

# Who's Segregated Now? Latinos, Language, and the Future of Integrated Schools

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## Abstract

**Background:** Since the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the demographic landscape of American schools has changed dramatically. By 2011, there were 12.4 million Latinos enrolled in prekindergarten to 12th-grade public schools, which constitutes 23.9% of the U.S. student population. A primary challenge that faces schools today is the increasing segregation of these Latinos, who are now the most segregated group of students in the West. Despite the Supreme Court decision to address the plight of segregation of Latino students, desegregation and language programming to assist English learners has been viewed as contradictory and competing with each other. **Implications:** The authors contend that school and community leaders should focus on the promotion of dual immersion, International Baccalaureate, and magnet programs to provide Latino, and particularly, English learners, the opportunity to attend strong integrated schools.

## Keywords

Latino students, segregation, English learners, bilingual education, integration

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Since the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the demographic landscape of American schools has changed dramatically. In the mid-1950s, Latinos were less than 5% of the population, and Asians were an insignificant presence. The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 opened the borders to continents that had formerly been barred and set new limits on all immigration. Today White students have declined to barely more than 50% of the total population; African Americans have increased to more than 15%; Asians are now more numerous than Latinos were in 1954—more than 5%, and Latinos are one quarter of the entire school enrollment nationally. Failing political, economic, and social systems have prompted millions of families from Latin American to migrate to the United States (Garcia, 2006; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). The largest number of migrants is from the Southern hemisphere, and of those, two thirds are from Mexico. Between 1980 and 2000, the Latino population more than doubled from 14.6 million to 35.3 million, shifting the group from 6.4% to 12.5% of the U.S. population (Hobbs & Stoops, 2002). By 2010, the Latino population had risen to 50.5 million and constituted 16.3% of the population, reflecting a 43% growth over the decade (Passel, Cohn, & Lopez, 2011).

Not surprisingly, these demographic trends lead to language shifts. As of 2011, 37.6 million people age 5 and older spoke Spanish at home, representing almost two thirds of all speakers of languages other than English; the next highest percentage of speakers of other languages was Chinese with 4.8% (Ryan, 2013). Census data from 2010 reveal that Spanish is spoken by at least 25% of the population (5 years or older) in 54 out of 57 metropolitan areas in the United States. Of these metropolitan areas, 22 are located in California and 12 in Texas. Despite the increase of multilingual individuals, and Spanish speakers in particular, U.S. schools have failed to capitalize on the linguistic assets these students and their families bring with them. In regions of particularly high concentrations of Latino immigrants such as California and Arizona, the backlash against Spanish-speaking immigrants and children has been especially fervent resulting in restrictive language policies promoting English-only instruction (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). In Arizona, state policy requires school districts to provide a minimum of 4 hours of instruction in the English language, eschewing the instruction of other subject areas such as social studies, math, science, and so on. This takes place in linguistically segregated classrooms where the EL students lack exposure to peers who actually speak English, a known predictor of efficiently learning the language (Gándara & Orfield, 2012; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008).

The rise in the Latino population has undoubtedly affected the context of American schools, given that the Latino population is generally younger and therefore more concentrated in the school system. By 2011, there were 12.4

million Latinos enrolled in prekindergarten to 12th-grade public schools, which constitutes 23.9% of the U.S. student population. While one in four students in public elementary schools was Latino, one in five students in public high schools was Latino (Fry & Lopez 2012). Census projections estimate that Latinos will comprise one third of all youth by 2036. A primary challenge that faces schools today, and no doubt into the future, is the increasing segregation of these Latinos, who are now the most segregated group of students in the West (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). Despite *Brown's* attempt to curtail racial segregation, the segregation that plagued the country 60 years ago continues to affect the way students experience the American educational system. School leaders need be aware that for Latinos, the effects of segregation are especially problematic given their potential to be triply segregated: by ethnicity, by poverty, and by language.

## A Historical Perspective

The *Brown* decision was, of course, in response to the apartheid conditions of African Americans in the United States. And while it took an inordinately long time, and considerable hurdles, to desegregate Southern schools, by 1970 they became the most desegregated schools in the country (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). In contrast, the efforts to desegregate Latinos were more sparse and failed to gain momentum.

Tucked away in the Southwest corner of the United States, Mexican Americans were often experiencing a similar apartheid treatment, but it went largely unnoticed. Viewed as a small population (estimated at 5%), relatively little attention was paid to this group although through the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s there were consistent accounts of segregation and poor treatment of Mexican-origin children in the schools of the Southwest. For example, Powers (2008) writes,

In the mid-1940's . . . the segregation of Mexican American students in Arizona's public schools was not an isolated practice but occurred in tandem with other discriminatory practices that restricted the social rights of Mexican Americans, many of whom were American citizens. (p. 473)

In fact, in 1946, Gonzalo Méndez went to court to keep his children from being segregated into an inferior "Mexican school" located beyond the nearest White school. In the *Mendez v. Westminster* (1946) case in Southern California, years before *Brown* reached the Supreme Court, the federal district court found that it was unconstitutional to segregate Mexican children from their White peers, and the Méndez children were admitted to the White

school. Just a couple years later, in the *Delgado v. The Bastrop Independent School District* (1948) decision, the federal district court in Texas ruled that segregation of Mexican American students was illegal. In both cases the courts found the practice of segregation of Mexican children unconstitutional based on their states' own constitutions.

In 1951, a federal court decision outlawing segregation of Latino students in separate schools in Arizona concluded that segregation on the basis of language needs was harmful and could only be permitted under very limited circumstances. The court found that

children are retarded in learning English by lack of exposure to its use because of segregation. . . . It is also clear that the methods of segregation prevalent in the respondent school district foster antagonisms in the children and suggest inferiority among them where none exists. (*Gonzales v. Sheely*, 1951)

Thus years before *Brown* became the law of the land, the courts were relying on state constitutions to outlaw segregative practices with Mexican children in the Southwest. Yet these practices continued.

The same day of the *Brown* decision, May 17, 1954, the U.S. government launched "Operation Wetback," which ultimately repatriated more than one million Mexicans, many of whom had been drawn to the United States by agribusinesses and factories in need of labor during and after World War II (Ngai, 2004). This reduced the Mexican population in the Southwest and also sent the message: *Mexicans are no longer welcome* and marked the beginning of a period of low northern migration. Many individuals of Mexican ancestry, however, had lived in the region since before it was the United States, having been caught in a changing border as a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the U.S.-Mexican War in 1848. Thus, the Mexican-origin population of the Southwest was both a long established one, going back generations, and one augmented by periodic northward migration, depending on the economic and political vagaries of the United States. Because U.S. schools had largely failed this population, Spanish remained the primary language of many families that had lived in the area for generations (see U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1972).

However, just a few years after the *Brown* decision, in 1959, more than 200,000 Spanish-speaking immigrants began arriving on U.S. shores. This time it was Cubans fleeing Fidel Castro's revolution. The first wave of these immigrants was well-educated and from the upper and upper-middle class, and the United States welcomed them. The fact that they were fleeing communism allowed them to be considered refugees and therefore eligible for considerable benefits, including small business loans and access to higher

education for their children, resulting in a strong Cuban ethnic enclave in Miami. Many also brought their own human and financial capital. The teachers that the Cuban refugees brought with them were perhaps their greatest human capital asset. Private schools were set up that provided bilingual instruction for the children of the Cuban exodus (because there was general agreement that they would need to be educated in both Spanish and English as their stay would be short, until the new dictator could be ousted). The first waves of Cuban migrants throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were able to develop their own schools and harness their linguistic capital, which would prove very different than for the next wave of Cuban migrants (notably with less capital than the first waves), who more generally enrolled their children in public schools (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

The third primary group of Latinos living in the United States during the 1950s was Puerto Ricans who were U.S. citizens and therefore could travel back and forth easily between the island and the eastern seaboard of the United States. Because of this easy movement, it was especially difficult to know what percentage were actually permanent mainland residents. Most settled in New York or New Jersey, and while they did not suffer the same problems of immigration status as the Mexicans, they generally ranked very similarly with respect to income and education and clustered together in barrios where the schools were weak and the urban environments were treacherous (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1976).

The heterogeneity in the experience of Latinos living in the United States influenced how language, segregation, and schooling played out for these immigrants. It was not until the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights began investigating the issue of segregation in the early 1970s that any data were collected<sup>1</sup> or attention paid to the egregious problems of inferior and segregated schooling for Mexican-origin children that policy makers began to wake up to this challenge. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights found widespread and overt, as well as covert, discrimination against Mexican-origin children in the Southwest: "School board members consciously and purposefully established school attendance areas in order to segregate Mexican Americans from Anglos" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1971, p. 12). These policies were also aided by housing discrimination that ensured that Mexicans would not live in the same attendance areas as the white students (Guzmán, 1956).

Deficit notions of Mexican children supported the idea and practice of segregated classrooms in which Mexican-origin students were educated in English only, often being punished for the use of their home language (González, 1999). Reasons given for segregating the Mexican-origin children in the Southwest generally fell into two categories: (1) it was for their own

good because they could learn English and adapt to American culture in classes dedicated solely to them, and (2) it was better for the non-Hispanic children because they need not be bothered by these children who were slow learners and came to school with poor hygiene. Some Anglo parents and school board members argued that the Mexican children should be separated from the White children because they did not learn as well and did not value education as highly, thus they needed “special attention” in special settings (González, 1999; Powers, 2008). As Carter (1970) noted: “Mexican American children were isolated until such a time as they were considered to have overcome their ‘English language handicap’ and to have become ‘adjusted’ [Americanized]” (p. 67). In 1971, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights reported that many children did not go to school beyond the first few years and only 60% completed high school across the Southwest, compared with 86% of Anglo children (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1971).

The first—and only—major Supreme Court decision to address the plight of segregation of Latino students came in 1973 with the *Keyes v. Denver School District No. 1* decision. In this decision, the U.S. Supreme Court clearly recognized the rights of Latino students (a great many of whom were English learners) to desegregation remedies. The Court concluded that “though of different origins, Negroes and Hispanics in Denver suffer identical discrimination in treatment when compared with the treatment afforded Anglo students.” It also found that “Hispanos” experienced “economic and cultural deprivation and discrimination.” In implementing the *Keyes* decision, Denver’s federal district court found it necessary to protect the rights of the school district’s Latino students to appropriate linguistic support and successfully encouraged a settlement between the plaintiffs and the district on this issue. Unfortunately, the *Keyes* decision came too late to make much difference for Latino segregation, as the election of Richard Nixon in 1968 had marked the beginning of the end of desegregation efforts. Although plans put into place before his election continued to desegregate Blacks, new desegregation plans that would have had similar effects for Latinos were never pursued. Instead the Nixon administration shifted the focus to the language issue for Latinos, thereby diverting desegregation efforts. As Orfield (1978) described this shift:

HEW’s [Health, Education and Welfare department] shift in goals began in 1970 with the issuance of the “May 25th Memorandum” declaring that a school system’s failure to provide education that met the needs of non-English speaking children violated the little-noticed section of the 1964 Civil Rights Act forbidding discrimination because of national origin. Language was defined as a basic part of “national origin.” (p. 207)

The shift in focus from desegregation to language assistance for Latino students was accelerated by the passage of the Bilingual Education Act in 1968, and then in 1974 the Supreme Court decision, *Lau v. Nichols*. The Bilingual Education Act, introduced by Texas Senator Ralph Yarborough, was the first federal recognition of the language needs of students who were immigrants or who did not speak English as their first or primary language. It provided modest funding for some experimental programs that would educate limited English speaking children at least partly in their primary language, but was nonspecific about its goals—whether the bilingual instruction was to help students maintain their primary language or simply to move as rapidly into English as possible.

Over the years, funding grew for such programs, but the goals of the program were always controversial. The *Lau* decision, while acknowledging the responsibility of school districts to provide special programming for limited English speakers was even more nonspecific about what that programming should be (Hakuta, 2011). The Court noted that school districts could simply teach these children English or it could provide bilingual instruction, but the students had to be given access to the regular curriculum offered English speakers. The two goals—desegregation and programming to assist English learners—were often viewed as contradictory and competing with each other (Orfield, 1978), a framing that would prove particularly costly for Latino students. In effect, the desegregation policies were often short-lived and deemphasized as federal policy (through the Bilingual education Act, Title VII of ESEA) focused on students' language needs and distributing resources to school. For school districts, the decision to support bilingual education programs often meant they did away with desegregation plans (Contreras & Valverde, 1994).

What could not be foreseen in the years surrounding the *Brown* decision and the couple decades afterward was that the Limited English Proficient<sup>2</sup> (AKA EL) student population would grow astronomically, in large part due to the massive increase in the Latino population (between 1968 and 2011 there has been a 28% decline in White enrollment nationally and a 495% increase in the number of Latino students; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014), or that the EL population would become increasingly segregated, often by ethnicity, language, and poverty (Gándara, 2010a, 2010b). The share of Latino students in 90% to 100% minority schools, which are almost always also overwhelmingly populated with low-income students, reached 45% of the total Western Latino enrollment by 2011 (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). Recent analyses of school segregation in California (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014), the state with the largest number and percentage of English learners in

the country, found that EL students were the most intensely segregated in low performing schools of any subgroup.

The impact of segregation on English learners has been particularly harmful in terms of academic outcomes. In their examination of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Rumberger and Tran (2010) found that the single factor under the control of schools that contributed to the difference in achievement between EL and non-EL students was their level of segregation. In other words, segregation had a broader impact on EL student achievement when compared with other school factors such as school resources, practices, and structure. Therefore, in order to improve the achievement outcomes for Latino English learners, policy makers would need to include measures to desegregate schools.

In spite of the fact that nearly one in four students in the United States today is the child of an immigrant and that 20% are language minorities, monolingual English policies have largely driven the agenda for the education of Latinos and English learners of all backgrounds for the past several decades. The legacy of these language policies has been a focus on English acquisition for immigrants even to the exclusion of any focus on academic achievement and even if by segregation. This fact was never made clearer than when, in 2001, the ESEA was reauthorized as No Child Left Behind, and the former Office of Bilingual Education disappeared in favor of the Office of English Language Acquisition (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007). For the most part, immigrant children in the United States are taught in some form of English immersion class (Zehler et al., 2003), and this is both the cause and the consequence of a series of English-only instructional policies passed by states and communities over the past couple decades (Gándara et al., 2010). This is unfortunate for several reasons, including that the research has increasingly shown the cognitive, psychological, educational, and now labor market advantages of bilingualism and biliteracy (Bialystok, 2009; Callahan & Gándara, 2014; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Portes & Hao, 2002; Umansky & Reardon, 2014).

But with respect to the desegregation of Latinos, English learners, and other segregated subgroups, most school leaders have not seized the opportunity that multilingualism represents (Warhol & Mayer, 2012). While English-only policies and practices across the nation have denied many children of immigrants the opportunity to become fluently bilingual, a grass roots movement has been taking place to create more two-way dual immersion programs. In California, between 2006 and 2012, the number of such programs grew from 201 to 318 (Yang Su, 2012). Similarly, in Arizona, another "English-only state," middle-class parents have been spearheading bilingual programs so that their monolingual English speaking children might also



have the advantage of becoming bilingual (Resendez, 2014). The problem in Arizona, however, is that native speakers of Spanish who are not fluent in English cannot participate, obviating the positive role these children could play in their peers' learning and preventing the programs from being used for desegregation purposes. School district leaders should concern themselves if their dual immersion programs tend to enroll more middle-class students and exclude students in poor communities or English learners (native speakers of Spanish; Palmer 2010). Teachers in particular must be vigilant that these dual immersion programs improve the educational outcomes for language minority students living in poverty who are typically underserved in schools (Delgado-Larocco, 1998; Valdes, 1997).

In numerous other places, however, leaders and teachers of two-way dual immersion programs (those that enroll roughly half English learners and half English speakers) are thriving and providing a "natural" way to break down the isolation of English learners and provide a major benefit for both groups of students, as research has shown that these programs tend to produce the best educational outcomes for EL and other students (Genesee et al., 2006; Umansky & Reardon, 2014). In Southern California, the Glendale Unified School District offers dual language programs in seven languages and attempts to maintain a 50/50 ratio of English learners to English speakers. The Los Amigos program in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was established in 1986 to incorporate in roughly equal numbers students from Spanish-speaking homes with students from English-speaking homes. Beyond the benefits of learning in two languages, the program also positively influenced intergroup relations. The program has been highly successful and influential in language education politics in Massachusetts, garnering a legislative exception from the state's English-only policy adopted in 2003 (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010).

School leaders and language teachers will need to develop new programs and determine how to best implement and sustain these programs. Emerging research points to the International Baccalaureate (IB) program as another viable opportunity to desegregate schools using its rigorous curriculum and foreign language component as a way to educate Latino students alongside White, Asian, and African American students (Mayer, 2010). Given the reputation of IB as an internationally prestigious program, various majority-minority schools throughout California have used IB programs as a desegregation tool in an effort to attract more middle-class students and develop a more diverse student body. For school leaders, IB programs boast a reputation of improved outcomes for low-income and minority students (Culross & Tarver, 2011; Mayer, 2008). More important, the IB program philosophy promotes bilingualism and allows educators to reframe Latino

students' primary language as an asset (Aldana & Mayer, 2014). In Milwaukee public schools, a district administrator and school leaders have utilized IB programs to integrate their predominately African American schools as well as their predominately White schools located in historically segregated neighborhoods. Ronald Reagan High School in Milwaukee not only welcomed language minority students but also actively recruited Latino Spanish speakers. IB educators and administrators believed strongly that these students would be an asset to the school and developed rigorous coursework that would promote the skills of Latino Spanish speakers. Unfortunately, these schools are not the norm and few IB programs actually serve substantial numbers of Latino, Spanish heritage speakers.

Magnet programs that specialize in a unique field such as medicine, science, or the arts have also been used as a tool for desegregation. A litany of research finds that magnet programs not only provide a more diverse learning experience for students but also magnet school students perform better on math and reading assessments than students in public and private schools (Frankenberg & Seigel-Hawley, 2008). Not surprisingly, educational researchers continue to advocate for an assets-based approach and a high-quality curriculum that should be delivered consistently over a long period of time citing a body of research that continuously shows how these curricula can have a significantly positive impact on academic outcomes for low-income and ethnic minority students.

## Lessons Learned

Martin Luther King's dream of an integrated society remains elusive, and in fact, has been losing ground. If the nation is going to impede segregation from spreading, the work must start today. Across the country many schools are more segregated than in years before the *Brown* decision, and segregation is perhaps even more harmful in today's increasingly multicultural and globalized society. No nation can prosper if its citizens cannot work across racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines.

Although the Supreme Court has made it extremely difficult to desegregate schools (see *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 2007), school districts can still work to assign students to schools that will integrate them racially, socioeconomically, and linguistically. All over the country dual language schools that operate to both integrate English speakers with English learners and to provide them with a strong bilingual education together are wildly popular. District administrators have the opportunity to undo years of segregative practices and use Latino students' linguistic assets to desegregate the nation's classrooms and reduce

the risk of triple segregation that afflicts Latinos. School and community leaders should focus on the promotion of dual immersion, IB, and magnet programs to provide children with the opportunity to attend strong integrated schools that will equip them for a future that is multicultural and global, and in which the most successful individuals will be those who can easily cross those lines.

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### Notes

1. The U.S. Census's collection of data on Latino groups has been inconsistent at best. For a discussion on the use of racial categories in the U.S. Census following the introduction of Hispanic in 1970, see Hirschman, Alba, and Farley (2000).
2. At the time these students were referred to as "LEP" (Limited English Proficient), now they are more commonly called "English Learners" or "ELs" or "English Language Learners" or "ELLs."

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