



A Critical Perspective on the Educational Labeling of Multilingual Students in the United States

Why are multilingual children labeled in US schools?

Educational policy, such as the Bilingual Education Act (1967), mandates equal treatment and educational opportunities for students from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. In recognition of the needs of students who speak one or more language(s), the federal government imposes labels to identify children based on their proficiency in English, the language of instruction in schools. The process of being labeled begins when a student is enrolled in a public school. Guardians of students in public schools must complete a *Home Language Survey* which asks if a language other than English is spoken at home. If so, the student's "proficiency" in English is assessed. Children are then labelled as "English proficient", or alternatively either "Limited English Proficient" (LEP) and "English learner" (EL). Children from communities of color¹ are the ones who predominantly bear the LEP and EL labels.

Why is this problematic?

The LEP and EL labels explicitly name ways in which minoritized children are seen as different from the w/White, English-speaking mainstream. They focus only on who children are not and what they cannot do. This deficit orientation erases students' cultural, racial, and linguistic ways of being and promotes w/Whiteness and "standard" English monolingualism as the norm. The use of these deficit-based labels impacts teachers' perceptions of students' intellectual abilities and students' access to more advanced learning opportunities and diverse peer relationships.

The labelling may also follow students throughout their educational trajectories. For example, in California children's language development is tracked through five different labels (e.g., English Learner, Reclassified Fluent English Proficient, Ever English Learner, Long-term English Learner, Redesignated as Fluent English Proficient). This sort of intricate deficit-oriented tracking of language fails to recognize the dynamic multilingualism students embody. For example, "Long-term English Learner" describes students as "orally bilingual" but deficient in both English and the minoritized language, and does not acknowledge the ways in which students' bilingualism can be used for learning and for the co-construction of positive academic and bilingual identities. Instead, it serves as a form of institutional surveillance of students from immigrant backgrounds that may have serious implications for both their academic and bilingual development.

What can teachers do to combat deficit labeling and perspectives?

Teachers can draw on students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds as a starting point for learning.

Strength-based labels - Identifying children who are developing an additional language in schools as "emergent bilinguals" or as bilingual/multilingual students learning English frames students as learners who have primary language assets. These labels capture how children are engaged in creatively using the full range of their language knowledge and practices to approach academic tasks. They also encourage educators to focus on how the children use their languages inside the classroom and in their communities. This asset-based orientation values students' multilingualism.

Teacher positioning and learning - When teachers believe students' home languages pose barriers for learning and it is not their professional responsibility to support students' use of primary languages for learning, they position multilingual students as invisible within the classroom. When teachers embrace the responsibility of teaching all students, they can empower multilingual learners by leveraging students' culture and primary languages as resources for learning. The use of multicultural and multilingual children's books, for example, offers opportunities to affirm primary and community-based languages, serve as a reflection of students' lived experiences or a window into new perspectives. Teachers may also use these texts to facilitate salient discussions about social inequities which reflect the experiences of students from marginalized backgrounds.

¹ Communities of color is a label used to represent members of brown and black (immigrant) communities such as Latinx and African-American peoples.



Resources for Educators, Practitioners and Scholars:

- [NCTE Policy Brief](#): "Understanding Translanguaging in US Literacy Classrooms: Reframing Bi-/Multilingualism as the Norm"
- [The Educational Linguist](#) by Nelson Flores
- [The Center for Applied Linguistics](#) (CAL)
- Columbia University- New York, New York State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals ([CUNY - NYSIEB](#))
- [Colorín Colorado](#)

Dr. Suzanne García-Mateus is an Assistant Professor and the Director of the Monterey Institute for English Learners at California State University- Monterey Bay. Her research examines the intersection of language, race and class in school and community contexts and aims at centering the experiences of students of color.

Dr. Joanna Wong is Associate Professor in the College of Education at California State University, Monterey Bay. Her teaching and research address culturally and linguistically sustaining pedagogy for multilingual and culturally diverse K-12 students.

Dr. Sofia E. Chaparro is an Assistant Professor at the University of Colorado Denver in the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Education program at the School of Education and Human Development. She investigates how race and class influence ideologies of language development and bilingualism as well as equity in bilingual programs.