

Chapter 11

Equity for Emergent Bilinguals: What Every Teacher Needs to Do

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will explore how teachers work for social justice by advocating for emergent bilinguals. Four sites in which advocacy can be enacted—the classroom, the school, family and community, and larger sociopolitical structures—are used as a framework for organizing the research. Each section begins with a real scenario experienced by a teacher of emergent bilinguals. These scenarios serve to illustrate the need to promote social justice and equity in that site. Each section will then outline practices, beliefs, and frameworks highlighted in recent research. In the classroom, effective curricular and instructional decisions will be explored. Ideas for collaborative structures in the school are described. Effective methods of outreach to families and community partners are discussed, and activism in society and political organizations is explained as a necessary step to improve the long-term outcomes of emergent bilinguals in school and society.

INTRODUCTION

The emergent bilingual population in America's schools increased from 9.2% in 2010 to 10.2% in 2018, a gain of roughly 500,000 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021a). While approximately three-quarters of the emergent bilinguals in American schools identify as Latinx (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021a) and Spanish is the most spoken language among the population (US Department of Education, 2017), this population is truly diverse. Emergent bilinguals may speak English and a multitude of other languages at home, may be born in the United States or in another country, may have come as an immigrant or a refugee, and may have traveled alone or with a family unit (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). The term “emergent bilingual” is deliberately used to emphasize an asset-based rather than a deficit-based perspective of students who are learning English in school. Uses of alternate terminology (e.g., English learner) have been preserved in

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quotations from other researchers. In this chapter, the need for advocacy - specific support for emergent bilinguals to ensure their access to equitable educational opportunities - will be explored in terms of what all teachers need to know and be able to do.

BACKGROUND

Discussions about the school success of emergent bilinguals usually begin with an examination of the opportunity gap that exists between these learners and their native English speaking peers. However, the standardized assessments used to compare emergent bilinguals and their peers “prevent [emergent bilinguals] from using more than half of their linguistic repertoire” and “only validate the language practices of dominant monolingual groups”, emphasizing the differences between groups and perpetuating deficit ways of thinking about emergent bilinguals (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2020, p. 567). The oft-quoted statistics around emergent bilinguals’ school achievement do not address the inequitable opportunities provided to this population or the root causes of school challenges for marginalized populations.

Of crucial importance is emergent bilinguals’ access to language and content instruction that meets their needs. In terms of language instruction, there are not enough licensed English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers to support emergent bilinguals in the United States; 19 states and Puerto Rico reported shortages in the 2020-21 school year (United States Department of Education, 2021). For content instruction, emergent bilinguals tend to be placed in general education classrooms for much of the school day (Mills et al., 2020). Since only 40% of public school teachers reported having taken a course on supporting emergent bilinguals before entering the field (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b), the majority of emergent bilinguals continue to be left to sink or swim in these content area classrooms. Emergent bilinguals need equitable access to grade-level content, not just equal exposure to the general education curriculum provided by teachers who feel unprepared to work with them (Wessels et al., 2017).

Infused into the discussions around teaching emergent bilinguals is a pervasive notion of these students as a problem to be solved or a challenge to overcome. Systemic issues of linguistic racism, and classism impact the educational opportunities of emergent bilinguals. The idea that a child can better learn a second language by abandoning their first has long been discredited by linguists and educational theorists, yet emergent bilinguals still feel the repercussions of this mistaken belief every day (Rizzuto, 2017). Monolingualism, often expressed in ways such as “You’re in America - speak English” to children and adults alike, continues to be the prevailing idea in the United States. This form of discrimination, viewed as somehow more acceptable than other forms, is often used to mask the overarching causes of the challenges that emergent bilinguals face in school, namely institutionalized racism and socioeconomic inequities within American school systems (Santa Ana, 2004). The identification of many emergent bilinguals as Latinx and the fact that approximately 60% of emergent bilinguals live below the poverty line (Grantmakers for Education, 2013) means that most emergent bilinguals, like most Black Indigenous Students of Color (BISOC) and students from lower socioeconomic status, attend schools that are inadequately staffed, maintained, and equipped for student success (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Considering the ways in which emergent bilinguals have been and continue to be disadvantaged by schools and school systems, it is more important than ever for all teachers to advocate for this student population. Advocacy has been defined as “working for ELs’ equitable and excellent education by taking appropriate actions on their behalf” (Staehr Fenner, 2014, p. 8). Advocacy as a concept has often

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