

THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT ON ESL STUDENT LEARNING

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Abstract

This paper investigates the influence that parental involvement that has on the outcomes for English language learning students. This discourse will compare different educational and developmental research. This will incorporate historic and current legislation on English as a Second Language services and discuss the availability and the practicality of these services. Based on findings of researchers such as Lee, Bowen, and Araujo, recommendations for educators and policy makers will be made to promote ESL programs that align with current findings.

Keywords: English as a second, English Language Learner, parental involvement, parental education, cross-cultural education, linguistic barriers

The Influence of Parental Involvement on ESL Student Learning

I. Introduction

Parental involvement correlates with improved outcomes for student learning. For the estimated 4.1 million English language-learning (ELL) students in the US school system, how non-native English speaking parents are treated and involved in their child's education is crucial. For many families, involvement with the school life of their child is limited because of language and culture barriers. This paper seeks to outline the history of English as a Second Language programs in the US and their effectiveness to provide educational opportunities for success of ELL students.

II. Background to the Issue

According to Jung-Sook Lee and Natasha Bowen in their article "Parent Involvement, Cultural Capital, and the Achievement Gap among Elementary School Children," parent involvement has been positively related to children's educational performance. As with many aspects of academic success, ethnicity and socioeconomic status play strong roles in influencing a student's success. Many have suggested the relationship between parent involvement and child success as a way to improve student success. Lee and Bowen's study used data from 415 students with three demographic variables: race/ethnicity, participation in the free or reduced-price school lunch program, and parent education level (with parent education assessed by "*did not complete high school, received a high school diploma or equivalent, received some college or vocational training, completed a 2-year college degree, completed a 4-year college degree, and completed a graduate degree*") (p. 201). African American, Hispanic/Latino, and European American students were included in the study. Parent-school involvement was measured by frequency of parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at the school, or attending fun events at the school.

Parent-home involvement was evaluated based on how often parents reported managing the child's time, talking about school topics, and helping with homework. They also remarked on how often they were involved with their child's literacy: how often they limited TV time and how often they encouraged/told their children to do non-homework reading. The final point of evaluation was parent expectations of the students. The results showed that poverty, race/ethnicity, parent education, and parent involvement played a significant role in their student's achievement. White, educated, affluent parents were more likely to volunteer at the school, as their lives often looked more like the teachers' lives and so they felt more comfortable in the school. African American and Hispanic parents were more likely to be involved with their child's education from home: reminding them to do their homework, instructing them to spend time reading or doing homework, turning off the television, etc. Parents from non-dominant groups sometimes encountered psychological barriers such as feeling of inferiority to volunteer at the school that discouraged them from volunteering in the school or meeting with the teachers. More impoverished parents reported lacking confidence when they interacted with teachers, and a tendency to defer to the teachers' advice rather than offer a differing opinion (p. 210).

In another study, Blanca Araujo investigated best practices for teachers working with linguistically diverse families in an attempt to document how teachers can challenge this achievement gap and assist parents in becoming more involved in their student's academic life. She explains that as English-language learners in American classrooms increase, more teachers have to come up with ways to develop relationships with parents who may or may not speak English. Even among this large group of foreign-born American residents (roughly 33.5 million), these students are not a homogenous group, representing Latin America, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. The issues that teachers encounter with communicating with parents will not

be solved easily, such as requiring all teachers to speak Spanish, since obviously not all ELL students are native Spanish speakers. Araujo explains the concept of funds of knowledge, the concept that all of us have certain information that we know from our families, such as how to cook or taking care of siblings, or resiliency, that do not necessarily reflect a white, middle class experience. So while knowledge of these things is necessary for their home lives, unlike white, middle class children, the classroom experience and home life do not necessarily work together in the child's education. Thus, she explains, the best practice connects home life with school environment, either through bilingual programs, being conscious of cultural and ethnic issues and differences, and includes culturally relevant teaching. Fostering parent-teacher communication and support is also vital because many parents of ELLs don't feel validated by the school and so accept a more passive role in their involvement. Araujo also gives a couple examples about how different schools have addressed the concerns of their communities: one school in a rural Indian reservation holds monthly meetings between tribal leaders and the school as a way of facilitating community and communication between the groups, creating a system of collaborating entities, instead of competing ones.

Parents whose native language is not English often struggle with how to assist their children in their studies as English is a language they may not speak, or a language that is still a challenge for them to read and write. In their article "Assisting your Child's Learning in L2 is like Teaching them to Ride a Bike: A Study on Parental Involvement," Rigoberto Castillo and Linda Camelo Gámez evaluated how to best involve parents in the second language acquisition process for their children. Ten children, their parents, and their teacher were involved in this study to investigate how to give parents scaffolding to help them support their children's learning. The analogy this research is based is that parents do not necessarily have to know how

to ride a bike in order to teach their child. Workshops were given to parents as a way for them to feel more confident and find a balance in how to teach their child. This research was conducted in public elementary schools in Colombia, where English as a foreign language is regularly taught, but not always led by trained English teachers. The article also reviews literature on parental involvement, literacy, and second language acquisition.

Castillo and Camelo Gámez' research was designed to help improve parental involvement as a way to improve the success of low performing students. This study asks two questions: "What does the training of parents reveal about the support of young learners' literacy development?" and "How can parental involvement support the young learners' English language proficiency development?" The project began with a parent-teacher meeting to evaluate how they could partner together to improve the children's understanding of English. Parents were responsive and wanted to help their children, but cited reasons such as working long hours or lack of English proficiency as reasons that they struggled to help their children. They cite Joyce Epstein for her framework of parental involvement in their children's lives: parenting, communicating with the schools, volunteering at the school, assisting their children with homework and teaching them other skills at home, being involved in the process for making decisions for the education for their children, and collaborating with the community. While education is obviously transferred to students via schools and teachers, parents are critical in developing literacy and home is the primary environment where children are encouraged in literacy and grow (Castillo, 59). Parental attitudes about literacy and education influence children greatly.

III. Barriers to Communication with the School

The barriers to ESL parent involvement at school are divided into five categories in Guo's research: "language differences, parent unfamiliarity with the school system, teacher attitudes and institutional racism, different views of education, and cultural differences concerning home-school communication" (Guo, 83). Parents encounter language barriers when communicating with the school, whether through written emails, phone calls, or in-person meetings. If the school does not have on-site interpreters, the child is often left to do the interpreting, which is problematic because of his or her own English skills and their own maturity. For example, a ten-year-old may not want to be very forthcoming in interpreting a statement that indicates his behavior in class has been less than stellar.

Cheatham and Ro review interactions and communications between educators and English language learning parents. As students in early childhood education programs are coming from more and more diverse sociolinguistics backgrounds, culturally and linguistically, it is necessary for teachers to evaluate their communication with non-native English speaking parents for its effectiveness. Many times, parents will respond in an affirmation, like "uh-huh" when they may not completely understand what the teacher just said. One distinct difference between native English speaking parents and non-native English speaking parents is the number of times they speak during a parent-teacher meeting. For example, during this study, native English speaking parents spoke 28.2% of the meeting, while "self-identified Latino, non-native English speaking parents provided 10.8% of the utterances with the same Early Head Start and Head Start Teachers" (Cheatham, 250). Because the ELL speakers are speaking in their non-native language, barriers to understanding exactly what educators are saying were created and communication was not effective. Additionally, "listening to and understanding early educators

may be exhausting for parents when speaking a second language resulting in a gradual decrease in parents' comprehension across the duration of the meetings" (Cheatham, 250). In the end, these barriers and a general lack of understanding of the content of the meeting can increase parents' reluctance to return to a future meeting.

Semantic comprehension is the understanding of both the literal meaning of individual words and the complete meaning of the words in context. For native speakers, we hear and elect the meaning that makes the most sense without consciously thinking of it. For example, there are many meanings of the word "board," but native speakers can discern its meaning in context. "The board meeting" has a different meaning than "the stack of boards at the warehouse" and a native speaker can quickly figure out the difference. However, homophones and words with multiple meanings prove difficult for non-native speakers.

Pragmatic comprehension is the understanding of the underlying meaning. For example, parents of ELLs may be able to understand the speech act: "Please sign here" yet not understand the implications that a signature has in the American school system. A parent's signature often indicates an understanding of the covered material and an acknowledgment of its proceedings. Parents may be asked to sign a paper after an IEP meeting, stating that they agree with the proposed plan. However, they may have no idea that their signature carries legal and educational ramifications for their child (Cheatham, 252).

IV. A Brief History of ESL Legislation

In North Carolina, through the 1950s and 1960s, the language instruction policy was one of submersion. "This practice is what is sounds like: children who spoke little or no English were placed into classes conducted entirely in English, were submersed in the language, and would effectively sink or swim" (Bowman, 923). In 1964, the Federal Civil Rights Act became law.

The U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (today known as the Department of Education) was given authority to insure that policies that promoted discrimination would be changed. However, the Civil Rights movement had primarily focused on the plight of African Americans; both in the writing of and execution of it, the Civil Rights Law largely overlooked the situation of Latinos/as. For the many people in the US who identify as neither white nor black, the Civil Rights Law initially did not help much. Around the mid-1960s, schools starting offering more ESL classes to ELL students and even bilingual education programs started immersing. However, bilingual programs were slow to take off and even experienced backlash because white community leaders feared that "white flight" would occur and the communities would become primarily Latino/a (Bowman, 923). The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 "was the first piece of federal legislation to provide funding for schools to teach English to students who were not English-proficient" but schools were not obligated to accept the funding or even provide the language instruction.

The 1973 Supreme Court's decision in *Keyes v. School District No. 1* in Denver, Colorado forced many states, including North Carolina, to desegregate. During *Keyes*, "the Supreme Court affirmed the lower courts' holdings that Latinos/as were an identifiable group protected by *Brown*" (Bowman, 925). However, typically that was applied as viewing students as either white or non-white, not as white, African-American, and Latino/a. Lower courts were left the decision on how to maintain a desegregated system, including whether they would offer ESL courses.

In 1974, the *Lau versus Nichols* case in San Francisco, California changed how the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was interpreted; it forced schools to take "affirmative steps to remedy students' language deficiencies" (Bowman, 927). The San Francisco school system had just

integrated in 1971 because of a federal court decree. Around 2,800 students of Chinese ancestry in San Francisco's schools could not speak English. Some received English language courses to supplement regular classroom involvement, but 1,800 were excluded from language courses. Previously, the Civil Rights Act had been used to prohibit discrimination based on race, color, or national origin. In 1970, that guideline was expanded to include language deficiencies, and in 1974, the students in San Francisco were granted access to English language courses (Beyond Brown). States were then more obligated than ever before to actually provide language instruction to their ELL students.

Yan Guo's research chronicles the history of controversial legislation surrounding misunderstandings between ESL programs and parents. In the 1980s, a group of ESL parents "successfully sued a school authority because they felt their children were being "ghettoized" in an ESL program. On the basis of this decision, the Ministry of Education prohibited ESL programs throughout the UK, and ESL teachers now work as support teachers in content classes" (Guo, 82). In 1998, California "eliminated all forms of ESL instruction and bilingual programs in that state except for a one-year sheltered English immersion" (Guo, 82). Today, some ESL parents feel strongly that their children are being excluded from grade-level content when they are taught in ESL and so sometimes try to prevent their student from being identified as an English language learner. They felt like ESL programs were actually slowing down their children's acquisition of English and stunting their academic progress.

Throughout the end of the 1970s, school districts struggled to balance desegregation requirements and ESL programs. Some districts were accused of segregating students via ESL programs, while other districts were accused of not providing their ELLs with English services. In the late 1980s, the Bilingual Education Act was amended to increase funding for Structured

English Immersion (SEI) and placed a "three-year limit on students' enrollment in bilingual programs" (Bowman, 930). That amendment has limited ELL students' choices and the number of years they could receive services in both English and their native language.

V. Current Legislation

Some states have ESL policies that contradict basic linguistic research. Texas requires all ESL students to be able to pass the mainstream end of year test at the end of their third year taking ESL classes, despite the fact that most people need five to eight years of assistance in their second language to adequately pass an exam. Curtin, in her article "Teaching Practices for ESL Students" investigates the policies of ESL education in Texas and how successfully they have been carried out. Prior to the 1974 court case *Lau vs. Nichols* when English as a Second Language classrooms began, the US had a "sink or swim" policy where students had to acquire English quickly in order to keep up with their studies, or simply flounder or fail. While legislation varies widely by state, Texas offers ESL classes for three years, but at the end of the third year of education in the US, the ELL students are required to take the regular, end of year exams, called the TAKS test. The assumption is that second language acquisition only takes three years and that an ESL student on the third year of education could take a test and score comparably to a native English speaker.

According to Jim Cummins, while Basics Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) can be acquired relatively quickly by students, their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALPS) takes more time and requires more scaffolding (and probably more ESL teaching) before they can compete in state standardized tests (Second language acquisition). While researchers say that three years is inadequate for a middle or high school student to acquire English and take standardized tests, Texas legislators say that it is adequate. Six students were

used in Curtin's study: three male and three female students who were all ten or eleven years of age upon arrival to the US. All of them said that the mainstream teachers were not as helpful to them as the ESL teachers were. They said that the ESL teachers used more examples, explained things more, and gave them more practice and tutoring time, whereas mainstream teachers more often gave fewer examples and gave all directions for an activity at one time. The mainstream teachers gave correct answers without much explanation, ignored students raising their hands, or spoke faster, all of which combined to make the students feel more lost or confused in their class. They even said that they were afraid of making the mainstream teachers mad if they asked too many questions, or were even told to "look it up in the dictionary" if they didn't understand something. Even if the students said that the teacher didn't "get mad," they said that the teacher wasn't very kind when answering questions. The students were discouraged by their mainstream teachers to speak to other Spanish-speaking students in Spanish, whereas ESL teachers said that it didn't bother them, since they understood that they were transitioning from Spanish to English, so some Spanish didn't upset them. Curtin found that ESL teachers gave more examples on the blackboard, whereas the mainstream teachers often gave only one and then expected the students to work silently for a while. Essentially, the ESL teachers used more interactive methods of teaching, rather than a didactic method. All six students included in the study had to take the end of year exam as prescribed by Texas law. None of them passed. Three years does not appear adequate time to transition from an ESL classroom to a fully-English/mainstream classroom and is an inadequate amount of time for students to successfully take standardized exams.

VI. Current statistics in achievement gaps

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, achievement gaps between Hispanic and white students continue to exist. These statistics include details between Hispanic

and white students, as well as native English-speaking Hispanic and English language learning Hispanics. Achievement gaps between reading and mathematics scores were measured in the fourth and eighth grades. "In 2009 at grade 4, the 29-point achievement gap between non-ELL Hispanic and ELL Hispanic students was not statistically different from the gap in 1998" (NAEP, 9). This points to the fact that ELL students will consistently test below students even from similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds, because of the challenges of taking a test in English, not because they do not understand the actual material at hand. Learning a new language and quickly being incorporated into the standardized testing pervasive in the American education system is creating a cycle of failure for ELLs. This testing is unnecessary and creates additional barriers to success for ELLs. This gap is evidenced in the map below of the achievement gap between white and Hispanic American students (see Appendix).

VII. Parental involvement/student success correlation

Child psychology has established a positive relationship between a child's academic success and his/her parents' involvement in their education (Harper, 123). Parental involvement also improves the child's cognitive and emotional development (Harper, 123). For parents of ESL students, their involvement in their child's academic life is even more crucial, as their child faces many additional challenges when compared to a native English-speaking student. ELL students may often struggle more than just academically, working hard and sometimes failing to establish strong relationships with classmates and teachers.

VIII. How mainstream and ESL teachers can partner with the parents

Cheatham and Ro conclude their research with suggestions for how to assist non-English speaking parents in their efforts to be involved in their child's education experience. They suggest beginning a meeting asking the parent about how the child is doing at home. This will

help the teacher gauge the parent's use of certain vocabulary and grammatical structures. Also, teachers should explain educational words such as *parallel play* and *fine motor skills*. This will help parents grasp more of the meanings behind the teacher's conversation. Early educators are encouraged to develop positive relationships with the parents and families in order to have open conversations about how culture, beliefs, and individual personalities influence their child and how they perceive education (Cheatham, 254).

IX. What ESL services have accomplished

Through the past fifty years, ESL services have changed dramatically. From a sink-or-swim policy, to a combined model that includes in-class scaffolding and pull-out sessions, English language learners now have much more support than they did previously. ESL teachers have gained more respect in the education community and are proving vital assets in helping classroom teachers and administration more tactfully address the needs of ELL parents. Teachers are now more aware of the needs of ELLs and have been given at least some level of training for addressing the needs of the diverse population in their classrooms. ELLs have new opportunities available for them as ESL teachers have argued for not testing their students the first few years of receiving ESL services, although states have very different policies about when that testing begins. Nonetheless, the advocacy of educators has gifted their students with more time with ESL services, instead of being fast-tracked for main classrooms.

X. Areas that need emphasis for future success of ESL programs

For future success of ESL programs, ESL training needs to be offered more extensively as continuing education courses for teachers and school administrators. ESL teachers should offer classes on interacting with different cultures and languages to the other teachers, so that classroom teachers can better incorporate the needs of their ELLs. Techniques and coaching

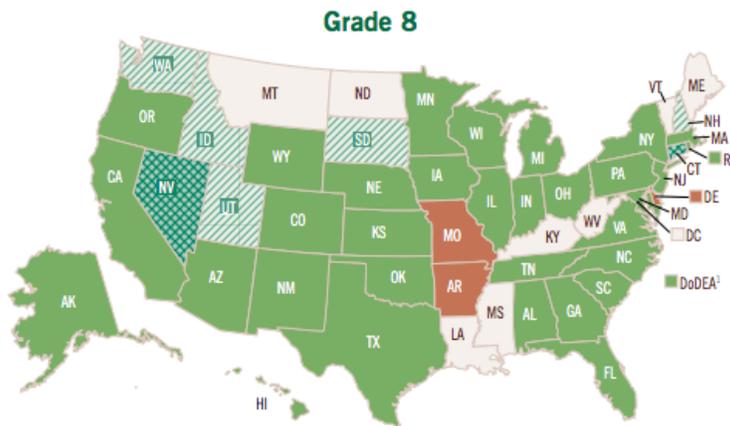
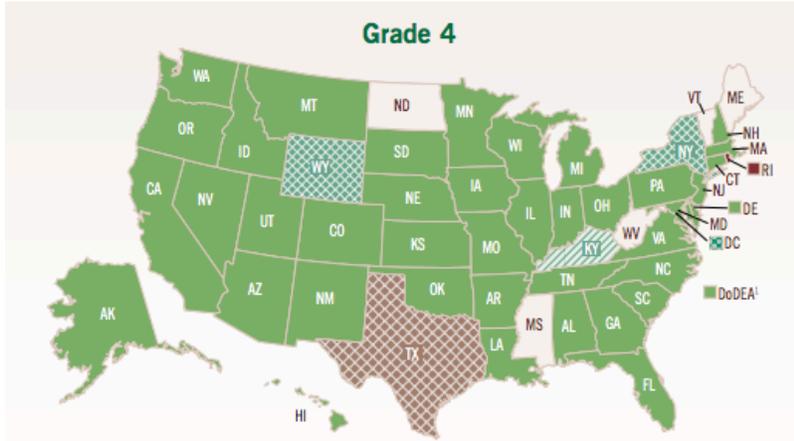
methods that scaffold ELLs are helpful to all students, such as guided note-taking and graphic organizers. Schools should also consider offering courses to their parents, as referenced in the research of Camelo Gámez and Castillo. School events like an international night where parents and children could showcase their cultures, foods, and language would be a great opportunity for ELL parents and students to feel valued and respected in their school community. Just as the social justice issues of black Americans have been brought to the forefront and legislation has worked to address those issues, the social justice of issues affecting immigrants, their children, and their education needs to be addressed politically. School programs are only given the resources for what policy deems necessary, leaving schools who would want additional ESL teachers without the financial resources to hire adequate staff. The needs of ELL students to be brought before local, state, and federal legislators as educators and parents advocate for the needs of their community's children. Policies that encourage teachers to be bilingual would also be helpful in providing bridge support for students as they eventually transition to an English-only educational environment. Nonetheless, teachers should not only be encouraged to study Spanish. Arabic, Korean, Chinese, Urdu, Pashtu, and Hindi are all languages spoken by large immigrant communities. Teachers, then, should be encouraged to learn a variety of languages, reflective of the needs of their students.

XI. Further issues to be researched

Several issues pertaining to this research need to be developed further. One research topic should be to research the success of training mainstream teachers on the needs of their ELL students and effective communication with ELL parents. Schools regularly have diversity awareness training for their teachers, yet do these programs actually facilitate genuine communication across cultural and linguistic barriers? Another area would be to delve into the

influence the political climate has on the relationships between homes and schools. Investigation on the equality in standardized tests should also be conducted, as there continues to be an achievement gap between white and Hispanic students, even if the Hispanic students are not English language learners. This begs the question whether the test questions are more oriented around a common culture, or fund of knowledge, than it is an accurate representation of the student's learning.

Appendix



	Grade 4	Grade 8
Ways the Gap Narrowed		
Hispanic students' scores increased while White students' scores did not change.	No states	AR, DE, MO
Ways the Gap Widened		
Hispanic students' scores decreased and White students' scores did not change.	TX	No states
Hispanic students' scores did not change, while White students' scores increased.	RI	No states
Ways the Gap did not Change		
Both Hispanic and White students' scores increased.	DC	CT, NV
Hispanic students' scores did not change, while White students' scores increased.	KY	ID, NH, SD, UT, WA
Hispanic students' scores did not change, while scores of White students decreased.	NY, WY	No states
Both Hispanic and White students' scores did not change.	41 states	33 states
Data not available.	5 states	9 states

¹ Department of Defense Education Activity (overseas and domestic schools).
 NOTE: Data for the comparisons between 2009 and the first assessment year are not shown.
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2007 and 2009 Mathematics Assessments.

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