

# LITERACY ISSUES & PRACTICES

an e-journal of the State of Maryland International Reading Association Council

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<b>From the Editors: <i>Literacy Issues &amp; Practices 2.0</i></b>	1
<i>Shanetia Clark &amp; Vicki McQuitty</i>	
<b>Guest Editorial: Looking Back...Looking Forward</b>	3
<i>Barbara Martin Palmer</i>	
<b>A Duck is a Duck is a Duck?: The Roles of Reading Specialists</b>	5
<i>Gilda Martinez-Alba, David Wizer, Judith Cruzado-Guerrero, Scot McNary, Stephen Mogge, &amp; Shelly Huggins</i>	
<b>The Seal of Biliteracy in Maryland: Reflections and Predictions</b>	23
<i>Luis Javier Pentón Herrera</i>	
<b>The Role of Validating English Language Learners' Cultures in Promoting Literacy Development</b>	33
<i>Barbara Martin Palmer, Kristina B. Major, Nikole Mannherz, Gisela Morales-Colón, Katelyn Phelan, &amp; Julee Talbot</i>	
<b>Book Reviews</b>	46
<b>Call for Manuscripts</b>	50

## **The Seal of Biliteracy in Maryland**

### **Predictions and Reflections**

*Luis Javier Pentón Herrera, Concordia University Chicago*

#### **Abstract**

The 21st century is a global era where communicating across languages is an essential skill for young people. Many programs in schools today promote the teaching and learning of mathematics and science, and learning foreign languages continues to occupy a status of secondary importance. However, a recent program focuses on changing this trend and in promoting biliteracy in the United States by capitalizing the students' bilingual skills. The emergence of the Seal of Biliteracy program has led to a realization of the potential English Language Learners and simultaneous-bilingual students have in today's society. The purpose of this literature review is to introduce the Seal of Biliteracy program to literacy professionals. In addition, this article explores the impact of the Seal of Biliteracy program in Maryland by analyzing findings from two states that have already implemented it.

Correspondence: Luis Pentón Herrera  
luis.penton@gmail.com

The state of Maryland is currently one of the most diverse places in the United States (Census, 2015) with a total of over 29 languages spoken at home (MLA, 2010) as a first language. Multiculturalism in Maryland is not something new, and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) has taken positive steps since 2003 to ensure inclusive environments in schools for non-English speakers. One of the MSDE's top three priorities for policies and programs related to English Language Learners is to require that each local school system establishes an English as a Second Language (ESL) or bilingual education program for those students who have been identified as Limited English Proficiency (LEP; MSDE, 2003). This policy, among many others taken by the MSDE, is a positive step towards the right direction in promoting multilingualism within schools and in the state.

A special note is warranted as it pertains to the term of LEP used by the MSDE. The term LEP was first used in 1975 after the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Lau vs. Nichols* (Hornberger, 2005) to refer to students who speak English as a Second or additional language. This term was also used in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act to refer to ESL students. However, since its initial introduction to the field in 1975, the term LEP has evolved and it is now believed to have a negative connotation because it highlights the students' deficiencies rather than their assets. The new Every Student Succeeds (ESSA) Act uses the term English Learners (ELs) to describe English Language Learners (ELLs) and this will soon be the norm as it becomes more popular (CCSSO, 2016). Therefore, MSDE will be inclined to change the term of LEP to ELs in future years to ensure that ESL and bilingual programs in Maryland are perceived as an asset rather than a deficit.

In an attempt to continue promoting multilingualism and diversity in Maryland, legislators introduced The Seal of Biliteracy Bill, also known as the SB 0781, on February 24th, 2016. This Bill was signed on April 26th, 2016 by Governor Larry Hogan and the Act was effectively enacted on July 1st, 2016. Beginning with the graduating class of 2017, each eligible student who meets the criteria and requirements established by the state board shall receive a Seal of Biliteracy. This Seal will either be affixed to the student's diploma or transcript at graduation.

The approval and implementation of this bill seeks to bring a positive transformation in the vision of biliteracy within Maryland schools. Thus, it is important to start educating literacy practitioners on the possible implications of the Seal of Biliteracy now that this program has been adopted. The purpose of this article is to provide background information about the Seal of Biliteracy and its importance to education in the state of Maryland. In addition, this review presents findings from other states that have already been awarded the Seal of Biliteracy with a vision of anticipating outcomes and future practices in the schools of Maryland.

### **Seal of Biliteracy**

The Seal of Biliteracy is a distinction that validates, certifies and encourages students to pursue and attain a high level of mastery in one or more languages besides English. It encourages students to pursue biliteracy, honors the skills that students attain, and serves as evidence of the students' biliterate skills, which are attractive to future employers and institutions of higher education. According to the Seal of Biliteracy website, "the Seal of Biliteracy is an award given by a school, school district, county office of education or state in recognition of students who have studied and attained proficiency in two or more languages by high school graduation" (2016). This award is a tangible recognition of the bilingual students' academic success and proven biliteracy skills. There are currently 17 states in the United States that have been approved for this program, and there are 15 more states under consideration or in the early stages of application.

The Seal of Biliteracy has been celebrated by many educational associations such as the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE), TESOL International Association, The National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL), and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). All four of these associations have permanent links on their websites with information about the Seal of Biliteracy and its guidelines. These guidelines specify that all students being considered for the Seal of Biliteracy must provide comparable evidence of their English language proficiency, as well as a minimum of an intermediate-middle proficiency in languages other than English. In addition, specific languages such as Latin, Classical Greek, American Sign Language, and Native American Languages, among others, have

recommended assessment guidelines to demonstrate understanding and proficiency (ACTFL, 2015). This innovative nationwide program is an opportunity to promote biliteracy in the United States and to finally accentuate the impact bilingualism has in the personal, cognitive, academic and social development of students.

### **Seal of Biliteracy in California and Illinois**

California and Illinois are recipients of the State Seal of Biliteracy, which means that the entire Department of Education within the state participates in this program. These states have been chosen for this review because they are uniquely devoted to promoting biliteracy, and, like Maryland, both states have recently experienced a consistent increase of English Language Learners (De la Garza, Mackinney, & Lavigne, 2015; Nesrala & Corea, 2016). The information presented about both of these states represents a possible reality of what the state of Maryland might look forward to now that this program has been implemented. In addition, this information may also serve as an opportunity to compare educational realities between these states and Maryland and identify areas of improvements.

#### *California*

The state of California was the first state to adopt the Seal of Biliteracy on October 8th, 2011. Since then, the findings in literature have revealed that this program has benefited students, parents, and the society as a whole (Rodríguez-Valls, Montoya, & Valenzuela, 2014). The Seal of Biliteracy has proven to be a program that promotes linguistically responsive pedagogy and the inclusion of innovative curriculum in early biliteracy childhood education and in adult biliteracy education. However, the benefits of the Seal of Biliteracy go beyond the classroom and individual biliteracy skills; it impacts the entire community. In a globalized world where more than half of Europeans are multilingual (De Houwer & Wilton, 2011), California has found the Seal of Biliteracy to be an opportunity to bridge the linguistic gap and promote communication with other countries and cultures to improve their economy (Rodríguez-Valls, Montoya, & Valenzuela, 2014).

A recent study presented at the conference of the California Council on Teacher Education (CCTE) reports that “the implementation of California’s Seal of Biliteracy has had an impact on the demand for bilingual teachers” (Rodríguez-Valls, Salvador, Outes, & Muñoz, 2015, p. 21) in the state. In their study, Rodríguez-Valls et al. explored the topic of effective pedagogical approaches for educating biliterate learners. The initial findings of this study define the profile of the 21st century teacher “as an educator with (a) a committed pedagogy; (b) linguistic and cultural sensitivity; and (c) proficiency in the languages of instruction” (Rodríguez-Valls et al., p. 21). This research is still in an early stage, but these findings reflect a potential turn in literacy education in California as the state becomes more involved in forging biliterate learners.

There are many examples that demonstrate how the state of California continues to promote bilingual education since the Seal of Biliteracy was implemented in 2011. The California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE) is a key organization with four bilingual education affiliates whose central vision is to support biliteracy and bilingual education in the state. In order to support bilingualism, the California Department of Education offers the Bilingual, Cross-cultural, Language and Academic Development (BCLAD) certificate for teachers who provide instruction in a language other than English. This teaching certificate ensures that bilingual educators have the necessary training and content knowledge to successfully educate English learners (Jepsen & de Alth, 2005). A study conducted by Ojeda (2016) shows that bilingual educators and bilingual instructional assistants in California’s schools support bilingual and multilingual students “in the classroom by translating, helping students with their work, explaining content” (p. 9) and differentiating instruction to meet the students’ needs. In California, bilingual educators are perceived as resource teachers. In addition to their primary teaching duty, they are expected to work regularly with bilingual/multilingual students and offer bilingual/multilingual resources that promote the students’ development in their native language and in English.

### *Illinois*

The state of Illinois was the third state to pass legislation for The State Seal of Biliteracy status and adopted this program on August 27th, 2013. The incorporation of the Seal of Biliteracy was a positive shift in Illinois’s educational approaches and

policies regarding biliteracy and multiculturalism in their schools. Before adopting the Seal, Illinois had done little to promote, maintain, or enhance the teaching and learning of foreign language skills in their ELL and bilingual student population (De la Garza, Mackinney, & Lavigne, 2015). However, the adoption of the Seal showed the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)'s commitment to leveling the playing field in schools and to capitalizing and validating the linguistic assets that many students in their classrooms already possessed (ISBE, 2014). Considering the many benefits attached to programs that promote biliteracy and bilingualism (De la Garza, Mackinney, & Lavigne, 2015; Pentón Herrera, 2015), it is not surprising that more parents are choosing to enroll their children in Dual Language (DL) programs, which has resulted in an increasing demand that Illinois can barely meet.

The increasing demands for DL programs in Illinois reflect its accelerated changing demographics. In a recent report, the National Center for Educational Statistics reported that Illinois was among one of the states in the Midwest with the highest percentages of ELL students, with a public school enrollment between 6.0 to 9.9 percent (2015). The adoption of the Seal of Biliteracy in Illinois is a positive step in including and endorsing the bilingual skills of these ELL students, but the state is currently dealing with a shortage of bilingual educators. The considerable shortage of DL teachers in Illinois "stems from multiple requisite strands of expertise: a) fluency in two or more languages, b) educational theory and methodology, c) content in two languages, d) second language instruction, and e) co-construction of language and content" (De la Garza et al., p. 367). Shortage of bilingual teachers is an alarming reality for Illinois. Unless ISBE can come up with a quick solution for addressing the shortage of qualified bilingual teachers, the different DL programs currently offered may be reduced in numbers or completely decline.

Besides the information previously provided, there is currently limited research on bilingual education in the state of Illinois although efforts are being made to promote the dissemination of information and advocacy. The Illinois Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages – Bilingual Education (ITBE), a non-profit organization, held a conference in 2013 where bilingual education was the main focus. Although the presentations at the conference did not specifically address bilingual education in the state of Illinois, the four presentations provided insight on the importance of promoting vocabulary retention, oral presentations, and writing activities to promote language

development and bilingualism in students (Fernández, 2013). In addition to the ITBE, the Illinois State University, as the largest teacher preparation school in Illinois (Williams, 2014), is also promoting and advocating for bilingual education by adding an urban education component to its coursework (Williams, 2014). Both of these efforts are highly relevant to the future of bilingual education in Illinois as educators and policy makers in the state continue to grow and understand the implications of bilingualism/multilingualism after the recent adoption of the Seal of Biliteracy.

### **Seal of Biliteracy in Maryland: Implications for Teaching and Learning**

Educating bilingual and bicultural students requires “extra effort and commitment on the teachers’ part in order to create literacy programs that promote biliteracy” (Rodríguez-Valls, 2011, p. 20). This statement is certainly true in states and schools that do not have the support or vision of promoting biliteracy, but the adoption of the Seal of Biliteracy can change this reality. Maryland is a highly diverse state that currently houses many DL immersion programs in elementary and middle public schools, and it also has many innovative multilingual programs in private schools, such as The New Century School. Furthermore, MSDE has been promoting language literacy in all subjects for a few years (Maryland Public Schools, 2012) and its commitment to immigrants and language education is extended to the recent opening of two international schools in Prince George’s County.

In addition to the many DL programs present in K-12 education, the state of Maryland is one of the three states in the United States where the Ana G. Méndez University has a campus. The Ana G. Méndez University is the only DL institution of higher education in the United States where all students, faculty and administrative personnel are required to be fully bilingual in Spanish and English. Furthermore, the Ana G. Méndez University is a regionally accredited institution of higher education that seeks to educate “bilingual, bicultural, and bi-literate professionals that can comprehend and respect diversity, and can effectively and meaningfully put into practice their acquired knowledge” (Toledo-López & Pentón Herrera, 2015, p. 26). Without the Seal of Biliteracy, Maryland was already one of the states with more academic opportunities for bilingual and biliterate students in K-12 and higher education. Nonetheless, the adoption of the Seal of Biliteracy was necessary for taking

bilingual education within the state to the next level and incorporating more policies that focus strictly on the teaching, learning, and enhancement of biliterate skills in students.

The literature previously discussed about the impact of the Seal of Biliteracy in the states of California and Illinois show that this program has proven beneficial for minority and bilingual students in those states. The Seal of Biliteracy has empowered minority students in Illinois and California to be proud of their heritage and become fully proficient in their native language. The positive feedback from the community has resulted in an increase of DL programs in both states, which reflects the parents' recognition and interest on this program. At the same time, due to the rapid increase in bilingual programs, ISBE and the California Department of Education have experienced a shortage of qualified bilingual educators. These two findings are potential predictions of Maryland's reality now that the Seal of Biliteracy has been approved and students' biliteracy skills have become an opportunity for empowerment and distinction.

### **Conclusion**

Although language learning continues to occupy a status of secondary importance in states and counties across the United States, its benefits and relevance are distinct for students in the 21st century (Pentón Herrera, 2015). The Common Core Framework is focused on mathematics and language arts, but the majority of its components mirror cultural perspectives present in world languages classes. The Seal of Biliteracy is a program that empowers bilingual students and gives bilingual minority groups the opportunity to be recognized for a skill that has been long unacknowledged. The statewide adoption of this program offers many benefits because minority students' bicultural, biliterate, and bilingual identity is now awarded at the state level and recognized as an achievement rather than as a deficit. This article reflected on the implications of the approval of the Seal of Biliteracy program in the state of Maryland and the possible impact it could have on schools and the community.

## About the Author

**Luis Javier Pentón Herrera**, a doctoral candidate at Concordia University Chicago, is an ESOL teacher at Laurel High School in Laurel, MD. His research focuses on bilingual education, Spanish, ESOL/ESL, adult education, literacy studies, and history of Hispanic pedagogues.

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