The title of this article comes from a presentation made by ninth-grade student Kanta Khalid in October 2005 at the Ontario Teachers of English as a Second Language (TESL) conference in Toronto, Canada. Kanta discussed the Dual Language story, entitled *The New Country*, that she and her friends, Sulmana, and Madiha, had written and published online two years previously under the guidance of their teacher, Lisa Leoni. In many presentations during the past 15 years, I have quoted the insights of Kanta and her classmates because they speak directly to the essence of effective teaching of multilingual students. In a nutshell, effective teaching of multilingual students requires more than simply instructional support for learning English. This instructional support is obviously important. There is a large degree of consensus that teachers should be familiar with instructional strategies for scaffolding students’ access to curriculum content and should be committed to reinforcing academic language across the curriculum. However, effective teaching of multilingual students also requires a sustained and simultaneous focus on:

- enabling students to engage actively with literacy from their earliest experiences of schooling;
- affirming students’ identities by enabling them to use their multilingual language and literacy skills to carry out powerful intellectual and creative academic work.

These claims are based on the fact that most multilingual students in the United States experience opportunity gaps associated both with low socioeconomic status (SES) and the effects of societal discrimination and/or racism directed at their communities. Thus, effective instruction requires that teachers implement evidence-based strategies to “push back” the effects of poverty and racism, in addition to supporting the learning of English language and literacy skills.

The academic benefits of encouraging students to engage actively with literacy and use their entire multilingual repertoire can be illustrated in the 20-page English-Urdu story, *The New Country*, written by Kanta, Sulmana, and Madiha (See Figure 1 in online version or go to http://multiliteracies.ca/index.php/folio/viewProject/8.)

Affirming Identity through Multilingual Literacy Engagement: A Concrete Example

Both Kanta and Sulmana had arrived in Toronto in fourth grade and were reasonably fluent in English, but Madiha was in the very early stages of acquisition. In a typical English-Only classroom, Madiha’s ability to participate in a seventh-grade social studies unit on the theme of immigration would have been severely limited by her minimal knowledge of English. She certainly would not have been in a position to write extensively in English about her experiences, ideas, and insights. However, when the social structure of the classroom was changed in very simple ways that permitted her to collaborate with her friends and draw on her first language L1 knowledge and literacy, Madiha was enabled to express herself in ways that few English Learners experience. Her L1, in which all her experience prior to immigration was encoded, became once again a tool for learning.

She contributed her ideas and experiences to the story, participated in discussions about how to translate vocabulary and expressions from Urdu to English and from English to Urdu, and shared in the affirmation that all three students experienced with the publication of their story, both as a printed book and online. This affirmation was powerfully expressed by Kanta in her presentation to educators at the TESL conference:

> When I came here in Grade 4 the teachers didn’t know what I was capable of. I was given a pack of crayons and a coloring book and told to get on coloring with it. And after, I felt so bad about that—I’m capable of doing much more than just that. I have my own inner skills to show the world than just coloring and I felt that those skills of mine are important also. So, when we started writing the book [The New Country], I could actually show the world that I am something instead of just coloring. And that’s how it helped me, and it made me so proud of myself that I am actually capable of doing something, and here today [at the Ontario TESL conference] I am actually doing something. I’m not just a coloring person—I can show you that I am something.
>  
> (Leoni et al., 2011, 50)
Kanta’s account illustrates the major themes of this paper. Multilingual students’ academic performance will be enhanced when teachers enable students to use their entire multilingual repertoire to engage actively and creatively with literacy in ways that affirm their personal and academic identities. The more formal theoretical framework that embodies this claim is outlined in the next section.

**Implementing Evidence-Based Multilingual Instruction**

A first step in thinking about educational policies and pedagogical practices that might be effective in reversing patterns of underachievement among minoritized multilingual students is to examine the research evidence regarding causes of underachievement. (See Table 1 in online version of article). Three sources of potential educational disadvantage can be identified (excluding special education needs):

- **Home-school language switch** requiring students to learn academic content through a new language;
- **Low socioeconomic status (SES)** associated with low family income and/or low levels of parental education;
- **Marginalized group status** deriving from discrimination and/or racism in the wider society.

Some communities in the United States are characterized by all three risk factors (e.g., many Latinx students). In other cases, only one risk factor may be operating (e.g., middle-class African American students, high-SES white European-background students learning English as an additional language). These three risk factors become realized as actual educational disadvantage only when the school fails to respond appropriately or reinforces the negative impact of the broader social factors.

**Home-School Language Switch.** The following approaches respond to the potential disadvantage of having to learn at school in a language different than the one spoken at home and can reverse patterns of underachievement.

**Scaffold meaning.** The term “scaffolding” refers to the ways in which teachers provide additional supports to help multilingual students understand instruction and engage actively in learning. Scaffolding strategies include the following:

- Graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams, flow charts, etc.
- Visuals in texts such as photographs, drawings, diagrams, video clips, etc.
- Demonstrations such as modeling for students how to make sense of a text while reading.
- Hands-on experiences such as science experiments.
- Collaborative group work such as completing a graphic organizer.
- Encouraging L1 use, for example, writing initially in L1 as a means of transferring knowledge and skills from L1 to L2.
- Learning strategies such as planning tasks, visualization, grouping/classifying, note-taking/summarizing, questioning for clarification, etc.
- Language clarification through teacher explanations, providing examples, dictionary use, etc.

**Reinforce academic language across the curriculum.** The language of textbooks and classroom instruction is very different than the language we use in everyday conversation. Academic language includes far more low-frequency words (e.g., photosynthesis, hypothesis, prediction, etc.) as well as grammatical constructions (e.g., the passive voice) that we almost never use in casual everyday interactions. Research carried out in several countries, including Canada, Israel, and the United States, shows that although multilingual students may acquire reasonable fluency in using the school language for everyday conversational interactions within about two years of exposure, it typically requires at least five years (and frequently longer) for students to catch up academically. A major reason for this is that they are catching up to a moving target—students who are native speakers of the school language are increasing their literacy and general academic skills every year and thus multilingual students must “run faster” in order to bridge the gap. Students’ progress will be accelerated when all teachers systematically draw students’ attention to language and take every opportunity to deepen their knowledge of the school language across curriculum subjects.

**Engage students’ multilingual repertoires.** Extensive research has demonstrated both the positive outcomes of bilingual programs for minoritized students and strong relationships between students’ L1 conceptual development and their level of attainment in the school language (e.g., Cummins, 2001; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). In recent years, a wide variety of collaborative projects involving educators and researchers have also demonstrated that multilingual students’ L1 can play a significant positive role in promoting achievement even in contexts where many languages are represented in the classroom and the teacher does not speak these languages (Cummins & Early, 2011; García & Kley, 2016).

**Low Socioeconomic Status.** Some of the sources of potential educational disadvantage associated with SES are beyond the capacity of individual schools to address (e.g., housing segregation and overcrowding) but the potential negative effects of other factors can be partially reversed by school policies and instructional practices. In this regard, extensive research suggests that the role of literacy engagement is crucial. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds experience significantly less access to print and opportunities to engage with literacy in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods than students from more advantaged backgrounds (Duke, 2000). An obvious reason for limited print access in children’s homes is that parents who are experiencing economic difficulties don’t have the money to buy books and other cultural resources (e.g., smartphones, tablet computers) and some may not have had opportunities to become literate in their own languages. Research from around the world has demonstrated a causal relationship between literacy engagement and literacy achievement (Krashen, 2004). In fact, the extensive research of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2010) suggests that schools could “push back” about one-third of the negative effects of social disadvantage by ensuring that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds become actively engaged with reading and other literacy activities from an early age.
Teachers can promote a culture of literacy engagement in their schools by implementing the following strategies:

- Ensure that schools serving multilingual students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have well-stocked libraries, ideally including books in relevant community languages that students can take home to read with their parents and/or siblings;
- In the preschool and early grades of elementary school, read and dramatize engaging stories to students on a daily basis;
- Create a community of readers within the classroom where students discuss fictional and non-fictional books, connect the ideas to their own lives and interests, and explore the deeper meanings of what they are reading;
- Encourage students to write in a variety of genres and display examples of students’ writing in English and their L1 prominently throughout the school.

Marginalized Group Status. Research carried out since the 1960s has documented the chronic underachievement of groups that have experienced systematic long-term discrimination in the wider society (e.g., indigenous communities around the world). The effects of constant devaluation of the culture and identities of marginalized social groups is illustrated in the well-documented phenomenon of stereotype threat (Steele, 1997). Stereotype threat refers to the deterioration of people’s ability to carry out cognitive tasks in contexts where negative stereotypes about their social group are communicated to them.

How can schools counteract the negative effects of societal power relations that devalue the identities of students from marginalized social groups? Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) expressed the essence of an effective instructional response: “When students are treated as competent they are likely to demonstrate competence” (1994, 123). In other words, educators, both individually and collectively, must challenge the devaluation of students’ language, culture, and identity in the wider society by implementing instructional strategies that enable students to develop “identities of competence” (Manyak, 2004) in the school context. These “culturally sustaining pedagogies” (Paris & Alim, 2017) will communicate high expectations to students regarding their ability to succeed academically and support them in meeting these academic demands by affirming their identities and connecting curriculum to their lives.

Conclusion

The sources of minoritized multilingual students’ underachievement go far beyond the challenge of learning English language and literacy skills. Teachers, individually and collectively, must also respond to the constriction of students’ opportunities to learn brought about by economic exclusion and societal discrimination. For me, the most significant message to emerge from the extensive body of recent research carried out by teachers and university researchers working collaboratively is that teachers can challenge identity devaluation and at least some of the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage. This research (e.g., Cummins & Early, 2011; García & Kley, 2016; Isola & Cummins, 2019; Paris & Alim, 2017) has documented powerful and inspirational instructional approaches that promote identities of competence and confidence among multilingual students.

Table 1, Figure 1 and References are available at the end of this online version of the magazine: https://www.gocabe.org/index.php/communications/multilingual-educator/