

Chapter 6

Flip the Script: English Learners Aren't Underperforming – We Are Underserving: A Move From Deficit Thinking to Democratic Education

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ABSTRACT

English learners (ELs) in the United States are viewed as deficits based on their lack of the English language and their performance on standardized assessments. To improve education for ELs, practitioners need to be trained to value a student's multilingualism and culture, leverage native language to build content knowledge and English language acquisition, and embrace Arthur Pearl's vision of democratic education for ELs. The building of language and content will allow ELs to be able to participate with and contribute to society. The University of Rhode Island has developed a teacher training program to meet this need.

INTRODUCTION

At the federal and state level, the trend has been clear and consistent; there is a significant achievement gap between English Learners (ELs) and non-ELs. This achievement gap has made nationwide headlines with another consistent message: ELs are framed as a challenge, as opposed to an asset, in our education system. This deficit way of thinking is not new. Richard Valencia (1997) argues that school failure, which he defines as “persistently, pervasively and disproportionately low academic achievement among a substantial proportion of low-SES minority students” can be mainly attributed to the theory of deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997, p. 1). The deficit thinking model essentially blames the student who is failing for his or her own internal shortcoming (Ryan, 1976). These shortcomings can be due to intellect, *lack of language*, lack of motivation, and poor behavior (Valencia, 1997, p. 2). Valencia, however, points out that the victim is not to blame, but the dominant culture (i.e. white, upper class) are the ones who keep

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“failing” students “in their place” by creating a system of educational policies and practices that do not value marginalized groups (Valencia, 1997, p. 4).

The enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002 was one of the most impactful educational policies that devalued ELs’ multilingualism. For starters, NCLB labeled ELs as “limited English proficient,” which immediately posits ELs as deficits as opposed to assets in the educational system (Wright, 2015). In addition to the explicit language choice to label ELs in a negative light (i.e. “limited”), NCLB, specifically Title III, requires that ELs must be taught English and grade-level content, both of which are assessed annually for student progress. The annual assessments were devised as a tool to hold students, teachers, and schools accountable for the language and content instruction of ELs. While holding high expectations for all students sounds positive, the requirement of English instruction removed previous language of the “*Bilingual Education Act*” to make a nation-wide push for English-only instruction, another step towards devaluing multilingualism. The word “bilingual” itself was even removed from the new law. Ironically, the push for English-only and the removal of “bilingual” education was concurrent with the widely cited longitudinal research of Thomas and Collier (2002) who found that bilingual students outperform monolingual peers in *all content areas* if bilinguals have access to a minimum of four to seven years of schooling in both languages. Additionally, the greatest predictor in English acquisition and content area success was strong literacy in the child’s first language (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Thus, this research *should have* incentivized policy makers and practitioners to maintain and foster native language along with English language development for ELs to make gains in the annual assessment of content and language.

Instead, NCLB has been reauthorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2017, along with the English-only verbiage that accompanies its origination. The reauthorization makes it clear that federal policy and local practices run counter to research about the *benefits* of multilingualism in academic achievement. The reauthorization also perpetuates the English hegemonic culture of the deficit thinking model that Valencia (1997) claims is plaguing our education system—dominant groups keep marginalized groups from succeeding. So, what should we do to combat these systemic problems impacting our ELs nationwide? Let’s take a look at a theory that has both informed and driven our practice to improve education for ELs.

MOVING FROM DEFICIT THINKING TO DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION: USING THEORY TO INFORM PRACTICE

Arthur Pearl proposes “an alternative to deficit thinking-- democratic education” (Pearl, 1997, p. 211). Democratic education, as defined by Pearl, is providing *all* students (marginalized groups included) with the knowledge, skill, voice, and opportunity to have “informed debate” on “social and personal issues,” equal rights as outlined in our Constitution, equal rights to have the power over one’s own life, and equal participation in society ” (Pearl, 1997, p. 216). For students to feel powerful and confident enough to participate in this type of society, democratic education would require schools to create environments that value ELs’ multilingualism and culture, elevate ELs’ acquisition of language and critical thinking skills so they can critically engage with others, build and expand ELs’ knowledge of the U.S. Constitution and their basic human rights under it, and advocate for their emancipation from deficit thinking.

It is important to note that Pearl’s description of democratic education and recommendations to *combat* deficit thinking can only be fully understood within the broader understanding of sociocultural

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