

Emergent Bilingual and Multilingual Learners in California: Californians Together Passing the Torch to the Next Generation of Advocates (1996 to Present)

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I am an immigrant, born to formerly undocumented parents who left Hong Kong for the United States with barely a middle school education and a pair of tourist visas. Separated from my parents for four years, I later joined them at the age of seven. Upon arriving in the United States, I was one of three English Learners (ELs) in the entire elementary school. I had not known at the time what this label would signify until I became a classroom teacher in New York City 15 years later. In my current role as an assistant professor at California Polytechnic State University, part of a network of state universities that prepares approximately 6,000 California teachers annually for public school classrooms (California State University, 2019), my work centers on historical and contemporary perspectives of culturally, racially, and linguistically marginalized peoples and environments. In my daily work as a teacher educator, I prepare future teachers so that they can create more socially just classrooms through deepening their knowledge and practices toward greater civic engagement and advocacy for the most underserved students in their classrooms and schools.

As a newly arrived immigrant learning English, I learned to blend into the background and to hold back tears when faced with questions and tasks that were incomprehensible to me. My parents left their home country because they believed that education in the United States would open doors to opportunity. Because of where my family lived during my adolescence, the public schools I attended were excellent. The schools were well supported, and teachers created multiple ways for me to engage meaningfully with disciplinary ideas while I was simultaneously learning English.

Yet, when I began teaching immigrant and first-generation Puerto Rican and Dominican students—some of whom were ELs—in the South Bronx of New York City, I recognized how ill-prepared I was for the task. My five-week “summer boot camp” as a Teach for America corps member was insufficient preparation for what I needed as a novice teacher and thus a disservice to the students and their families at this public middle school (Labaree, 2010). Though I was eager and motivated as their

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science and English language arts teacher, I did not have the knowledge or teaching practice that would be necessary to get them college- and career-ready. I was not alone in that regard. I frequently saw teachers water down tasks for their students, reflecting lowered expectations for students. I would later come to understand that this systemic lack of teacher preparation was inherent to the system in which I was an educator.

Fast-forward 20 summers from when I first set foot in a classroom as a teacher in New York City, and I have found myself scheduling appointments with my California state senator and assembly member as their constituent. I have joined a new generation of activist leaders organized by Californians Together, a statewide advocacy coalition that brings together voices from all segments of the education community, including teachers, administrators, board members, parents, and civil rights non-profit leaders. Last summer, we gathered in the state capital of Sacramento and discussed issues pertaining to multilingual and emergent bilingual learners, meeting with our respective state legislators to advocate for the passage of legislation and increased budget measures for bilingual teacher training and investments in bilingual program models in California.

I share this story because the work we do as educators—be it classroom teachers, policymakers, or researchers—rests on layers upon layers of complex decision-making. Both macro- and micro-actions and inactions that have occurred over time have resulted in our current state of education. In our current political climate where anti-immigrant language frames Black and Brown immigrants as infestations and invasions (Brown, n.d.), those of us who work with these populations in schools have an obligation and a moral imperative to act and speak against the injustices that have permeated and engulfed the lives of our most vulnerable students. In fact, my journey toward political mobilization grew more pronounced with the 2016 presidential election as the rhetoric and reactions toward immigrants, unaccompanied minors, and undocumented students grew more alienating and toxic. Seeing families torn apart by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has emboldened my charge to work closer with advocacy organizations in pressuring lawmakers to protect and serve the needs of *all* students in our public school classrooms (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982).

In my work, I advocate for students whom our educational system labels as ELs—or “Limited English Proficient” in earlier administrations—and I build from Olsen’s (2009) article in which she explored, “the ways in which advocacy groups engage in efforts to protect immigrant students’ access to, and inclusion in, schools, and how that engagement is shaped and seeks to impact on prevailing policies and ideologies” (p. 817). I reflect on my personal and professional journey to date, as both an insider-outsider as well as boundary spanner (Akkerman, & Bakker, 2011) traversing the worlds of practice, research, and advocacy work for some of our more marginalized learners in our public school systems. I argue that the advocacy work led by Californians Together has been instrumental in how various stakeholders (e.g., teachers, policymakers, and researchers) have engaged in the work with ELs in the arena of legislative policies, aligned research efforts, and redefined ELs with an asset-based orientation. At the core of this advocacy work has been mobilizing educators like myself—so that our collective voices can be heard, and together we build mechanisms to amplify our actions.

In the remainder of this piece, I first provide a brief history of California Proposition 227, commonly known as the English-only bill, which severely limited instruction in students’ home languages, instituted intensive sheltered English immersion programs for children not fluent in English that lasted no longer than one year, and restricted bilingual education efforts throughout the state (California Secretary of State, 1998). Passed by 61.28% of the electorate in 1998, Proposition 227 radically transformed how ELs would be educated, turning back and stalling decades of advocacy work on behalf of immigrant families (Parrish et al., 2006). Twenty-seven years later, on November 8, 2016, California voters overwhelmingly passed Proposition 58—also known as the California Multilingual Education Act—with a 73.5% majority of the votes, essentially repealing the English-only requirement of Proposition 227. This was a significant milestone moment that was a result of nearly three decades of reactionary responses to the deleterious policies, practices, and outcomes from Proposition 227 (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Asato, 2000; Wentworth, Pellegrin, Thompson, & Hakuta, 2010).

Formation of Californians Together: A Reactionary Response to Proposition 227

The tides are changing, and much of the credit goes to the strategic and comprehensive efforts of Californians Together, formed shortly after the passage of Proposition 227, designed to be a coalition and an ongoing voice of advocacy for immigrants and designated ELs in California. With an all hands on deck and a strength-in-numbers approach to systems change, this loosely coupled network of teachers, administrators, board members, researchers, parents, and civil rights non-profit leaders have developed expertise and inserted themselves in leadership roles across the complex formal-education ecosystem that shapes pre-K-12 learning in California (Coburn, 2004; Weick, 1976). The approach was comprehensive, recruiting practicing educators throughout the state so the coalition “could respond with traditional advocacy strategies such as lawsuits, compliance complaints, action alerts, mobilization, and legislation to intervene and mediate when educational access [for ELs] were threatened” (Olsen, 2009, p. 843). Not only was Californians Together mobilizing individual educators through much of their formal and informal networks, the team allied with the Latino Caucus in the legislature and worked in close collaboration with the California Association for Bilingual Education to strengthen their messaging. Together they built a portfolio of work-around policies, practices, and research to reverse the reparable harm that was happening to this population and also to mitigate the growing population of learners classified as “long-term ELs” or students who languish for more than six years in EL status without sufficient English proficiency to be reclassified (Olsen, 2010, p. 1).

More recently, Californians Together formed the EL Leadership and Legacy Initiative (ELLLI), of which I am a member. As the name of the initiative suggests, the team recruits and builds emerging educators’ capacities to continue advocacy work on behalf of immigrants and emerging bilingual and multilingual learners in the California public school system. I had been craving a deeper understanding of the historical perspective and wanting practical skills to advance advocacy and action work across the local, regional, and state levels on behalf of ELs and their families. It is through this initiative that I broadened my portfolio of work into advocacy and expanded my network, which pushed me to consider how the convergence of research, policy, and advocacy influences my motivations and work now as a teacher educator in the California State University system.

Convergence of Research, Policy, and Practices in Reframing the Conversation

The moment I sat down at the first convention of ELLLI in 2018, I knew that the work and the conversations would differ from those that I had as a teacher during professional development, the district leadership meetings in which I participated as part of a research-practice partnership, and the research group meetings that were a core part of my doctoral training. Yet, these communities were all interconnected through the work of passionate educators in support of ELs.

There I was in the summer of 2018, sitting at a roundtable at an ELLLI conference venue along with a district administrator, a teacher educator, a lobbyist, a classroom teacher, and me—a researcher-in-training and future teacher educator. All of us were former ELs and intimately involved in improving the educational experiences of students who shared similar immigration and English language learning journeys in schools. As a collective, we recognized the unequal resources and related outcomes that played out in California schools (Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003). We talked about the demographic changes in our student and teacher populations, the severe shortage of bilingual and multilingual educators (Kaplan & Mesquita, 2019), as well as culturally and linguistically responsive curriculum and assessment that teachers need for their diverse learners (Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee, 2017; Gándara & Mordechay, 2017).

The interconnectedness of the work and the passion we brought to the table were electrifying. We shared our stories of immigration and ways that the political climate has motivated and spurred each of us into action mode. At the core of our conversations were the learners themselves. How do we lessen the harms that are being done via immigration enforcement that have permeated into the communities and schools in which we serve (Ee & Gándara, 2019)? At the same time, how do we reframe the conversation

so that we counter-balance the negative raciolinguistic ideologies that undergirded the momentum behind the passage of Proposition 227 (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa, 2018)?

It was in this space that we examined how our collective advocacy efforts have created opportunities so that the framing, as well as the substance of research and policy efforts, could be aligned to our work with ELs. Seminal pieces that emerged from research included Olsen's (2010) report entitled *Reparable Harm*—a study of 40 California school districts highlighting the urgent need to address the language and academic needs of long-term ELs. A year later in 2011, a research and practice initiative was formed at Stanford University called Understanding Language (see ell.stanford.edu). Co-founded by experimental psycholinguist Kenji Hakuta and a veteran practitioner María Santos who has led EL efforts in New York State and Oakland Unified School District in California, this initiative has brought together practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to create a platform to shape the EL narrative and to produce research and resources that better attend to the needs and assets of culturally and linguistically diverse learners in formal and informal educational spaces. Shortly thereafter, Olsen and Hakuta joined forces and co-led efforts in drafting the *English Learner Roadmap*, which was unanimously adopted by California's State Board of Education in 2017, providing guidance to more than 1,000 local school districts and over 1.3 million designated ELs in the state (California Department of Education, 2017).

Persuading the California Electorate: Changing the Paradigm

Undergirding all of this external-facing work, Californians Together advocated to shift the framing and language being used to describe our students. This included a change from labeling learners as Limited English Proficient and ELs to the now more commonly used terms, such as emergent bilingual and multilingual learners. This framing moves how we view our culturally and linguistically diverse learners from a deficit, or less-than status, to one that is enriching and asset-based in our school communities (Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006). Additional statewide policies and practices put forth by Californians Together included the Seal of Biliteracy, signed into law in 2011, the development and state adoption of English Language Development Standards in 2012 and new World Language Standards in 2018, and a grassroots campaign to support Proposition 58 in 2016. More recently, Californians Together have mobilized two cohorts of ELLLI to push legislation that would fund the expansion of bilingual education (e.g., Assembly Bill 2514; Pupil Instruction: Dual Language Grant Program, 2018) and grow the pipeline of bilingual teachers (e.g., Assembly Bill 952; Bilingual Teacher Professional Development Program, 2017). All of these policies and legislative alliances have contributed to the larger waves of change that shift how we talk about learners and how we build on each other's efforts as part of a coherent advocacy community. No longer are ELs referred to as Limited English Proficient or seen as lacking certain normative values of who our learners are and how they learn. Rather, bilingualism and multilingualism are seen as assets and benefits to learning communities and the world at large. Organizations like Californians Together have built and mentored a community of educators—many of whom are current and former teachers—to imagine a world of limitless possibilities for our culturally and linguistically diverse learners across the California public school system.

EL Roadmap: A Bumpy Road Ahead

The *EL Roadmap* (2017) outlined four key principles: (a) assets-oriented and needs-responsive schools, (b) intellectual quality of instruction and meaningful access, (c) system conditions and support effectiveness, and (d) alignment and articulation within and across systems. At first glance, one could argue that these principles would be good for *all* learners, not only students who may be newly learning English. Shifting from a paradigm that ELs are no longer solely the responsibility of the English language development teacher to one where these learners are included and integrated within and across *all* content classrooms, much work is needed across the four principles in how we support all teachers so that culturally and linguistically diverse learners can thrive throughout the school day and have successful educational and life trajectories (Valdés, Kibler, & Walqui, 2014).

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Already, existing state policies, such as the Local Control Funding Formula, that govern how schools are funded have had unintended consequences for this population (Auditor of the State of California, 2019; Zarate & Gándara, 2019). The passage of Proposition 58 remains only symbolic in meaning given the absence of funds to support the work (e.g., increasing teacher capacity and growing the next generation of bilingual/multilingual educators). Lastly, much work is needed in the development and application of instructional and assessment resources supported by research findings so that we can educate English learners as emergent bilinguals and multilingual learners (García & Kleifgen, 2010; Goldenberg, 2013).

What I am most appreciative of in this early journey as an ELLLI advocate is the cross-pollination of ideas and the ability to move fluidly within a network of educational stakeholders in building a *coherent* and *collective* vision of the work for this population. Even though my professional role sits within the community of teacher educators in the academy, I have the opportunity to join forces with others so that our work is more tightly coupled and targeted in achieving the coalition's goals. The individual voices in our respective educational learning spaces are weak when they are uncoordinated. By banding together in support of advancing educational and life outcomes for ELs, our collective impact is more coherent and powerful. At the same time, I also recognize the multi-dimensionality of our work as educators—that our roles are dynamic, and we have much to learn regarding how other parts of the system operate and impact movement toward our goals. The more opportunities we have to collaborate toward shared goals across the complex educational ecosystem, the greater collective power we have in creating a more socially just educational system where those who have been traditionally marginalized and dehumanized can thrive.

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