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# Falling Behind: Understanding the Educational Disparities Faced by Immigrant Latino Students in the U.S.

CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILY CONSORTIUM CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH eREVIEW





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CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH eREVIEW

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## RESEARCH SUMMARY

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### Introduction



Growing and developing in a society where income is correlated with access to education and opportunities, Latino students in the United States are showing far different educational outcomes than their white peers and are facing inequitable opportunities that lead to inequitable lifelong outcomes. This gap has been a long-standing source of concern as differences in scores, particularly in math, reading, and graduation rates, are found at state and national levels (Anderson, Medrich & Fowler, 2007). This article describes the “opportunity gap” — the educational disparities influencing immigrant Latino students’ achievement — with an eye toward increasing understanding. We also examine the achievement gap from an ecological perspective, acknowledging multiple influences for disparities in the ongoing interactions and experiences of immigrant Latino youth and children and their contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Finally, we discuss further implications for policy and practice from the point of view of practitioners working in the field.

While the term “achievement gap” has been used to measure and report outcome differences between

populations, many scholars and practitioners acknowledge the need for terminology that reflects differences in opportunities between populations. In this paper, the term “achievement gap” is used if the focus is on student outcomes, and the term “opportunity gap” is used if the focus is on disparities in experiences and access to education among different populations.

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### Background

Current population trends show that the Latino population in the United States reached a record of 51.9 million in 2011. Within this larger group are populations from more than 20 Spanish-speaking nations worldwide (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera & Cuddington, 2013). Statistics show that the U.S.-born Latino population has grown at a very fast pace, while the share of foreign-born Latinos in the United States is in decline (Krogstad, & Lopez, 2014). The U.S. economic downturn, stricter border enforcement, dangers associated with unauthorized border crossings, and demographic and economic changes have influenced the slowdown of foreign-born immigrants to the United States. The percentage of students whose parents were born outside the United States (second generation) has been gradually decreasing. However, U.S. births in the Latino population remain high, and the percentage of those whose parents were born in the United States (third generation) has been gradually increasing. Generational status is significant to consider because third-generation students are most likely to have parents who are fluent in English and less likely to live in poverty (Fry & Passel, 2009).

Regardless of their generational status, Latino children are disproportionately poor, with one-third living in poverty and two-thirds living in low-

income households. These living conditions are commonly characterized by larger household sizes, smaller residential units, and more crowded housing when compared to non-Latino children (Turner, Guzman, Wildsmith & Scott, 2015). In some cases, these housing conditions are also associated with greater residential instability or economic insecurity. Additionally, Latino students make up a large share of English language learners. According to data collected by the U.S. Department of Education in 2009, 37 percent of Latino students in grade four and 21 percent of students in grade eight were English language learners, one of the many factors influencing the achievement gap between young Latino and white students (Hemphill, Vanneman, & Rahman, 2011).

### Dimensions of the Achievement Gap

As noted, we use the term “achievement gap” to describe outcomes — specifically, differences in scores on state and national achievement tests between various student demographic groups. The achievement gap is demonstrated by differences in proficiency rates as revealed in math, science and reading scores, as well as graduation rates of children of color and other disadvantaged children compared with graduation rates of white children. The achievement gap is not a one-time event but an ongoing trend that shows poor performance of specific groups of students.

Historically, the focus has shifted from the differences in individual scores in achievement between African-American and white students to both individual scores and differences in racial and ethnic groups’ performance (Anderson, Medrich & Fowler, 2007). Achievement gaps are identified by comparing data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the largest national evaluation of student knowledge in the United States. See Table 1 for a comparison of differing test scores for Hispanic (Latino) and white students in grades 4 and 8.

For example, in 2015 eighth grade Latino students in U.S. public schools ranked 23 points below white students in mathematics test scores. As a

consequence of the students’ performance, high school graduation rates for Latino students were lower than their white peers in 2012-2013 (see Table 2, which uses “Hispanic” for “Latino”). Given the numbers in Table 2, it is important to note that these graduation rates represent the number of high school diplomas anticipated based on those enrolled in ninth grade. Approximately 75 percent of enrolled Latino ninth grade students graduated four years later. This means that students who dropped out of school before ninth grade are not represented.

SUBJECT/ GRADE/ YEAR	AVERAGE SCORE WHITE	AVERAGE SCORE HISPANIC	AVERAGE SCORE DIFFERENCE IN POINTS
MATHEMATICS/ 4/2015	248	230	18
SCIENCE/ 4/2009	163	131	32
READING/ 4/2015	232	208	24
MATHEMATICS/ 8/2015	293	270	23
SCIENCE/ 8/2011 (2015 UNAVAILABLE)	165	138	27
READING/ 8/2015	274	253	21

**Table 1. National Average Achievement Scores, Grades 4 and 8 by Race/Ethnicity.**

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Science, National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). State profiles — National Assessment of Educational Progress. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>.

% U.S. TOTAL	% WHITE	% HISPANIC
81.1	86.6	75.2

**Table 2. 2012-2013 Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), by Race/Ethnicity.**

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Science, National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). Common core of data — National Assessment of Educational Progress. Retrieved from [http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR\\_RE\\_and\\_characteristics\\_2012-13.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2012-13.asp).

## Dynamics of the Opportunity Gap

As noted, we use the term “opportunity gap” when focusing on disparities in experiences and access to education among different populations. Measuring those disparities can be a tricky business, however. While there are assessments designed to measure student performance and identify factors associated with it, these exams are not designed to identify or explain the causes of differences in students’ performance — causes that include disparities. Historically, there is a pattern of educational inequities in the United States formed around race, class, and ethnicity. For instance, during the period of enslavement of African-American people, laws were passed in most Southern states prohibiting the teaching of a slave to read or write and forbidding slaves from accessing formal schooling (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Likewise, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mission and boarding schools were used to force assimilation by immersing young American Indian people in European-American culture.

Similarly, Latino children have also experienced disparities in their education through long-standing practices of denial and segregation dating back to the early 1900s. For example, in Texas at this time Mexican-American students were placed in separate classrooms from students of European heritage. European-American parents were not interested in enrolling their children in the same schools with students of Mexican descent. Schools for white children were called “American” and schools for any students of Mexican descent were called “Mexican,” and the decision to be placed in either one or the other was arbitrary – students were placed not according to policy but according to the perceptions of school district officials (Gonzalez, 2013). In these years, education was sought to ensure that students of Mexican descent remained a subordinate group by providing them only limited access to inferior and non-academic instruction; this type of subtractive education does not acknowledge traditional knowledge, language, skills and families’ values and culture (San Miguel & Donato, 2010). It is widely agreed that subtractive education, which divests students of important

social and cultural resources, leaves them progressively vulnerable to academic failure.

In the mid-1920s, Mexican-American organizations began to file lawsuits against school segregationist practices. However, segregation continued because of widespread support from local school officials and white communities. The significant 1946 court case *Mendez v. Westminster School District* in California concluded that segregation fostered antagonism and highlighted inferiority where there is none. After this victory, the battle moved to other states and other school segregation claims (Salinas & Kimball, 2007).

Latino children have also experienced disparities in their education through long-standing practices of denial and segregation dating back to the early 1900s.

One such claim was *Keyes v. School District No. 1, Denver*, which asserted that the manipulation of student attendance zones, school site selection, and neighborhood policies amounted to de facto segregation and deprived Latino and black students of a quality education (Horn & Kurlaender, 2006). The Supreme Court ordered the Denver district to end practices that effectively segregated schools and to provide substantially equal facilities and education to all students, regardless of race or ethnicity. This not only shaped the future of the Denver public schools, but schools across the country. For the first time, Latino students gained the same kind of rights that black students had gained through other court decisions.

In addition to disparities based on race, there are funding disparities between urban and suburban schools that tell a story about the value placed on the education of different groups of students (Peske & Haycock, 2006). Latino children from low-income families often attend the most poorly equipped urban schools in the most impoverished school districts. These schools lack resources to educate their increasingly diverse populations (Lee, 2002). For instance, under-funded urban schools often struggle to recruit and retain effective

teachers, a situation that can have a negative impact on the educational outcomes of students. Additionally, there are no incentives or recognition for teachers taking extra steps to address the issues of diverse students and their families (Peske & Haycock, 2006). As a consequence of these disparities, Latino students are overrepresented in lower educational outcomes nationally — they tend to have lower grades, lower scores on standardized tests, and higher dropout rates than do students from other ethnic groups (Peske & Haycock, 2006).

Another factor that hurts Latino students' school performance is a lack of access to pre-school. Research has shown that education in early years promotes school readiness and educational success in elementary school and beyond (Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005), but children of immigrant parents, including Latino parents, are less likely than others to have access to these educational opportunities. For example, immigrant children often enroll late in pre-school, and generally speaking, they lack access to early education programs that often cost more than parents can afford. These opportunity gaps affect students' educational outcomes at very early ages, starting in or before kindergarten and growing as students progress through their education.

### The Effect of Ecological Factors



**Graphic 1. The Ecological Model of Human Development.**  
Source: Huitt, W. (2012). A systems approach to the study of human behavior. Retrieved from <http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/materials/sysmdlo.html>.

The Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) ecological model (see Graphic 1) illustrates the dynamics of personal and environmental, i.e., ecological, factors in an individual's life.

Each individual, as well as the family as a unit, affects and is significantly affected by interactions among a number of overlapping contexts, systems or environments. Although nearly all children possess the potential to learn, external environmental factors have the capacity to enhance or detract from that potential. Economic constraints (Lopez & Velazco, 2011; Gormley et al., 2005); language barriers (Hakuta, Goto Butler, & Witt, 2000; Soltero, 2008); acculturation (Vega, 1990; Bacalao & Smokowski, 2007; Skuza, 2007; Hernandez & Napierala, 2013); and prejudice and discrimination are among the factors that impact the educational outcomes of Latino immigrant children. Each of these ecological factors is examined in more detail in order to better understand the different forms of the opportunity gap that Latino children face.

### Economic Constraints

More Latino children are living in poverty — 6.1 million in 2010 — than children of any other racial or ethnic group. This development marks the first time in U.S. history that the single largest group of poor children is not white. According to an analysis of 2010 data from the U.S. Census Bureau by the Pew Hispanic Center, 37.3 percent of poor children were Latino, 30.5 percent were white and 26.6 percent were black (Lopez & Velazco, 2011). It is important to highlight that the prevalence of poverty is not the same across all Latino families. Latino families headed by single mothers had the highest poverty rate (57 percent), followed by Latino families with an unemployed parent of either sex (43 percent). In contrast, only 9 percent of Latino families with a parent holding a college degree were classified as living in poverty (Lopez & Velazco, 2011).

Another aspect of the economic picture for Latino families is that those with immigrant parents face different barriers than Latino families with U.S.-born parents. According to research by the Pew

Hispanic Center, more than two-thirds (4.1 million) of the 6.1 million Latino children living in poverty in 2010 were the children of immigrant parents, while the other third (2 million) were children of parents born in the United States. Among the 4.1 million impoverished Latino children of immigrant parents, the vast majority (86.2 percent) were born in the United States (Lopez & Velazco, 2011). Economic constraints hinder Latino children's academic success, with children of low-income Latino immigrant parents faring even worse than children of low-income Latino parents who were born in the United States. Although the children of U.S.-born Latino parents still lag behind other ethnic groups academically, they benefit somewhat because their parents are more likely than immigrant parents to speak English and to understand American school systems.



### Language Barriers

The challenges that minority children, including Latino children, who speak little or no English encounter in their early school years are many and likely to interfere with their school adjustment. This may result in a disadvantage for social and academic success in the future (Kang, Haddad, Chen, & Greenberger, 2014). Minority students (including Latinos) who have limited English-language skills receive fewer opportunities to learn than students who are fully bilingual, or speak only English well. This limits Latino students' access to post-secondary education, and those who do successfully access it may not be well prepared to

perform because of knowledge gaps and lower language skills.

It is well known that the pace of language acquisition for immigrant children affects their academic achievement (Hakuta, Goto Butler, & Witt, 2000). Because linguistic, cognitive, and social development of children are all related, the environment in which language skills are acquired is critically important for children of Latino immigrant parents. Children construct mental frameworks for perceiving the world through cultural bonds and socially mediated processes of language development (Garcia & Frede, 2010). As children develop their ability to use language, they also acquire a better understanding of social situations and improve their thinking skills.

Limited English proficiency is commonly misdiagnosed in schools as a language disorder, and Latino immigrant students are overrepresented in special education classes as a result.

As with all languages, English learners have to master not only communication skills in daily life, but also how to read and speak English in academic settings. Given that oral English proficiency can take three to five years to develop, and academic proficiency may require four to seven years, students from a lower socioeconomic status who lack resources and exposure to academic environments may learn English more slowly (Hakuta, Goto Butler, & Witt, 2000). While facing these language barriers, Latino immigrant students have limited opportunities to fully participate in activities that would support social and cognitive development. As a result, they will likely continue to struggle academically and may suffer socially as well. Over time, both academic and social deficiencies can become more severe as children reach higher grades.

Limited English proficiency is commonly misdiagnosed in schools as a language disorder, and Latino immigrant students are overrepresented in special education classes as a result. This can

lead to slower academic growth due to a lack of developmentally challenging education (Soltero, 2008). For English language learners in particular, the learner needs to be exposed to information that challenges in meaningful and understandable ways; the teachers' main role is to ensure that students receive this exposure (Hoff, 2006).

## Acculturation



Acculturation is another ecological factor that can either enhance or detract from a child's potential to learn. "Acculturation" is the process of adopting the cultural traits or social patterns of another group. For Latino immigrant children, the process of

acculturation includes facing the new experiences and challenging events that require immediate attention, such as to how to navigate the school system, communicate with teachers, acquire knowledge (absorb what they're taught), and participate in sports and other extra-curricular activities. Students also need to understand local traditions as simple as playing games at recess or participating in seasonal celebrations and other activities. Knowing how to respond to these situations helps alleviate stress and stave off fatigue that can mount over time as a child adjusts to life in a new country (Skuzza, 2007).

Immigrant children are often learning a new language, adjusting to a new culture, and experiencing the everyday challenges of growing up. All this can be exhausting. Latino immigrant children also must often balance *familism*, which is a cultural value that emphasizes family closeness and loyalty with conflicting values in the United

States. Familism encourages individual family members to put the needs of the family first, even if this requires making personal sacrifice (Vega, 1990). This can create stress particularly for those children who have family obligations such as language translation or caring for younger siblings. Of course, familism can also be a source of support because it facilitates a sense of mutual obligation and promotes shared roles and responsibilities in meeting the challenges of new living conditions (Bacalao & Smokowski, 2007).

Another Latino cultural value is known as *marianismo*, which emphasizes the self-sacrifice of females and highlights their traditional role as family caregiver (Rodriguez, Castillo, & Gandara 2013). Together, familism and marianismo are challenging for Latina immigrant girls, who feel pressure to fulfill family obligations that may keep them from devoting time to studying and succeeding in school. Latina teenage girls also face the brunt of other behavioral demands stemming from marianismo and familism, such as refraining from joining in public activities without their parents. This keeps them from participating in after-school activities and field trips, and from socializing with peers.

Familism encourages individual family members to put the needs of the family first, even if this requires making personal sacrifice (Vega, 1990).

Acculturation of immigrant family members is also influenced by ongoing contact with individuals of different cultural backgrounds. This contact gradually changes family dynamics and relationships. For example, Latino children tend to become more independent and opinionated as they are exposed to peers who have adopted the predominant North American culture. As Latina girls become more independent, families can experience tensions around the "traditional" female roles parents learned and the "modern" female roles seen in North American culture (Folicov, 2007). Inter-generational tension within Latino families can also arise because immigrant children

typically learn English faster than their parents and receive greater exposure to the new culture through their time in school (Coatsworth, Pantin & Szapocznic, 2002). As a result, parents and their children experience acculturation differently. These differences may create more family tension that can burden children and negatively affect their performance in school.

Another factor impeding the acculturation of Latino immigrant parents arises because they often have different perspectives than their children's teachers on parental involvement in school success because of differing cultural values and norms. As a result, according to some studies Latino parents are often less involved in their children's education than parents of other ethnicities — particularly when it comes to communicating with teachers and volunteering in the classroom (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). At the same time, while Latino parents who have limited English skills appear to be less involved with their children's school, their involvement may be demonstrated in other ways that are less visible to school personnel, such as offering encouragement and guidance to their children, reinforcing the importance of education in the home, and setting examples. Parental involvement may also include exposing children to the rigors of manual labor as a way of demonstrating the harsh consequences of not succeeding in school (Lopez, 2001). These ways of teaching and guiding can be less visible to school personnel, but are often more feasible for parents with lower educational attainment (Hernandez & Napierala, 2013).

### **Prejudice and Discrimination in School**

A final, important ecological factor lies in prejudice and discrimination against Latino immigrants, which persists in the United States. The prevalence of perceived discrimination against Latino immigrants has been reported in several studies (Alvarez de Davila, 2014; Chung, Bemak, Ortiz, & Sandoval - Perez, 2008; Fennelly, 2005; Skuza, 2007). Other studies report that negative judgments and discriminatory practices affect the wellbeing of Latino children, and that being judged

or experiencing unfair treatment because of language, culture or physical features is associated with poor mental health (Romero & Roberts, 2003). When youth are stigmatized by their peers based on cultural generalizations they tend to feel diminished or less capable (Skuza, 2007). As a result, students often band together for protection against threatening peers or school personnel in order to survive anti-immigration and xenophobic sentiments (Norrid-Lacey & Spencer, 2000). In several studies, Latino students have reported discrimination in school and in public, as well as harsh school and public environments where they do not feel respected or valued (Edwards & Romero, 2008; Pereira et al., 2010). Studies show that when Latino students attend schools with few Latino peers, they can feel disconnected from the school and are likely to report perceived discrimination by the end of 10th grade. They feel less represented in terms of numbers, less motivated to participate in student activities, and consequently more disconnected with school (Benner & Graham 2011).



Despite the fact that steps have been taken in the United States to end racial segregation, differences in socio-economic status and racial and ethnic compositions of neighborhoods still lead to between-school student segregation with a disproportionate representation of one racial or ethnic group in one school or district compared with another, and to within-school student segregation where academic practices like student tracking and teachers' expectations limit students' access to a challenging curriculum (Milner, 2012). In addition, researchers sometimes compare the school performance of students of color, including

Latino students, with white students without factoring in the causes of disparities and differences discussed here. White students can be tacitly viewed as intellectually and academically superior to students of color, which can contaminate research results because studies are conducted from a deficit perspective that doesn't acknowledge the racist structures, systems, contexts, policies and practices that influence the world in which students of color develop and grow.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

**Mitch Roldan, [El Colegio Charter School](#);  
Dean of Students/Parents Liaison**

School personnel interested in closing the achievement gap for Latino students must look at the level of training that is provided for teachers, counseling staff and administrators. If the school's staff has had little or no training in the areas of cultural relevancy, language acquisition, or a general understanding of relevant issues to the Latino community, how will the change happen?

The research in this *eReview* could be presented as part of the yearly professional development plan for teachers and support staff. These research findings might also be incorporated into a curriculum for parents as a tool to empower them to organize and advocate for the needs of their children. In addition, this research could be shared in school newsletters, along with information about steps the school is taking to address the issues raised. Furthermore, this research should be presented to school boards to raise awareness about the need to shift ineffective policies that may be hurting groups of students.

It is important for schools with Latino students who are falling behind to examine the teaching models they are using in the classroom. Latino students have unique linguistic needs, and language acquisition is essential to their academic progress. The research presented in this *eReview* could support the argument for the implementation of [Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol \(SIOP\)](#) or [Guided Language Acquisition Design \(GLAD\)](#) strategies in every

classroom. Strategies that have proven to be effective could help all students.

In addition to setting content objectives, teachers could also be intentional about including language objectives in their lessons. We know that when a student doesn't fully understand English and academic terms used in school, reading, writing and listening will be challenging. This research on immigrant Latino students' lack of fluency in English could also influence school leaders to look at dual language programs as a possible solution for teachers. This *eReview* also cites the economic disparity that exists in the lives of many Latino students. This could lead schools to include social justice topics throughout the school day in order to impact the lives and future opportunities of their Latino students.



I have encountered both teachers and administrators who find it difficult to understand Latinos' experience regarding acculturation in this country. For example, I believe that while many educators say they value the Latino culture, they find it hard to value the actual Latinos. It is much easier to throw a taco party on Cinco de Mayo than to work day after day with a student who grew up in rural Central America who speaks Spanish as a second language and is struggling in school because he just spent the last eight months in an immigration detention center. In order to meet these kinds of challenges, we teachers and administrators should first be trained to become aware of our biases. Steps should be taken to offer continuous training in the areas of white privilege and racial equity. Training and evaluation around

these topics should be woven into the school's yearly professional development plan. Lastly, schools might also look at providing opportunities for teachers and administrators to interact with parents and families as a community-building mechanism.

It is also important to find the right trainers. It is my belief that trainers must be able to help teachers and support staff members understand how their destiny is connected to that of their students. In my experience, when educators fail to make that connection they often fail their students. This is challenging work that requires commitment and high levels of self-awareness. If the research were simply presented in printed form or presented by a trainer, and this doesn't result in a deep understanding based on practice, I think that the research could be easily be misinterpreted.



The research in this *eReview* rings true with different Latino populations with whom I have worked. However, it is important to consider the diversity that exists in the Latino/Hispanic community and to avoid a “one size fits all” approach. For example, in south Minneapolis, two schools are located only a few miles from each other and both serve large numbers of Latino students. However, by simply walking through their front doors it is easy to see the different levels of acculturation and assimilation of these students just by the way they dress and talk. There are a number of factors that come into play when analyzing the reality of Latino students' varying levels of acculturation at different schools. What may be engaging and meaningful instruction for

the students at one school may not be for those at the other school. Creating effective curricula provides sufficient time for building background knowledge about students' lives, which can guide the teacher in making content relevant for student learning.

In conversations I have had with fellow educators throughout the years, they often talk about being frustrated that they were not prepared to develop and deliver culturally relevant lesson plans to their students. It is imperative for research like that reported in this *eReview* to be required reading for anyone in education, especially teachers and school support staff. They need opportunities to talk about these issues, debate them, and deconstruct their own biases. This will allow them to be better prepared and avoid giving up on challenging students. It is also valuable for teachers and school staff to hear the voices of both youth and parents in this research. They usually know exactly what they need. We just need to listen.

**Monica Hurtado, *Voices of Racial Justice*; Racial Justice and Health Equity Organizer**

This *eReview* can serve multiple purposes. It can be used to help achieve equity in education by informing changes in services, programs, policies, and procedures to transform the educational system. As a first step to change, this research should be used to engage communities experiencing the greatest educational disparities. A main goal should be to inform policy analysis and policy development at the national, state, and local level. We know there are multiple approaches to change, including direct services, education, advocacy, mobilizing and community organizing. Therefore, the research in this *eReview* should be discussed by and with members of communities experiencing educational disparities so they can continue their work to address these issues.

One group that would benefit from such discussion is the Education, Equity, and Organizing Collaborative (EEOC), a community-based alliance in the Twin Cities already addressing issues in education. Community members' perspectives and wisdom would enhance the analysis and

conclusions described in this *eReview* article, creating community ownership of the process and setting the stage for a possible authentic partnership between community and academia. For instance, as a community member I would make a request to reconsider use of the term “achievement gap”, and instead consider using a term which community members have already adopted — “equity” or “opportunity gap.” The “achievement gap” term reinforces the notion that individuals are solely responsible for becoming better educated and minimizes the role that social conditions and structural barriers play in preventing a person’s readiness to learn and achieve better educational outcomes.



In Minnesota, those in the educational system have been doing a better job of collecting and sharing data than people in some other state’s systems. However, this *eReview* notes some significant gaps in Minnesota data, such as “Students who dropped out of school before ninth grade are not represented,” or “These [National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)] exams are not designed to identify or explain the causes of differences in students’ performance.” Community members have identified gaining access to meaningful data as a key factor in identifying priorities, allocating resources, and making systems accountable. Therefore, this *eReview* could inform how we define processes for collecting, using, and sharing data to address disparities in education. Examples of questions might include: What data will be needed to identify and explain differences in performance between children of color and their white counterparts? How can we

collect more meaningful data to lead policy work in education?

...research done without community involvement throughout the entire process will be meaningless.

When I was asked to be part of this *eReview* one of the questions I had to consider was “In what ways could this research stimulate specific change in intervention or prevention practices?” I firmly believe the only possible way for this research to create change is by answering this question with communities experiencing the greatest educational disparities. A process to make this research relevant will include developing a partnership between the University and the community. One of the challenges to creating such a partnership might be the communities’ distrust of large mainstream systems like the University. However, the complex and multifaceted situation of disparities in education is such that research done without community involvement throughout the entire process will be meaningless.

The organization I work for, [Voices for Racial Justice](#), has identified some Principles of Authentic Community Engagement that can offer a starting framework to develop a partnership between communities and the University. This process must begin with the setting of clear and meaningful expectations. I would like to mention some key concepts around engagement to support the creation of a healthy partnership. To start, Voices for Racial Justice defines authentic community engagement as the “intentional process of co-creating solutions to inequities in partnership with people who know through their own experiences the barriers to opportunity best.” Some of our principles are:

- To work *with* communities, *not for*, on behalf of, or to do things *to* communities;
- To balance power, which in this case would mean that academia and community “need be aware of any working assumptions and of power dynamics and how they impact the

development, sustainability, and success of partnerships;”

- To address racism, because authentic community engagement (1) intentionally addresses issues of race, institutional and structural racism, discrimination and exclusion, and (2) embodies “cultural humility.”

The last principle mentioned is especially relevant for this *eReview* because structural racism is undoubtedly one of the most significant root causes for educational disparities, just as it is for other disparities such as health. Therefore, research on structural racism in education needs to be intentionally designed and conducted.

Furthermore, training on structural racism might benefit both University and community members while creating the partnership. This grounding work will create a safer and much needed space to have discussions about the use of research and also the roles academia and communities should play regarding educational disparities.

There are very important considerations when defining new research on this topic of educational disparities. This *eReview* mentions the role policies have played in creating these disparities. The ability to create effective policies is directly connected with structures of power. Therefore, the study of structural barriers and their role in creating disparities in education needs to be part of a new research agenda.

Latino families are facing many challenges that affect their health - challenges that are deeply connected to the social conditions in which they live. I specifically remember a 14-year-old girl who visited the clinic where I worked. She had started getting bad grades at school, was not sleeping well, and was feeling depressed. After a couple clinic visits, we were able to understand how all these symptoms were connected to her poor housing conditions. This girl, her two younger siblings and her parents were living in a one-bedroom apartment infested by bed bugs. This situation had been happening for months, and their landlord had done nothing to fix the problem. She was sleep-deprived, feeling overwhelmed, and had no sense

of control over her life conditions. Her father was working two jobs and her mother had a part-time job and advocacy work in the community. This story supports the need for research that connects how disparities impact population health for the Latino community, and how stress related to structural, institutional and interpersonal racism impacts our kids’ abilities to attain better outcomes in the educational system.

...the study of structural barriers and their role in creating disparities in education needs to be part of a new research agenda.

### **Isabel Duran-Graybow; Youth Development Clinic Based Project, [Aqui Para Ti](#); School/College Connector**

This research highlighted in this *eReview* can be used in both academic and public spaces. It is important to raise awareness at every level about the fact that the achievement gap between different ethnicities is not an issue that affects students only — it affects us all in a social, cultural, academic, and family way. Closing the achievement gap is the civil rights issue of our time, and we need to make this a priority. This research supports the fact that the United States education system is not providing low-income and minority children access to the high-quality education they need to compete on the same level with their white peers. When we fail to educate all children, the outcome is predictable; eventually students will not have the ability to succeed in college or compete in today’s economy. The consequences can include increased poverty, crime and incarceration, and decreased productivity and quality of life.

The results of research discussed in this *eReview* help us recognize that disparities in academic achievement between white students and Latino students are not only the result of a language barrier. Many situations must be addressed before making the assumption that Spanish-speaking students are not fulfilling expectations. For example, society needs to recognize the lack of Latino students’ access to after-school education

programs and activities, in part because parents are not informed of these programs. How can parents know about these opportunities if they must inquire or enroll online, and they lack this access? Or, are public schools requiring every household to have a computer, and are parents required to know how to navigate online in order for their kids to go to school?

Another problem arises from the way the results of the student evaluations are forwarded as charts and graphs to parents or responsible adults. Based on my personal and professional experience, these graphics are often not understandable to most immigrant families, and they do not know who to ask to explain their meaning. Parents report that these evaluations are irrelevant to them. This means we, as educators, must provide families with information for their kids' best development in ways they can understand. In addition, it is very important for families to know the educational system at their children's school so they can meet expectations the school has of them. However, each school must also expand its knowledge and be open to working with students within their different contexts and strengths.



We have talked a lot about the differences in educational outcomes between white students and students of color, but there are few studies that talk about the reasons that lead to these differences, or how students' experiences are reflected in evaluations of the learning process. Teachers are responsible for the evaluation of student progress – a very challenging task for them.

Trying to measure the acquisition of knowledge, leaving aside the student context in order to give a “letter” or a “number” to this student knowledge, seems unfair. How can we evaluate two individuals with different histories, circumstances and skills in the same way? And how can this evaluation be accurate when those conducting assessments belong to a different racial or ethnic group?

As this *eReview* article notes, one reason for differences in educational outcomes is immigrant students' lack of fluency in English. Students who speak English as a second language are considered English language learners (ELL). Acquiring language and interacting in the classroom as an ELL student is an extremely complex task. English-speaking teachers and peers have an ease with spoken English that ELL students do not. The concentration and effort necessary for students to translate and comprehend English for a full school day is often discounted when considering classroom interactions. Active listening requires a great deal more attention and skill for an ELL student than for a native-born speaker of English. ELL students can feel uncomfortable being singled out for special classes, but also feel a sense of isolation in the mainstream classroom where they spend most of their time. There, they get a sense of never feeling “good” enough, as if they do not truly belong in their school. This could lower their self-esteem and hence their academic achievement.

The research highlighted in this *eReview* presents a more open vision about the expectations of schools regarding parent involvement. Through my experience with Latino immigrant families, I have had the opportunity to listen in on parent-teacher school conferences. Often, teachers do not understand why Latino parents have little involvement with their children's academic achievements, while parents tend to leave such matters to the “experts” (the teachers). Teachers do pay a lot of attention to how the child behaves at school, and parents respect this; many parents consider it a great value in the Latino culture and want to know if what they are teaching at home is reflected at school. But when communication is lacking, immigrant students may not get what they

need. They can sometimes feel paralyzed when they have to make decisions like choosing a sport, an advanced class, or attending higher education after graduation.

There is no "right" way to educate, and every person regardless of ethnicity learns in a different way. It is impossible to measure all students with the same rules. The evaluation measures that are used at the present time are not culturally appropriate for all ethnicities. The research discussed in this *eReview* provides valuable data that helps us recognize the way all students are placed under scrutiny according to a standardized view of white students. The broader picture presented in this research invites us to reflect on why Latino students are held to a lower academic standard in the United States. We need to build bridges between schools and students' families that respect and highlight differences, as well as successfully integrate the roles of each in student development. This integration will help to start closing the achievement and opportunity gaps between Latino students and their white peers.

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