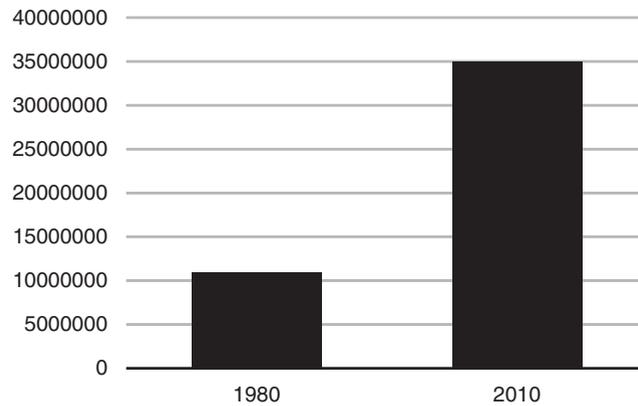

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The Changing Landscape of U.S. Schools

A Call to Action

According to the 2010 census, the United States is now home to more than 50 million Hispanics, and this number is projected to top 132.8 million by 2050. Hispanics accounted for more than half the growth of the total population from 2000 to 2010, though 63 percent of the increase resulted from births, not immigration. At this time, one in six people, and one in four children, living in America is Hispanic.

Figure 1.1 The number of U.S. residents who speak Spanish at home has increased from 11,000,000 in 1980 to 35,000,000 today.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a.

Top 10 List: States With the Highest Hispanic Populations

	Number of People	Percentage of Total State Population
California	14,013,719	37.6
Texas	9,460,921	37.6
Florida	4,223,806	22.5
New York	3,416,922	17.6
Illinois	2,027,578	15.8
Arizona	1,895,149	29.6
New Jersey	1,555,144	17.7
Colorado	1,038,687	20.7
New Mexico	953,403	46.3
Nevada	716,501	26.5

Source: *Race and Hispanic or Latino: 2010—United States—Places and (for Selected States) County Subdivisions With 50,000 or More Population by State; and for Puerto Rico 2010 Census Summary File 1* (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c).

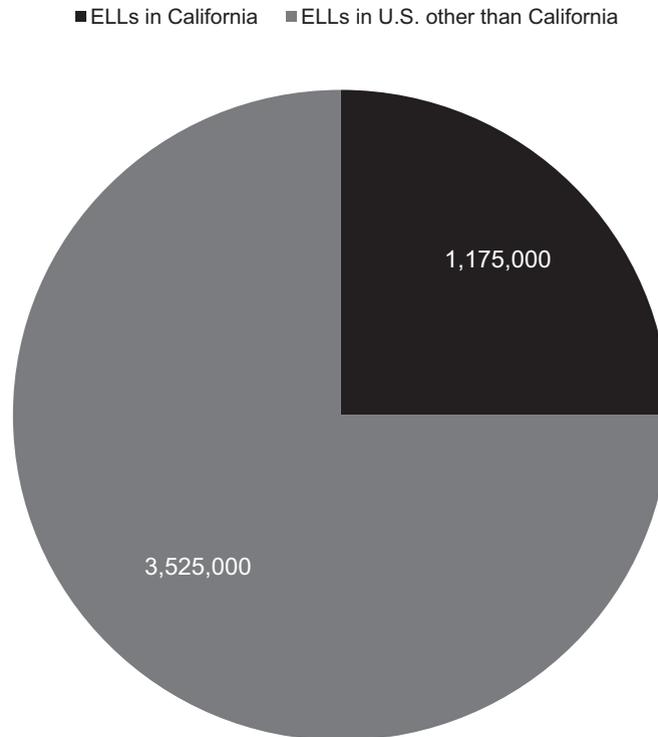
Demographics

In this chapter we look at the growing number of immigrants who speak primarily Spanish in the home. Considering the increase in the number of U.S. residents who speak Spanish at home from 1980 to today (see Figure 1.1), you can see why you may face a challenge as a teacher adapting resources to meet the varying needs of students in your classroom, or as an administrator who is searching for resources and strategies to satisfy the full spectrum of educational needs presented by an evolving population. The school district is a microcosm for the changing landscape of American demographics and manifests the same tensions and struggles of people wanting to assimilate and fit in without suffering the loss of cultural identity, language, and society.

Children who speak primarily Spanish at home are likely to be first- or second-generation immigrants. This demographic can be challenging to schools ill-equipped to deal with their numbers and varying levels of fluency and academic proficiency. These are also the students who may have the hardest time assimilating into school in the first place, on top of a traumatic move to a foreign country and culture. In states that have large migrant populations, such as California and Washington, even greater challenges arise when children move from place to place, often changing schools or missing classes for periods of time as their families move to find the next job.

Then there are families who do not speak English at all, parents who may not have had the opportunity for extensive education in their home countries, and others who feel little connection to schools or are too overburdened to oversee their children's education. All of this can be overwhelming, especially in the face of language barriers and student uniqueness, as well as, in many cases, poverty. These factors and others have been cited to explain a startling achievement gap even among third-generation Hispanics. Using important data points, we here highlight a number of the challenges to be overcome in the education of our country's Hispanic students. But do not despair! The remainder of this book offers information and strategies for teachers and administrators who are looking for practical steps they can take to build an effective learning environment for Hispanic students and English language learners (ELLs).

Dr. Francisco Jiménez, now a professor at Santa Clara University, describes his nomadic life as a child of Mexican migrant workers in his book *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* (1997). For years, his poverty-stricken family dreamed of California where "people there sweep money off the streets." However when they stepped into life as seasonal harvesters, cold, hard reality set in. The family lived in tents, garages, or dilapidated barracks while his father, mother, and brother did backbreaking work in the fields. Young Francisco was in and out of school depending on the family's location, his need to generate income for the family, and the time of year. He describes his shyness in class, his embarrassment to speak or read aloud on account of his accent, and the teachers that believed in him regardless of communication limitations. The book is written with an honesty that does not include bitterness or regret—simply the reality of the migrant experience from the perspective of a man who memorized English words and definitions as he picked cotton and strawberries, and, ultimately, went on to receive a PhD from Columbia University and become a professor and writer.

Figure 1.2 English Language Learners in the U.S. and California

Did you know? California educates nearly one fourth of the country's ELLs. A whopping 25 percent (or 1.5 million) of California's K-12 students are English learners. Some 85 percent of these students speak Spanish as their primary language, and 85 percent are economically disadvantaged.

Source: Payán & Nettles (2006, pp. 1-8).

Potential Obstacles to Educating Hispanic Youth

Language Barrier

The population of students whose primary home language is Spanish is rapidly growing in U.S. schools. The 35.5 million people living in the United States who self-identified as speaking only Spanish (or Spanish Creole) at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009) computes to 12.4 percent of our total population (see Figure 1.3). This

Figure 1.3 Chart of U.S. Residents Who Speak Only Spanish or Spanish Creole at Home

1980	1990	2000	2007	2009	Percentage change 1980-2009	Percentage of population
11,116,194	17,345,064	28,101,052	34,547,077	35,468,501	319	12.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007; American Community Survey, 2009.

reflects an increase of 126 percent since the year 2000, and an increase of 319 percent since 1980. The numbers keep growing due to large immigration levels, primarily from Mexico, and a high fertility rate for Hispanic females giving birth to children while already living in the United States.

Many students enter school without knowing a word of English. In fact, as of 2009, there were a reported 4.7 million ELLs in schools nationwide. The majority of these students speak only Spanish at home. Of all ELLs, 61 percent are in elementary school and 20 percent are in middle school. Furthermore, of those 35.5 million U.S. residents who reportedly speak only Spanish at home, 45.7 percent of them claim that they speak English “less than very well.” We can conclude by the age breakdowns that more than 50 percent of the parents of students that speak only Spanish at home have limited to no knowledge of English.

However, many students designated as ELLs were born and have undergone all of their schooling in the United States. They have parents that do speak English and, even so, have been on the ELL track for much of their schooling career. While the average time spent in an effective bilingual program is three years, it takes between three and five years for a student to obtain basic oral proficiency, but between five and seven years to attain academic proficiency. Working up to academic proficiency can account for a large percentage of a child’s education, so it is important that both bilingual programs and mainstream classroom experiences be effective and supportive to the student.

Poverty

Adding to language barriers are obstacles of poverty. A compilation of data by the National Center for Education Statistics (2009b) reported that 77 percent of Hispanic public school fourth graders

I could see how difficult it was for my mother to try and buy us new clothes for school, so in fourth grade I began to work in the fields picking fruit in the hot sun just so I could buy my own clothes and so that my mom could have enough money to provide for my siblings. This has made me a hard worker, and it opened my eyes and made me realize that I do want to succeed and I will follow my dreams. My vision is to get a higher education and to protect our country, the United States of America, the country where my family lived and struggled.

—Elena, high school student

were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, in comparison to 48 percent of eligible students in the general population. The Census Bureau's American Community Survey in 2009 revealed that the poverty rate for Hispanics was roughly 25.3 percent in this country, as compared to a poverty rate of 14.3 percent for the total population. That translates to more than 11 million Latinos living in poverty, which in 2009 for a family of four was set at \$22,050 in earnings per year. The median income for Hispanic families is \$40,000 per year, as opposed to \$50,000 for the aggregate populace. If we expand our net of data to consider that 29 percent of Hispanics are reportedly living at one to two times the poverty level, the conclusion is that more than 50 percent of Hispanics are living in some degree of poverty.

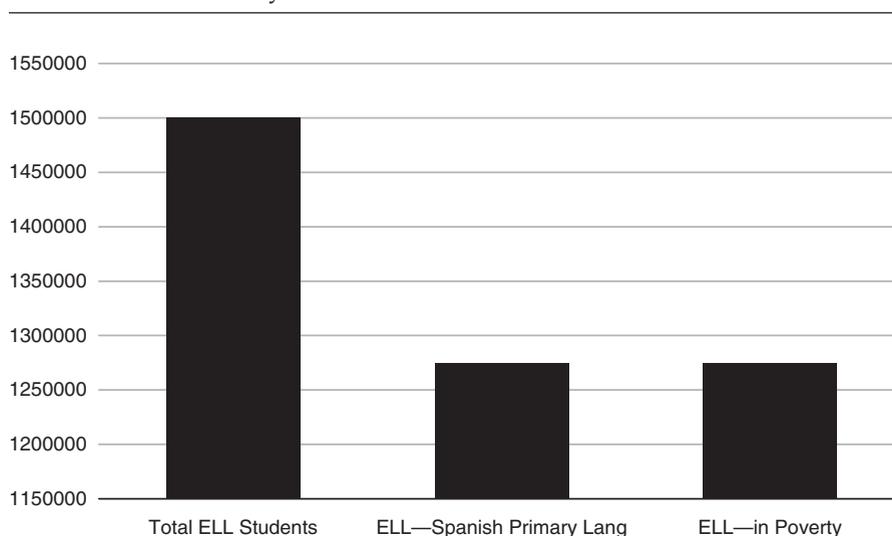
Poverty has far-reaching implications on projected school success, as many studies have shown. It also can cause students to leave school early in order to work to support their families.

A recent report commissioned by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation found that high-achieving first graders in poverty dropped from the ranks of high achievers during their first four years of elementary school, often not finishing high school or going on to college.

When they enter elementary school, high-achieving, lower-income students mirror America both demographically and geographically. They exist proportionately to the overall first grade population among males and females and within urban, suburban, and rural communities, and are similar to the first grade population in terms of race and ethnicity (African-American, Hispanic, white, and Asian). (Wyner, Bridgeland, & DiIulio, 2009, pp. 4–5)

Unfortunately, high achievement is not sustained throughout even the elementary years. This results in poor performance in school that often leads to underachievement, extended placement in remedial tracks, and leaving school early.

Figure 1.4 U.S. ELLs With Spanish as Primary Language and U.S. ELLs in Poverty



Source: U.S. Department of Education. Total Number of English Learners: 2008-09.

High-Poverty Schools

The data show that Latino students are more likely to attend high-poverty schools, defined as schools where between 76 and 100 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. In the 2008–2009 school year, 21 percent of U.S. public school students were Hispanic, but 45 percent of students at high-poverty schools were Hispanic. High-poverty schools are most likely to be situated in cities, have more limited English proficient (LEP) students (25 percent compared to 4 percent of students at low-poverty schools), higher instances of violence and crime, teachers and principals with lower educational attainments, higher teacher-to-student ratios, and lower performance on standard assessments (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010b). Figure 1.4 shows that, while certainly not all ELL students live in poverty, a large percentage of ELLs do and many of those students speak Spanish as their primary language.

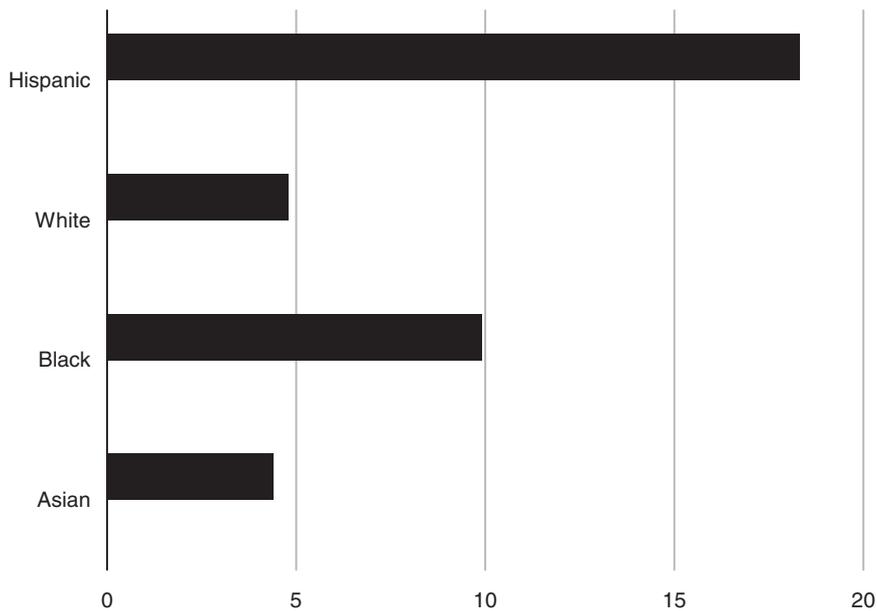
High School Dropout Rate

The high school status dropout rate (defined as the percentage of young adults aged 16 to 24 who were not enrolled in a high school program and had not received a high school diploma or obtained an equivalency certificate) for Hispanics is double the general dropout rate of all youths. It is four times that of white students and double that of African Americans. About 17.2 percent of Hispanics drop out

of high school, compared to 8.3 percent of students overall. The dropout rate is higher for foreign-born students than for students born in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010c). As Renzulli and Park (2000) reported, students are influenced to drop out by factors including race, sex, socioeconomic status, family background, and personal problems. They cited Beacham (1980) as concluding “lack of interest in school is one of the major reasons for dropping out” (p. 263).

Though the Hispanic dropout rate is high compared to other ethnicities (see Figure 1.5), the good news is that the data show it has gradually decreased over the past 30 years. But, as the Hispanic population continues to grow and if the dropout rate remains, there are major implications to our communities and economy. Lacking a high school degree limits job possibilities and increases the probability that a family will, in turn, live in poverty and at risk. In fact, a 2011 report on earnings by the U.S. Department of Education compiled Census Bureau data to show that males ages 25 to 34 who have not completed high school earn about \$10,000 per year less than those

Figure 1.5 High School Dropout Rate by Ethnicity



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2010b). *The Condition of Education 2010* (NCES 2010-028).

with a high school degree or equivalent, and \$22,000 per year less than those with a bachelor's degree or higher. The median income of those without a high school degree is between \$19,000 and \$23,000 per year, which hovers around the poverty level for a family of four. High school dropouts are more likely to become involved in crime (Lochner & Moretti, 2004) or be unemployed (Caspi, Wright, Moffit, & Silva, 1998). A pool of Latino workers less skilled and less prepared will not be good for our communities or for our country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

In a 2009 survey by the Pew Hispanic Center, Hispanic youths ages 16 to 25 were asked, "Why don't Hispanic students do as well as others in school?" Students responded with a combination of the following explanations:

- Parents of Hispanic students do not play an active role in their education.
- Hispanic students know less English.
- Too many teachers do not know how to work with Hispanic students.

These responses were especially strong among first-generation Hispanics, those who were born outside of the 50 states (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). Their explanations, of course, are not scientific but do reflect the personal experience of Latino students and their perceptions of the problem, as well as their acknowledgement that there is, indeed, an achievement gap. In this book we examine ways in which we as educators can help to reverse this trend.

College Enrollment Rates

From 2009 to 2010, there was a 24 percent increase in Hispanic college enrollment numbers for 18- to 24-year-olds (Tavernise, 2011). This is good news, especially since only 7 percent of this gain can be explained by population growth (Fry, 2011). Rising educational attainment over time and the weak labor market are two additional factors that have contributed to the increase. However, the proof is in the pudding, or in this case, the graduation. The fact remains that, though almost a third of young Hispanics are currently enrolled in college (see Figure 1.6), the odds that these students will graduate are low. So, while we have seen positive growth over the past three decades, there is more work to be done.

Figure 1.6 College Enrollment by Ethnicity

	College Enrollment Rates by Ethnicity, 2010	Completed at Least a Bachelor's Degree, 2010
	18- to 24-year-olds	25- to 29-year-olds
Hispanics	32%	13%
(Native-Born Hispanics	n/a	20%)
Black	38%	19%
White	43%	39%
Asian	62%	53%

Source: Pew Hispanic Center (Fry, 2011, pp. 4–5) analysis of the October 2010 Current Population Survey.

Disproportionality: Hispanics in Special Education

Additional eye-opening data illustrate that ELLs (most of whom are Hispanic) are in some states referred to, and enrolled in, special education at higher-than-normal rates. In 2008, 13.2 percent of all students were served under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009a, 2010a). An example of disproportion occurs in state data from the same year, which shows that 28.36 percent of ELLs in California were categorized as learning disabled (California Department of Education, 2009b). In New Mexico, that number was 20.5 percent, and in Texas it was more proportional at 15 percent (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2008).

Research has shown that disproportionality (quantities of students above or below the proportionate rate) results when referrals are based on subjective criteria, such as informal teacher recommendations, versus objective criteria, such as early universal screening (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2007). Numerous factors could explain the disproportionality of ELLs in special education. Teachers may feel that a student will benefit from more one-on-one time that a special education placement might afford. Some districts do not address certain student issues without a special education label, or students may have behavioral issues that cause special education referrals. Students may be falling behind on school work and, with limited classroom resources, few aides, or little to no ESL training, teachers are desperate to help the child. Or, low performance results not from a learning disability but from nonmastery of English language skills.

For Further Reading

Off Track: When Poor Readers Become "Learning Disabled" by Louise Spear-Swerling and Robert J. Sternberg (Westview Press, 1998)

"Language Difference or Learning Disability? Answers from a Linguistic Perspective" by Rod E. Case and Shanon S. Taylor, in *The Clearing House* (Vol. 78, No. 3, Jan.-Feb., 2005), pp. 127-130

Implications for Students Misplaced in Special Education

- Once students are receiving special education services, they tend to remain in special education classes.
- Students are likely to encounter a limited, less rigorous curriculum.
- Lower expectations can lead to diminished academic and postsecondary opportunities.
- Students in special education programs can have less access to academically able peers.
- Disabled students are often stigmatized socially.
- Disproportionality can contribute to significant racial separation.

Source: From *Truth in Labeling: Disproportionality in Special Education*. National Education Association report (2007).

If it is true that special education programs engender students to receive more one-on-one attention and have smaller class sizes, would this not be beneficial regardless, even if a real learning disability does not exist? The research answers with a resounding "No"! First, consider that "a 2000 survey of 500 special education teachers by the Council for Exceptional Children found that most reported devoting less than one hour a week to one-on-one time with students" (Snell, 2002, p. 2). Additionally, while some ELLs may need special services, the support they receive in special education often does not apply to their needs and may even compound the problem by placing them in classes with low expectations and less rigorous curriculum. Latino students are at risk from this standpoint, as they are two times as likely to be placed in limited special educational settings removed from the general classroom (Harvard University, 2002).

Federal Definition of *Specific Learning Disability* (SLD)

- (i) *General.* The term *specific learning disability* means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.
- (ii) *Disorders included.* Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.
- (iii) *Disorders not included.* Such term does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

Source: U.S. Department of Education (2010).

Students are placed in special education programs under the following categories: mental retardation, hard of hearing, deaf, speech or language impairment, visual impairment, emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, deaf/blindness, multiple disability, autism, traumatic brain injury, and specific learning disability (SLD). Children labeled with SLD account for more than half of students served under IDEA (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010a).

The federal definition of SLD is detailed in the box above. Each state has its own definition as well. According to a National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (2007) white paper, SLD is overidentified due to a number of factors, including inconsistency in definition and identification processes. A 2002 report to the President's Commission for Excellence in Special Education confirmed that:

[T]he lack of consistently applied diagnostic criteria for SLD makes it possible to diagnose almost any low- or under-achieving child as SLD depending on resources and other local considerations. . . . To the extent that teachers are not prepared to manage behavior or instruct those with learning characteristics that make them "at risk" in general education, minority children will be more likely to be referred. (p. 25)

I am the daughter of Mexican parents and the ninth of eleven children. My parents never had a formal education and did not speak English when they first came to the United States. I was an English language learner and misplaced into special education along with a number of my peers. I later was placed into the gifted and talented program. Because there were no bilingual interpreters, my parents did not attend school conferences and could never assist with homework due to the language barrier and work schedule. My parents expected that Spanish would be spoken at home and that English was to be spoken in school. When I became a principal of a school of more than 95 percent English language learners, mostly Hispanic, I knew that we as a school needed to make sure parents understood how our school system worked. Many of the teachers and I were fortunate to know Spanish and our school site council meetings turned into opportunities for us as a school to provide parent education. The number of parents attending meetings went from 10 to more than 100 parents on a monthly basis. The comfort in speaking to teachers and an administrator that spoke their language and came from a similar upbringing was reassuring to them. We became somebody they could trust. There was no hesitation in our minds that these parents were eager to learn. These parents cared about the success of their children and these parents wanted to be involved.

—Olivia Bolaños, coauthor and school administrator

This report also found that 80 percent of students labeled with SLD are thus diagnosed “simply because they haven’t learned to read” (p. 3).

This trend in high-Hispanic instances of SLD is highlighted by individual state data. The data report that 51 percent of students enrolled in special education in California are Hispanic (California Department of Education, 2009b). That is close to proportionate since the population of Hispanic students comprises 49 percent of the overall school population in the state. However, a closer analysis of the disability breakdowns clarifies that Hispanic students in California are more than two and a half times as likely to be labeled with SLD than are white students, and they are one and a half times more likely to be labeled with SLD than all other races combined (i.e., the other half of the student body). SLD is an example of a learning disability categorization that is based largely on subjective measures, versus blindness or deafness, which are clearly objective. The overrepresentation of Hispanics in this category suggests that educators must take great care in assessing student ability or disability, as the case may be.

Having said all this, there is a converse issue of underrepresentation of ELL students in special education in some districts or states. Sometimes it is the “haves”—families who can hire an outside advocate for their children—that end up benefiting from services. This issue again points to the need for clearer definitions, accurate assessments, and understanding of individuals and cultural contexts.

Underrepresentation in Gifted Programs

Simultaneously, the data reveal that nationally, 6.4 percent of all students are enrolled in gifted programs while only 1.4 percent of ELL students are enrolled in these programs (Hopstock & Stephenson, 2003). In school year 2009–2010 in Oregon (which has had a 114 percent growth in its Hispanic student population since 1999), Hispanics comprised only 2 percent of the Talented and Gifted (TAG) population but 7 percent overall (Oregon Department of Education, 2010). In California, while Hispanic students represented almost half of the student body, they only made up 30.6 percent of Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) students in 2008 and 2009 (California Department of Education, 2009a). These numbers are troubling when we consider that every child’s future depends on being accurately assessed and placed in a program that best fosters his growth and achievement.

Many theories explain why minorities or low socioeconomic status students are underrepresented in gifted programs (Clark, 2007).

Carol Ann Tomlinson comments on the importance of understanding student *affect*, or attitudes toward and about school and their own possibilities for achievement, as it relates to disproportionality of minority students (overrepresentation in special education, underrepresentation in gifted programs):

Students of color and poverty hear the message clearly, “Achievement is not really yours. This won’t work for you.” . . . It is reiterated when school does not connect with my language, my neighborhood, my family, and so on. It is likely that understanding the imperative of building affective bridges to cognitive achievement for bright kids from low economic and minority backgrounds is our next step in the very steep learning curve for educators who truly care to make schools and classrooms doorways to self-actualization for all who come our way. (Tomlinson, 2002, p. 41)

Most likely the phenomenon stems from a combination of factors. Carolyn M. Callahan (2005), professor in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, frames the issue in this way:

[T]he more common belief is that there are few students who come from ethnic minority groups or from families in poverty who are capable of developing into gifted children and adults or of exhibiting gifted behaviors. . . . As a consequence, the focus of instruction for these children becomes mired in low-level, drill-and-kill practice of mundane, uninteresting, and unmotivating learning tasks. The children in these classrooms are never exposed to and are not given the opportunity to explore their ability to be creative, critical, analytic, and high-level thinkers and problem solvers in the school environment. (p. 99)

The recommendation to test a child for qualification in a gifted program generally comes from one of two people: a teacher or a parent. If intelligence knows no ethnic bounds, why are the rates of Hispanic enrollment in gifted programs so low?

Barriers to Entry

There are a number of possible reasons why teachers or parents may not recommend Hispanic students for testing, or why students do not qualify:

- Hispanic parents are unaware of the characteristics of gifted children, how to identify these in their children, and the program opportunities available for a child manifesting these characteristics.
- Schools have been unable to cross the language or cultural barrier to educate teachers on identifying the strengths of their bright but limited English proficient (LEP) students.
- The pattern of low achievement that has been observed from an early age among Hispanic youth precludes them from even being considered for such programs. Teachers and schools may not know that more than half of gifted students are not high achieving in school.
- Educators and administrators mistakenly equate fluency in English with high intelligence. We have encountered well-respected colleagues who feel that even if students are highly intelligent, they do not belong in any kind of gifted program until they master English.

- The district's qualification criteria are limited, and tests do not take into account linguistic or cultural bias.
- Some characteristics of gifted children may be mistaken, through lack of knowledge or genuine confusion, for signs of a learning disability. Many cases of misdiagnoses of gifted children have been documented. Traits and behaviors commonly manifested by gifted children have often been mistaken for autism, Asperger's syndrome, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Why Hispanic Enrollment in Gifted Programs Matters

When we consider the achievement gap from the standpoint that many ELL or special education programs focus on basic, rote skills, we can see why motivation might wane for children whose learning is centered on such approaches. At the same time, basic skills are vital for academic achievement, and teachers face major challenges trying to bring to competency students who lack the English language skills they need to perform well. So, how does one strike a balance between drawing out talents, creating higher-level learning opportunities, and providing an environment for basic skill mastery?

Putting the Puzzle Together

The challenges are clear: an influx of students who do not speak English at home, unresolved language and socioeconomic barriers, an excessive high school dropout rate, and low enrollment in gifted education programs. Top these with lack of, or at least weak, professional development for teachers in these areas. The odds seem stacked against Hispanic youth from the outset, and perhaps they are if we look at the problem from the typical vantage point. But in this book we approach the issue with practical ideas that individual teachers, schools, and districts can immediately use to work toward success with their Spanish-speaking students. The first step is in understanding the benefits of being bilingual and how children acquire a second language.

Thinking Questions

1. What challenges have you encountered in your classroom or district that have stifled effective education for Spanish-speaking students?
2. What solutions have innovative teachers or administrators used to overcome these?