

# Texas Education Review

## **Language Policy Insights: The Success of Latinos in Teacher Education Programs**

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Volume 1, pp. 40-47 (2013)

Available online at [www.txedrev.org](http://www.txedrev.org)

## **Language Policy Insights: The Success of Latinos in Teacher Education Programs**

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As we face the reality of the many injustices that continue to plague our growing Latino population, the time has come to re-examine the fact that although there is no official current language policy in the United States today, our country has managed to achieve a high level of monolingualism. In states like Arizona, California and even Texas, the mainstream culture has felt threatened by the presence of multiple languages competing with English; therefore, the fact that a majority of the population speaks a second language is not seen as an asset, but rather a hindrance or liability that has kept many from truly being accepted both socially and professionally.

During an election year for example, the one question that must be addressed deals with the future of our educational system. One key question that has been in the forefront of many politicians is how they plan to ensure that schools are meeting the academic needs of our English Language Learners. In most cases, the answer to this question makes reference to the variety of federal and state policy mandates linked to No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. Both of which support the model of high stakes testing and promote a culture of English language learning while de-emphasizing a bilingual or dual language program. Furthermore, this practice now pressures districts to focus on a transitional bilingual program utilizing a “quick exit” model. The students are then moved from one language to the next without regard to the necessary time for them to fully acquire their first language (L1) before acquiring the

second (L2). Inevitably, this tactic of repressing the students' "mother tongue" will not eliminate the nation's need to contend with the impact of Latino demographics that in the future promises to change into a majority population, especially in our larger border states of Texas, California and Florida.

### **Texas Educator Preparation Programs**

Students today, as in the past, are concerned with just "fitting in" and language plays a big part of their new academic and social world. In order to begin to navigate the change process, teacher preparation programs must continue to focus on the art of communication. One key step to this would be a well-planned orientation with ample time for questions and answers. The questions would be addressed by both administrators and faculty that will connect with the new students by providing more individualized attention in a positive and creative, learning environment. This process addresses the need to prepare future teachers as multicultural educators and to use service learning with immigrant populations as part of a teacher education program. In their study "the pre-service teachers gain an understanding of the challenges facing the immigrant families, develop respect for the families' home cultures, and gain confidence in their ability to teach children from diverse backgrounds" (Bollin, 2007).

Another suggestion by De Jong and Harper (2007), is to address the perspective of "just good teaching", which implies the hidden biases and invisibility to teach English language learners who have culturally and linguistically different backgrounds, under the standard curriculum. They suggest that "teacher education programs focus on both the ESL and standard curriculum teachers to provide prepared and effective teaching for

all students.” In speaking with students that are in the process of completing their university teacher education program (K-12), they shared experiencing this “common language” phenomenon. They also shared about a need to navigate between two culturally different language systems, the home and the academic environment. Each system has its own set of rules, norms and standards which contributes to the nature of privilege based on language. These sets of rules, norms and standards that include the components of grammar, vocabulary, spelling, euphemisms and idioms are indicative of the complexity of the English language.

Therefore, under the current language policies, if students cannot navigate between both language systems, they may feel a need to negotiate their identity in order to be valued. The change in Latino demographics has also continued to impact the methods utilized in relation to the schooling of minority students. At the present time of political correctness, these students are eloquently known as English Language Learners (ELL’s). Another significant factor that is part of the language dilemma includes the impact of immigration on the economy. This only serves to continue the perpetual political dynamics of an “assimilationist ideology” and increase the fear that new arriving immigrants will bring with them a language other than English, which will pose a threat to the established language practice in the workplace.

### **Latinos in Education Today**

Hispanics are the nation’s largest, youngest and fastest-growing minority population, comprising 16.3% of the U.S. total population and 22% of the K-12 student enrollment. Since one of every two people entering the workforce today is Hispanic, the nation cannot meet its workforce needs without Hispanic

Americans and it cannot address the economic and technological challenges of today's economy without doing a better job of assuring higher education access and success for Hispanic students (Passel, J. S., D'Vera, C, & Lopez, M. H., 2011). Consequently, the numbers involved in meeting the Hispanic educational goals are large and continuing to grow larger. The issues is critical in states like California and Texas (the two largest states in total population with 46% of the nation's Hispanics), but growing in importance are many other states, especially those not historically thought of as centers of Hispanic population and culture (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). For these reasons HACU (2010), proposes the need to focus more on student success and engagement in and outside of classroom settings in an effort to truly arrive at the definitions of success. Hispanic Serving Institutions also will need to incorporate more non-cognitive research measures and develop fully-comprehensive, theoretically-driven and culturally-sensitive databases to study different student groups in every sector of higher education.

### **Factors to Consider**

According to Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) (2010), the following table includes internal and external factors associated with the four major components often overlooked when gathering data on Hispanic students: *psychological, social, cultural* and *environmental* perspectives. These components must be addressed if we are to transform Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI's) into stellar teaching and learning communities.

<u>Psychological</u>	<u>Social</u>	<u>Cultural</u>	<u>Environmental</u>
coping, spirituality, college & personal efficacy, stereotype threat, resilience, depressive symptomatology, self-esteem, distress	mentoring experiences, civic engagement, family, community, peer, faculty & institutional support, cultural sensitivity, college adjustment & satisfaction, social involvement and engagement, academic integration, sense of belonging	cultural awareness (as related to policy and environment), cultural efficacy, academic family, ethnic identity, level of acculturation, class identify, campus climate, cultural competence of faculty & administration	family financial circumstances off-campus work, commuting vs. living on campus, quality of faculty/ student interactions, sense of community, campus support programs, perceived discriminatory behaviors, policy/politics at state and institutional levels

The success of the Latino first generation university students depends primarily on the university’s ability to listen/communicate with them, assist with scheduling classes, and ensuring an inviting learning environment. Opportunities for student classroom experiences include the following: content, pedagogy, cultural perspectives in an effort to engage Latino students during class activities, implementation of an instructional outcomes approach through the persistence in a course, student peer interaction and engagement and the year-to-year retention of Latino undergraduate students (Snyder, T.D., and Dillow, S.A., 2011). Since the students already possess a high degree of social and cultural capital, U.S. educational institutions must do all they can to recognize their full potential and provide activities such as orientation seminars, peer tutoring, pair mentor, and social interaction gatherings that will establish a “value added” approach

to the learning process. The “value added” model is a statistical method that helps educators measure the impact schools make on a student’s academic progress rates from year to year. This is the same growth metric districts are utilizing in order to begin interpreting the impact of their curriculum, instruction, programs, and practices on student achievement. Since all teachers in Texas have an assigned Texas Education Agency (TEA) identification number, the state will be able to correlate the district students’ achievement progress, with the university that teachers attended to obtain their teaching degree.

### **Consideration Factors**

This information is critical not only for parents and students in the process of selecting a university to attend, but to policymakers in their decisions about funding public institutions while holding them accountable for student performance. If universities want to increase the numbers of first generation, Latino graduates, they must strive to enhance the communication skills of minority student populations in the areas of academic and social networking. For example, university faculty members can benefit new students by not assuming that they understand how to use the library when they enter school because not everyone has had the same experiences before entering the university.

For the most part, school experiences of minority students are supplemented to a great extent by a family’s focus on education; therefore, universities need to consider the following: students’ satisfaction as the product of the academic and social experiences while enrolled in college, students sense of belonging on a college campus, feelings of alienation and intolerance, the impact that an undergraduate experience has on the prolongation

of academic pursuits, the attainment of a sense of intellectual identity and the students' belief that they are part of a larger community with the desire to be active life-long learners (HACU, 2010). If and when this type of cultural capital is enhanced, students will be empowered to continue on their pathway towards graduation success.

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