Engaging English Learners with Rigorous Academic Content: Insights from Research on Tracking

Adam Gamoran

@agamoran

@wtgrantfdn

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

1930's

1940's

1950's

1960's

1970's

1980's

1990's

2000's

2010's

William T. Grant
F O U N D A T I O N

- Founded in 1936

- Supporting research to improve the lives of young people

- Focus areas:
  - Reducing inequality
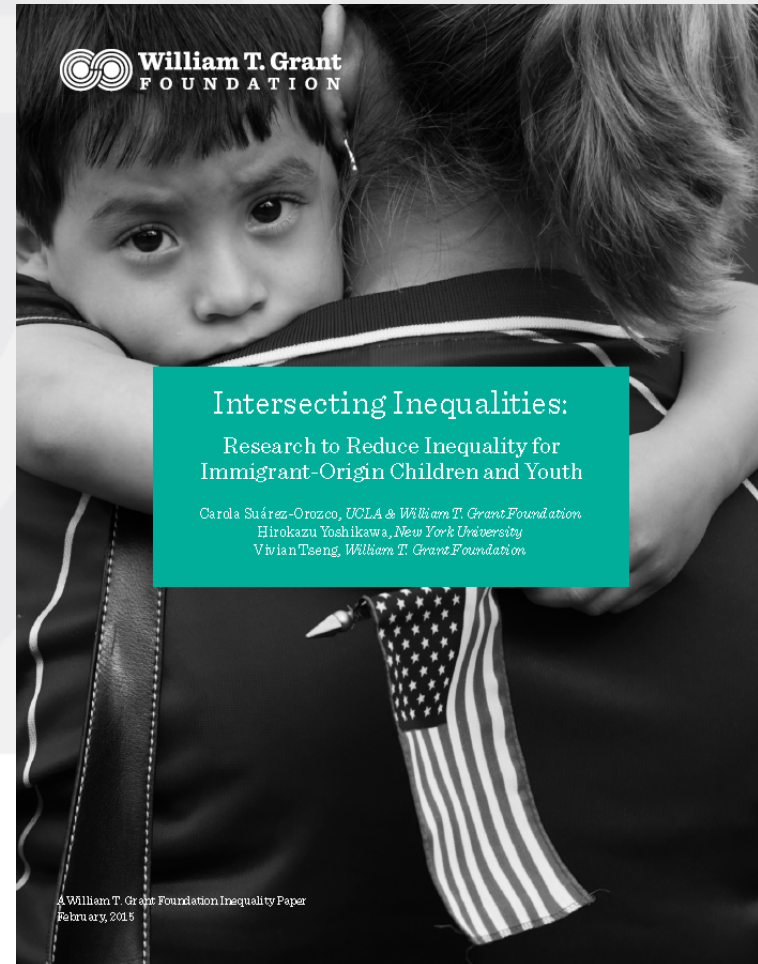 - Improving the use of research evidence

Inequality is the Problem

1. Levels of inequality are exceptionally high
2. High inequality causes economic and social harm
3. Social policies can combat inequality
4. We need research to identify effective policies, programs, and practices

William T. Grant
F O U N D A T I O N

Immigrant-Origin Children & Youth

- ⊙ Contexts of immigration intersect to generate inequality
  - Poverty, newcomer status, language barriers, undocumented status
- ⊙ Family and education provide contexts for alleviating inequality
- ⊙ Pressing research agenda
  - Immigrants as core policy concern
  - Study policy efforts to aid immigrant adaptation e.g. DACA
  - Avoid a deficit framework

Intersecting Inequalities:
Research to Reduce Inequality for Immigrant-Origin Children and Youth

Carola Suárez-Orozco, *UCLA & William T. Grant Foundation*
Hirokazu Yoshikawa, *New York University*
Vivian Tseng, *William T. Grant Foundation*

A William T. Grant Foundation Inequality Paper
February, 2015

Immigrant-Origin Children & Youth

Reducing Inequality for English Learners: Research Questions for the Field

Vivian Louie

Toward a New Research Agenda to Improve Outcomes for Adolescent English Learners

Carola Suárez-Orozco, Vivian Louie

Research to Improve Outcomes for English Learners

Vivian Louie

William T. Grant FOUNDATION

Immigrant-Origin Children & Youth

Key issue for English learners: How schools organize children for instruction

- ⊙ Immigrant children, and many children of immigrants who are born here, grow up with a language other than English at home
  - A valuable asset
  - Also poses challenges
- ⊙ School success of English learners is a prominent topic of research

William T. Grant
F O U N D A T I O N

Responding to Heterogeneity

⊙ Responding to heterogeneity in the classroom is essential to teaching
  - Students enter at different levels of performance
  - Effective instruction meets students where they are, and carries them forward
  - Different starting points demand different instructional responses

Responding to Heterogeneity

- Age-grading is the first, and most obvious response to heterogeneity
- For more than a century, educators have also sorted students by performance levels into "tracks" or "ability groups"
    - Intention: Fit instruction to student needs
- Seems logical and efficient
    - Why is this problematic?

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Problems of Tracking

- Due to circumstances outside of school, separating students by academic performance may also separate them by ethnicity and social class
- Homogenous classes lack the diversity that may foster rich discussions

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Problems of Tracking

- Although tracking is intended to provide equally effective instruction to all students, that rarely occurs
  - Teachers are also tracked
  - Cycle of low expectations
  - Low-level classes as caricatures
  - Emphasis on procedures in low-level classes, discussion in high-level classes

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Problems of Tracking

⊙ Partly as a result of unequal classroom conditions, inequality between students assigned to high- and low-level classes widens over time

Tracking and English Learners

- Research on tracking of English learners is a hot topic
- Landmark study by Callahan (2005)
  - Track placement matters more than English proficiency for academic performance
  - Low track assignment holds back advancement of English learners
  - Backed up in recent national study

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Tracking and English Learners

- Mixed-methods studies show schools differ in how they place English learners
  - In one case, students were automatically assigned to low tracks once they were judged proficient in English

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Tracking and English Learners

⊙ More broadly there is variation across schools, but English learners often overrepresented in low tracks and underrepresented in high tracks

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Tracking and English Learners

- Umansky (2016) explained why English learners are placed in low tracks
  - Prior achievement is low
  - Lack of English proficiency mistaken for low ability
  - English learners attend schools with fewer resources
  - Course sequences divert English learners
- Low achievement accounted for track levels, but English learners were excluded from academic content irrespective of test scores

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Tracking and English Learners

- Emerging evidence shows tracking diverts English learners away from academic content
- But simple response of "place English learners in high tracks" has not worked out

Tracking and English Learners

⊙ Thompson (2017) studied math trajectories in 6 CA school districts that placed most students in eighth grade algebra

- Nearly half of English learners had to repeat
- Schools failed to provide high-quality instruction and additional language support

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Tracking and English Learners

> Quality of instruction may be more important for English learner success than the way students are organized for instruction

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

What Research on Tracking Offers

⊙ Research on English learners and research on tracking share common challenges
  - Recognition that heterogeneity presents a real dilemma for teachers
  - "Detracking" efforts that ignore heterogeneity meet resistance and typically fail

⊙ Successful responses to tracking have two common features
  - Rigorous academic content for all students
  - Extra instructional time for low achievers

William T. Grant
F O U N D A T I O N

Implications for Research on English Learners

- Studies of English learners show it is essential to break the link between English language proficiency and exposure to academic content
- What can we learn from research on tracking on how to achieve this aim?

Implications for Research on English Learners

◉ Conceive of the challenge in a new way
- Research on English learners largely dominated by two concerns
  - ✓ What language of instruction?
  - ✓ When to reclassify?
- Research on tracking brings another issue into focus
  - ✓ Whether English learners have access to academic content that prepares them for college and careers

William T. Grant
F O U N D A T I O N

Implications for Research on English Learners

- By this logic, questions about reclassification and language of instruction follow rather than precede the larger issue of academic content
- Provides a criterion on which to judge policy decisions
  - Which approaches best provide access to academic content?

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Implications for Research on English Learners

⊙ Research on tracking points to instructional approaches that may work for English learners
- Prepare teachers to differentiate instruction for linguistically diverse classes
- Ensure that students learning English have access to rich academic content
- Allow extra instructional time

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Implications for Research on English Learners

- Move from studying barriers to English learner success to conditions that support progress

- As in tracking research
  - Instead of "homogeneous vs heterogeneous"?
  - Ask, what conditions boost success?
- So in research on English learners
  - Instead of, "bilingual vs immersion"?
  - Ask, what conditions promote access to academic content?

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Ilana Umansky
University of Oregon

How are ELs tracked?

Level
- How does the course level of placement compare to non-ELs?
- E.g. honors, remedial.

Inclusion/exclusion
- How does EL/non-EL enrollment compare in particular content domains?
- E.g. ELA, math, electives.

Parallel
- To what extent are ELs in separated, parallel courses?
- E.g. sheltered, bilingual.

How are ELs tracked?

Level
- How does the course level or placement compare to non-ELs?
- E.g. honors, remedial.

Inclusion/exclusion
- How does EL/non-EL enrollment compare in particular content domains?
- E.g. ELA, math, electives.

Parallel
- To what extent are ELs in separated, parallel courses?
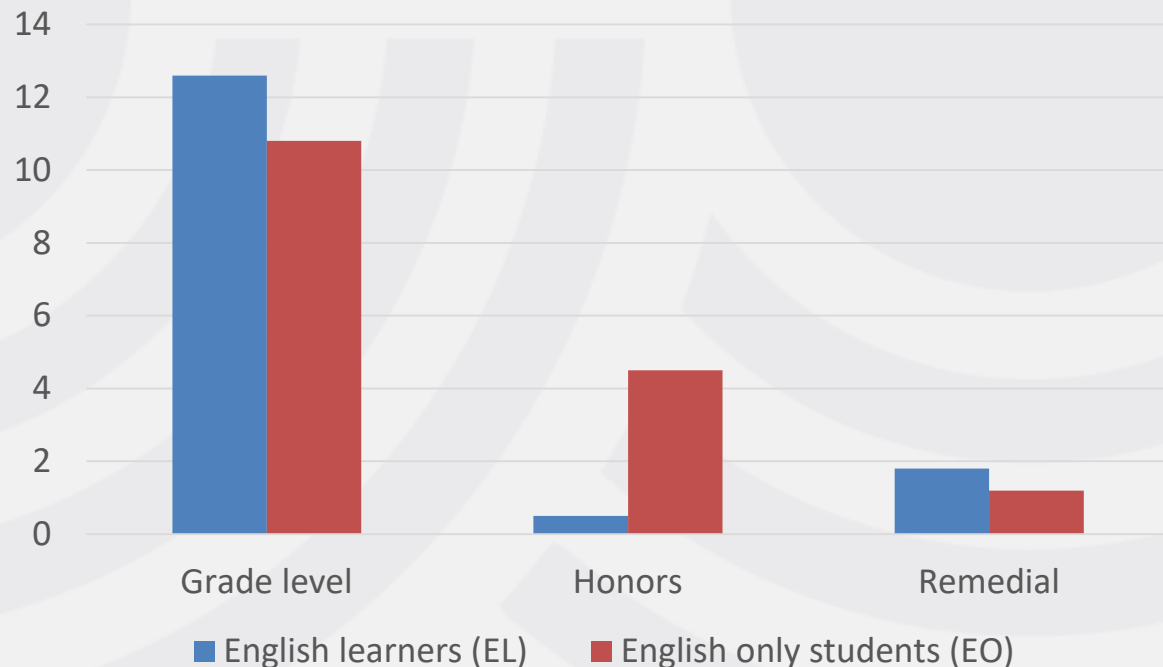- E.g. sheltered, bilingual.

QUALITY & ACCESSIBILITY

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Leveled tracking, descriptively

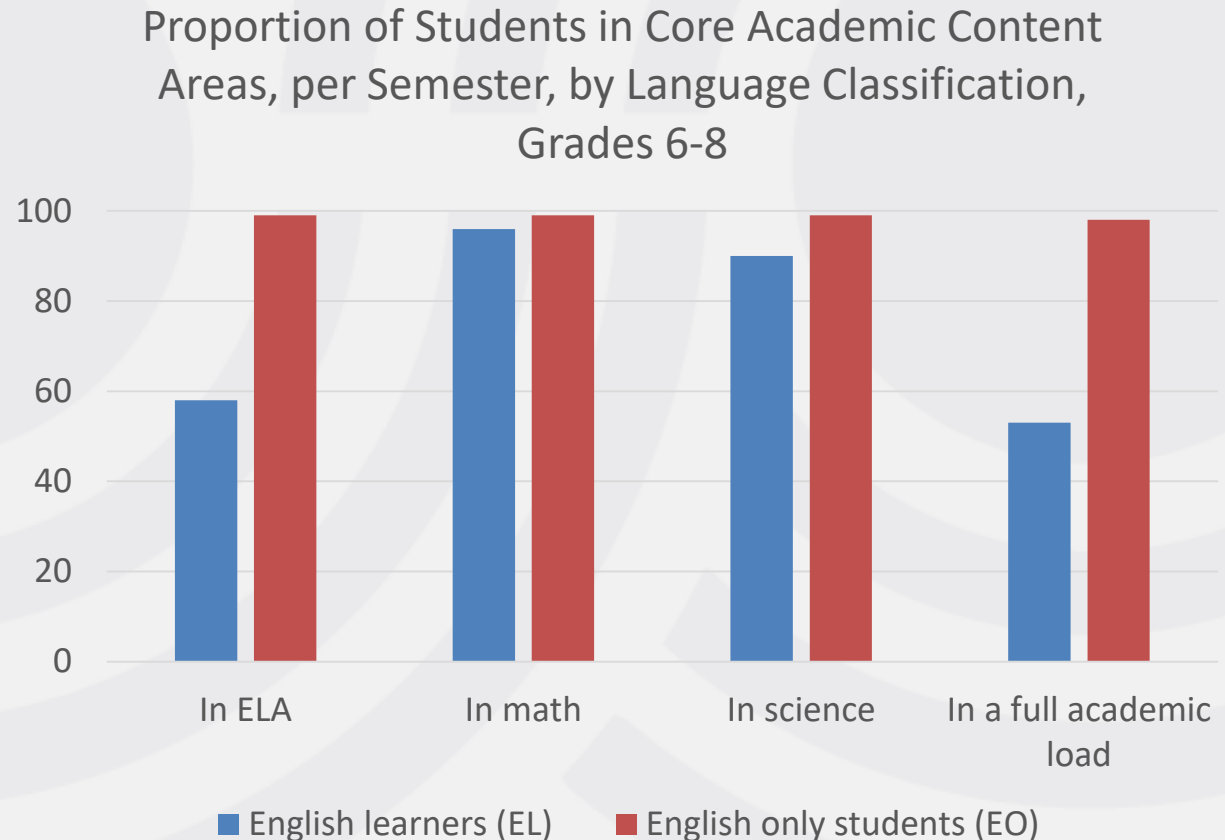ELs take more grade-level and remedial credits, but fewer honors level credits than EOs.

Number of Credits Taken per Semester, by Course Level and Language Classification, Grades 6-8.

■ English learners (EL) ■ English only students (EO)

Data are from one large school district. See Umansky, 2016.

William T. Grant FOUNDATION

Exclusionary tracking, descriptively

ELs are far less likely to be enrolled in a full course load, driven primarily by ELA.

Proportion of Students in Core Academic Content Areas, per Semester, by Language Classification, Grades 6-8

■ English learners (EL) ■ English only students (EO)

Data are from one large school district. See Umansky, 2016.

RD effects of EL classification as students transition to 6th grade

Outcome	Effect size
Total # of credits	3.05***
Likelihood of taking full load	-0.07**
ELD credits	2.52***
Likelihood of taking ELA	-0.18***

Data are from one large school district. See Umansky, 2016.

Research considerations to reduce inequality

- Instructional access by level
  - Blocked schedules at secondary
  - Between & within class separation in primary
- Impact of different kinds of tracking
  - For ex. Bilingual v sheltered, electives v. ELA
  - On curricular access and educational outcomes
  - For different subgroups of ELs (long term ELs, newcomers)
- Correlation and causation
  - Implications for policy & practice
- Impact of policy alternatives & interventions:
  - Full content policies
  - Course recovery programs or extended days
  - PD on differentiation or integrated language instruction
  - Integrated ELA and ELD
- Trade-offs?

Math course-taking across six California districts

	Current EL	Former EL	Never EL
Repeated Algebra I	47%	49%	42%

⊙ Nearly half of students, including current, former, and never ELs, repeated Algebra I.

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Math course-taking across six California districts

	Current EL	Former EL	Never EL
If repeated Algebra I, had same or higher math proficiency level first time in course	67%	61%	60%

- For many students, repeating Algebra I did not result in additional math learning.
  - Approximately two-thirds of students scored at the same or higher proficiency level on the state Algebra I assessment their first time in the course.

William T. Grant
F O U N D A T I O N

Math course-taking across six California districts

	Current EL	Former EL	Never EL
Enrolled in Algebra I in 8th grade	41%	74%	68%
Ever scored proficient in Algebra I	12%	42%	39%
Enrolled in accelerated math sequence	7%	27%	28%

- Current ELs were much less likely than other students to be enrolled in Algebra I in 8th grade, ever score proficient in Algebra I, and be enrolled in an accelerated math sequence.

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Support for Ever ELs' math learning

- The need for both opportunity *and support* to learn
  - Earlier intervention, perhaps outside of conventional classroom settings
  - Shifts in classroom practices
  - Interventions addressing math self-concept and mindset
- Schools' responses to students' struggles in math often do not facilitate learning
  - Students often show little evidence of learning when repeating a course

William T. Grant
F O U N D A T I O N

Support for Ever ELs' math learning

- ❯ The need for support to actually be supportive

  - ❯ Students rejected support when the utility was not clear, the costs were high, and/or it did not have intrinsic value

Potential Future Work to Reduce Inequality

◉ Research question: What malleable factors contribute to math access and achievement outcomes for current and former ELs?

◉ Malleable factors to be examined include: math course offerings within schools, EL course placement policies, local implementation of EL reclassification policies, peer composition of math courses, teacher qualifications and characteristics

◉ Quantitative and qualitative analysis:

  ◉ Descriptive analyses using statewide data
  ◉ Case studies in schools with different course-taking patterns and different outcomes

Questions?

Vivian Louie
William T. Grant Foundation

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Need for Research on Reducing Inequality

Hallmarks of our approach

- ❯ Focus on young people (ages 5 to 25)
- ❯ In the long run, research we support will lead to action
  - Build, understand, test, and improve programs, policies, and practices
  - No single study will be transformative
  - Results will accumulate to guide policy and practice
- ❯ Support for tools that benefit many researchers
- ❯ Interdisciplinary portfolio

We seek researchers to answer this call

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Funding Opportunities

High-quality research to ensure that young people from diverse backgrounds reach their fullest potential

- ⊙ RESEARCH

- ⊙ WTG SCHOLARS

- ⊙ INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGE

Research Grants

⊙ **LETTER OF INQUIRY**
- Deadlines in January, May, and August
- 6-7 week response time
- Internal review for fit with current interests and funding criteria

⊙ **FULL PROPOSAL**
- External review
- Internal review

⊙ **APPLICANT RESPONSE TO REVIEWS**
- Internal review
- Board of Trustees meeting in March, June, and October

William T. Grant
F O U N D A T I O N

Application Tips

- Make sure the fit is strong

- Show how the work significantly *adds* to theory and prior empirical work

- Tackle a few research questions or hypotheses well

- Show the project's relevance for policy or practice

William T. Grant
F O U N D A T I O N

Application Tips

- Map Research Design, Methods, and Analyses tightly to the research questions or hypotheses

- Provide sufficient information for reviewers to evaluate rigor and appropriateness of methods

- Demonstrate your understanding of the strengths and limitations of the design, methods, and analyses

- Respond to reviews seriously, graciously, and in depth

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION

Questions?

Learn more online
www.wtgrantfoundation.org

@wtgrantfdn

William T. Grant
FOUNDATION