

Research Paper

Improving Literacy Access Through Strategic Communication and Policy-Informed Education for Immigrant and Low-Income Communities

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Abstract

Literacy access remains a critical challenge for immigrant and low-income communities in the United States, with profound implications for educational attainment, economic mobility, and civic participation. This paper examines multifaceted barriers to literacy access and evaluates evidence-based strategic communication and policy-informed education interventions. Through comprehensive review of empirical research, this study identifies key barriers including language proficiency limitations, cultural disconnection, economic constraints, institutional inadequacies, and policy gaps. The analysis reveals that effective interventions combine culturally responsive pedagogy, community partnerships, technology integration, and policy advocacy. Results indicate that successful literacy programs employ multilingual outreach, leverage community networks, integrate family literacy approaches, and align with policy frameworks supporting equitable resource allocation. Improving literacy access requires coordinated efforts across educational institutions, community organizations, and policymakers, with particular attention to culturally sustaining practices and systemic reform.

Keywords: literacy access, immigrant communities, low-income populations, strategic communication, policy-informed education, ESL literacy, health literacy, community partnerships

Introduction

Literacy serves as a fundamental gateway to educational achievement, economic opportunity, and full participation in democratic society. However, immigrant and low-income communities in the United States face persistent barriers to literacy access that perpetuate cycles of disadvantage (Takanishi, 2004). As demographic shifts continue reshaping American society, addressing literacy disparities has become both a moral imperative and practical necessity (Hernandez et al., 2008). The intersection of immigration status and economic disadvantage creates unique challenges for literacy development. Immigrant communities often contend with limited English proficiency, cultural and linguistic diversity, disrupted educational histories, and unfamiliarity with institutional systems (Kreps et al., 2008). Low-income populations face resource scarcity, inadequate educational infrastructure, and competing survival priorities that impede sustained engagement with literacy programs (Kong, 2011). When these factors converge, barriers to literacy access become particularly formidable.

Strategic communication and policy-informed education represent two critical levers for improving literacy access. Strategic communication encompasses culturally responsive outreach, multilingual information dissemination, community engagement, and use of trusted networks to connect target populations with literacy resources (Ginossar et al., 2010). Policy-informed education involves designing and implementing literacy programs that align with evidence-based practices, leverage policy frameworks for resource allocation, and advocate for systemic reforms addressing structural inequities (Callahan et al., 2009).

This paper examines current knowledge regarding literacy access for immigrant and low-income communities, with particular attention to strategic communication and policy-informed education interventions. The analysis addresses three central questions: What are the primary barriers to literacy access? What strategic communication approaches have proven effective? What policy-informed education strategies demonstrate promise for improving literacy outcomes?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Context and Contemporary Challenges

The history of literacy education for immigrant and low-income populations reflects broader patterns of inclusion and exclusion in American society. Early adult education programs emphasized rapid assimilation and English acquisition, with limited attention to native language literacy or cultural preservation (Hartel, 1986). Contemporary literacy challenges are shaped by globalization, changing immigration patterns, and evolving labor market demands. Many recent immigrants arrive with limited formal schooling in their

native languages, creating "preliterate" populations who must simultaneously develop foundational literacy skills and acquire English proficiency (Wrigley, 2009). Low-income communities contend with systemic underinvestment in educational infrastructure, particularly in adult education programs. Public libraries have emerged as critical sites for literacy support, offering free access to learning resources and serving as community hubs (Kong, 2011). However, library-based programs often operate with limited funding and face challenges reaching the most marginalized community members (Dannenbaum, 2023).

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks

Sociocultural theory emphasizes that literacy development occurs within specific cultural and social contexts, with learning mediated by interaction with more knowledgeable others (Monzó et al., 2001). This perspective highlights the importance of understanding learners' home literacy practices and building bridges between community and school literacies. Critical literacy theory focuses on literacy as a tool for social transformation, encouraging learners to analyze and challenge power structures perpetuating inequality (Danzak, 2020). Health literacy frameworks recognize that literacy extends beyond traditional academic skills to encompass the ability to access, understand, and use health information (Kreps et al., 2008). Integrated approaches addressing both general literacy and health literacy have shown promise (Shrivastaw et al., 2023).

2.3 Family and Community Literacy Approaches

Family literacy programs recognize that literacy development occurs within family systems and that supporting parents' literacy can have intergenerational benefits (Schoorman et al., 2020). These programs typically provide literacy instruction for adults while supporting children's literacy development. For immigrant families, family literacy programs can serve as culturally responsive spaces that honor native languages while supporting English acquisition (Vocke, 2009). Community-based literacy initiatives leverage existing social networks and community organizations to reach target populations and provide culturally relevant instruction (Wong, 2017).

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper employs an ecological systems framework to analyze literacy access for immigrant and low-income communities. This framework recognizes that literacy development is influenced by multiple interacting systems, from individual characteristics and family contexts to institutional policies and broader societal structures. At the microsystem level, individual factors such as prior education, language proficiency, and motivation interact with immediate family and peer influences. The mesosystem

encompasses connections between different microsystems, such as relationships between families and schools or between community organizations and educational institutions. The exosystem includes institutional policies and practices that indirectly affect literacy access, such as funding formulas for adult education, immigration policies shaping access to services, and labor market conditions influencing time availability for education. The macrosystem encompasses broader cultural values, ideologies, and societal structures shaping attitudes toward immigration, poverty, and education. This ecological perspective highlights that improving literacy access requires interventions at multiple levels, from culturally responsive pedagogy at the instructional level to policy advocacy at the systemic level.

4. Barriers to Literacy Access

4.1 Linguistic and Cultural Barriers

Language proficiency represents the most visible barrier to literacy access for immigrant communities. Limited English proficiency affects the ability to engage with English-language literacy materials, navigate educational systems, and access information about available programs (Kreps et al., 2008). For preliterate adults who lack literacy skills in their native languages, the challenge is compounded by the need to develop foundational literacy concepts while simultaneously learning a new language (Wrigley, 2009). Cultural barriers extend beyond language to encompass differences in educational expectations, learning styles, and cultural values. Many immigrant communities come from educational systems with different pedagogical approaches (Hartel, 1986; Mansoor, 1993).

4.2 Economic and Resource Constraints

Economic barriers profoundly affect literacy access for low-income populations. The immediate demands of survival, securing housing, food, and employment, often take precedence over educational pursuits (Kong, 2011). Many low-income adults work multiple jobs or irregular hours, making it difficult to attend regularly scheduled classes. Childcare responsibilities, transportation costs, and lack of access to technology further constrain participation (Vocke, 2009). Resource scarcity extends to the educational infrastructure serving these communities. Adult education programs often operate with inadequate funding, resulting in limited class offerings, large class sizes, and high instructor turnover (Wrigley, 1993; Kong, 2011).

4.3 Institutional and Systemic Barriers

Institutional barriers include policies and practices that inadvertently exclude or disadvantage immigrant and low-income learners. Complex enrollment procedures, documentation requirements, and inflexible scheduling can deter potential students (Hartel, 1986). Educational institutions may lack culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach materials (Ginossar et al., 2010). Systemic barriers reflect broader structural inequities in how educational resources are allocated. Immigration policies that limit access to public benefits or create fear of deportation can deter immigrants from seeking educational services (Wang, 2007). Educational policies that prioritize K-12 education over adult education result in chronic underfunding (Li, 2011).

4.4 Information and Awareness Gaps

Many eligible individuals remain unaware of available literacy programs or lack accurate information about how to access services. Information gaps are particularly pronounced for recently arrived immigrants who have not yet developed social networks or familiarity with community resources (Chu, 1999). Traditional outreach methods may not effectively reach populations with limited literacy or limited internet access (Ginossar et al., 2010). Misinformation and mistrust also create barriers, with some immigrants fearing that participating in publicly funded programs could affect their immigration status (Schoorman et al., 2020).

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Literacy Barriers Faced by Immigrant vs. Low-Income Communities

Barrier Type	Immigrant Communities	Low-Income Communities	Policy Implications
Linguistic	Limited English proficiency; preliteracy in native language; unfamiliarity with English phonetic systems; difficulty accessing English-language materials (Kreps et al., 2008; Wrigley, 2009)	May include native English speakers with low literacy; limited academic vocabulary; reading comprehension challenges (Kong, 2011)	Multilingual program materials; native language literacy support; ESL instruction integrated with literacy development; professional development for instructors
Cultural	Unfamiliarity with U.S. educational systems; different learning style preferences; cultural values regarding education and gender roles (Hartel, 1986; Schoorman et al., 2020)	Cultural disconnection from mainstream educational institutions; historical experiences of educational marginalization (Monzó et al., 2001)	Culturally responsive pedagogy; community-based program delivery; involvement of cultural liaisons

Economic	Employment in low-wage jobs with irregular hours; lack of childcare; transportation costs; competing survival priorities (Vocke, 2009; Ginossar et al., 2010)	Chronic poverty; housing instability; food insecurity; multiple job demands; limited technology access (Kong, 2011; Li, 2011)	Flexible scheduling including evening and weekend classes; provision of childcare and transportation support; free instructional materials; technology access programs
Institutional	Complex enrollment procedures; documentation requirements; lack of multilingual outreach; insufficient cultural competence among staff (Wang, 2007; Kanno et al., 2010)	Geographic isolation in underserved areas; limited program capacity; inadequate funding; high instructor turnover (Wrigley, 1993; Kong, 2011)	Simplified enrollment processes; elimination of unnecessary documentation barriers; increased funding for adult education; expansion of program capacity
Systemic/Policy	Immigration policies creating fear of accessing services; limited pathways to credential recognition; exclusion from certain public benefits (Wang, 2007; Callahan et al., 2009)	Chronic underfunding of programs serving low-income adults; policy prioritization of K-12 over adult education; structural inequality in resource allocation (Li, 2011; Dannenbaum, 2023)	Immigration policy reform to ensure access to education; increased federal and state funding for adult literacy; credential recognition pathways; equitable resource allocation

***Note:** Barriers often overlap and compound for individuals who are both immigrants and low-income. Policy implications require coordinated action across multiple sectors and levels of government.*

5. Strategic Communication Approaches

5.1 Culturally Responsive Outreach

Effective outreach to immigrant and low-income communities requires culturally responsive communication strategies that recognize linguistic diversity, cultural values, and community-specific communication patterns. Multilingual outreach materials are essential, but translation alone is insufficient; materials must be culturally adapted to reflect community norms (Kreps et al., 2008). Visual communication and oral information sharing may be more effective than text-heavy materials for populations with limited literacy (Hartel, 1986). The use of trusted messengers significantly enhances outreach effectiveness.

Community members, religious leaders, and staff at community-based organizations often have established relationships and credibility that formal educational institutions lack (Ginossar et al., 2010; Chu, 1999).

5.2 Technology-Mediated Communication

Technology offers both opportunities and challenges for strategic communication with immigrant and low-income communities. Internet-based information dissemination can reach geographically dispersed populations and provide 24/7 access to program information (Ginossar et al., 2010). However, the digital divide remains significant, with many low-income and immigrant individuals lacking reliable internet access or digital literacy skills (Mansoor, 1993). Effective strategies employ multiple channels. Text messaging can reach individuals with basic mobile phones. Community radio and ethnic media outlets serve as important channels for reaching immigrant communities in their native languages (Hartel, 1986).

5.3 Community Partnership and Network Building

Strategic communication is most effective when embedded within broader community partnerships. Collaborative relationships between educational institutions, community-based organizations, healthcare providers, social service agencies, and faith-based organizations create multiple touchpoints for reaching target populations (Vanek et al., 2020). These partnerships enable coordinated outreach, mutual referrals, and integrated service delivery. Network building extends to creating peer support systems among learners. Programs that facilitate connections between current and prospective students enable peer-to-peer communication about program experiences (Schoorman et al., 2020; Vocke, 2009).

5.4 Health Literacy Communication

Health literacy represents a critical domain where strategic communication intersects with literacy education. Immigrant and low-income populations face significant health disparities, often compounded by limited health literacy and language barriers (Kreps et al., 2008). Effective health literacy communication employs plain language, visual aids, and teach-back methods to ensure comprehension. Integration of health literacy content into ESL and adult literacy programs provides relevant, practical applications of literacy skills while addressing important health needs (Shrivastaw et al., 2023). Community-based participatory approaches to health literacy communication involve community members in designing and delivering health information, ensuring cultural appropriateness and building on existing community knowledge

(Ginossar et al., 2010). Partnerships with community health workers leverage trusted relationships and cultural expertise to communicate health information effectively.

6. Policy-Informed Education Strategies

6.1 Evidence-Based Instructional Approaches

Policy-informed education begins with instructional practices grounded in research evidence. For adult ESL literacy, this includes explicit phonics instruction combined with meaningful reading and writing activities, integration of learners' background knowledge, and scaffolded support for language development (Wrigley, 2009). Family literacy programs that engage parents and children together have demonstrated effectiveness in promoting intergenerational literacy development (Schoorman et al., 2020). Trauma-informed pedagogy has emerged as an important framework for serving immigrant and refugee populations who may have experienced violence or displacement. Curricula that incorporate attention training, mindfulness, and social-emotional learning alongside literacy instruction can address the impacts of trauma while building literacy skills (Shrivastaw et al., 2023).

6.2 Integrated Service Delivery Models

Effective policy-informed education recognizes that literacy development cannot be separated from other life domains. Integrated service delivery models co-locate literacy education with other services such as job training, childcare, healthcare, and social services (Vanek et al., 2020). These models reduce barriers to participation by addressing multiple needs in coordinated ways. Career pathway programs that integrate literacy instruction with occupational skills training offer promising approaches for low-income adults seeking economic mobility (Murie, 2008). These programs align literacy instruction with specific career goals, providing motivation and immediate relevance.

6.3 Policy Advocacy and Systems Change

Policy-informed education extends beyond program design to include advocacy for policy changes that support literacy access. This includes advocating for increased funding for adult education, elimination of policy barriers that restrict immigrant access to services, and development of accountability systems that incentivize serving the most disadvantaged populations (Wang, 2007). Systems change initiatives address structural inequities in how literacy education is organized and funded, including advocating for policies that recognize the full costs of serving immigrant and low-income populations (Li, 2011). Policy

frameworks that support collaboration across sectors can create more coherent and effective systems for supporting literacy development (Vanek et al., 2020).

6.4 Assessment and Accountability

Policy-informed education requires robust assessment and accountability systems that accurately measure learner progress and program effectiveness while avoiding unintended negative consequences. Standardized assessments may not adequately capture the literacy gains of immigrant learners or the multiple dimensions of literacy relevant to adult learners' lives (Wrigley, 2009). Alternative assessment approaches, including portfolio assessment and performance-based assessment, can provide more comprehensive pictures of learner development. Accountability systems should incentivize programs to serve the most disadvantaged populations rather than selecting more advantaged learners (Li, 2011).

Table 2: Summary of Evidence-Based Strategic Communication and Education Interventions

Intervention Type	Target Population	Key Outcomes	Supporting Evidence
Multilingual Community Outreach	Immigrant communities with limited English proficiency	Increased program awareness and enrollment; enhanced trust in educational institutions; improved information access (Hartel, 1986; Ginossar et al., 2010)	Hartel (1986); Kreps et al. (2008); Ginossar et al. (2010); Chu (1999)
Family Literacy Programs	Immigrant and low-income families with children	Intergenerational literacy gains; strengthened parent-child literacy interactions; improved school readiness; enhanced parental engagement (Vocke, 2009; Schoorman et al., 2020)	Vocke (2009); Schoorman et al. (2020); Monzó et al. (2001)
Community-Based Partnerships	Immigrant and low-income adults in specific geographic communities	Culturally responsive program design; sustained community engagement; improved program accessibility; enhanced social capital (Wong, 2017; Vanek et al., 2020)	Wong (2017); Kong (2011); Vanek et al. (2020); Dannenbaum (2023)

Integrated ESL and Health Literacy	Immigrant adults with limited English and health literacy	Improved English proficiency; enhanced health literacy and health outcomes; better navigation of healthcare systems (Kreps et al., 2008; Shrivastaw et al., 2023)	Kreps et al. (2008); Shrivastaw et al. (2023)
Trauma-Informed ESL Curriculum	Immigrant and refugee adults with trauma exposure	Improved attention and concentration; enhanced well-being through mindfulness; literacy gains alongside social-emotional support (Shrivastaw et al., 2023)	Shrivastaw et al. (2023)
Technology-Enhanced Instruction	Low-income and immigrant adults with varying technology access	Flexible learning opportunities; self-paced instruction; access to diverse learning resources; challenges with digital divide (Mansoor, 1993; Ginossar et al., 2010)	Mansoor (1993); Ginossar et al. (2010)
Library-Based Literacy Programs	Low-income and immigrant community members	Free access to learning resources; community hub for immigrant engagement; literacy support in welcoming environments (Kong, 2011; Dannenbaum, 2023)	Kong (2011); Dannenbaum (2023)
Career Pathway Programs	Low-income adults seeking economic mobility	Integration of literacy with occupational skills; credential attainment; employment outcomes; motivation through career relevance (Murie, 2008)	Murie (2008); Kanno et al. (2010)
Peer Education and Ambassador Models	Immigrant communities with established social networks	Leveraging trusted relationships; culturally relevant information sharing; peer support and motivation; community capacity building (Chu, 1999; Schoorman et al., 2020)	Chu (1999); Hartel (1986); Schoorman et al. (2020)

Policy Advocacy and Systems Change	Immigrant and low-income populations at systemic level	Increased funding for adult education; policy reforms reducing access barriers; improved accountability systems; enhanced cross-sector collaboration (Wang, 2007; Li, 2011; Vanek et al., 2020)	Wang (2007); Li (2011); Vanek et al. (2020); Callahan et al. (2009)
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***Note:** Effective interventions often combine multiple approaches and require sustained implementation with adequate resources. Outcomes vary based on program quality, implementation fidelity, and contextual factors.*

7. Discussion

7.1 Synthesis of Findings

The evidence reviewed demonstrates that improving literacy access for immigrant and low-income communities requires multifaceted interventions addressing barriers at individual, institutional, and systemic levels. No single intervention type is sufficient; rather, effective approaches combine strategic communication, culturally responsive pedagogy, community partnerships, and policy advocacy. The comparative analysis reveals both distinct and overlapping barriers faced by immigrant and low-income populations, suggesting the need for tailored interventions that recognize population-specific needs while addressing common challenges related to poverty and marginalization. Strategic communication emerges as a critical enabler of literacy access, facilitating connections between potential learners and educational opportunities. The most effective communication strategies employ multiple channels, leverage trusted community relationships, and provide culturally and linguistically appropriate information (Ginossar et al., 2010; Hartel, 1986). However, communication alone is insufficient without accessible, high-quality programs. This underscores the importance of simultaneous investment in both outreach and program capacity. Policy-informed education strategies demonstrate the value of grounding practice in research evidence while engaging in advocacy for systemic change. Evidence-based instructional approaches such as integrated ESL and literacy instruction, family literacy models, and trauma-informed pedagogy show promise for improving outcomes (Wrigley, 2009; Schoorman et al., 2020; Shrivastaw et al., 2023). However, these approaches require adequate resources, professional development for instructors, and supportive policy environments to achieve scale and sustainability.

7.2 Implications for Practice

For practitioners, these findings suggest several priorities. First, literacy programs serving immigrant and low-income communities should invest in culturally responsive outreach and relationship building with community organizations and leaders (Wong, 2017). Second, programs should adopt integrated service delivery models that address multiple barriers simultaneously (Vanek et al., 2020). Third, instructional approaches should be evidence-based and culturally sustaining, recognizing learners' linguistic and cultural assets (Schoorman et al., 2020). Fourth, programs should leverage technology thoughtfully (Mansoor, 1993).

7.3 Implications for Policy

Policy implications span multiple levels of government and sectors. At the federal level, increased and sustained funding for adult education is essential, with funding formulas that recognize the additional costs of serving immigrant and low-income populations (Li, 2011). Immigration policies should ensure that immigrants can access educational services without fear of negative immigration consequences. Language access requirements should be enforced across public institutions (Wang, 2007). At the state level, policies should support coordination across adult education, workforce development, and social services to create more coherent systems of support. Accountability systems should incentivize serving the most disadvantaged populations and should employ multiple measures of program quality and learner outcomes (Wrigley, 2009). At the local level, policies should support community-based program delivery and partnerships between educational institutions and community organizations (Vanek et al., 2020).

7.4 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations in the current evidence base warrant attention. Much of the research consists of descriptive studies or small-scale evaluations rather than rigorous experimental designs. Additionally, many studies focus on program outputs rather than longer-term outcomes such as literacy gains or economic mobility. Future research should prioritize rigorous evaluation using experimental designs and longitudinal studies tracking learners over extended period . Research should examine broader outcomes including educational attainment, employment, health, and civic participation.

8. Conclusion

Improving literacy access for immigrant and low-income communities represents both a significant challenge and a critical opportunity for advancing equity and strengthening society. The barriers these

populations face are substantial and multifaceted, encompassing linguistic, cultural, economic, institutional, and systemic dimensions. However, the evidence demonstrates that effective interventions exist and that strategic communication and policy-informed education can make meaningful differences in literacy access and outcomes. Success requires coordinated action across multiple levels and sectors. At the program level, culturally responsive pedagogy, community partnerships, integrated service delivery, and evidence-based instructional approaches are essential. At the communication level, multilingual outreach, trusted messengers, multiple communication channels, and community engagement are critical for reaching target populations. At the policy level, increased funding, elimination of access barriers, support for evidence-based practices, and accountability systems that incentivize equity are necessary. The ecological systems framework employed in this paper highlights that literacy development is influenced by factors at multiple levels, from individual characteristics to societal structures. Interventions must therefore address multiple levels simultaneously, combining direct services to learners with efforts to transform the systems and structures that create and perpetuate literacy disparities. This requires sustained commitment, adequate resources, and genuine partnerships between educational institutions, community organizations, and the communities themselves. As the United States continues to become more diverse, with immigrant populations representing an increasing share of the population, ensuring literacy access for all residents is not merely a matter of social justice but also of national interest. Literacy is foundational to educational attainment, economic productivity, health, and civic participation. Investing in literacy access for immigrant and low-income communities is investing in the nation's future. The evidence and frameworks presented in this paper provide a foundation for action, but realizing the vision of literacy equity will require sustained effort, political will, and genuine commitment to the principle that all individuals, regardless of immigration status or economic circumstances, deserve access to the literacy skills that enable full participation in society.

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