



## **An R&D approach to the educational challenges of the growing Latino population in the United States’ “New South”**

By Dr. Pedro Portes

[portes@uga.edu](mailto:portes@uga.edu)

Dr. Rolf Straubhaar

[rolf@uga.edu](mailto:rolf@uga.edu)

Dr. Paula Mellom

[pjmellom@uga.edu](mailto:pjmellom@uga.edu)

Center for Latino Achievement and Success in Education  
University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia

The authors here outline three evidence-driven school-based initiatives of the Center for Latino Achievement and Success in Education at the University of Georgia: an afterschool program, culturally-responsive pedagogy training, and a longitudinal study of Latino students. All these initiatives focus on improving educational outcomes for Latino students throughout the state.

*Keywords:* Latino students, New South, culturally responsive pedagogy

**The Latino population** within the U.S. has in recent years grown more quickly than any other ethnic group and attracted considerable political attention. According to the most recent census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), the U.S. Latino population increased by 15.2 million between 2000 and 2010 — a

number that represents more than half of the total U.S. population growth during that same period. Due to demographic and economic trends for the next decades, English Language Learners (or ELLs) now represent 9.1 percent of the U.S. student population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Since 77.2 percent of those ELLs are Spanish speakers, predominantly from Latin America (National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy, 2010), it is safe to say that an increasingly large number of U.S. schoolchildren are Spanish-speaking Latinos. In states like Georgia in the so-called “New South,” these students are confronted with not only the linguistic challenges of learning English, but with a teaching workforce that is considerably under-prepared to succeed with ELLs and often predisposed against Latinos. On the other hand, evidence-based alternatives are available that can turn this crisis around, and these need to be disseminated.

Our purpose here is to show how this crisis can be averted in a systemic fashion, one that can help improve the educational infrastructure for not only Latino ELL students, but their peers from all other marginalized groups. After identifying key challenges, we show a glimpse of some of the action steps that our research has proven effective in transforming Latino underachievement in the New South, and which could easily be scaled up at the K-12 level throughout the country.

## **The Origins of Latino Underachievement**

While not all Latinos are ELLS and not all ELLs are Latinos, they comprise the large majority of students living in poverty that are taught in ways that produce significant gaps in learning outcomes and college opportunities. Research has shown that structural inequalities are present when comparing Latino and majority student achievement: in 2009, the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that non-Hispanic white fourth grade students outperform Latino fourth grade students by 21 points in mathematics and 25 points in reading (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In 2002, similar assessments provided similar results, showing that low-income students considered at risk (including Latino students, both those who were born in the U.S. and those born abroad) were graduating from high school with between a three and four year deficit of content knowledge in reading, mathematics and science (Portes, 2005). No reforms to date appear designed to turn this severe problem around, a problem that (to hearken back to the language of a previous era of reform) truly places our nation at risk (Gardner et al., 1983).

Part of this gap can be explained in socio-linguistic terms: previous research has shown that Latinos in this system typically require four to six years of instruction in order to develop sufficient capacity in academic English

to fully participate in and benefit from regular instruction (Thomas & Collier, 1996; Valdés, 2001). However, this linguistic difference is exacerbated by a startling lack of U.S. public school teachers trained to work with ELLs—that is, the research shows that most teachers speak no languages other than English (Howard, 2006), do not possess certification in teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and have received little professional development in that area (National Center for Education Statistic, 2013), and often hold negative, deficit-focused attitudes towards Latino students and other ELLs (Walker, Shafer & Iiams, 2004). These deficit attitudes only serve to hamper the psychological and academic development of Latino students (Portes & Salas, 2010), and scholars such as Walker, Shafer & Iiams (2004) argue that this hostile school climate for Latinos will only worsen as the number of Latino ELL students continues to increase.

This state of affairs presents the U.S. public education system with a serious challenge: can we provide sufficiently high-quality teaching and learning to effectively help Latino ELLs transition into U.S. schools and perform to the best of their abilities therein? We at the University of Georgia's Center for Latino Achievement and Success in Education (or CLASE) argue that this problem can be effectively addressed for years to come on the basis of a single, simple presumption: that by progressively improving teacher

effectiveness through training in evidence-based student-centered strategies, those teachers certified through CLASE programs become able to leverage change in their schools and districts as instructional leaders, within the New South and throughout the country. Here we will outline particular ways in which CLASE has expanded the knowledge base regarding effective policy and instruction for Latino ELLs, and has the capacity to further prepare both pre-service and interested teachers and administrators in those evidence-based best practices. We end with related recommendations for policy makers, who we hope are aware of the larger implications for our society if we do not take advantage of the human resources inherent in the burgeoning Latino student population.

### **An Evidence-driven Instructional Model**

Given the previously mentioned academic gaps between Latino ELL and majority students, there is an urgent need for the development and expansion of pedagogical models that more effectively promote the academic achievement of Latino ELLs. In an effort to address this need, the research team at CLASE was awarded a multi-year federal grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences to evaluate the efficacy of the Instructional Conversation (IC) pedagogical model on ELL achievement. This study, designed as a randomized controlled trial, tests

whether teacher training in the IC model improves both the academic achievement and cognitive development of elementary-level ELLs in high poverty schools in North Georgia. In this research model, we randomly assigned 147 third and fifth grade classroom teachers, spread out over three cohorts, into treatment and control groups. These teachers were spread out in 47 low-income elementary schools in a combination of rural, suburban and urban parts of North Georgia. The treatment group received multiple, in-depth in-person trainings in the IC pedagogy, and then had frequent support from IC coaches throughout a full academic year (whereas the control group only received the standard professional development provided by their school and district administrators). Following this “practice” year, in which the teachers focused on mastering the IC pedagogy, we then followed them for a second “experimental” year in their classrooms with regular visits, videotaping and analyzing their instruction and monitoring their students’ academic output (primarily in the form of standardized test scores), in which we measured the impact of the IC training on student achievement.

The hypothesis tested by this study was whether the IC pedagogy, a purposefully student-centered, culturally relevant pedagogy, could positively impact the academic achievement of low-performing Latino students in Georgia. The IC pedagogy primarily consists of a regularly-occurring

instructional session in small groups, similar to a guided reading group. While these sessions are teacher-led, teachers purposefully try to intervene in the conversation as little as necessary—prior to an IC, the teacher trains their students in how to participate in a teacher-facilitated, mature conversation focused on academic content and leading towards an academic goal (such as, for example, differentiating between fact and opinion). Each IC session typically includes between three and seven students, and should take about twenty minutes. During this time, students discuss exemplary content, such as practice sentences, math problems (in the case of a math-focused IC), or other sample questions which test their knowledge of a previously taught concept. The students then discuss each example, debate possible answers and the merits behind them, and come to a consensus. The teacher, ideally, only intervenes to get students back “on track” if the consensus is leading towards an erroneous conclusion, and as the IC is used more and more frequently, the premise is that students will become better and better at maturely carrying on an adult conversation regarding academic content and connecting it to their daily lives.

To give a clearer picture, we here provide a concrete example of an IC. This lesson is from an elementary fifth grade classroom in the Metro Atlanta area which we observed regularly for two years as a part of our study.

## **Snapshot of an IC**

Seven fifth grade students sit in a circle on the floor of their classroom. As the other 25 students in the class work quietly in independent groups at other centers, their teacher takes a sentence printed on a strip of paper that has been cut from a worksheet and reads aloud, “Because Tia’s Bugatti was in the shop.” Then she lays the strip on the floor in the center of the circle. The students, without needing to be told by their teacher, immediately begin discussing the phrase, working together to decide if it is a fragment, a run-on sentence, a compound sentence, a complex sentence or a simple sentence. They state their thoughts and listen to each other’s ideas, agreeing or refuting by offering evidence to support their opinions: “I believe it’s a fragment because it begins with because,” says one student. “I respectfully disagree,” says another student. “A complete sentence can begin with because, but this one doesn’t have a main idea. I mean what happened because the Bugatti was in the shop?” “I respectfully agree with Marco,” says a third student, “this sentence is a fragment because it isn’t a complete thought, do you agree Elias?” A thin boy in a red jacket, who has been watching and listening intently, leans in and responds, “I agree, this sentence is fragment, because it not have whole idea.” After all the students in the group have voiced their



thoughts and come to a consensus, they place the paper strip on the pile labeled “fragment,” and the teacher reads another sentence.

In the 20 minutes that follow, the teacher makes very few comments, only asking facilitating questions to help the students clear up misconceptions. For instance, they debate at length whether the clause “Ms. Hill ate” is a complete sentence or a fragment. The teacher, who has been able to use this discussion for formative assessment, explains that a complete sentence just needs a subject and a verb and that sometimes a two-word sentence can be very powerful, e.g. “I am.” Nevertheless, she praises them, recognizing that they think that the sentence must be a fragment because it lacks the detail they have grown used to seeing and using as they prepare for the state writing test.

This dynamic, with children politely discussing with each other using academic language, and polite turn-taking, would be perfectly normal and expected in a “gifted” classroom. However, this group of children, several of which were ELLs, including Elias, a newcomer who had no English when he arrived 4 months before, were placed in this particular teacher’s class because in addition to being an exceptional teacher, she is a former Marine and the principal knows that she can “handle” the roughest of kids enrolled at their Title I school in Metro Atlanta. These are the kinds of children who may not

normally be given the opportunity to engage in this kind of high level academic discourse in an average classroom. But, given the tools and practice afforded them by the Instructional Conversation model, these children regularly and consistently use thought-out, polite discourse that spills over into their hallway, lunchroom and playground interactions. Through these Instructional Conversations, the children are not only learning content and developing cognitive and language skills, but equally importantly they are learning how to interact with one another, voice their thoughts in appropriate ways, and listen carefully to their peers to seek understanding, reach consensus and resolve conflict.

### **Proven Results of IC Implementation**

Through this on-going study, CLASE has found that students taught by IC-trained teachers outperform their peers across most core subject standardized achievement tests (including ELA, math, reading, science and social studies) after controlling for other factors such as prior achievement and English language proficiency. In terms of cognitive development, students taught by IC-trained teachers also scored higher than students from similar backgrounds on psychological assessments of cognitive ability and self-esteem (Mellom, Nixon, Gokee, & Portes, 2012).

In addition to improving cognitive and academic outcomes for students, through analysis of teachers' personal journals and notes during their training, CLASE has also found that IC training improves teacher attitudes towards their ELL students, creating a more welcoming classroom climate in which to learn.

When rigorously-designed research studies produce such results, the models in question merit expansion. While several cohorts of Georgia teachers have been trained as a part of this larger study, on the basis of these results CLASE has also expanded to work with individual school districts to train their teachers in these same proven IC pedagogical techniques. By investing in transforming teachers through current and future pedagogical training, and thus creating "expert teacher cells" in schools throughout Georgia of teachers capable of sustaining and sharing more effective ELL pedagogies with peers, CLASE expects to see an impact on student achievement and development that extends well beyond the scope of the current study.

### **Expanding the School Day through Effective Afterschool Programming**

In addition to studying pedagogical models that can improve the instruction students receive during the school day, CLASE has also committed long-term to evaluating the most effective methods of expanding instructional time. Previous research has found that a difference in academic learning time

(Aronson, Zimmerman, & Carlos, 1998) between Latino ELLs and their majority peers accounts for a significant portion of the achievement gap between these groups (Madrid, 2011).

One means of providing additional academic learning time is through tutoring programs, which previous studies have found to be effective in improving literacy (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, & Moody, 2000; Ritter et al., 2009). However, unfortunately most afterschool tutoring and mentoring programs use the same less-effective pedagogical models used during the school day (Lauer et al., 2006). The CLASE tutoring and mentoring program sets itself apart by operating on the philosophy that “more of the same” is not sufficient for addressing the serious achievement gaps facing Latino ELLs. Instead, the CLASE program has for several years utilized a model focused on student centered learning that has been found to improve student performance while leveraging college student participation and training (Mira, Portes, Mellom & Moreno, 2012). More specifically, CLASE’s afterschool program trains tutors in culturally relevant pedagogical techniques, including the same IC pedagogy which the aforementioned study found to be effective in raising Latino student achievement throughout North Georgia. While the impact of this program over nearly a decade of implementation is still being analyzed, previous analyses of individual cohorts found that students in the

program outperformed their in-school peers on standardized tests in math, and to a lesser extent, in language arts (Mira, Griffin, Simmons, & Portes, 2014). This program, like CLASE's entrée into teacher training at the school and district level throughout Georgia, is also ripe for expansion and scaling throughout the New South with community-higher education partnerships.

### **Studying the Development of Latino Students:**

#### **A Longitudinal Pilot Project**

Beginning with the students in its tutoring and mentoring program, CLASE has begun a larger study in which the children of Latino immigrants will be followed throughout their educational careers, so as to more accurately document the difficulties and successes which immigrant children as a group experience in school settings in the New South. In our model, each ELL student is matched with a college mentor/ tutor for each semester they are in the study. While yet in its infancy, including only a few cohorts, such a longitudinal study is unprecedented in the current literature and provides an integrated way to improve school outcomes and the economic future of all in this region. This is because both initiatives can impact and benefit both Latino ELLs and other groups of students.

## **Conclusion**

The longstanding gaps resulting from current instructional and reform efforts call for innovative and longitudinal responses that improve policy, practice and particularly pedagogy. This is vital to recognize as higher standards are here to stay that call for more stringent pedagogical standards and extra learning time for those who most need assistance after school. The University of Georgia's Center for Latino Achievement and Success in Education sets itself apart by longitudinally studying both the educational trajectories of ELLs and the effectiveness of policies and pedagogies that can positively impact those trajectories (See Portes, 2014; Portes, Salas, Baquedano-López & Mellom, 2014). Through those studies, as documented here, CLASE has both provided evidence regarding effective policy and pedagogical models that could be brought to scale for the benefit of Latino ELLs nationwide, and developed its own capacity as a teacher-training institution that can help to implement that expansion.

## References

- Aronson, J., Zimmerman, J., & Carlos, L. (1998). *Improving student achievement by extending school: Is it just a matter of time?* San Francisco, CA: WestEd.
- Elbaum, B., Vaughn, S., Hughes, M. T., & Moody S. W. (2000). How effective are one-to-one tutoring programs in reading for elementary students at risk for reading failure? A meta-analysis of the intervention research. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92(4), 605-619.
- Gardner, D. P., Larsen, Y. W., Baker, W., Campbell, A., & Crosby, E. A. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington DC: United States Department of Education.
- Howard, G.R. (2006). *We can't teach what we don't know: White teachers, multiracial schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lauer, P. A., Akiba, M., Wilkerson, S. B., Apthorp, H. S., Snow, D., Martin-Glenn, M. L. (2006). Out-of-school-time programs: A meta-analysis of effects for at-risk students. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(2), 275-313.
- Madrid, M. E., (2011). The Latino Achievement Gap. *Multicultural Education*. 19(3), 7-12.

Mellom, P. J., Nixon, C., Gokee, R., & Portes, P.R. (2012). *Ping pong vs. pinball:*

*Instructional Conversation as a tool for L2 language development.*

Presented at the Second Language Research Forum. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Mira, W., Portes, P.R., Mellom, P. J., & Moreno, D. (2012). *An evaluation of a*

*tutoring and mentoring program involving undergraduate college*

*students and elementary school English learners.* Presented at the 2012

Annual Meeting for the American Educational Research Association.

Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Mira, W., Griffin, T., Simmons, C., & Portes, P. (2014). *Technical report on*

*tutoring and mentoring program at Oglethorpe Elementary.* Athens, GA:

Center for Latino Achievement and Success in Education.

National Center for Educational Statistics. (2013). *Digest of education*

*statistics.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2014). *The condition of education*

*2014: English language learners.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy. (2010). *Top languages*

*spoken by English language learners nationally and by state.*

Washington, D.C.: Migration Policy Institute.



- Portes, P. R. (2005). *Dismantling educational inequality: A sociocultural approach to closing the achievement gap*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Portes, P. R. (2014). *Making kids smarter: How to maximize children's intellectual development and creativity* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.). Colorado: Portes Books Publishing.
- Portes, P.R., & Salas, S. (2010). In the shadow of Stone Mountain: Identity development, structured inequality, and the education of Spanish-speaking children. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 33(2), 241-248.
- Portes, P.R., Salas, S., Baquedano-López, P. & Mellom, P. J. (Eds.). (2014). *U.S. Latinos in schools: Research-based policy directions for change*. New York: Routledge.
- Ritter, G. W., Barnett, J. H., Denny, G. S., & Ginger, R. A. (2009). The effectiveness of volunteer tutoring programs for elementary and middle school students: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 3-38.
- Thomas, W., & Collier, V. (2002). *A national study of school effectiveness for language minority students' long-term academic achievement*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- U.S. Census Bureau (2010). *The Hispanic population: 2010*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce.

- U.S. Department of Education (2011). *Achievement gaps: How Hispanic and White students in public schools perform in mathematics and reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress* (Publication No. NCES 2011-485). Washington, D.C.: Institute of Education Sciences.
- Valdes, G. (2001). *Learning and not learning English: Latino students in American schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Walker, A., Shafer, J., & Iiams, M. (2004). "Not in my classroom:" Teachers' attitudes towards ELLs. *Journal of Research & Practice*, 2(1), 130-160.