



A Response to U.S. Supreme Court decision about Voluntary School Integration

By M. Beatriz Arias
June 28, 2007

The last two decades have transformed the demography of school districts across the nation, so that Latino students are present in every state of the country. Along with increasing numbers, has come increasing segregation. Latino students, English Language Learners (ELLs) and fluent English speakers, have become the largest growing and most highly segregated minority group in the nation (Orfield and Lee 2004). Some of the largest school districts in the nation, including New York, Prince George's County and Miami-Dade have the highest level of Latino segregation in 2000. Today, the increasing segregation of Latino students in schools and communities isolates English Language Learners (ELLs) from the exposure to English speaking peers and contexts needed to acquire English.

Recent research has concluded that Latino ELLs are excluded from the access to English needed for them to succeed in school. Latino ELLs reside in "linguistically isolated" communities, are tracked in classes leading to an "ESL (English as a Second Language) ghetto", and attend schools with limited resources and poorly prepared teachers to assist them in their language learning. One of the educational consequences of segregation in schools and in communities is that most Latino ELL students do not have comparable exposure to English as their non-ELL counterparts. Exposure to native English speakers through daily formal and informal contact is a prerequisite for acquisition of academic English. Through contact with English speakers, English Language Learners learn English. Contact to English speakers is key. Due to housing patterns, Latino ELL students primarily attend segregated schools and their opportunity for exposure to English is diminished and restrained.

Many Latino ELLs reside in communities where Spanish is the *lingua franca*. These are communities that are designated as "linguistically isolated" by the U.S. Census Bureau, where Spanish is the language of commerce, daily living, health and religion. Portes and Rumbaut (1996) have characterized the dynamics of linguistic isolation as part of immigrant settlement patterns. They note that homogenous ethnic neighborhoods preserve mother - tongue monolingualism and consequently, children of immigrants are more likely to be limited English Language Learners because of insufficient exposure to English. (p227)

Census Bureau data has documented an increase in the growth of "linguistically isolated" households. A linguistically isolated household is one where no one over the age of 14 speaks fluent English. The total number of Spanish speaking children ages 5-17 residing in linguistically isolated household was tabulated at 1.5 million in 2000. The states reporting the highest numbers of linguistically isolated households were Arizona, California, Florida Illinois, New York and Texas. The communities (of 100,000 or more) with the highest number of persons age 5-17 who resided in linguistically isolated households included East Los Angeles, El Monte and Santa Ana in California; Hialeah and Miami in Florida; Elizabeth in New Jersey; Brownsville, El Paso, Laredo and McAllen in Texas.

Access to English speakers is critical for students of non-English backgrounds, whose future is linked to English acquisition. Constantino de Cohen and her colleagues (2005) affirm that "the segregation of LEP students results in their isolation from the educational mainstream and the attendant loss of the benefits of interacting with English-speaking classmates: and a loss for English dominant students" (p 16). ELL students need to interact with native language speakers in order to be able to use English to communicate in school settings and to use English in socially and culturally appropriate ways. It is essential to assure that ELL students are systematically exposed to English language contexts.

It is essential to assure that ELL students are systematically exposed to English language contexts.

Latino ELLs need access to English which includes the following:

- a social setting that brings learners and target language (TL) speakers into frequent enough contact to make language learning possible (Fillmore, 1991);
- interaction with ordinary English-speaking peers is essential to English language development and to acquisition of academic English (Valdes, 2005);
- systematically planned English Language Development (ELD) instruction: development of student's social and academic English through modeling, participation, practice, reading and writing Gibbons (2002).

One consequence of the linguistic isolation of Latino ELLs is that these students are limited in their access to the very medium they require to succeed. Valdez and Guifford have concluded: "Our analysis of the hypersegregation of Hispanic students, and particularly Spanish-speaking ELLs, suggests that little or no attention has been given to the consequences of linguistic isolation for a population whose future depends on the acquisition of English... For ELLs, interaction with ordinary English - speaking peers is essential to their English language development and consequently to their acquisition of academic English.." p 147

We know that ELLs are hypersegregated in schools across the nation. Cosentino de Cohen et al identified 5000 elementary schools which enroll 70% of all K - 5 LEP students. High LEP secondary schools are similar to High LEP elementary schools in that they were more likely to offer Title I service, remedial programs, after school and summer school programs. These high LEP schools were likely to be in urban centers, with larger enrollments, class sizes, greater racial and ethnic diversity, higher incidences of student poverty, student health problems, tardiness, difficulty filling teacher vacancies, greater reliance on unqualified teachers and lower levels of parent involvement. Furthermore, when the concentration of ELL students increased in schools, the percentage of fully credentialed teachers, qualified to serve them, decreased.

Equal educational opportunity for ELLs includes access to English through contact and interaction with native English speaking peers in school settings. Together with participation in systematically planned English Language Development instruction in classrooms. Parents, students and school district representatives advocate for programmatic designs and remedies which address linguistic segregation. Due to the discrete deleterious effects of linguistic isolation and segregation cited here, support for voluntary integration efforts which implement educational reforms to address these issues is fundamental. If Latino ELLs are to receive constitutionally guaranteed access to an opportunity to learn English, greater focus must be achieved in identifying and implementing best practices and beneficial educational contexts most conducive for teaching English Language Learners.

M. Beatriz Arias, Ph.D. of the Mary Lou Fulton College of Education, Arizona State University responds to the Supreme Court's *Parents Involved* decision about voluntary school integration. If Latino English Language Learners are to receive constitutionally guaranteed access to an opportunity to learn English, greater focus must be achieved in identifying and implementing best practices and beneficial educational contexts most conducive for teaching English Language Learners.

References

- Arias, M. B. School Desegregation, Linguistic Segregation and Access to English for Latino Students. *Journal of Educational Controversy* Vol. 2 University of Washington, 2007
- Cosentino de Cohen, C., Deterding, N., Clewell, B.C. (2005) *“Who’s Left Behind? Immigrant Children in High and Low LEP Schools”*. Washington, D.C. The Urban Institute.
- Frankenberg, E., & Lee, C. (2002). *Race in American public schools: rapidly resegregating school districts*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University.
- Frankenberg, E., Lee, C., & Orfield, G. (2003). *A multiracial society with segregated schools: Are we losing the dream?* Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University.
- Gibbons, P. (2002) *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning*. Portsmouth, NH. Heineman
- Gifford, B. R. & Valdes, G. (2006) *The Linguistic Isolation of Hispanic Students in California’s Public Schools: The Challenge of Reintegration* in *The Annual Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*. 2006.
- Orfield, G. & Lee C.M. (2004) *Brown at fifty*. Cambridge. MA: Civil Rights Project, Harvard University
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2001). *Legacies: The story of the immigrant second generation*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Rumbaut, R. G. (1995). The new Californians: Comparative research findings on the educational progress of immigrant children. In Ruben G. Rumbaut & Wayne A. Cornelius (Eds.), *California’s Immigrant Children: Theory, Research and Implications for Education Policy* (pp. 17- 69). San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2003). *Characteristics of the 100 largest public elementary and secondary school districts in the United States: 2001-02* (NCES 2003-353). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2003). Selected statistics for the 100 largest school districts in the United States and jurisdictions: By school district, school year 2001–02 [Table 1]. *Characteristics of the 100 largest public elementary schools in the US 2001-02* (NCES 2003-353) (p. 12). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics.

U.S. Department of Education. (2003). Number and percentage of public elementary and secondary migrant students and number and percentage of students served in English Language Learner (ELL) Programs in the 100 largest districts in the United States and jurisdictions: By school district, school year 2001–02 [Table 20]. *Characteristics of the 100 largest public elementary schools in the US 2001-02* (NCES 2003-353) (p. 56). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics.

U.S. Department of Education. (2004). *English Language Learner students in U.S. public schools.: 1994 and 2000* (NCES 2004–035). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics.