



CAUGHT IN THE CROSSHAIRS: EMERGING BILINGUALS AND THE READING WARS



After a relatively quiet phase, the “reading wars” reignited in 2018 in the wake of a flurry of news media coverage sparked by a public radio documentary that argued that students across America were receiving inadequate phonics instruction. More than a dozen states—including Florida, Texas and North Carolina—rushed to react, passing laws requiring pre-service and current teachers to place a greater emphasis on phonics.

Now researchers who study Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students are raising questions about the potential impact of these efforts on such students, including emerging bilinguals.

A Colorado group called Higher Educators in Linguistically Diverse Education (HELDE) recently wrote a letter raising concerns about a 2020 state law that requires educator preparation programs to be evaluated based on whether they provide

[c]ourse work that teaches teacher candidates the science of reading, including the foundational reading skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency including oral skills, and reading comprehension, and the skills and strategies to apply to ensure that every student learns to read.

One issue is that emerging bilinguals are learning how to read and learning English at the same time, explained HELDE member, University of Colorado Boulder professor, and NEPC Fellow Kathy Escamilla to the education-focused news site, *Chalkbeat*.

“My fear is these two things get reduced to decoding,” she said. “I’m afraid we’re narrowing a curriculum.”

An additional concern outlined in the HELDE letter is that emerging bilinguals may be able to “keep pace in ‘word calling’ through instruction on phonemic and phonetic skills” even as they struggle to understand the meaning of the words they are parroting.

In addition to adding new reading standards to the evaluation of teacher preparation programs, Colorado lawmakers also, in 2019, [passed legislation](#) requiring the state education department to ensure that early reading curricula used in schools emphasizes phonemic awareness.

Last year, the education department found that two-thirds of Denver schools use early reading curricula that don’t meet these standards. Yet one-third of the district’s students are emerging bilinguals whose early literacy curricula is impacted by a [federal consent decree](#) that requires schools to “use efficient and effective techniques to provide students with the English language skills they need to meaningfully and equally participate in school.”

“It’s not enough to take a monolingual view of reading instruction, apply it wholesale without considering unique needs and strengths of second-language learners and then expect to have equal outcomes,” Escamilla [told Chalkbeat](#) in December. She also noted that few Spanish-language literacy programs had been evaluated and deemed acceptable by the state under the new rules.

The phonics-heavy approach to literacy instruction that spawned the laws in Colorado and other states is sometimes referred to, controversially, as “the science of reading” (SOR). And Escamilla told us that the concern about English learners and the SOR applies to all such students, whether or not they are in bilingual programs. In bilingual classrooms, she explained,

the students may be getting phonics programs that have been hastily translated from English to Spanish and/or some other languages, [and] the translations may not be valid for the non-English language and [also not valid for] the way phonics-based reading programs should be applied in those languages.

For English learners not in bilingual programs (and that is about 87% of all ELLs in Colorado and nationally), “these students are likely not to get any accommodations according to the SOR, and this is of great concern. They are going to get SOR as if they are English proficient, and they aren’t.”

In a [statement](#) released through NEPC last year, researchers wrote that “there is no settled science of reading and that the research base and evidence base on reading and teaching reading is diverse and always in a state of change.”

“Much of the legislation beginning to emerge is harmful, especially to students living inequitable lives and attending underfunded, inequitable schools,” according to that statement.

“People at the state don’t know that they’re inadvertently undermining the ability of districts to implement solid bilingual programs, and that’s a shame,” Escamilla said.

NEPC Resources on Language Policy

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