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Focus: Language

English Language Learners and the Future of Texas An Overview of Symposium Discussions, Policy Implications and Next Steps

by Albert Cortez, Ph.D.

On February 2, 2015, in San Antonio, IDRA convened a gathering of educators, researchers, policy reform advocates, and civic leaders to examine the status of English language learner education in Texas. The event was the first annual IDRA José A. Cárdenas School Finance Fellows Program symposium and was hosted by Our Lady of the Lake University's Mexican American Studies Center.

Participants included more than 90 educators, university faculty and staff, state policymakers, researchers, and civic and community leaders who gathered to examine new research on ELL education in Texas, discuss pressing reform issues, and develop policy recommendations for improving the educational outcomes of one of the nation's fastest-growing and increasingly geographically dispersed student populations.

Presentations included an overview of the status of English language programs and policies with summary information on the 900,000 ELL students enrolled in Texas public schools, issues that impact the type and quality of programs offered to those students, and development of policy recommendations for improving services provided to this student population.

Participants discussed an overview of ELL education in the state, including a long history of the under-funding of programs serving these students and the related gaps in academic perfor-

mance between ELL and non-ELL students on the state's academic exams. Researchers made reference to changing demographics in Texas and around the country and the need to recognize that failure to improve the educational outcomes and related economic opportunities for all students, and especially ELL students, will have serious negative economic consequences for the state's and nation's long-term economic well-being.

Dr. Oscar Jimenez Castellanos, IDRA's inaugural Jose A. Cárdenas School Finance Fellow recipient, shared his key findings from a year-long study of secondary level ELL programs in Texas. Among the major findings were: fewer than 20 Texas high schools reported that their ELL subgroups had met state standards on mandated state assessments in reading and mathematics; those schools that had higher operational expenditures had higher levels of ELL student performance; and add-on funding for ELL programs was well below the levels of funding recommended for similar programs in research conducted on similar programs around the country.

A cross-sectional panel at the symposium consisted of attorneys, policymakers, bilingual educators and university faculty who discussed the current status of ELL programs. Panel members agreed that there is need for improved teacher preparation, more targeted use of add-on funding, improved curriculum and materials that
(cont. on Page 2)

“The challenge before us is not that the faces or the languages of our nation's children are changing. Change is not new. In fact, our challenge is not our children at all, but rather our capacity, commitment and will as adults to achieve excellence in education for all students – every one.”

– Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

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are tailored to address the unique needs of ELL students, and higher funding levels based on actual needs and related costs rather than a funds-available approach.

Discussants also cited the need to provide sheltered instruction for ELL students at the secondary level, indicating that content area teachers must be provided specialized professional development that enhances their ability to adapt instruction to address the needs of their ELL students.

Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA’s President and CEO, cited the need to ensure that we hold all schools accountable for providing high quality services to ELL students, warning against the potential to dilute that accountability with a total elimination of some form of state assessment system that includes at least sample data for all student groups. Participants agreed that accountability systems must be designed not only to monitor ELL student achievement but also to include comparisons of ELL and non-ELL student achievement and specify the closing of that achievement gap as one of the state’s major policy priorities.

Participants alluded to the need for expansion and improvement of partnerships between policymakers, researchers, and community stakeholders to design and implement reforms needed to improve the quality of educational programs serving our growing ELL populations.

Following the day-long discussion, the participants created an inventory of policy priorities that need to be moved forward to improve educational opportunities for ELL students, not only in Texas, but around the nation. Among the policy priorities cited were:

- Improving targeted funding levels for ELL students;
- Funding ELL programs on the basis of what research identifies as actual costs;
- Improving curriculum offerings, complemented by access to high quality instructional materials;
- Expanding and improving reporting and accountability systems to ensure that monitoring of program quality and ELL student outcomes can be accessed and used to inform state level and local intervention;
- Monitoring use of ELL targeted resources to ensure transparency and to inform effective resource utilization;
- Improving ELL teacher certification, including expanding the pool of teachers with bilingual and ESL certification;
- Expanding all teacher preparation requirements to ensure that all new teachers are provided some instruction in addressing the needs of ELL students, particularly given the growing number and distribution of ELL students;
- Strengthening administrator training to ensure capacity in addressing ELL student needs and effectively supporting teaching staff providing services;
- Expanding community engagement efforts to include ELL community members so that they participate in educational decision-making at the district and local campus level; and
- Expanding partnerships between policymakers, business, researchers, university staff, educators and parents to assess the needs of ELLs, provide input on program design, and participate in ensuring program accountability.

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The symposium was complemented by a briefing provided to policymakers and staff in Austin on February 3. In addition to sharing the results of the IDRA José A. Cárdenas School Finance Fellows Program study, participants engaged in a discussion of related policy implications for upcoming state policy debates. Video of the event is available on-demand online as well at www.idra.org.

Albert Cortez, Ph.D., is director of Policy. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at albert.cortez@idra.org.

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Federal Guidance on Schools' Civil Rights Obligations for English Learners

by Kristin Grayson, Ph.D.

Attention schools and school districts! New guidance addresses a topic that is timely and must be immediately addressed. On January 7 of this year, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice issued a significant guidance document concerning the obligations that school districts and state education agencies have in providing equal access for English language learners (ELLs) to a quality education.

This guidance comes at a time when our nation is celebrating the important milestone anniversaries of the passing of the *Civil Rights Act* in 1964 and the *Equal Educational Opportunities Act* in 1974, and the Supreme Court case, *Lau vs. Nichols* in 1974. It also comes at a time when diversity in public schools continues to increase as evidenced in the new Civil Rights Data Collection database. According to the Institute for Education Sciences, ELLs constitute 10 percent of the student population in this country – over 4.7 million students.

They are protected by law to an equitable education with equitable outcomes of student success. However, this is usually not reflected in data of their academic performance and/or treatment and opportunity in schools. For instance, the Civil Rights Data Collection for the 2011-12 school year found that while ELLs represented 5 percent of the high school population across the country, they were being retained at a rate of 11 percent. While 7 percent of the general population participated in gifted and talented programs, only 2 percent of ELLs were enrolled in these programs. The civil rights database reports such data at the national, state, district, and the campus levels and exposes alarming disparities. The data, without a doubt, indicate that changes must be made now.

Clearly, with this publication of a “Dear Colleague” letter and very explicit guidance, the U.S. Department of Education along with the Office for Civil Rights and the U.S. Department of Justice are stating that attention needs to be drawn to this issue. English language learners are

significant part of U.S. public schools. It's time to strengthen programs and services. Quality staff, resources, and the funding needed to implement programs must be provided.

Programs for ELLs are not to be set up as an after-thought. They are to be implemented fully in order to ensure students' civil rights and because ELLs are *our* kids, *everyone's* kids. By ensuring their academic success, we prepare them to be college-ready and to contribute to our communities. Embracing diversity and other languages helps all of us to think and share from our different perspectives, so that creative thinking and solutions to social issues are found.

The January federal document, for the first time, gathers all the key legal information concerning the education of ELLs into one place. It gives guidance over what the law requires and what it should look like in schools. The document details the 10 areas of non-compliance that the departments have found as they work across the country. As stated in the guidance document, this includes the obligations of districts to do the following.

- A. Identify and assess ELL students in need of language assistance in a timely, valid and reliable manner.
- B. Provide ELL students with a language assistance program that is educationally sound and proven successful.
- C. Sufficiently staff and support the language assistance programs for ELL students.
- D. Ensure ELL students have equal opportunities to meaningfully participate in all curricular and extracurricular activities, including the core curriculum, graduation requirements, specialized and advanced courses and programs, sports and clubs.
- E. Avoid unnecessary segregation of ELL students.

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Programs for ELLs are not to be set up as an after-thought. They are to be implemented fully in order to ensure students' civil rights and because ELLs are our kids, everyone's kids.

IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity

For more information about the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity or to request technical assistance, contact us at 210-444-1710 or contact@idra.org.

Additional resources are available online at www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity
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(Federal Guidance on Schools' Civil Rights Obligations for English Learners, continued from Page 3)

- F. Ensure that ELL students with disabilities under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) or Section 504 are evaluated in a timely and appropriate manner for special education and disability-related services and that their language needs are considered in evaluations and delivery of services.
- G. Meet the needs of ELL students who opt out of language assistance programs.
- H. Monitor and evaluate ELL students in language assistance programs to ensure their progress with respect to acquiring English proficiency and grade level core content, exit ELL students from language assistance programs when they are proficient in English, and monitor exited students to ensure they were not prematurely exited and that any academic deficits incurred in the language assistance program have been remedied.
- I. Evaluate the effectiveness of a school district's language assistance program(s) to ensure that ELL students in each program acquire English proficiency and that each program was reasonably calculated to allow ELL students to attain parity of participation in the standard instructional program within a reasonable period of time.
- J. Ensure meaningful communication with parents of ELL students.

The full document can be found at http://www.idra.org/South_Central_Collaborative_for_Equity/.

School districts also must remember that families of English language learners have recourse through the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) when they feel that their civil rights have been violated. Families who feel that their children suffer from the ravages of discrimination can file a complaint with the OCR, which reviews and determines the legitimacy of the complaints and brings it to the attention of school districts for immediate action and remedy.

While this all might seem daunting, an exciting feature of this guidance document is that it clearly lays out what needs to be done for ELL students. School district and campus leaders can review the document and evaluate their program status and needs. The document gives explicit details about what needs to be done if an area of non-compli-

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ance is noted.

For example, a sample scenario is given about an elementary school: “The school finds that there is a disparity with the number of ELLs enrolled in their GT program. However, they noticed that there is a student very gifted in math yet low in reading skills. By allowing that student to take a non-verbal or a math-only test, the student qualifies for the math GT program. She is also in an intensive language development class 30 minutes per day along with a grade level teacher who is ESL certified and has received extensive training in sheltered instruction.”

Such sample scenarios along with links to valuable resources at the end of the document give schools, districts and state education agencies solutions to remedy civil rights non-compliance. This website for resources is <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/ellresources.html>.

As a field-based researcher, I see opportunity at all levels – state agencies, district administrators, campus administrators, and teachers – to lead together to transform systems that fully educate and include families of this growing population of public schools. Let’s work together to create new ways to help English learners become the success and the resource that they can be.

Resources

Grayson, K., & B. Scott. “Civil Rights Update for English Learners.” IDRA Classnotes Podcast (March 31, 2015).

Institute for Education Sciences. Fast Facts – English language learners, website: <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96>

U.S. Civil Rights Data Collection website: <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/>

U.S. Department of Education. “U.S. Departments of Education and Justice Release Joint Guidance to Ensure English Learner Students Have Equal Access to High-Quality Education,” news release (January 7, 2015). <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-departments-education-and-justice-release-joint-guidance-ensure-english-learner-students-have-equal-access-high-quality-education>

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The Role of Conversation – Engaging Students in Critical Thinking through Dialogue

by Paula Johnson, M.A.

The Challenge

Although teachers may be proficient in their subject area knowledge, many do not employ instructional strategies that engage students in academic discourse. Research by Schoen, et al. (2003) stresses the need for professional development that guides teachers and, in turn, students in redefining their roles in the development of knowledge. Providing teachers with professional learning in the use of instructional conversations and higher-order questioning is a critical element in laying the foundation for meaningful learning.

How do peer conversations about a student's approach to a problem or conjecture regarding an idea develop critical thinking skills? What constitutes meaningful discourse? Is it possible to effectively increase understanding and engagement by delivering instruction through a student-centered dialogue model? In this article we will investigate the role that conversation plays throughout instruction toward building teacher capacity and student self-efficacy in subject matter knowledge.

Research supports the premise that in order to meet the challenges of an increasingly diverse population of learners, we must employ a student-centered approach to teaching and learning that not only relays instructional content, but also engages students in authentic activities that elicit disciplinary discourse (Lampert, 2004).

For example, defined as an inherently social activity by Schoenfeld (1992), mathematics is described as a set of rules that must be learned by students. Once learned, these rules have the ability to empower students as they move beyond the basic concepts to explore new understandings as they are developed. Schoenfeld further asserts that this requires both curricular and instructional transformation. These types of student experiences can only occur once students have learned to communicate with each other and their instructor, using the language of mathematics.

Van Hiele (2004) proposed that a student who

only knows what has been taught to him, without any relevant connections or meaning, will not have the capacity to apply what he has learned in new situations. This transfer of knowledge is what has been lacking for far too long in the areas of comprehension and retention. Carpenter, et al.'s (2004) experimental study found that teacher's awareness of students' knowledge can more thoroughly support meaningful learning and critical thinking.

Unfortunately, in the traditional classroom, students are not linguistically involved in the lesson. They are the receivers of information, rarely producing opinions or suppositions. Without student voice, teachers cannot readily assess their level of understanding.

The Process

Instructional conversations are a form of discussion-based lessons that develop students' conceptual and linguistic skills through guided discourse. Students engage in exchanges with their peers and instructor to communicate their personal understandings and negotiate meaning of content on various levels (Goldenberg, 1991). Providing students with multiple opportunities to discuss ideas with fellow students promotes peer-supported strategic thinking. Finding the "right" answer becomes secondary to discovering the process or reasoning behind a concept. The integration of this method of instruction with academically rich vocabulary and higher-order questioning is especially effective with language-minority students (Goldenberg, 1991).

Providing students with numerous opportunities to contribute to thought-provoking discussions surrounding content increases student participation and willingness to present their ideas related to topics of instruction. Moreover, as teachers improve their capacity for utilizing higher-order questions to guide student discourse, they also are able to more readily perceive student misconceptions and redirect students with questions that

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Conversation plays a vital role in the modern cycle of instruction. In order for students to begin thinking like scholars, they must be placed in an environment that supports a community of practice that operates according to scholarly behaviors.

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help them to revisit their thinking, dialogue with their peers, and choose a more sensible approach or conclusion (Johnson, et al., 2013).

IDRA developed a synthesis of effective teaching strategies guide that states: “Substantive conversations require considerable interaction that is on task and involves higher order thinking processes during the negotiation process (i.e., drawing conclusions, challenging ideas, asking questions). The discussion can have guidance but is not completely scripted or controlled by the teacher. It requires students to generate authentic discourse in a coherent manner to promote an improved collective understanding of the content (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993). It provides learning opportunities for students to interact with the content and each other through authentic dialogue guided by an essential question or learning outcome.” (Johnson, et al., 2013)

The guide (Johnson, et al., 2013) gives examples of what substantive conversation is not:

- Lecture-heavy teaching where students are recipients of facts and information that is copied into a notebook or journal,
- Just reading about a topic or discussing factual results of an activity (i.e., lab investigation) in small groups or partners,
- The teacher providing lists of questions on a worksheet,
- Asking close-ended questions with one word responses or questions where the teacher self-answers, or
- Copying definitions out of the book as a vocabulary building exercise.

“Substantive conversations are critical for English language learners because...they provide specific opportunities to practice and build on listening and speaking skills using academic language that coincides with language learning standards and converges common core state standards.” (Johnson, et al., 2013)

The Results

Teachers using substantive conversations encourage students to bring to mind their own ideas and views of a topic, then engage in rich dialogue with their peers to identify common understandings, key information, and address any confusion about the problem. This method of inquiry allows students to collectively think through a problem before actually beginning to solve it. For example,

a pair of chemistry students might hypothesize possible outcomes of an investigation before conducting the experiment. They scrutinize the problem as a doctor might examine a patient before determining treatment. Students learn to look for clues regarding how to approach a task or problem. They are able to view the work before them from a situational perspective, considering the academic vocabulary involved and calling on prior experiences to generate solutions.

Conversation plays a vital role in the modern cycle of instruction. In order for students to begin thinking like scholars, they must be placed in an environment that supports a community of practice that operates according to scholarly behaviors. This alternate base of engagement provides opportunities for discussions using academic vocabulary, high level questioning, and rich conversations. Students negotiate meaning

through a structure that shifts the responsibility of learning from teachers to the students.

Resources

Carpenter, T.P., E. Fennema, P.L. Peterson, C. Chiang, M. Loef. “Using Knowledge of Children’s Mathematics Thinking in Classroom Teaching: An Experimental Study,” in T.P. Carpenter, & J.A. Dossey, J.L. Koehler (Eds.), *Classics in Mathematics Education Research* (Reston, Va.: National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2004) pp. 134-151.

Goldenberg, C. “Instructional Conversations and their Classroom Applications,” *NCRCDLL Educational Practice Reports* (Berkeley, Calif.: National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 1991).

Johnson, P. “Building Critical Thinking through Visual Literacy,” IDRA Classnotes Podcast (May 2014).

Johnson, P., & V. Betancourt, A. Villarreal, R. Rodriguez. *Synthesis of Effective Teaching Strategies and Practices – A Handbook for Secondary Mathematics and Science Teachers* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development

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Meet Paula Johnson, M.A. IDRA Education Associate

This year, the *IDRA Newsletter* is highlighting our staff’s varied and diverse talents and backgrounds. Paula Johnson, M.A., is a member of IDRA’s Department of Educational Transformation and Innovation. She also serves as an equity specialist for the IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity, a federally-funded equity assistance center.



Ms. Johnson has served in the education field for nearly 20 years. Though she has a passion for teaching and learning, she possesses an artistic side. Throughout her life, Paula has performed on stages: dancing, singing, acting, reciting poetry and playing the flute. Behind the scenes, she has acted as both choreographer and producer. She plans to add author to the list by fulfilling one of her dreams of publishing a book, co-authored by her mother. The *Mother’s Handbook* (in the making for almost 30 years) is a guidebook full of parenting advice from a precocious adolescent to her mother based on her rules regarding situations she finds herself in.

Education has been a constant in Paula’s life. She has known that she wanted to be a doctor from an early age. For the past two years, Paula has studied at Texas State University pursuing a doctorate in mathematics education. Realizing that her research aspirations were moving in a different direction, she sought to return to the University of Texas at San Antonio to complete her doctoral studies. In Northside ISD, she was the mathematics department coordinator and academic coach. Recently, Paula received news that she has been accepted into the fall 2015 cohort for the Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching doctoral program. She has chosen to focus on curriculum and instruction. She is dedicated to the achievement of mathematical literacy and understanding for students of all ages.

Paula considers family her greatest treasure. She enjoys spending as much quality time as possible with her husband, three children, close friends and relations. She loves to entertain and hosts several events at her home throughout the year to bring her loved ones together for fun, food and fellowship.

IDRA Analyses Show Texas Equity Gaps would Widen under Proposed School Funding Measure

Data Presented in Texas House Public Education Committee Hearing on CSHB 1759

David Hinojosa, J.D., IDRA national policy director, presented expert testimony in April based on IDRA's analysis of Committee Substitute House Bill 1759, put forth by state Rep. Jimmie Don Aycock, who chairs the House Public Education committee, in an attempt to improve the way Texas funds its public schools.

"We appreciate Chairman Aycock for taking the leadership role in presenting a school finance plan this session that seeks to put more resources into public education," summarized Mr. Hinojosa. "Unfortunately, the plan fails to continue that trek toward greater equity and instead puts significantly greater resources, on average, in the wealthiest districts."

IDRA's analyses show that the measure fell short by:

- Increasing the inequitable funding between students in the poorest districts and those in the wealthiest districts;
- Failing to address the inadequate funding and opportunities for economically disadvantaged and English language learner students; and
- Failing to provide sufficient revenue to ease the tax burdens of several property-poor school districts taxing at or near the cap of \$1.17.

In May, Representative Aycock withdrew his school finance plan to avoid the hours of debate that were expected as a result of various controversial features it contained. His proposal was one of two school finance proposals offered during this session following the Texas District Court ruling that the Texas school finance system violates the Texas Constitution, finding that the current funding system is "constitutionally inadequate, unsuitable and financially inefficient."

In addition to Aycock's proposal, Representatives Armando Walle, Mary Gonzalez and Diego Bernal have sponsored House Bill 3671, which would provide a far more equitable and adequate education for millions of Texas children than ever

before. It would do so by:

- Increasing the basic allotment to amounts that more closely reflect the actual funding levels needed to provide a quality education in Texas;
- Increasing funding weights for low-income and English language learner students (for the first time in 30 years);
- Calling for a new cost study to guide future funding efforts particularly as they affect funding equity;
- Increasing efficiency in state funding by eliminating excessive enrichment reserved only for super-wealthy districts without creating an undue burden on the school children in those districts; and
- Increasing transparency in how state funding is used in schools.

IDRA research has found that under the current funding system, there is \$1,098 gap in per student spending between the 100 poorest and 100 wealthiest schools in the state. (see infographic)

This means that the richest school districts have about \$27,450 more to spend per classroom to recruit and retain the most qualified teachers and maintain lower student to teacher ratios. They can offer advanced placement and dual credit courses and provide the counseling and academic supports to focus on college readiness. And by covering the cost of transportation and arts and music programs, they can engage students in all kinds of ways.

IDRA has provided expert testimony and analyses in every Texas school finance case dating back to the first *Edgewood* case in the 1980s through the more current *Edgewood VI*. In the latest case, Dr. Albert Cortez, IDRA director of policy, testified: "Low-income and minority students in Texas are more likely to be in under-resourced schools with limited access to quality teaching and curriculum. In Texas, the quality of schooling still seems to be markedly affected by the neighborhood in which you happen to reside."

Research released at the IDRA José A. Cárdenas School Finance Fellows Program Symposium in February stressed the specific need for Texas to secure educational equity and excellence for English language learners in Texas secondary schools.

In analyzing any plan, the following minimal features must be assured:

- Fair funding now – There is not a need for complete restructuring of the school funding system. But Texas school funding must be equitable, provide for equal return for equal tax effort, and provide equitable access to excellent education (high quality curricula, teaching, support services, and facilities) for all students in all school districts.
- Features that maintain inequity and that have been hidden within the state funding system for decades need to be eliminated immediately – no more phasing out.
- Special population funding increases must be implemented now. After decades of neglect, Texas needs to increase funding for compensatory education and ELL weights to 40 percent, as supported by the research literature.
- Public funding must be reserved for public schools. Diverting public money away from public schools would do nothing to address the current crisis and would create dual school systems: one separate for the few and one under-funded for the many.
- Facilities funding priority should be given to public schools.

Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President, stated: "It is imperative that we have excellent and equitable education for all Texas school children. We call on policymakers to have the courage to do what it takes to invest in our state's children. The future of us all depends on it."



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