Title: Language (Policy) Matters!

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Abstract

Public education has a vital role in ensuring that this and subsequent generations are successful in a global, multilingual economy. In this What Matters brief, we examine how teachers, students, parents, and communities in our nation's schools can create rich opportunities for students to learn.

Language (Policy) Matters! includes information and resources about: school policies and practices that support language access; research on best practices for students who are English language learners; strategies teachers can use to support students who are English language learners.

Language (Policy) Matters!

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"I ascribe a basic importance to the phenomenon of language. To speak means to be in a position to use certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization."

- Frantz Fanon
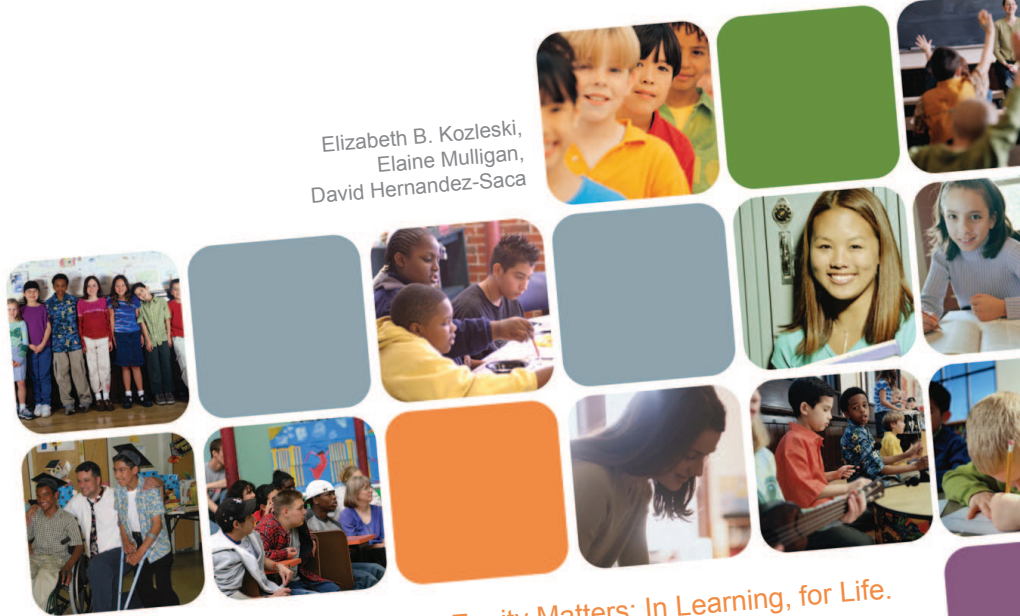
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Public education has a vital role in ensuring that this and subsequent generations are successful in a global, multilingual economy. In this *What Matters* brief, we examine how teachers, students, parents and communities in our nation's schools can create rich opportunities for students to learn. Educators and policy makers have an obligation to ensure that ALL students have equitable opportunities to learn, meaningful participation and engagement in school, and successful outcomes.

In this brief, we explore the complex issues that surround one of the fundamental aspects of what makes us human: the languages that we use to communicate, express, reflect, and influence others. Long after a generation has left us, their deeds and wisdom live on in their oral and written histories and commentaries. Each of the world's languages offer nuanced ways of describing the human condition from the Laplanders in Finland to the Maori of New Zealand. Indigenous as well as widely spoken languages inform and are influenced by the multiplicity of languages that inhabit our world. Language contains nuanced understandings of the world around us. By hearing about the world through the structures and design of multiple languages, our collective understanding is enriched and deepened. Our individual perspectives are bounded and some would say constrained by the languages that we understand and speak.

Languages seem to develop a life and trajectory of their own. Some become increasingly dominant while others dwindle in popularity and use. Each year the world runs the danger of losing more and more indigenous languages as global languages like Chinese, English, and Spanish anchor themselves in wide flung communities across the globe. Learning about the importance of language in representing the world in which we live allows us to understand how language shapes our realities. Language is a powerful expression of the world around us, and should be appreciated and celebrated as a resource that students and families bring to school rather than a barrier to assimilation.

Studying and becoming proficient in more than one language builds a capacity to understand and use language skillfully in multiple languages. Because languages can be structured differently, the mental schemas that use language to store and retrieve information can become more powerful by becoming fluent in more than one language. Languages offer clues into the cultures from which they emerge, so language learning is another way of understanding and developing cultural fluency as well. Multilingual approaches provide access to new cultures, information and knowledge, and opportunities to forge new economic and political alliances.

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Language matters for individuals, the cultures they inhabit, and the ways in which language can inform and shape how we think and make connections. Language is a medium of exchange for economic and political stability. What languages we speak and when we choose to use those languages is fundamental to our identities and cultural practices. Language is an important tool that we use to define who we are as individuals and members of specific tribes and communities. In vibrant democracies like the United States (which has been and continues to be created and advanced by immigrants), understanding the uses and value of multilingualism is a critical feature of our continued hybrid strength.

Why Do Language Policies Matter?

As the U.S. population becomes more racially and ethnically diverse, schools in both urban and rural areas are experiencing changes in student demographics at a remarkable rate. For instance, there is no "majority" demographic group of students in California. Hispanic students comprise just under 50% of California's student population and although they are the majority nationally, White students comprise only 28% of California's students. This trend in California is emerging across the U.S. not only in border states in the Southwest but in also in states that have historically had a predominately White and African/American population such as North Carolina and Tennessee. How well we educate these multilingual students will depend on our capacity to improve the language knowledge and skills of all classroom teachers. Increasing our collective capacity to think and act in multilingual ways will expand the opportunities for all learners to become multilingual.

Consider the demands of globalization. Teams of engineers in multinational companies working on civil engineering projects in regions such as China, Uzbekistan, South Africa and many other countries assemble members from multiple countries to bring the best knowledge and skills to bear on complex problems. Language is a critical criterion used to make selections for these teams. When UNESCO and other branches of the United Nations look for members of their regional outreach teams, they look for people who have the language skills to learn and become proficient in a variety of languages. Knowledge of a particular discipline is simply insufficient to flourish in multinational teams. Whether the context is architecture, business, education, law, medicine, science,

School Policies and Practices

In this climate of accountability, efforts addressing the education of English learners are essential. Accordingly, every aspect of their educational experience must be thoroughly examined and improved upon as schools collect and analyze data. Findings from this examination should be made public, and school communities should engage in inquiry, reflection, conversation, and action planning in order to ensure English learners have access to rigorous opportunities for learning. Some strategies for examining and reporting on how students are becoming proficient users of multiple languages include the following:

Engaging parents, students, teachers and staff in professional learning communities that explore the confounding interactions between content knowledge and linguistic knowledge;

Investigating the performance of English learners on tests over time to see how assessments adequately represent students' levels of proficiency in language and content knowledge;

Providing multiple formats for informal and formal language learning networks, recognizing proficient users of multiple languages;

Educating the community about the importance of multilingualism and developing programs to engage students in learning more about the languages of their communities and states;

Connecting with teams of professionals who are working across national boundaries, and having them visit and share their own experiences with language learning;

Finding ways to extend concepts of multilingualism across the school day so that all students are exposed to hearing and participating in conversations in their non-dominant language;

Examining the growth patterns of redesignated students in order to determine whether or not the proficiency level of students is adequate enough to master academic standards at grade level without additional assistance or accommodations;

Examining how language learning initiatives in your school are impacting students and their families by having students and parents share their stories of everyday experiences; and

Publishing evidence of language learning in school newsletters, family handbooks, school report cards, and on the school website to celebrate accomplishments and acknowledge areas for growth.

or service industries, the capacity to learn and use multiple languages is a critical aspect of post-school success.

While U.S. schools are unprepared for the influx of culturally and linguistically diverse students, they also forget about the opportunities presented by the increasing numbers of languages spoken in their schools. Investments in language learning so that *All* students can have the opportunity to learn to speak more than one language is critical. Research and development that builds language learning communities in

which families, students, and teachers exchange language proficiencies is an essential investment in the next generations. Language policies that are being enacted in states and districts, as well as the intended and unintended consequences of those policies, will determine the degree to which the U.S. will be a global leader in government, the professions, arts, engineering, sciences and financial industries. We cannot afford to bank on English as *the* global language.

What the Research Says

It is important to be aware of the research on what produces the best outcomes for schools' increasingly diverse student populations. *Here's what we know:*

Language must be comprehensible for it to be learned. Immersion is most effective when it is connected to known and purposeful English comprehension strategies (Krashen, 1996). English learners acquire language by hearing and understanding messages that are slightly above their current English language level. One way to help students learn new vocabulary involves the use of simplified speech. For example, an English learner may understand the referents in the phrase "Put them in your backpack," an English learner may not know what is meant by "them". By slightly changing the phrase to "Put the books and pencils in your bag," the teacher scaffolds information that increases the learner's language comprehension.

Students' verbal skills will appear before true proficiency in academic content emerges (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000) Newly arrived English learners often engage in social interactions that lessen their cognitive load so that they can focus on language learning. The teacher can structure predictable conversations with students and peers in order to facilitate this process. Often students are able to decode simple reading passages which may mask their difficulty in understanding what the words they just read mean. They may also be able to respond to and write answers for short informational questions and participate in activities such as science experiments, content related projects, and assignments involving drawings, models, and other knowledge representations.

However, as learning material content becomes more cognitively demanding and the vocabulary becomes more specific to each subject area, the English learner will have limited success without appropriate support.

The acquisition of academic English skills requires a period of five to seven years (Cummins, 1989). The most significant variable in how long it takes for a student to learn English is the amount of formal schooling students receive in their first language (Thomas and Collier, 1997). Students with two to three years of formal education in their primary language typically take five to seven years to test at grade level in English, while students with little or no formal schooling or who were below grade level in their primary language can take up to 10 years to reach grade-level norms of proficiency in academic English.

Immersion models that provide short-term language support to achieve proficiency is at odds with what we know to be true about the language acquisition process (Barrera, 2006). Thomas and Collier (1997) found that English learners who received all of their schooling in English performed extremely well in kindergarten through 3rd grade, regardless of the type of language program. These students made dramatic gains in English. However, when they reached the 4th grade and moved through middle and high school, their performance fell substantially because the cognitive demands of the content were beyond the students' language facility. English learners fell behind because they could not access the content knowledge they were being asked to manage and incorporate into increasingly complex cognitive schemas. What passes as conversational competence is sometimes misunderstood as academic proficiency. It is best to give students more time to develop their English language skills to develop academic proficiency. Early language support programs help students engage socially but they are not sufficient to produce academic proficiency.

Simultaneous primary and second language instruction helps to increase new language comprehension, as students are able to make sense of contextual knowledge while they learn both new language and new content. (Ramirez et al., 1991). First language development often aids the second language learners' academic progress. In many cases students must reach proficiency in one of their languages if they are to attain the same academic progress as their monolingual peers.

Teacher/Student relationships

Strong, supportive teacher-student relationships are imperative to the academic and linguistic growth of English learners. Developing trust and rapport can be challenging when methods of communication are limited. Special attention to classroom climate and culture is critical, and teachers should take steps to create an inclusive classroom where students are encouraged to engage with one another, sharing ideas, creating rules, and making decisions about their learning and their environment. When possible, teachers should also empower students to direct their own learning. In this case, the teacher may serve more of a facilitative role. Teachers should be interested in reaching and encouraging all students, and should work hard to adapt materials and situations to maximize student success.

A teacher interested in making the classroom more inclusive for students learning English might ask the following questions:

- What does the classroom environment look like? What is the general feeling one gets as they walk into the room? Does the space appear to include ample room for student movement? Does the arrangement of furniture promote collaboration and the opportunity for students to engage in dialogue and conversation?

- Who makes decisions regarding curriculum? Does the teacher select topics that reflect the cultural backgrounds of all students in the class? Do students participate in decisions regarding classroom involvement? Are they often permitted to work in pairs or small groups? Is the use of their primary language permitted?

- How is equity and mutual respect fostered? How are actions of discrimination and/or prejudice addressed? In what ways are students encouraged to think critically about issues of multilingualism?

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Conclusion

The issue of language use in schools has been contentious throughout the United States' history as a nation of immigrants. Early policy makers emphasized the need for English language instruction in order to assimilate non-English speaking students into the predominant Anglo culture. Educators acknowledge that the acquisition of the English language is imperative for students, as school language and literacy are important tools in accessing the core curriculum and increasing academic achievement, yet policy makers disagree about which methods are most effective for teaching English.

In order to fully access the core curriculum and post-secondary educational opportunities in the dominant U.S. culture, students need to be proficient in English while also being provided with opportunities to validate, appreciate, and build upon their own rich cultural, language, and literacy heritage. The Equity Alliance at ASU recommends that practitioners utilize evidence-based practices for supporting language development, which include active, authentic activities, ongoing professional learning and collaboration, and utilization of students' own language abilities and strengths to support their development of English.

Resources

Websites

California Association for Bilingual Education (**CABE**)
http://www.bilingualeducation.org/

The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (**CARLA**)
http://www.carla.umn.edu/

Equity Alliance at ASU's
Language Differences Media Lab
http://www.equityallianceatasu.org/ell

The **Mauricio Gaston Institute** for Latino Community Development and Public Policy
http://www.gaston.umb.edu/

National Association for Bilingual Education (**NABE**)
http://www.nabe.org/

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What Can You Do?

Research-based strategies known to be successful with English language learners include:

- **Create a predictable environment**

- **Involve students in meaningful and challenging tasks**

- **Provide explicit support for comprehension**

- **Develop a highly interactive classroom**

- **Incorporate problem-solving activities**

- **Extend opportunities for discovery learning through thematic experiences across the curricula (Collier 1995; Zehler, 1994).**

- **Establish collaborative learning communities that focus on community-building strategies.**

- **Provide policy makers and governing boards with feedback on how policies affect ALL students, families, learning environments and communities.**

- **Be reflective in your own practice and remain informed about research.**

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