new bar for federal intervention, and while it importantly called attention to the needs

of ELL students, it also stigmatized them and their schools. Unable to perform adequately on tests given in a language they do not understand, ELL students have been blamed for putting their schools at risk for sanctions. This policy must change. There are many alternatives to consider, including: (1) providing more time for students to acquire English before testing them in English; (2) continuing the testing, but reducing its high stakes; (3) providing bilingual testing for students straddling two languages; (4) offering alternative assessments while students are still learning English.

➤ Because the federal government does set a tone for the nation, states will likely respond favorably to policies that incentivize the provision of bilingual and bicultural education. The federal government could declare once and for all that immigrant children are a net asset to the nation and their strengths should be celebrated. One way to do this is to create a national Seal of Biliiteracy that would be awarded to all students who can demonstrate high levels of proficiency in two or more languages upon high school or college graduation—a skill that is of great interest to college admission officers and employers. Nine states already have such a certification, and several more are considering it. Over time, this should lead to greater prestige for programs that promote biliiteracy, such as dual language programs that enroll both English language learners and English speakers who are striving to become bilingual. Not only does this have the potential to bring ELLs into equal status relations with their English speaking peers, but it can also help integrate schools, which have become increasingly segregated for ELLs and immigrant students.

➤ The provision of high quality instruction for English language learners requires the recruitment and preparation of bilingual teachers with highly specialized skills—for the nation’s ELLs and immigrant students, there is no greater need. It has proven to be quite challenging for schools to provide equitable instruction in heterogeneous classrooms, and doing so requires much training and vigilance. The challenge is doubly difficult in the case of bilingual equitable instruction. Add to this the implementation of the Common Core standards with ELLs, and any school or district has a tall order. In short, the nation urgently needs a large cadre of highly trained, highly skilled, bilingual teachers, and all levels of government would do well to consider how they can help develop such a cadre. Fortunately, with

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one in four young people coming from a home in which a second language is spoken, the candidates for these positions are available. But their talents must be tapped.

- » New federal legislation should attend to the extraordinary needs of regions that have seen new and unprecedented enrollments of immigrant students, where schools have no existing infrastructure to meet those students’ needs, either culturally or linguistically. The federal government could provide additional funding for these states and districts to hire university and district personnel to ramp up training of teachers—and, given the advantages of dual-language instruction, it would be advisable to place special emphasis on the production and recruitment of bilingual teachers.
- » There is an urgent need for the federal and state governments to collect good data on how ELLs and immigrant students are faring. At present, we simply do not know. The performance of students who are *labeled* as Limited English Proficient looks appallingly bad, according to test scores, while those who manage to reclassify as English Proficient often outperform native speakers. However both of these findings are, in large part, statistical artifacts. Students classified as LEP are required to take tests in a language (English) that, by definition, they do not yet understand, while reclassified students have achieved that status by passing tests that would be difficult for many of the native English speakers to whom they are compared. Further, we know little about how these newly English proficient students do over the long term (though there are indications that

many do not fare well as academic demands increase; Lillie et al. 2012; Slama 2014). It is critical that we monitor these students over time.

- » A good way to begin writing a new chapter for ELL and immigrant students would be to return to Senator Yarborough’s initial vision of a Bilingual Education Act that would incorporate not only the native language but also the *culture* of the children it served. Many of the assets these students have are embedded in the traditions they bring with them from home, which are often the very same characteristics that can propel them to deeper learning.
- » Finally, it is also critical that the federal government develop an immigration policy that supports all students, rather than punishing some children for things that are beyond their control, and that respects immigrant families that have contributed to their communities and to the nation. States, too, can pass laws that protect students within their borders, such as policies that extend in-state college tuition rates to all residents, as well as providing all residents with access to driver’s and professional licenses that allow them to be insured and pursue meaningful occupations and professions.

With these fundamentals in place, ELLs and immigrant students could take full advantage of the assets they bring to school and could share these assets with their native English-speaking peers. These students could even be a leading force in the movement for deeper learning.

» There is an urgent need for the federal and state governments to collect good data on how ELLs and immigrant students are faring.

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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

TEL 617.728.4446 FAX 617.728.4857 info@jff.org

88 Broad Street, 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110 (HQ)
122 C Street, NW, Suite 650, Washington, DC 20001
505 14th Street, Suite 900, Oakland, CA 94612

WWW.JFF.ORG

