



College of Education

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Research Highlights of Current Faculty Projects

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Latina/o Literacy and School Success

The comparatively low levels of literacy development and academic achievement of Latina/o youth, the largest minority in U.S. schools, have prompted many researchers, educators, and policy makers to focus on ways to promote literacy development. Illinois researcher Robert Jiménez says that pursuing this question alone fails to consider how literacy is already meaningful to Latina/o students and may inadvertently alienate them by neglecting the meaning and use of literacy in their homes and communities. Most teachers working with Latina/o students are European American, and many are young, inexperienced, and ill-prepared for working with linguistically and culturally diverse students. Responding to these issues, Jiménez is building a knowledge base of Latina/o students' literacy and academic experiences to help teachers choose curriculum and instructional methods that will better serve their students. In his latest research, he has studied four bilingual classrooms in a Midwest urban school where 56% of the students are Latina/o and many of the students are low performing. Participants included the four teachers and eighty-five 4th and 6th graders of four bilingual classrooms (one a special education classroom). All of the students were either recent immigrants or the children of immigrants. Data collection included classroom observation of literacy instruction, informal dialogues and formal interviews with teachers, and sessions with four to six focal students in each classroom. Sessions included structured interviews and think-aloud exercises in which students described their thoughts after reading text passages. Jiménez then designed and conducted strategy lessons with the focal students to introduce various reading strategies based on the experiences of successful bilingual students. His findings synthesized input from the teachers and experts and resulted in several important results.

What this research tells us:

Jiménez found that pinpointing evidence of identity and its implications for literacy development required a sophisticated and thorough attention to the data. His findings incorporate many direct comments from students attempting to convey the challenge of navigating two separated worlds in which those around them fail to recognize the tasks these students are called to perform. Conversational and behavioral data showed the methods students use to address the hybridization of identity as they navigate between cultures and languages. Jiménez found that basic linguistic behaviors, like switching between languages during conversation or using frequent translation, that could appear to evidence poor literacy skills actually served meaningful roles to emphasize and connect new ideas and old knowledge. Parents encouraged literacy development and modeled it at home through activities like letter writing. Students described responsibilities rarely experienced by mainstream children, including their elders' dependence on them to engage with the written and spoken English-speaking environment over practical matters key to family welfare. The complex skills necessary to meet these obligations are seldom part of a school curriculum. Even children who handled such difficult tasks often appeared to struggle with English and literacy in the school environment. Obstacles to their developing English proficiency included the students' fears that it might supplant the Spanish skills valued and necessary in their community. Jiménez found that school literacy activities attracted students more effectively if they supported rather than supplanted their Latina/o identity. He created activities that invited students to display their bilingual/biliterate abilities, knowledge, and experiences. Student responses showed increases in literacy awareness, text-processing skills, and understanding.

Recommendations for Educators of Latina/o Students:

- ⇒ Treat Latina/o students as individuals who want and need to read and write.
- ⇒ Make connections across and between Latina/o students' two languages; use translation judiciously; and include information learned via their first language.
- ⇒ Design instructional activities that require students to demonstrate and implement bilingual/biliterate skills and tap non-traditional literacies.
- ⇒ Use instruction that is linguistically sensitive, culturally relevant, and cognitively challenging.

For more information about this research:

- Jiménez, R. T. (2000). Literacy and the identity development of Latina/o students. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(4), 971-1000.
- Jiménez, R. T. (2001). "It's a difference that changes us": An alternative view of the language and literacy learning needs of Latina/o students. *The Reading Teacher*, 54(8), 736-742.

We invite your response...

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