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Elementary School Progress Lags for Some Linguistic Minority Students

A new study, featured in the UC Linguistic Minority Research Institute's current newsletter, finds that a growing achievement gap separates California's linguistic minority students -- those who come from households in which a language other than English is spoken regularly -- from native speakers.

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of Kindergarteners followed a group of 9,976 students across the country from their first day of kindergarten in 1998 through the end of their fifth grade year in 2004. Researchers monitored their progress in reading, language and mathematics. According to the study's findings, the gap in language and reading skills that existed in kindergarten improved for some groups, but worsened for others as they moved through elementary school. Math achievement, however, showed greater relative improvement. Further, the study found the greatest disparities between English-only speakers and children who came from Spanish-dominant households.

"It's a pretty sobering picture to see how far we have to go to improve the outcome for English learners," said Russell Rumberger, director of the UC LMRI, a University of California systemwide research center based at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Rumberger, who is also a professor in the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, wrote the feature article that appears in the Institute's winter newsletter. The newsletter is published quarterly and distributed to 3,500 academics, educators, and policymakers throughout the United States.

The study, which was conducted under the auspices of the National Center for Educational Statistics, found that in the fall of 1998 more than half of all kindergarteners in California came from non-English-speaking households, as compared to 16 percent in the rest of the United States. Of those students in California, well over half came from homes in which Spanish was the dominant language, roughly a third spoke a second language at home but used English primarily, and the rest came from households with another dominant language.

"We're not surprised to see these large achievement gaps early on," said Rumberger. "The fact that there's little improvement in reading and language skills isn't encouraging considering how important they are for learning later on. Language demands increase with grade level, and the fact that they're having trouble starting secondary school portends a lot of problems ahead."

To understand the differences in students' backgrounds, the study also examined the socioeconomic status of their families. Family socioeconomic status measures family income, parental education, and parental occupational status. Together, these factors are useful indicators of family resources and a strong predictor of subsequent student achievement. The study identified Spanish-dominant households as the most economically disadvantaged in California and the United States.

According to Rumberger, the study's overall findings call into question California's efforts to educate the state's growing linguistic minority population -- especially Spanish-speaking students -- and to close the sizeable achievement gap with other students.

"These students represent half our school-age population, so the future of the state rests on our ability to educate them successfully," he said. "If part of our goal is to eliminate achievement differences, then we have a long way to go."

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