# The Achievement of Spanish Speaking Students in Secondary Schools in England<sup>1</sup>

# Feyisa Demie

School of education, Durham University, Durham, UK

# Abstract

This research aims to examine Spanish-speaking students' attainment to improve our knowledge about students at the end of secondary school in England. The sample consisted of students who completed the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in inner London Local Authority. The findings of the analysis of GCSE results by language spoken at home suggest that, overall, students who speak Spanish language do less well than other groups, and their low attainment is a key concern for policymakers and teachers. However, while this is true overall, there were wide differences in performance when broken down into European speakers and Latin American speakers. The empirical evidence suggest that European Spanish speakers do better that Latin American Spanish speakers. A number of factors were identified in the underachievement of Spanish students, including the language barrier, poverty, and pupil mobility rate. Policy implications for data collection and further research are discussed in the final section.

KEYWORDS: Spanish speakers; Latino; language proficiency; attainment; GCSE; language diversity

# Introduction

This research aims to examine Spanish-speaking students' attainment to improve our knowledge about students at the end of secondary school in England. This section of the article examines what the research tells us about why bilingualism matters and the achievement gap of Spanish speakers.

The theoretical and analytical framework that drives this research article is the importance of bilingual education and maintaining a heritage language, which is now recognized by many researchers in a multicultural society. As the school-aged population in the UK, and indeed in the US, becomes increasingly diverse, teachers and other education professionals need to know how they can best serve the English learners and ensure the achievement of bilingual students. There is now consensus from the literature that heritage language maintenance is critical to the psychological, cognitive, linguistics, social and academic success of English learners. There is also evidence from research that maintaining and using a first language in schools furthers these learners' proficiency in English. It does not compromise students' English abilities but helps to close the achievement gap in multicultural society (Collier & Thomas, 2020; Thomas & Collier, 1997). These findings also suggest that:

When students who have had no schooling in their native language are taught exclusively in English, it takes from seven to ten years to reach the age and grade-level norms of their native English-speaking peers. Students who have been taught through both their native language and English, however, reach and surpass the performance of native English-speakers across all subject areas after only four to seven years when tested in English. Furthermore, when tested in their native language, these bilingual education students typically score at or above grade level in all subject areas. (Collier & Thomas, 2020)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> See Journal of Latinos and Education, April 2021 https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2021.1899925

Other research evidence also suggests that, with the rapid rate of globalization, there has been a dramatic increase in interest in the study of bilingualism (see Murphy, 2015; Padilla et al., 2013; Prevoo et al., 2015; Umansky & Reardon, 2014). For example, recent studies in the US looked at language proficiency and academic achievement of students who completed a two-way Mandarin immersion program.

The results from this study show that students who are taught in Mandarin for much of the school day generally achieve at levels on California-mandated tests in English language arts, writing, math, and science that are as high as, or sometimes higher than, their non-immersion peers who attend the same school. These results are reassuring because they demonstrate that, when students receive instruction in two languages, they are not only developing as bilinguals but also do not fall behind their peers on the essential content. (Padilla et al., 2013, p. 675)

Research into translanguaging also argues that giving bilingual learners the opportunity to use their full language repertoire enables them to reach their full potential and allows language, academic, and cognitive development to flourish in their first and second languages (García & Wei, 2014). The importance of a positive attitude toward bilingualism and bilingual education has been supported by many researchers, including Demie (2019b, 2018, 2015), Conteh (2005), García and Wei (2014), and Michael et al. (2016) in the UK. Their research findings reenforce the idea that valuing bilingualism in school promotes success for bilingual learners.

However, despite a number of studies that support first language use when supporting early EAL children and the importance of bilingual education, the British government's policy is to use English language only in classrooms (see García, 2009; Michael et al., 2016). The Department for Education (DfE) states that first language should not really be a consideration in teaching EAL children, and an English-only approach should be used (Author, 2019b; DfE, 2012). In general, the policy is English only for classroom teaching, and the role of linguistic and cultural practice of the home is largely ignored in England. This is a concern in a country where over 350 languages are spoken in schools in addition to English, reflecting the different cultures, experiences, and identities of the people in the community. However, European languages such as French, German, Spanish, Polish, and Italian are taught as a normal part of the Modern Languages Curriculum in England and Wales.

#### The achievement gap of Spanish speakers

The achievement of Spanish-speaking students should be a major concern for educators, policymakers, and school leaders. This research aims to explore the attainment of Spanish-speaking students in schools and consider factors influencing performance. As a result of the lack of data, there are limitations in past research into Spanish-speaking achievement in British schools. The absence of national comparative data that identifies patterns of children of Spanish-speaking origin places serious constraints on efforts to affect policy and practice developments at the national and local levels. Such study is now important, given the growth in the Spanish-speaking population in the world (see Figure 1). A review of the literature suggests that there are about "460 million in the world who speak Spanish as a native language and 517,423,452 million who speak Spanish including those who speak it as their second language. Spanish is an official language of 20 countries worldwide with at least 70 countries with Spanish speaking population. Most Spanish speakers are in Hispanic America and in USA. There are over 50 million speakers" for whom Spanish is a second language in the US (see Spanish Language Domains Statistics, 2020).<sup>2</sup>

There is extensive literature on the gap that exists in academic achievement between Latino students and students of other races and ethnicities (Villegas & Irvine, 2010) in the US, but few studies

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> https://spanishlanguagedomains.com/the-numbers-of-spanish-speakers-in-the-world-exceeds-500-million/.

examining the factors that are considered as barriers to academic achievement among Latino students elsewhere. Latinos in general have much lower academic achievement than do members of other ethnic groups (Pew Hispanic Centre, 2017). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading and mathematics shows that the gap between Latino students and their White





classmates persists; in 2008, the difference was 21 with Whites achieving a mean scale score of 314 and Latinos attaining a mean scale score of 293 (Rampey et al., 2009). Reardon and Portilla (2015) also found the White-Hispanic gap at school entry was 0.56 standard deviations in reading and 0.67 standard deviations in math.

Researchers have long sought to understand and explain the vast racial and ethnic disparities in achievement that have always existed in the United States (Hung et al., 2020; Reardon & Portilla, 2015) and have identified a wide range of factors that contribute to educational achievement, including the reasons for the relative low achievement of Black and Latino students in the United States. One major factor that the research has consistently found is parental socioeconomic status. Parental education and income are identified as powerful predictors of student achievement for students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds (Aragon, 2018; Wong & Hughes, 2006). Because child poverty rates for Blacks and Latinos are more than twice as high as child poverty rates for Whites (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003), these differences contribute to differences in educational achievement among these groups. Recent evidence from the US on the achievement gap also indicates that economic inequality, racial inequality, and household adult

education attainment factors are strongly associated with Black/White student achievement gaps and also with Latino underachievement (Hung et al., 2020).

Language fluency is also considered a major factor, and many Latino students face challenges in classrooms as a result of language barriers (Barrett et al., 2012). Spanish is the first language for many Latino students. During the 2008–09 academic school year, there were 5.3 million students classified as English language learners (ELLs) in prekindergarten to 12th grade public school classrooms, which is a 51% increase from the 1997–98 academic year (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Forty-five percent of all Latino students in US public schools are classified as ELLs, and 79% of ELLs in elementary schools are Latino (Lazarin, 2006).

Studies in language fluency in the US by the Philadelphia Education Research Consortium (2017) also showed about six in 10 students reached English proficiency after their first four years in the Philadelphia district public schools. Students whose home language was Spanish were considerably less likely to reach proficiency than any other subgroup; only 43% compared to Chinese (79%), Vietnamese (72%), Arabic (68%), and Khmer (64%). Spanish speakers were almost half as likely as Chinese speakers to cross that proficiency threshold. Spanish speakers were by far the largest group— by a factor of more than three. This was not unique to Philadelphia. The report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2017), *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*, found the same gap nationwide. In general, one could argue that, based on the evidence from the literature, English proficiency has been linked to lower achievement outcomes in the US (see Barrett et al., 2012)

This issue is also apparent in the UK. A few recent studies have attempted to better understand the many factors associated with achievement and the barriers to learning for ethnic minority students. A number of researchers have identified some of the main reasons for performance differences between different groups, including factors such as race and racial discrimination issues, stage of English proficiency, economic deprivation, pupil mobility, and racism (Demie 2019b; Strand, 2012; Vincent et al., 2012). Other UK and international evidence also suggest that ethnic minority students face several problems at school, including poverty across generations, lack of parental engagement, and negative attitudes to education. There is now a general consensus that poverty and home factors impact the academic achievement of students and contribute to the achievement gap.

Previous research has also demonstrated a link between level of fluency in English and underachievement (Demie, 2018, Strand & Demie 2005; Strand & Hessel, 2018). Children for whom English is a second language, and those who are not fluent in English, have restricted access to the National Curriculum and are severely disadvantaged. The research findings from inner London show that children who are not fluent in English tend to do less well in Key Stage 1 (KS1), Key Stage 2 (KS2), and the GCSE than those students fully fluent in English (Author, 2018; Strand & Hessel, 2018). A recent study also showed that it takes about five to seven years on average to acquire academic English proficiency for English as an additional language student (Author, 2013).

Studies into the academic attainment of Spanish speakers in UK schools are non-existent, with most research being into ethnicity and English as an additional language overall. Spanish-speaking students can fall within more than one of the DfE's recommended ethnic categories, mainly White Other (which contains Spanish and American students), and Any Other Group (which contains Latin American students). UK studies into English as an additional language have, however, provided us with some things to consider when regarding Spanish speakers in our schools. Strand and Hessel's (2018) KS2 study suggests that when adjusted for background variables such as socio-economic background, Spanish speakers had average attainment. Within the White Other ethnic group, there were minimal differences between English, Russian, Spanish, French, and Italian speakers. Additionally, over a quarter of KS2 Spanish speakers had no KS1 test score, indicating a high level of mobility, and if from outside the UK, this would show a later process of learning English (Strand & Hessel, 2018).

Previous studies have argued that low achievement of several ethnic minority groups in England has been masked by government statistics that do not consider language spoken at home and English fluency (Author, 2015). In particular, the "White Other" and any "Other Ethnic Group" categories gloss over enormous cultural, geographical, and linguistic diversity. As such, it is useful to be cautious when using the national School Census ethnic categories.

There is now recognition of the weakness of using ethnicity for performance monitoring and for supporting students in the classroom without considering the language spoken at home. We would argue that home language and level of English fluency of students are important aspects of pupil achievement and powerful predictors of differential attainment (Demie, 2015, 2019b).

# **Research aims and methods**

# **Research questions**

This research is a Local Authority (LA) case study. Building on previous research that explored the links between ethnic background and academic achievement, this study aims to explore the attainment of Spanish-speaking students in LA schools and assess factors influencing performance. Three questions guided this research:

- What does the attainment data tell us about the achievement of Spanishspeaking students at the end of secondary education?
- Which are the factors influencing performance of Spanish speakers?
- What is the implication for data collection and further research?

## Data and research methods

The sample consisted of students who completed National Curriculum Assessment tests at the end of KS4. In addition, all of the LA's schools were asked to provide details of their students' backgrounds, such as name, date of birth, sex, ethnic background, free school meal eligibility, date of admission or mobility data, and level of fluency in English for contextual analysis. Where available, we also drew evidence from national data published by the DfE.

Data are collected annually in January as part of a school census on ethnic background, language spoken at home, and free school meals. The LA schools have a long history of collecting language, ethnicity, disadvantaged and English proficiency data since 1990 and the assessment is moderated by the LA. The main findings of the data show that the LA serves a diverse community. The largest ethnic groups were Black African (24.0%), followed by White Other (15.7%), White British (15.5%), and Black Caribbean (13.4%) and mixed-race students with a few smaller ethnic minority groups (Demie, 2019a, 2019b).

It is also important to note that, broadly speaking, Spanish-speaking students are found within the wider definition of "Other White" and "Any Other Group" in national-level data (DfE, 2019). It is also important to note that some LA Spanish-speaking populations are very small and so any percentages are prone to large fluctuations.

Table 1 breaks down the ethnic background of Spanish speakers from the last three school census returns in the LA. Consistently, the largest two ethnic groups were "Any Other Group" and "White Other,"<sup>3</sup> each of which comprised over one third of the total cohort.

Although much research has been carried out on attainment and ethnic background, this is less true of attainment and language spoken. However, the LA has collected data on language and ethnic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The DfE's definition of students to be included in "White Other" is Albanian, Bosnian-Herzegovinian, Croatian, Greek/Greek Cypriot, Italian, Kosovan, Portuguese, Serbian, Turkish/Turkish Cypriot, White European, White Eastern European, and White Western European; i.e., European Spanish speakers, while "any other group" would include Spanish speakers from Latin/South/Central America.

background of students through its annual pupil survey since 1990 and has a detailed set of trend data to utilize. The proportion and number of Spanish speakers in the LA has risen dramatically since 1992, when they comprised less than 1% of the school population. Figure 2 shows their steady rise, more than six-fold.

The data analysis was carried out in two stages. Firstly, attainment was matched to pupil information by background factors and analyzed by ethnic background and languages spoken at home to illustrate

	20	)17	20	)18	20	)19
Spanish Speakers by ethnic backgrounds						
	NO	%	NO	%	NO	%
Black - African	30	1%	39	2%	45	2%
Black Caribbean	26	1%	34	1%	40	2%
Mixed Other Background	225	10%	268	11%	276	11%
Mixed White and Asian	4	0%	4	0%	3	0%
Mixed White and Black African	25	1%	24	1%	28	1%
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	53	2%	62	3%	59	2%
Portuguese	21	1%	16	1%	21	1%
White British	40	2%	57	2%	91	4%
White Other Background	849	39%	873	37%	862	36%
Other Ethnic Group	873	40%	936	40%	959	40%
Any Other Asian Background	4	0%	6	0%	3	0%
Any Other Black Background	28	1%	34	1%	33	1%

Table 1. Breakdown of ethnic background of Spanish Speakers 2017-2019

Source: Demie, F and Tong, R. (2020). Education Statistics



Figure 2. Spanish speakers in LA schools, 2012–2019. Source: Author and Tong (2020), education statistics.

differences in attainment. Secondly, attainment data were further analyzed by social background factors and stages of English proficiency to explore the main factors influencing performance in schools.

# Measures of performance

It is important to note that, in the English education system, students aged 15 and 16 take General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams. These are the major qualifications taken by students

at the end of compulsory schooling at the age of 15. Therefore, the measure of performance used in the analysis is 9 to 4 in both English and Math in the GCSE.

#### The achievement of Spanish-speaking students in secondary schools

The next section examines the achievement of Spanish-speaking students in LA schools at the end of the GCSE. As noted earlier, Spanish-speaking students are found within the wider definition of "Other White" and "Any Other Group" in national-level data. Despite the lack of national data on Spanish-

speaking pupil achievement, since 1990 the LA has collected data on this group via the Language Survey, which has provided an interesting example in research evidence.

## Language diversity and GCSE attainment of Spanish speakers in secondary schools

Figure 3 shows GCSE achievement by languages spoken at home by the indicator 9–4 grade in English and Math (%). There is a clear difference in performance when the results are broken down by language spoken. There are wide variations in the attainment of different language groups within the Local Authority. Spanish speakers overall are considered to be an underachieving group, but when this is disaggregated by languages spoken by students, there are several language groups that are performing well compared to the national average. Urdu-speaking students were the highest achieving with 86% achieving the indicator. They were closely followed by Bengali (83%), Polish (78%), Chinese (77%), Albanian (69%), Yoruba (68%), Twi- Fante (67%), Tigrinya (63%), Italian (63%), Arabic (62%), and Somali (59%), who all performed above the national average at the GCSE in English and math grade 9–4 (see Figure 3). Notably, of the largest language groups, Somali, English, Yoruba, Twi-Fanti, Tigrinya, and Albanian speakers achieved better than the national average.

In contrast, Spanish-speaking students were by far the lowest performing category, with just 48% of students achieving expected levels at GCSE, followed by Krio-speaking students (19%). Similarly, low- achieving were speakers of Ibo (56%), English (56%), Lingala (54%), French (51%), Spanish (48%), and Krio



Figure 3. GCSE achievement by languages spoken at home: 9-4 grade in English and Math (%).

- The languages listed were spoken by over 10 students, while languages such as Spanish were spoken by 166 students, Portuguese 190 students, English 1097 students, Somali 115 students, French 72 students, Yoruba 50 students, Polish 40 students, Arabic 53 students, Twi-Fanti 48 students, and Bengali 30 students.
- Other African languages spoken by small numbers of students who took GCSE examinations included Amharic, Oromo, Arabic, Xhosa, Zulu, Hausa, Luo, Kikuyu, Manding, Runyakata, and Temne. These language results have not been reported here because they have between 1 to 9 speakers, which is too small to make a meaningful statistical interpretation. Care needs to be taken in the interpretation of the GCSE trend data of languages that have small numbers of speakers.

(40%). The underachievement of these language groups is corroborated by the findings of the analysis done on KS2 students, which found all of these language groups underperforming and comparisons of level and attainment gap being remarkably congruous (Demie et al., 2018). Overall, Spanish speakers are some of the lowest achieving groups of all the languages spoken. This is an area that should require further scrutiny.

However, when we look at results for Spanish speakers by Spanish subgroups, such as Latin American, European, and all Spanish speakers, there is evidence that European Spanish speakers attained 52% at English and Math grades 9 to 4, compared to Latin American at 44%. Attainment 8 for European Spanish Speakers was the same as the LA, 44.0, and for Latin American Spanish speakers was 40.8. The Progress 8 score for Latin American Spanish speakers was 0.52, compared to 0.19 for European Spanish speakers (see Table 2 for details).

Spanish-speaking students' results decreased dramatically between 2017 and 2019. In 2017, they attained 61% at English and Math grade 9 to 4, above the LA and national average. In 2019, the

Spanish-speaking cohort had dropped 13 percentage points to 48%. This is 11 percentage points below the LA average of 59% and 12 below the national average of 60%. Compared to other major languages, Spanish was the lowest, followed by Portuguese at 50%, English at 56%, and Somali at 59%.

# Factors influencing the attainment of Spanish speakers

# English language barriers and the attainment of Spanish-speaking students

The challenges that Spanish-speaking children who speak little or no English encounter in their early school years are many and likely to interfere with their schooling. Spanish speakers who have limited English- language skills receive fewer opportunities to learn than students who are fully bilingual or speak only English well. This limits Spanish-speaking students' ability to access English education. The English as an additional language learning need of Spanish-speaking students varies greatly from beginners to advanced. Stages of English proficiency have been used to describe the different stages of English through which students progress. The measure of stages of proficiency used in the case study for LA is five stages, comprising New to English, Early Acquisition, Developing Competence, Competent, and Fluent. These five stages are described in detail in Author (2018). The schools assess the position of their EAL pupils in reading, writing, and speaking and listening against a five-stage proficiency framework. They then make a "best fit" judgment as to the proficiency stage to which a pupil most closely corresponds, as noted in the following.

## Stage A (new to English)

May use first language for learning and other purposes. May remain completely silent in the classroom. May be copying/repeating some words or phrases. May understand some everyday expressions in English but may have minimal or no literacy in English. Needs a considerable amount of EAL support.

#### Stage B (early acquisition)

May follow day-to-day social communication in English and participate in learning activities with support. Beginning to use spoken English for social purposes. May understand simple instructions and can follow narrative/accounts with visual support. May have developed some skills in reading and writing. May have become familiar with some subject specific vocabulary. Still needs a significant amount of EAL support to access the curriculum.

		isir language speak	2017 2015.			
		Latin American	European Spanish	All Spanish speakers	All students	National
2017	English & Math 9–4	70%	53%	61%	60%	59%
	Number of Students	37	36	107		
2018	English & Math 9–4	50%	60%	55%	60%	59%
	Number of Students	80	53	157		
2019	English & Math 9–4	44%	52%	48%	59%	60%
	Number of Students	68	61	166		

## . . .

## Stage C (developing competence)

May participate in learning activities with increasing independence. Able to express self orally in English, but structural inaccuracies are still apparent. Literacy will require ongoing support, particularly for understanding text and writing. May be able to follow abstract concepts and more complex written English. Requires ongoing EAL support to access the curriculum fully.

## Stage D (competent)

Oral English will be developing well, enabling successful engagement in activities across the curriculum. Can read and understand a wide variety of texts. Written English may lack complexity and contain occasional evidence of errors in structure. Needs some support to access subtle nuances of meaning, to refine English usage, and to develop abstract vocabulary. Needs some/occasional EAL support to access complex curriculum material and tasks.

#### Stage E (fluent)

Can operate across the curriculum to a level of competence equivalent to that of a pupil who uses English as his/her first language. Operates without EAL support across the curriculum. (Demie, 2018; DfE, 2017a, pp. 63–66)

Figure 3 gives the average stage of English proficiency. The data show that 16% of the Spanish students in the LA schools are fully fluent in English, and about 19% are at Stage D level of fluency with little need for additional support. In contrast, 21% are at Stage C (developing competence), 14% at Stage B (early acquisition), and 11% at Stage A (new beginner).

Researchers have now recognized that the English language barrier is an important factor relating to the achievement of Spanish-speaking students. For students to have access to the curriculum, it is clear that they need to be fluent in the language of instruction. Some students with Spanish as their native language are fluent in English, while others may not be. A number of studies have explored the relationship between English fluency and pupil attainment. Examined the results at KS2 and GCSE while, at the same time, controlling for age, gender, free school meals, ethnic background, and mobility rate. The results indicated that students who spoke English as an additional language scored significantly lower than those who spoke English as their first language or were fluent in English.

Figure 4 shows that the vast majority of Spanish speakers are not fluent in English. It also shows that the fluency profile of Spanish speakers differs from that of Portuguese and Somali speakers, with the former having a higher proportion of students at the earliest stages of fluency, and correspondingly fewer with the highest level of fluency. In 2019, 11% of Spanish speakers were classified as Stage A (new to English). This is significantly higher than both Portuguese and Somali speakers, who had about 6% of their students classified at this level.

Table 3 divides the attainment by the Spanish subgroups, but the numbers are so small for each group that it is difficult to draw any conclusions.

About one third of Spanish-speaking students were fluent in English, and their results follow suggested patterns, with 66% attaining English and Math at grades 9 to 4, above both the LA and national figures.

#### Social background and attainment of Spanish language speakers

The free school meals variable is often used as a proxy measure of the extent of social deprivation in students' backgrounds and has been linked to underachievement in a number of studies (Author, 2019b). School-level data demonstrates a clear relationship between the concentration of poverty levels in schools and tests and examination results. The proportion of Spanish-speaking students in 2019 who were eligible for free school meals (FSM) was 14% compared to 27% in the LA.

At GCSE, there is no difference for Spanish speakers with or without FSM in 2019 in terms of English and Math. There is a marked difference, however, between those eligible for Pupil Premium and those students deemed to be not disadvantaged. There were 52% of Spanish speakers not eligible for Pupil Premium attaining English and Math at grades 9 to 4, compared to 41% who were eligible.



Figure 4. Breakdown of fluency stage, 2019.

		Stage A	Stage B	Stage C	Stage D	Stage E	Non- fluent	A to E	All
									students
Latin American	English & Math 9–4	n/a	0%	35%	33%	64%	28%	41%	44%
	Number of Students	0	7	17	15	22	39	61	68
European	English & Math 9–4	n/a	0%	44%	50%	74%	41%	52%	52%
	Number of Students	0	5	18	14	19	37	56	61
All	English & Math 9–4	n/a	0%	37%	42%	66%	33%	46%	48%
Spanish									
	Number of Students	0	16	43	33	59	92	151	166
All students	English & Math 9–4	0%	0%	43%	62%	67%	49%	59%	58%
	Number of Students	7	36	150	247	491	440	931	

Table 3. GCSE by proficiency 2019: Spanish subgroups.

When we look at the Spanish language subgroups, Latin American students eligible for FSM perform better at the English and Math indicators than those not eligible, although there is a small cohort of only eight students to consider. This is reversed when we compare those eligible for Pupil Premium with those not. European Spanish speakers follow the conventional pattern with those eligible for FSM and Pupil Premium both performing lower than their non-eligible counterparts (see Table 4).

# Gender and attainment of Spanish language speakers

Over the last 30 years, the gender issues that have shaped thinking and practice in schools have changed drastically. Today in the UK, the differences in the performance patterns of boys and girls are a matter of national concern. The overall message in the UK from research is that girls do better than boys. Girls have always outperformed boys overall at KS1 and KS2 and GCSE (Gillborn & Mirza, 2000), but this was not true of Spanish speakers. Surprisingly, male pupils outperform female pupils at GCSE. However, when the results are broken down by Spanish subgroup, a different picture emerges. At GCSE, the gap between genders was seven percentage points for Spanish speakers, the same as for all pupils. This is much lower than the 13-point gap for English speakers and, surprisingly, male pupils outperform female pupils at GCSE. The gender gap is slightly lower for Latin American Spanish speakers (at five percentage points) than for European Spanish speakers (at eight percentage points) see Table 5.

Research on cultural capital offers partial explanations of differences in performance of boys and girls who are Spanish speakers. The cultural influences and economic and social changes in the society as a result of migration can have a considerable effect on how male and female students respond to schools, and their relationships with teachers and peers. Different groups of boys and girls are affected in different ways, often reflecting the influence of class and ethnic background. Overall, there is a simple explanation for gender differences in which boys perform better in the context of Spanish speakers. As argued by Ogbu (1987, 2003), cultural factors may be responsible for how various ethnic minorities perform in the UK setting, and this also true for Latino success or failure in the UK. It is always challenging for immigrant minorities to settle in a new country, and many struggle to help their **Table 4.** GCSE by disadvantage 2019: Spanish subgroups.

		Free School Meals (FSM)		Pupil P		
		Eligible for FSM	Not Eligible	Eligible for PP	Not eligible for PP	All students
Latin American	English and Math 9–4	50%	43%	38%	47%	44%
	Students	8	60	21	47	68
European	English and Math 9–4	42%	55%	39%	59%	52%
	Students	12	49	22	39	61
All Spanish	English and Math 9–4	48%	48%	41%	52%	48%
	Students	23	143	58	108	166
English	English and Math 9–4	42%	62%	47%	67%	56%
	Students	311	786	568	529	1097
All students	English and Math 9–4	51%	61%	51%	66%	58%
	Students	1611	578	1085	1104	

Table 5. GCSE by gender 2019: Spanish subgroups.

		Female	Male	All
				students
Latin American	English & Math (9–4)	42%	47%	44%
	Number of Students	38	30	68
European	English & Math (9–4)	48%	56%	52%
	Number of Students	29	32	61
All Spanish	English & Math (9–4)	45%	52%	48%
	Number of Students	85	81	166
English	English & Math (9–4)	60%	47%	56%
	Number of Students	538	559	1097
All students	English & Math (9–4)	62%	55%	58%
	Number of Students	1090	1099	

children with their education in the way that British middle-class parents do. In any one context, several factors are likely to have an influence on school performance of both male and female Spanish speakers in different ways. This is an interesting and very complex area that requires further research with a focus on Spanish speakers.

#### Pupil mobility and attainment of Spanish language speakers

Another important factor that affects Spanish-speaking students' performance is pupil mobility. Mobile students are those who join or leave school at a point other than at the age they would normally start or finish their education. In the past few years, there has been increasing concern about pupil mobility in schools. Previous research in this area has generally focused on establishing the extent of pupil mobility problems in schools (Strand & Demie, 2005).

Table 6 shows the comparative performance of mobile and non-mobile, or "stable," students within the LA. For the purposes of this research, "mobile students" refers to students who first joined the

		Non- mobile joined in Year 7	Mobile joined in Year 8–11	All
				students
Latin American	English & Math (9–4)	44%	43%	44%
	Number of Students	45	23	68
European	English & Math (9–4)	63%	30%	52%
	Number of Students	41	20	61
All Spanish	English & Math (9–4)	54%	33%	48%
	Number of Students	118	48	166
English	English & Math (9–4)	58%	49%	56%
	Number of Students	938	159	1097
All students	English & Math (9–4)	60%	49%	58%
	Number of Students	1803	386	2189

 Table 6. GCSE attainment of Spanish speakers by mobility rate, 2019.

English school system in year 8 or later. There is a striking gap in attainment between mobile and nonmobile students; 33% of Spanish-speaking students who were mobile achieve English and Math 9–4 grade, but 54% of stable students met this standard. The biggest difference at GCSE between the Spanish-speaking groups was 33 percentage points in favour of non-mobile students for European Spanish speakers. Non-mobile students achieved 63%, while mobile students achieved 30%. The gap for Latin American speakers was only one percentage point; however, both had low levels of achievement, with mobile students attaining 44% and non-mobile students attaining 43%.

Without question, pupil mobility is a major factor affecting the performance of Spanish-speaking students in schools.

# Discussion, conclusions, and policy implications

## Conclusions

The achievement of Spanish-speaking students should be a major concern for educators, policymakers, and school leaders. This research aims to examine Spanish-speaking students' attainment to improve the knowledge about students at the end of secondary school in England. The findings of the analysis of GCSE results at the end of secondary education by language spoken at home suggest that, overall, students who speak Spanish do less well than other groups, and their low attainment is a key concern for policymakers and teachers. However, while this is true overall, there were wide differences in performance when broken down by individual language. Within the Spanish-speaking groups, there is a large variation in performance, depending on the language variant that is spoken. The empirical data suggested that speakers of Latin American Spanish were one of the lowest performing categories. Just 48% of students achieved the GCSE indicator of English and Math at grades

9 to 4- followed by Krio speaking students (19%). Also low achieving were speakers of Ibo (56%), English (56%), Lingala (54%), French (51%), Spanish (48%), and Krio (40%). In contrast, Urdu-speaking students were the highest achieving with 86% achieving the GCSE indicator. They were closely followed by Bengali (83%), Polish (78%), Chinese (77%), Albanian (69%), Yoruba (68%), Twi- Fante (67%), Tigrinya (63%), Italian (63%), and Arabic (62%), who performed above the national average at GCSE in English and math grade 9–4.

The main conclusion from that data is that, over the last three years, Spanish-speaking students have been consistently lower than the LA and national averages GCSE. When these figures are broken down into European speakers and Latin American speakers, there is no consistent trend of one group outperforming the other, but the data for 2019 suggest that European Spanish speakers do better that Latin American Spanish speakers. Of the largest language groups, English, Yoruba, Twi-Fanti, Igbo, Italian, Arabic, Tigrinya, and Polish speakers achieved better than the national average.

There is a need for strategies to be developed to raise levels of achievement of Spanish speakers and to reverse trends in the LA and at the national level. A number of factors were identified in the underachievement of Spanish students, including the language barrier, poverty, and pupil mobility.

An important key factor identified as the main reason for underachievement is the lack of English fluency. An examination of level of fluency in English on pupil performance confirms that there is a strong relationship between the stage of fluency in English and educational attainment. The results suggest that the percentage of students attaining the DfE GCSE indicators increased as stage of proficiency in English increased. Spanish-speaking students in the early stages of fluency performed at low levels, while EAL students who were fully fluent in English far outperformed those students for whom English was their only language. Overall, the conclusion from this study suggests that lack of fluency in English remains the key factor affecting the performance of EAL students in English schools.

Other key factors affecting achievement of Spanish-speaking students in English schools include the poverty factor associated with socio-economic status. The GCSE data indicate that there is a marked difference in performance between students eligible for free school meals and the most economically advantaged groups in schools at the end of secondary education. Overall, the finding from the national data confirms that Spanish-speaking students eligible for free school meals perform considerably less well than their more affluent peers.

Pupil mobility also affects Spanish-speaking students' performance. The main findings from the data indicate that those Spanish-speaking students who joined an English school after Year 7 recorded a lower attainment level at GCSE. About 49% of stable students achieved the expected standard compared to 44% of the mobile group.

The overall conclusion from the study is the Spanish-speaking students lags behind the average for England, and this country needs to improve the school performance of its biggest migrant group.

## Implications for data collection policy and further research

One of the contributions made by this paper is to provide statistical evidence on languages used by students in the Inner London local authority. This paper also explores how the available language data may be used for analyses to examine the attainment of Spanish-speaking children. The intention is to look at the possibility of extending the research to other language groups in English schools. The evidence from the data confirms that students speaking Spanish are one of the fastest growing groups still underachieving in English schools. The overall findings of this study suggest that the underachievement of Spanish-speaking children remains a cause for concern and is obviously an issue that policymakers and schools need to address.

These findings also have implications for the collection and use of data at the national and international levels. We would argue that the worryingly low achievement of Spanish-speaking

students has been masked by a failure of government statistics to distinguish "White Other ethnic group" and other ethnic groups that are used in national data collection by languages spoken at home. We pointed out that accurate and reliable disaggregated ethnic and language data are important to address education inequalities. Such data are important to identify knowledge gaps and develop effective programs and policies. We would argue that, as a matter of good practice, data on language spoken at home need to be collected to monitor performance of all groups and to identify groups that are underachieving in schools.

Finally, our research evidence is based on the data that are available at the local authority level. We would argue that the study of the educational achievement of Spanish-speaking students in schools, and its implications for performance, is a relatively under-researched field in England due to lack of data. While this study represents a beginning into the study of Spanish-speaking pupils' achievement in schools, it is our hope that it will be a springboard for further research. This study identifies some limitations, with several possible avenues and questions for future research, including: What is the challenge of learning English in addition to their native language for Spanish-speaking students? What can be done to improve bilingual children learning using both their native language and English in classrooms?

## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

#### References

- Aragon, A. (2018). Achieving Latin students: Aspirational counter stories and critical reflections on parental community cultural wealth. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 17(4), 373–385. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2017.1355804
- Barrett, A., Barile, J., Malm, E., & Weaver, S. (2012). English proficiency and peer interethnic relations as predictors of math achievement among Latino and Asian immigrant students. *Journal of Adolescence*, 35(6), 1619–1628. https:// doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2012.08.002

Collier, V. P., & Thomas, W. P. (2017). Validating the power of bilingual schooling: Thirty-two years of large-scale, longitudinal research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *37*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190517000034 Collier, V. P., & Thomas, W. P. (2020, March). Why dual language works for everyone, PK-12. In *Multilingual educator* (2020 annual ed.). California Association for Bilingual Education.

Conteh, J. (2005). The EAL teaching work: Promoting success for multilingual leaners. Sage.

- Demie, F. (2015). Language diversity and attainment in schools: Implication for policy and practice. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 18(5), 723–737.
- Demie, F. (2018). English language proficiency and attainment of EAL (English as second language) students in England. Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 39(7), 641–653.
- Demie, F. (2019a). Raising achievement of black Caribbean students: Good practice for developing leadership capacity and workforce diversity in schools. *Journal School Leadership & Management*, 39(1), 5–25.
- Demie, F.(2019b). Educational attainment of East European students in primary schools in England: Implications for policy and practice. *London Review of Education*, 17(2), 159–177.
- Demie, F. and Tong, R. (2020). Education Statistics. London: School Research and Statistics Unit
- DfE(2012). English as an Additional Language: A brief summary of Government policy in relation to EAL Learners. London: Department for Education.
- DfE. (2017a). Collection of data on pupil nationality, country of birth and proficiency in English, summary report. Department for Education.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/665127/

Data\_on\_pupil\_nationality\_\_country\_of\_birth\_and\_proficiency.pdf

DfE(2019). Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2019. London: Department for Education García,

O. (2009). Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective. Basil/Blackwell.

- García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). Translanguaging: Language, education, and bilingualism. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gillborn, D., & Mirza, H. S. (2000). Educational inequality: Mapping race and class. OFSTED.
- Hung, M., Smith, W., Voss, M., Franklin, J., Gu, Y., & Bounsanga, J. (2020). Exploring student achievement gaps in school districts across the United States. *Education and Urban Society*, 52(2), 175–193. https://doi.org/10.1177/ 0013124519833442
- Lazarin, M. (2006). Improving Assessment and Accountability for English Language Learners in the No Child Left Behind Act. *National Council of LA Raza*. Washington, DC

- Michael, E., Schneider, C., Arnot, M., Fisher, L., Forbes, K., Hu, M., & Liu, Y. (2016). Language development and school achievement opportunities and challenges in the education of EAL students, executive summary. University of Cambridge and Anglia Ruskin University.
- Murphy, V. (2015). A systematic review of intervention research examining English language and literacy development in children with English as an Additional Language (EAL). University of Oxford, Department of Education.
- National Academies of Sciences Engineering Medicine (2017). Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, Https://doi.org/10. 17226/24677.
- Ogbu, J. U. (1987). Variability in minority school performance: A problem in search of an explanation. Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 18(4), 312–334. https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.1987.18.4.04x0022v
- Ogbu, J. U. (2003). Black American students in an affluent suburb: A study of academic disengagement. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Padilla, M., Fan, L., Xu, L., & Silva, D. (2013). A Mandarin/English Two-way immersion program: Language proficiency and academic achievement. *Foreign Language Annals, 46*(4), 661–679. https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12060 Pew Research Centre. (2017). *Pew research centre tabulations of 2017 American surveys*.
- Prevoo, L., Malda, M., Mesman, J., & Van Ijzendoorn, M. H. (2015). Within- and cross-language relations between oral language proficiency and school outcomes in bilingual children with an immigrant background: A metaanalytical study. *Review of Educational Research*, Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315584685
- Rampey, B., Dion, G., & Donahue, P. (2009). The nation's report card: Trends in academic progress in reading and mathematics 2008. Institute of Educational Sciences, National Centre for Education Statistics, US Department of Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED505083.pdf
- Reardon, F. (2011). The widening socioeconomic status achievement gap: New evidence and possible explanations. In R. J. Murnane & G. J. Duncan (Eds.), Whither opportunity? Rising inequality and the uncertain life chances of lowincome children. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Reardon, F., & Galindo, C. (2009). The Hispanic-white achievement gap in math and reading in the elementary grades. American Educational Research Journal, 46(3), 853–891. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831209333184
- Reardon, F., & Portilla, A. (2015). Recent trends in socioeconomic and racial school readiness gaps at kindergarten entry (CEPA Working Paper No.15–02 (2015)). http://cepa.stanford.edu.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/wp15–02
- Spanish language Domains (2020). The number of Spanish Speakers in the World. https://Spanishlanguagedomains. com/the-numbers-of-spanish-speakers-in-the-world-exceeeds-500-million/.
- Strand, S & Demie, F. (2005). English language acquisition and educational attainment at the end of primary school. *Educational studies*, 31(3),275–91
- Strand, S. (2010). Do some schools narrow the gap? Differential school effectiveness by ethnicity, gender, poverty and prior attainment. School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 21(3), 289–314. https://doi.org/10.1080/ 09243451003732651
- Strand, S. (2012). The White British-Black Caribbean achievement gap: Tests, tiers, and teacher expectations. British Educational Research Journal, 38(1), 75–101. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.526702
- Strand, S., & Hessel, A. (2018). English as an additional language, proficiency in English and students' educational achievement: An analysis of local authority data. University of Oxford. https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/app/ uploads/2018/10/EAL-PIE-and-Educational-Achievement-Report-2018-FV.pdf
- The Philadelphia Education Research Consortium (2017). Finding Their Stride: Kindergarten English Learners'. *Time to Proficiency in Philadelphia*. Philadelphia, PA 19110
- Thomas, W., & Collier, V. (1997). School effectiveness for language minority students (NCBE Resource Collection Series No. 9). National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education
- Umansky, M., & Reardon, S. (2014). Reclassification patterns among Latino English learner students in bilingual, dual immersion, and English immersion classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(5), 879–912. https://doi. org/10.3102/0002831214545110
- US. Department of Education (2003). Digest of Education Statistics, National Centre for Education Statistics. Washington, DC 2006-5651NCES.ed.gov/pubs 2005025.pdf
- US. Department of Education (2011). Digest of Education Statistics. *National Centre for Education Statistics*. Washington, DC2006–5651
- Villegas, A. M., & Irvine, J. J. (2010). Diversifying the teaching force: An examination of major arguments. Urban Review, 42(3), 175–192. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-010-0150-1
- Vincent, C., Rollock, N., Ball, S., & Gillborn, D. (2012). The educational strategies of the Black middle classes. file:///C:/ Users/fdemie/Downloads/Theeducationalstrategiesoftheblackmiddleclasses.pdf
- Wong, S., & Hughes, J. (2006). Ethnicity and language contributions to dimensions of parent involvement. School Psychology Review, 35(4), 645–662. https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.2006.12087968