

## **Institutional and Structural barriers to Latino/a Achievement**

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Luz María was a female Mexican immigrant in the all-English, regular track in a Houston, Texas high school. She worked after school as an apprentice in a flower shop. As a gifted musician and an A and B student in her senior year with a 3.0 grade point average, she was set to be the first of her entire extended family to have ever attended college. Luz and her group of musician friends had all planned to leave home together to attend Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. Leaving home as part of a group was the only way her parents would agree to the idea of her going to a college outside of her home town. However, Luz's plans were derailed when she failed to pass Texas' standard exit exam after multiple attempts. Even after taking remedial test-prep courses for two consecutive semesters, Luz failed the reading portion of the state exam. Luz María not only lost the opportunity to go to college, but she also never graduated from high school despite having earned all of her credits and otherwise meeting the necessary course-related requirements for graduation.

The case of Luz María demonstrates how even academically outstanding, talented, and mature Latino/a youth can fall victim to rigid institutional and structural policies, practices, and barriers. The problem of low academic attainment for Latino/a students may be a result of the situation at the K-12 levels, a situation that is beyond the control of students or their families (Martínez, 2003). Analyses of school success must take into account the social and political hierarchies in schools, school systems, and communities, as well as the economy and class-based institutional resources, such as living wage, adequate housing, and associations with economically stable social networks that influence educational opportunities and outcomes (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). While there are many institutional and structural barriers that can impede academic success for Latinos/as, we focus here on just some of the most salient obstacles including particularly through the No Child Left Behind law; the impact of poverty on achievement; the dropout crisis; teacher quality; special education; and immigrant and language issues. Many students, discouraged and defeated by these barriers, drop out of school before graduation or decide not to continue onto higher education. Others overcome these obstacles by sheer determination, assistance provided by educational or community programs, or the interventions of caring teachers and administrators. Eradicating these structural barriers and policies is a critical component for Latino/a school success and warrants further investigation into how such obstacles operate and how they can be effectively mitigated, overcome, and eliminated.

To be clear NCLB was not the first instance of this high-stakes testing logic at the federal level. Still it does serve as the culmination of this school reform rationale. In addition, while examining the act and its effects, we should keep in mind the limitations of federal intervention and the predominant role of the states within the education policy-making system.

### **The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB): Accountability and the Testing Regime**

On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (DOE, 2002). The federal education act marked a historic reform of the public education system based on four key pillars, namely, accountability, school choice,

flexible usage of federal funds, and an emphasis on practices and programs deemed to be effective by “scientifically-based research” as defined rather inflexibly by NCLB (DOE, 2004). While these pillars may seem an appropriate and adequate basis for school reform, several of the act’s guidelines impose an unnecessarily rigid system that has deleterious consequences for many Latino/a youth. For example, if schools do not make adequate yearly progress after five years, they must make dramatic changes to the way the school is run or risk closure (DOE, 2004). Along the way, parents have the option to transfer their child from failing schools to better-performing public or charter schools (DOE, 2004). These principles hold serious complications for schools in minority communities that have historically been inequitably funded and understaffed, and where families often feel marginalized. To be clear, NCLB was not the first instance of this high-stakes testing logic at the federal level. Still, it does serve as the culmination of this school reform rationale. In addition, while examining the act and its effects, we should keep in mind the limitations of federal intervention and the predominant role of the states within the education policy-making system.

The intense focus on standardized test scores leads to the use of a single indicator of school performance as the basis of what makes a good school. Add to this the punitive measures imposed on school districts when scores are low, and we have an environment in which the pressure to improve is transferred through the education system to teachers and students (McNeil, 2000a). At the classroom level, these pressures inadvertently foster a shift from the teaching of content to the teaching and learning of how to take a standardized test (McNeil, 2000a; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; Valenzuela, 2005), thus creating a perverse incentive to narrow curricula in order to concentrate on improving test scores and inhibiting the development of innovative pedagogical practices. The result is immense pressure on school administrators to raise test scores at the expense of curricular goals and approaches that add depth to, and diversify, students’ learning experiences. Such an environment leads to disproportionate student disengagement in learning, resulting in high dropout rates, particularly for minorities and impoverished youth.

In many schools across the nation, NCLB’s focus on testing and strict measures of accountability have resulted in the abandonment of approaches to education that build on students’ cultures and native languages, such as dual language and other bilingual education programs (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwanto, 2005; Fine et. al., 2007). Critics of NCLB and its impact on Latino/a students in general, and on English language learners in particular, have not sought to lower the standards or release schools from their responsibility to educate all students to high levels of achievement. Rather, they have called upon legislators and school administrators to pay more attention to the quality of education that students receive and the conditions under which they learn (De Cohen & Deterding, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Rather than focus on tests that do little to improve the quality of education, we suggest that other institutional issues, both in and outside of school, need to be addressed. These include poverty, the dropout crisis, teacher quality, and special education and language issues, all of which are described below.

## **Poverty and Achievement**

It is clear that numerous institutional trends, practices, and policies beyond the control of students and their parents influence achievement, the effectiveness of instruction, and the social development of youth. But demographic and economic trends such as poverty, racial and ethnic diversity in schools, mobility, as well as homelessness and other social patterns, also affect schools and students (Cunningham, 2003). For example, migration patterns bring increasing numbers of immigrant students to schools that are ill equipped to serve their needs. Also, a disproportionate number of minority youth are negatively affected by unstable housing and inadequate funding of public schools.

As children are forced into a cycle of movement from school to school, residential instability due to inadequate and unaffordable housing leads to school mobility. Poverty contributes to homelessness and to the placement of children in foster care. In addition to the emotional challenges they face, homeless and foster care children also confront academic challenges because the curriculum often changes from school to school (Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007). Children in multiple foster care placements are especially vulnerable as they experience frequent school mobility when they are moved between foster homes, group homes, shelters,

and treatment facilities (Titus, 2007; Conger & Finkelstein, 2008). In addition, movement between schools interrupts young people's ability to build caring relationships with teachers, mentors and peers. Adolescents, in particular, are often reluctant to form friendships at school if they know they will be moving again (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003).

Minority children are overrepresented in homeless and foster care populations and have been traditionally underserved by child welfare agencies (Church II, 2006). In addition, Latino/a foster care children may be further disenfranchised if their foster parents lack cultural awareness and knowledge of the unique situation and background of their foster children. These placements may also lead to diminished social networks in the school setting (Church II, 2006). Inappropriate academic placements can also further marginalize Latino/a foster children. A former foster youth explained her placement in special classes and how it affected her academically: "They put me in these behavioral program classes and it was a downfall because I got behind in subjects and I was exempt all the time. It was easier for me to graduate because they exempted me (from the state test required for graduation)... It was pretty bad." She continued, "...I'm still behind. I think I'm behind because I think I would have been all caught up, but they put me in those classes..." (Perez & Romo, 2009a).

## The Dropout Crisis

Dropout rates have been another persistent and thorny reality in the education of Latinos/as for many years (Margolis, 1968; Orfield, 2004). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, or NCES (2006), the dropout rate among Hispanics is 28 percent, compared with 7 percent for Whites and 13 for Blacks. The numbers are even bleaker for foreign-born Hispanics: in 2007 the status dropout rate for Hispanics 16- to 24-year-olds who were born outside the U.S. was 34 percent—higher than the rate for native-born Hispanics (11 percent) (NCES, 2010). The dropout rate among Latinos/as has remained consistently high for over the past half century, in some cases nearly 80 percent, depending on how the rate is determined (Nieto, 2000a).

Each year in growing numbers and at an alarming rate, Latino/a students across the country fail to complete high school "on time" or obtain a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. However, because the dropout rate is calculated in very different ways across local, state, and federal agencies, there is little consistency in statistics. According to a study released by The Civil Rights Project (CRP) and the Urban Institute in 2004, while the graduation rate for White students is 75 percent, only approximately half of Black, Hispanic, and Native American students earn regular diplomas alongside their classmates (Orfield et al., 2004). According to Gary Orfield, the report's lead author, "Because of misleading and inaccurate reporting of dropout and graduation rates, the public remains largely unaware of this educational and civil rights crisis" (Orfield et al., 2004). Educational research and personal narratives emerging from the Latino/a community suggest that dropout rates may in fact be underreported because many youngsters drop out before high school, while others are either undercounted or not counted at all, including those in juvenile detention and those who are undocumented, among others (Conchas, 2001; Noguera, 2003; Valencia et al., 2002).

These national trends are exacerbated when we focus on particular regions and states across the country. In the southern states of Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and North Carolina, graduation rates in 2002 reportedly ranged from a high of 85 percent in North Carolina to a low of 61.8 percent in Georgia (Wald & Losen, 2005). When the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI)<sup>1</sup> was used, the graduation rates for these states sank well below these official estimates. Similar to national trends, the CPI method revealed that Black and Latino/a students fared worse than their Anglo counterparts. In Georgia, the rates for Blacks, Latinos/as and Native Americans were all below 50 percent (Wald & Losen, 2005).

In the state of Texas, the dropout rate hovers around 33 percent, which is about 20 points higher than official statistics compiled by the Texas Education Agency (Scharrer, 2007). In the class of 2005, more than 119,000 Texas students failed to graduate (Gottlob, 2007). Given the history and high dropout rate among

<sup>1</sup> The Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI), was designed by Christopher Swanson. The method is based on the combined average success of groups of students moving from ninth grade to tenth grade, from tenth grade to the eleventh grade, from eleventh grade to twelfth grade, and from twelfth grade to graduation, at the district and state level. The method sees graduation as an incremental process and allows for comparisons across years, districts, and states.

Latinos/as in the state, as well as the fact that 87 percent of the net increase in the Texas population (and two-thirds of its labor force), is projected to be people of color, we can understand why scholars say that, “Texas must invest in the socioeconomic improvement of its minority populations...” (Murdock et al., 1997).

California reports a robust overall graduation rate of 86.9 percent, but when the CPI method is used, the 2002 overall graduation rate was 71 percent (Civil Rights Project, 2005). The graduation rates in individual districts and schools, mainly those with large proportions of impoverished and minority youth, reflect dangerous national trends. Sixty-four percent of all students in central city districts graduate with regular diplomas (Civil Rights Project, 2005). Racially segregated districts fare no better; only 65 percent of students in segregated districts graduate compared with 58 percent when the metric used is socioeconomic class (Civil Rights Project 2005). According to Julie Mendoza of the University of California All Campus Consortium on Research for Diversity (UC/ACCORD), “Black and Latino/a students are 3 times more likely than White students to attend a high school where graduation is not the norm and where less than 60 percent of ninth graders obtain diplomas four years later” (see Civil Rights Project, 2005). In the state’s largest district, Los Angeles, only 48 percent of Black and Latino/a students who start 9th grade complete grade 12 four years later (Civil Rights Project, 2005).

Despite the grim news of the dropout situation across the country, several policies and programs have an opportunity to stem the tide and possibly reverse these dangerous trends. In the 80<sup>th</sup> session of the Texas State Legislature, the state approved the passage and implementation of House Bill (HB) 2237. The bill was the legislature’s combined effort to attempt to reduce the dropout rate and begin to obtain more reliable data. HB 2237 provided \$140 million dollars to fund a variety of programs in the preparation and continued education of teachers, dropout prevention, and college readiness (García, 2008). At the core of several of the grant programs was a concept of partnership across the public and private sectors, including local businesses, community organizations, institutions of higher education, and local school districts. Among these programs was a micro-grant program of extra-curricular activities (Section 29.095 of HB2237) developed by the Office of the Speaker of the House and the Texas Center for Education Policy (TCEP) at the University of Texas at Austin (García, 2008). The grant program provides state and local funding for extra-curricular activities that enroll “at-risk”<sup>2</sup> youth. Its structure provides the opportunity for teachers to employ innovative activities that engage these youth and facilitate the development of support structures (García & Valenzuela, 2007). While HB 2237 is certainly not perfect by any means, and it did not address the tough issue of inequities in public school finance or the often perverse pressures of testing and public school accountability, it nevertheless serves as a building block for a concerted effort to improve schools and reduce the dropout rate. Still, no one bill or strategy alone can deal with the magnitude of the challenge ahead of us. Systemic reform will require much more than a few innovative grant programs.

## Teacher Quality

Teacher quality has serious consequences for Latino/a children. In fact, some experts have concluded that much of the low achievement blamed on children and parents is actually the result of depriving the neediest students of the best-qualified teachers (Darling Hammond, 2000, 2004b). Overall, the quality of a school’s teaching staff is an organizational property that varies across schools and is strongly related to differences in student achievement and growth (Heck, 2007). A Tennessee study has demonstrated that teacher effectiveness is the single most powerful factor in student achievement, 10 to 20 times as significant as the effects of other factors affecting student academic gain (Haycock, 1998). In another study, consistent effective teaching resulted in a gain of more than 35 percentile points in reading test scores with similar gains in math scores (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). The researchers attributed a difference of a full 50 percentile points in math test scores to teacher effectiveness.

Other teacher-related issues that influence children’s achievement are lack of experience, salary gaps, and high turnover. The lack of preparation and inexperience of teachers in urban schools contributes to students’ poor academic outcomes and has been referred to as the “teacher gap” (Cunningham, 2003). Barth

<sup>2</sup> This study acknowledges that terms such as “minority”, “limited English proficiency”, “dropout”, and “at-risk” have negative connotations and are demeaning to the groups they describe. These terms will be used only when used in the original research or report cited.

(2000) revealed that schools with higher concentrations of Latino/a and African American students had teachers with lower scores on certification exams, less experienced teachers in the classroom, and a higher number of uncertified teachers as compared to more affluent White schools. Hispanic, African American, and low-income students are most likely to be assigned teachers who do not know their subject matter very well or who are not certified (The Education Trust, 2008). They also tend to be unprepared to teach English language learners. In a letter to President Obama before he took office, the Institute for Language and Education Policy (ILEP, 2008) reported that 43 percent of U.S. teachers had English language learners in their classrooms, yet only 11 percent of them were certified in bilingual education and only 18 percent were certified in English as a Second Language. The ILEP (2008) concluded that, “expertise in second-language acquisition, multicultural awareness, and effective classroom practices are largely lacking among staff responsible for educating these students.” In addition, when urban schools use less prepared teachers, long-term substitutes, and alternatively certified teachers, students are recipients of lower de facto funding (Reyes, 2003). In New York, for example, highly qualified teachers tend to transfer or quit due to challenging conditions in large urban schools as compared to those in affluent suburban schools (Lankford, Loeb, & Lankford, 2002).

One parent interviewed in a study of a parent-school collaboration in an urban school district serving primarily Latino/a students noted that some of the teachers assigned to urban schools have little experience and understanding of the obstacles facing urban and migrant students:

“I think some of the teachers that are from this area understand it, because, of course, they grew up here, and then some of the teachers who have recently come here, they’re slowly getting used to it. But I think there are still others that don’t really understand. How can I put it? I think some of the teachers don’t understand where these kids are coming from, and even though they try to figure it out, it’s just not clicking. A lot of the teachers are from, you know, nice families with good money and they don’t have to worry about the same things these kids are worrying about, so they don’t think about it when they are here.” (Romo et al., 2008)

The majority of pre-service teachers in the U.S. are White females and, because of the increased segregation of the nation’s schools, they are likely to have had little personal experience with ethnic or racial minorities in their own schooling. Research by Marx (2003) using data from stories teachers told about their teaching demonstrated that many new teachers’ altruistic intentions were undermined by an uncritical embrace of covert racist ideologies and deficit thinking. Teachers who have had little contact with Latino/a families are unlikely to understand the rich support of social and family networks that exist in Latino/a communities. On the other hand, culturally competent teachers can incorporate students’ “funds of knowledge” into the classrooms (Moll, González, Amanti, & Neff, 1992).

As mentioned previously, the work of Angela Valenzuela (1999) introduced the notion of “subtractive” schooling, that is, schooling in which policies, practices, school staff, and teachers ignore or devalue the home culture and linguistic knowledge of Mexican origin students, thus effectively stripping them of much of the social and cultural capital, potential, and perspective that they could bring into the classroom. She demonstrated the importance of teachers and institutional structures that value and actively promote positive connections between teachers and students, as well as among students themselves. She noted that this sense of authentic caring is especially important when it is directed toward students who are culturally different from the majority. Friendly institutional structures and effective administrators and teachers are instrumental in establishing a culture of caring and effective schooling. Family-like school environments created by teachers and school staff contribute to students’ “sense of belonging” (Nieto, 1998) and enhance the importance of caring teacher-student relationships.

Rather than blame students and their families, effective schools and teachers work with communities and families to achieve student success (Cortina, 2003). They build pride in identity into strategies that reinforce academic and social growth and that support the cultures, languages, and diversity that students bring to their schools. These culturally responsive teachers understand that schools and teaching styles need to accommodate the needs of students.



A program at the University of Texas at San Antonio gives Head Start teachers who understand the cultural and linguistic barriers faced by the lowest income students an opportunity to become better-qualified in terms of formal credentials and knowledge while earning Associates and Bachelors degrees. The program helps these culturally sensitive teachers overcome structural barriers of attending college (barriers such as tackling on-line registration, consulting with academic advisors, structuring degree plans, applying for financial aid, and choosing classes) so that they can be successful in higher education. Many go on to graduate with honors and return to their classrooms better prepared to teach. The majority of these teachers experienced structural barriers in earlier schooling or lacked financial supports to attend college. Support services, a family-like learning community, and caring staff helped them overcome obstacles that would have prevented them from becoming successful certified teachers.

The Puente Project in California provides a model of a caring high school environment. This program identified five bridges to students' success: family involvement, culturally enriched teaching and intensive instruction, counseling, mentoring, and positive peer support (Cooper, 2002). The success of Puente 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students demonstrates that programs that incorporate student and community cultures, high expectations for all students to succeed, increased levels of skills and competencies, and social capital (i.e., bonding of students to each other, teachers, counselors and administrators) can help alter tracking systems and ultimately improve student achievement (Cazden, 2002). This program shows how positive schooling experiences are a collaborative effort by a complete team of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community agencies.

## Special Education

The misdiagnosis and identification of Latino/a students in special education has been a long-term concern. In fact, research has revealed that Latino/a students are six times more likely than the general student population to be placed in special education programs (Medina & Luna, 2004). Latino/a students are also more likely to be incorrectly assessed as mentally retarded or learning disabled (Fletcher & Navarette, 2003). Overall, the literature points to a key structural factor, the racial composition of school districts, as the most powerful indicator of special education enrollment. Predominantly White school districts hold higher percentages of minorities in special education than large minority districts (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003). This suggests that cultural and linguistic responsiveness need to be addressed in appropriately identifying students with learning disabilities. Specifically, García and Ortiz (2006) and Fletcher and Navarrete (2003) all emphasize the importance, as well as the unique challenges, of understanding student sociocultural, linguistic, racial/ethnic and other background characteristics throughout the evaluation process.

Timely support systems are critical for struggling learners and may reduce inappropriate special education referrals. Prevention and intervention can help resolve the problem of academic difficulty caused by factors that are not true learning disabilities, such as differences in culture and language (García & Ortiz, 2006; Medina & Luna, 2004). According to Pérez et al. (2008), it is essential to examine identifying criteria, definitions, and the appropriateness of assessment tools used to determine eligibility for special education assistance, particularly when assessing English language learners. Historically, learning disabilities have been tied to biological and neurological issues, thus placing the onus on the child and the family. On the other hand, Fletcher and Navarette (2003) argue that this is a misguided assumption as other factors such as language development and acculturation are also at play. Medina and Luna (2004) found that Latino/a students in special education classes were largely disengaged and disenchanted with their schooling experiences and experienced alienation, disinterest, and anxiety. Pérez and colleagues (2008) have also raised concerns about special education placements that move students to separate classrooms, similar to those in English as a Second Language programs, because this placement may lead to isolation from mainstream populations.

For Latino/a students with real special education needs, lack of services may be an equally troubling problem. This is illustrated by Ramírez (2005) who described the case of an immigrant mother determined to have her child evaluated for services. Esperanza, an El Salvadoran immigrant, experienced failed attempts to have her second-grade daughter tested for special education and ESL placement and was told by school administrators that her child should be placed in regular classes to help her learn English. Attempts to address

her daughter's academic deficiencies were met with inaction by teachers and staff. Moreover, appointments were rescheduled without her knowledge, causing a loss of wages on several occasions, and misunderstandings and miscommunication occurred when there were no interpreters at school meetings. Immigrant and low-income parents such as Esperanza often encounter similar barriers as they learn to advocate for their children's education. Esperanza's child did not receive appropriate assessments until she entered the 9th grade, at which point she was far behind academically.

The story of Diego told by Ruiz, Vargas and Beltrán (2002) highlights the complex factors associated with bilingual Latino/a students in general and with special education assessments and placement in particular. Diego arrived as a second grader from Guatemala and was placed in a kindergarten class in East Los Angeles. He completed kindergarten and first grade and was labeled as both "a non-English and a non-Spanish speaker." Although his second grade teacher recognized that he knew more than he was producing academically, Diego did not receive special education referrals until the third grade and was not assessed until fourth grade. An Optimal Learning Environment project worked with bilingual teachers to implement research-based literacy instruction and immersed Diego in interactive literacy routines. After much reassurance from staff, Diego's writing skills began to develop and his confidence increased. He gradually began speaking and became more actively engaged in learning.

## **Immigrant and Language Issues**

The English language learner (ELL) subgroup of the Latino/a student population is part of an impressive demographic shift throughout the United States (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel & Herwanto, 2005; Murdock, 2006; Murdock et al., 1997). English language learner youth may be immigrants, migrants, or native-born students. One in five U.S. school-age children are the sons and daughters of immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001) and 40 percent of foreign-born youths attending school were officially designated as students with limited English proficiency, classified as LEP (Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2001). English language learners across the country have endured low academic achievement, poor performance on standardized exams, and a high dropout rate (Vásquez Heilig & López, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2004a; Gándara et al., 2003; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005). These students often deal with a learning environment characterized by critical shortages of teachers specifically trained to serve them, inadequate instructional materials, low teacher expectations, a lack of cultural sensitivity, and a high-stakes accountability system that leads to a narrowing of curricula (Crawford, 2004; Hampton, 2004; McNeil, 2000a, 2000b; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; Valenzuela 1999).

Students with limited English proficiency are nearly twice as likely to live in poverty and tend to be more geographically mobile than their peers (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994). They are less likely to graduate than the general student population (Rumberger, 2003; Titus, 2007). Geographically mobile students, such as migrants living in poverty and homelessness, experience high rates of absenteeism, thus lagging behind their peers academically (Núñez, 2001). In addition, students who experience high mobility and extreme poverty also experience deficits in health and nutrition and face inadequate study space that limits their ability to learn (Ashabi, 2005; Keogh, Halpenny, & Gilligan, 2006). Furthermore, lack of fluency in English, as well as economic and time constraints, may inhibit parent involvement in their children's schooling (Saenz et al., 2008). These issues may be exacerbated for rural ELL youth (Saenz et al., 2008).

The unique task of mastering academic knowledge and skills while simultaneously acquiring a second language poses a substantial hurdle for ELLs (Baker, 1993). A language student tends to take between 5 to 7 years to acquire native language fluency and the task becomes even more difficult for secondary youth (Cummins, 1981; Thomas & Collier, 1997). These difficulties are compounded for foreign-born immigrant students. As a result, youths from 16 to 19 years of age are significantly more likely to drop out of high school than their U.S.-born peers (Tienda & Mitchell, 2006). At the same time, it should be emphasized that speaking a language other than English is not in itself a handicap. As a matter of fact, in his research Rubén Rumbaut (1995) found that assimilation tends to have negative consequences for immigrants, particularly if it leads to students abandoning their native language and their ethnic ties. In data from over 2,000 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade immigrant students in the San Diego area, Rumbaut found that immigrant students learning English tended to outperform native-born students

who had great facility in English. Being fluent in English, then, is not the solution to all the problems faced by Latino/a students.

Highlighting another problem, in their research, Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (2001) found that some students in bilingual programs were kept from integrating into mainstream classes so that they could assist newly arrived students. They also reported that students in the ESL and bilingual tracks often have a difficult time switching to college bound tracks and may be overlooked by guidance counselors who work as gatekeepers for college applications and recommendations (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Few of the bilingual programs in public schools truly offer bilingual curricula that promote high levels of literacy and cognitive skills in both English and Spanish. The Suárez-Orozco team stated that “the structural barriers of poor, crowded, and violent schools with no meaningful curriculum or pedagogy are for many, especially low status immigrants, simply too much to overcome” (p.152). Thus, the primary predicament for English language learners is not that bilingual education does not work, but rather that most bilingual programs are located in poor, under-resourced schools, and are often staffed by inexperienced teachers with little pedagogical knowledge. While many parents and community leaders have long advocated for bilingual education, at the same time their advocacy should have also focused on high quality education in general, whether in English or Spanish. According to Gándara and Contreras (2009), “In many ways, the controversies and debates over language have distracted the Latino community from the essential inequities they face” (p. 149).

Several programs across the country have begun to serve the unique needs of ELL youth. In California’s San Diego county, approximately 300 students are served each year by *La Clase Mágica* (LCM). LCM has served San Diego County for over 17 years through university, community and organizational partnerships that use a technology-based curriculum for children from the ages of 3 to 18 (Vásquez, 2003, 2006). Rather than viewing cultural and linguistic differences as barriers and “subtracting” participants’ culture and language, LCM aims to create an “additive” learning environment (Valenzuela, 1999) by fostering active learning through positive, adult-peer interaction, and collaborative activities (Vásquez, 2003).

In Texas, the Austin Independent School District reported that approximately one-fifth (21.6%) of its student population (*up from 16.8% in 1999*) falls under the Limited English Proficiency classification (AISD, 2008). LCM is now in the process of establishing itself in Austin, Texas. The Texas Center for Education Policy at the University of Texas at Austin has led an effort, in collaboration with the City of Austin and the Austin Independent School District, to adapt LCM to serve the needs of Austin’s ELL youth.

As researchers, we believe that schools need to incorporate culture and language into the curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices; that they must support caring professionals who have high expectations of students; that they need to recruit a diversified staff and promote anti-racist professional development; that they must eliminate rigid ability tracking; and that they must create and nurture caring relationships with students through pedagogy, counseling, and other curricular and extracurricular activities. In such a school environment, every parent and every student would be valued.