

Book Review

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Beyond “Bilingual” Education: New Immigrants and Public School Policies in California, by Alec Ian Gershberg, Anne Danenberg, & Patricia Sánchez. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2004. 234 pp. Pb. \$29.50

One of the first questions I asked my Foundations of Bilingual Education class this semester was the difference between language-minority students, English language learners (ELLs), and immigrant students. I was spurred to ask the question by my reading of Gershberg, Danenberg, and Sánchez’s new book, *Beyond “Bilingual” Education*, because the main thrust of their argument is that the distinctions between these groups are too often overlooked in education research, policy, and practice, to the detriment of both immigrant students and the non-immigrant language-minority population.

My mostly first- and second-year master’s and doctoral students easily answered the immediate questions—“Are all language-minority students immigrants?” and “Are all English learners immigrants?”—with “no’s” and head shaking. With the exception of a few who were new to the field of language-minority education, they understood the labels. However, the discussion in my class continued for quite some time as students contributed their experiences as immigrants, as ELLs, as language-minority students in U.S. schools, and as practitioners working with these different populations. There were overlaps in their experiences, as well as very clear distinctions. There were instances where my students felt misunderstood by the research they had read that clouded these differences. Several students experienced a feeling of “wow” as we clarified the distinctions. The most valuable contribution of Gershberg et al.’s book is to open up the conversation and untangle the places where the characteristics, experiences, and needs of immigrants differ from those of ELLs or of language-minority students in general. Of course, the hope is that this clarification will help educators address the more specific concerns of the distinct groups.

I should point out that the authors generally refer to ELLs but not so much to language-minority students. This is a likely artifact of their location, California, which since the passage of Proposition 227 in 1998 has almost universally shifted language in referring to linguistic minorities as *ELLs* (Unz & Tuchman, 1997). Perhaps it is also an artifact of their attempt to maintain a “neutral stance” in the face of the highly politically charged nature of the debates surrounding ELL education in the state and the nation. Perhaps it is simply an attempt to keep their topic narrow enough to explore thoroughly. It is, however, impossible to write a book—even to talk about issues—in this field without taking a stand politically. By referring to students as *ELLs*, the authors decided to take on the discourse of post-Unz services to these students. How are we to define our students (and ourselves), by the language they are learning or by the status of the language they already own? Although most immigrants are learners of English, and all learners of English are by definition speakers of another (minority) language, the term *language-minority students* is broader than either *immigrants* or *ELLs*. It encompasses students who are already fluent bilinguals; students who are members of traditionally oppressed language communities whether or not they maintain fluency in that language; and speakers of dialects of English such as African American English. By limiting their discussion to ELLs rather than opening it up to the issues of language-minority students, they in fact limited their analysis, effectively avoiding the elephant-in-the-classroom of race and class issues.

However, merely pulling apart the entangled labels of *ELL* and *immigrant* offers enough challenge to fill seven chapters rich with information that policymakers definitely need access to. After a brief introduction to their project and mixed methodology (Chapter 1), the authors begin with their quantitative analysis.

In Chapter 2, they paint a statistical portrait of ELLs and of recent immigrants, describing their schools in California. They synthesize statewide data that are readily available on the Web, principally focusing on the five largest school districts in the state. In Chapter 3, the authors make the statistical case for treating ELLs and recent immigrants separately in policy decisions. They work to untangle ELL data from recent immigrant data at the school level, looking at factors such as achievement test scores, school-level resources, segregation, languages spoken, and nations of origin. Their analysis is compelling: Both ELL and immigrant students populate schools that are less resourced, have lower standardized test scores, have less prepared teachers, and are more segregated than the average; but ELL students are far worse off than immigrant students in all of these categories. Thus, they conclude, “we echo Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix (2000) in the belief that California has much more of a ‘long-term ELL problem’ than it does a ‘recent immigrant problem’” (p. 60).

There are some very valuable insights in these two chapters. For example, the average ELL elementary school student in the five districts studied was in a school that was over 85% low socioeconomic status. Such a heavy concentration of poverty in the schools of ELLs! Also contrary to common misconceptions about Hispanic students, according to this analysis, non-Hispanic ELLs are actually in schools that are lower scoring than schools with Hispanic ELLs. And countering beliefs about the segregating quality of newcomer programs, the authors show that the one district among their five with no explicit newcomer programs has the worst record of segregation of recent immigrant students.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 comprise the qualitative piece, in which the authors set out to pay attention in particular to the issues of immigrant students beyond their status as ELLs. The authors analyze the data gathered in interviews with district officials, principals, and teachers in the same five largest school districts in the state. They begin by discussing in general the challenges immigrant students face and the wide variety of ways schools respond to these challenges. Among the most commonly cited challenges are: language differences, cultural differences, poverty, inability to navigate the school system, and low levels of prior schooling. In describing solutions districts have tried, the authors first explore explicit newcomer programs, or “de jure” programs, which, while existent in all but one of the five large districts, were still severely inadequate to meet the needs of recent immigrant students. Far more interesting—and in some cases, inspiring—were the “de facto” and “ad hoc” approaches that individual schools or teachers have tried, including small-group instruction, “partnering” new students with a classmate, regular (every morning!) meetings with new immigrant parents, tapping community resources to assist with translation, needs surveys, and orientation processes.

In Chapters 5 and 6, the authors take a closer look at two aspects of the immigrant experience: the impact on recent immigrants of the current policy debates concerning language acquisition in the schools; and the efficacy (or in the opinion of many respondents, lack thereof) of current assessment, placement, and accountability systems for recent immigrants. Although it is not surprising, it is sobering to see the extent to which school personnel find themselves battling with existent policy in order to serve immigrant children.

The strongest part of the qualitative section is the way it gives voice to educators who work with immigrant students and their families in California. The analysis is peppered with their comments and insights. These are the voices we need to hear more in policy and research circles, and these are the voices we seldom hear.

On the other hand, the voices most missing from this book are the voices of immigrants themselves. We hear teachers and administrators telling us what parents’ concerns are, what students struggle with, and what “immigrant issues” are, and we see the statistics that define the immigrant and ELL

experiences in California schools. But we never hear the voices of those immigrants themselves. This is of course a different project entirely and possibly beyond the scope of the book, but the lack of immigrant voices in a book intending to define their experiences in the schools struck this reader as a serious flaw.

Overall, however, *Beyond "Bilingual" Education* essentially accomplishes what it sets out to do: Using statistical analysis and qualitative interview data, it begins the process of untangling our understandings of the issues and challenges for recent immigrant students and for ELLs. Focused as it is on California's five largest school districts, it covers a surprisingly large number of these students, and can offer insight into the issues urban districts are facing nationwide. In this, it is definitely worth a read.

References

- Ruiz-de-Velasco, J., & Fix, M. (2000). *Overlooked and underserved: Immigrant students in US secondary schools*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- Unz, R., & Tuchman, G. M. (1997). *Text of Proposition 227, "English for the Children."* Retrieved June 7, 2005, from <http://www.onenation.org/fulltext.html>