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## **Social and emotional development to foster academic growth in English language learning Preschoolers**

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Social and emotional development to foster academic growth in

English language learning Preschoolers

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## Abstract

The fastest growing population of students entering preschool classrooms are English language learners (Winsler et al., 2014). Not only is the population of English language learners growing (Winsler et al., 2014), but there is a steady increase in the academic achievement gap. Further, the growth of ELL students corresponds with the gap. Related to both is social and emotional development. Social and emotional skills provide the apparatus for all learning. The early childhood educator is well-versed in teaching these skills. Therefore, an early childhood educator teaching social and emotional development to English language learners provides opportunities to remedy the academic achievement gap. Such remedies appear as play and social interactions that incorporate students with all levels of English skill. This paper synthesized research on English language learners and the benefits of social and emotional development taught in Early Childhood classrooms. The research showed the value of English language-learning children entering high-quality early childhood classrooms at an early age. Programs that teach social and emotional education provide all children with a foundation to advance academically and close achievement gaps.

Keywords: English language learners, social and emotional development, early childhood, preschool, academic achievement gap

## Chapter One: Introduction

“Equity” and “achievement gaps” are terms and phrases that are frequented by educators. This frequency has created familiarity bordering on complacency, rather than mastery. “Equity,” in fact, requires “students to have the *opportunity* for the same education.” An “opportunity” is not inherently equitable, and the experiences of English Language Learners are proof. Immersing an ELL student in a classroom rife with opportunity does not mean these opportunities are obtainable, and to prove this, there are measurable, consistent achievement gaps in such classrooms. An early childhood educator can foster academic growth in English Language Learners through social and emotional development. First, the achievement gap of English language learning students must be exposed at its earliest instance (Yazejian et al., 2015). Second, the power of social and emotional development to permit academic growth must be proven. Finally, the application of social and emotional education techniques must show a measurable increase in academic achievement.

### Looking at the Achievement Gap

An English language learner is defined as a person learning two or more languages at the same time as well as learning a second language while learning a first language (Halle, Whittaker, Zepeda, Rothenberg, Anderson, Daneri, Wessel, Buysse, 2014). English language learning (ELL) students show disparities in cognitive abilities, according to Halle, Forry, Hair, Perper, Wandner, Wessel, and Vick (2009). The gap for ELL students widens from a 1.2% disparity at nine months of age to a 14% delta by 24 months of age (Halle et al., 2009). Accessing high-quality care lessens this gap.

### **Benefits of High-Quality Care**

Children with the highest language scores entered care in infancy and stayed until the age of five (Yazejian, Bryant, Freel, Burchinal, & ELN (Early Learning Network), 2015). Children who spoke fluent English at kindergarten entry kept pace with English speaking peers in reading and math over the course of the elementary school years. However, the children enrolled at a later age, three or four years old, showed language scores lower than the national average (Yazejian et. al, 2015). Entering high quality care in infancy raised language skills in English language learners. High-quality programs included staff who focused on social and emotional development as well as academics. According to Li, Farkas, Duncan, Burchinal, and Vandell, (2012) “high-quality care” is deemed when “caregivers were more sensitive to children’s behaviors, provided greater cognitive stimulation, had warmer and more sensitive interactions with children, fostered greater exploration, and were less emotionally detached (Li et. al, 2012, p.1442). Children who attend such high-quality programs in infancy and preschool have improved academic development, such as an 11.6% improvement on language assessments at 54 months of age compared to students that attended low-quality infancy and preschool programs (Li et. al, 2012).

### **Access to High Quality Care**

High-quality early childhood programs benefit all learners; however, not all learners have access (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). Reasons for not attending early educational care can vary between families. Almost 50% of children in the United States are enrolled in non-parental care, or a person taking care of the child other than the parent. Of these children enrolled in a childcare program, the majority are likely to have parents that speak fluent English or a high level of English. (Miller,

Vortuba-Drzal, Coley, & Coury, 2014). Miller et. al posed that acculturation, or adopting a new culture, may be a reason for parents sending children to early educational care. Immigrant families with English proficiency were 50% more likely to send a child to early educational care (Miller et al., 2014). Knowledge of the English language makes it more likely that a child will receive high quality education.

### **Power of Social and Emotional Development**

The period of early childhood, ages birth through eight, is a time of significant brain development. The first five years of life provide children with a framework for social and emotional development that shapes the brain for years to come (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). These experiences in social and emotional development are connected to academics by way of coping and navigating relationships. From infancy on, children are making connections to the world around them (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). High quality programs that start in infancy provide young English language learning children with the skills for English language acquisition.

### **Laying the Foundation**

Social and emotional development starts before preschool. In infancy, children are incapable of regulating emotions. A caregiver's responses to cues of hunger, being tired, or wet are the first stages of social and emotional development. (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004.) A caregiver, whether male or female, teaches the child how to regulate emotions by responding to the child's needs. These early interactions lay the foundation for more advanced social and emotional development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, & Halle, Whittaker, Zepeda, Rothenberg, Anderson, Daneri, Wessel, Buysse, 2014). As the child ages, interactions with family, peers, and teachers provide them with the appropriate

tools to manage emotions. This is imperative because the inability to manage emotions impedes the development of academic skills by way of attention and decision making (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004.).

Children with strong social and emotional skills could focus, retain information, and regulate emotions. These skills are referred to as “executive functions,” and the greatest increase in proficiency is between the ages of four to five (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011). Starting a successful early foundation of executive functioning skills during the ages of four to five is not feasible without high-quality care in infancy. Likewise, strong executive functioning skills developed in preschool are linked to a strong educational career (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011).

### **Social and Emotional Education for Language Acquisition**

All children need social and emotional education to achieve academic success. Bilingual children who have a low level of ability in non-verbal communication, oral communication in both languages, and a negative temperament had poor social interactions (Oades-Sese, Esquivel, Kaliski, and Manitias, 2011). These findings were consistent with gender, with boys being the most at-risk population. Social interactions between children help foster relationships, learn about culture through language and customs, and develop new language skills (Scrafton & Whittington, 2014). In preschool, play is the method of teaching. Children that have limited language abilities have a difficult time entering play (Scrafton & Whittington, 2014), and therefore, they lose a large amount of “instructional time” through play with peers and intentional educational play opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

To create equity for English language learners in preschool, it is important to understand what is needed to create an equitable environment. First, English language learners must enroll in early educational settings to provide them with language acquisition skills (Yazejian et al., 2015). Second, early educational settings must be attainable and culturally responsive to meet the needs of a growing and diverse population (Li et al., 2012). Third, once in these settings, social and emotional development strategies should be used to increase chances of academic achievement (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011). An early childhood Educator can foster academic growth in English Language Learners through social and emotional development. English language learners are a growing population (Winsler et al., 2014) that teachers must learn how to accommodate (Ramirez et al., 2018). Doing so diminishes the inequity that would limit the opportunities all children deserve, and there was ample professional literature analyzed to permit a synthesis that supported this claim.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

A foundational necessity in Early Childhood Education (ECE) is access. Students that do not speak the majority language will find access to education hampered (Scrafton & Whittington, 2015), and ironically, immediately emphasizing academic language to resolve the issue is not the solution. To overcome this obstacle, the language of social-emotional education must be taught. Upon successfully employing the methods of social-emotional education, student affinity rises. This newfound possibility for engagement within the classroom inevitably leads to academic success. Can early childhood educators foster academic growth in English language learners through social and emotional development? To fully establish the bridge, the themes of English language learners, play as a teaching method, social and emotional development, the teachers' role in early childhood education for English language learners, and brain development in English language learners must be applied to the question.

### **School Access and Academic Success**

In 2011, one in four children had a parent that was an immigrant (Miller et al., 2014). Middle and high-income English-speaking families have more resources available for high-quality care and have less limitations for success than English language learners (ELL) (Ansari, 2018). In 2014 many ELL students qualified as low-income, putting access to high-quality care at risk (Winsler, 2014). These families, some of them recent immigrants to the country, had barriers to overcome to accommodate the sending of a child to preschool. Miller, Vortubadruzal, Coley, and Koury studied immigrant families' use of childcare (2014). The quantitative study examined 2,950 diverse parents and children from the 10,700 families studied in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). Authors looked at the type of care parents used: parents, relatives, home-based care, or center-based care for children between the

ages of seven to 38 months of age. Miller et al. (2014) found increased income, parental education, and maternal employment increase the chance of children entering center-based care. African American families in the study used center-based care at the highest rates, and Latino families from Mexico used center-based care at lesser rates. Latinos from Mexico preferred a family member to take care of a child. The study called this non-parental care of children. Miller et al. (2014), found English proficiency and cultural consistency are factors in where a child was sent for care. An early childhood center with cultural consistency were consistent with the language and cultural values of the home. Authors found data showing communities with more non-English speaking care providers had more families enrolled in non-parental care. Mexican immigrants were the largest group to keep children at home, excluding Head Start data. Authors acknowledged limitations of the study included limited information on the types of care children were attending. Miller et al.'s study showed immigrant families have different needs when it comes to sending a child to childcare.

In Yazejian et al.'s 2015 quantitative study, authors cited associations between high-quality care, time in care, and children's language and social emotional skills. Twelve sites and 5,037 children in America were studied. Ninety-five percent of these children belonged to families of English language learners that hear or speak Spanish at home. Half of the participants were girls, and all families were low-income. The ages of ELL students in the study started at age two and ended at age five. Between the years of 2007 and 2013, parent interviews were conducted, and teachers administered language skills assessments and social emotional assessments in the fall and spring. Yazejian et al. (2015) found ELL students who had access to high-quality care and were able to sustain access had higher language scores. Early education for children, especially ELL students, benefits education. The earlier an ELL student can get into a

high-quality education setting, the greater the impact. Early, high-quality education improved language skills to match the level of middle-class peers (Yazejian et al., 2015). The study was limited, as it could not control which children enter or leave care, nor could it control teacher ratings of children.

### **Cycle of Poverty**

Halle, Hair, Wandner, McNamara, and Chien used the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) data from the years 1998-1999 to create a quantitative study. Halle et al. (2013), narrowed down the initial sample of 22,000-child data set to a sample of 2,700 ELL children. Findings indicated that Latino children were less likely to be enrolled in formal preschool programs than peers, also reported in Miller et al.'s (2014) study of immigrant families' use of childcare. The reasons were unknown, but contrasting cultural norms pertaining to education (Miller et al., 2014) and a lack of affordable care are likely (Halle et al., 2013). The longitudinal study data from 1998-1999 found ELL students did not gain English language proficiency like English-only speaking peers after two years of English instruction. Furthermore, the authors stated that factors contributing to English proficiency “include family socioeconomic status, parental education, neighborhood factors, the experience of discrimination, reasons for immigration (voluntary versus involuntary), social-emotional factors, length of exposure to English, and acculturation or motivation/aspiration” (Halle et al., 2013, p.5). Data from the study also revealed ELL students were 35% more likely to have parents with less than a high school degree, lower income, and more siblings that were immigrants than the other children in the ECLS-K. Before kindergarten, ELL children were more likely to be in parental care. When students start kindergarten, they are more likely to attend a low-income school with less highly

trained teachers (Halle et al., 2013). Limitations in the study included no knowledge of proficiency in child's first language and limited knowledge in childcare experiences.

Early childhood teachers have the immense responsibility to prepare a preschool class for kindergarten. Sixty percent of children enter school with the cognitive skills needed to be successful, but only 40% have the social-emotional skills needed to succeed in Kindergarten (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). A study supporting this fact can be found in Oades-Sese, Esquivel, Kaliski, and Manitias' 2011 quantitative study of 207 Hispanic American preschool children. The children attended two early childhood sites in New Jersey, and all children in the study were identified as low income. In the first section of the study, Oades-Sese et al. tested for cognitive functioning, temperament (how children respond to new people and situations), emotional regulation, language, autonomy (sense of self), acculturation level (adopting the majority culture), and social competence (2011). The study found that students with high social emotional skills, high linguistic ability in either English or Spanish, and high cognitive skills had higher academic scores and better oral English skills. Two years later, Oades-Sese et al. tested the same children in math, reading, and language and found that children are enthusiastic, adjust better at school, and have better academic scores if they have good social and emotional skills prior to kindergarten (2011). A limitation in the study was teachers were the only people asked to share classroom information.

In a quantitative study done by Ansari (2018), data was gathered from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) with 15,070 participants. The study focused primarily on middle-income families, differentiating from the Yazejian et al. (2015) and Halle et al. (2013) studies. The ECLS-K was conducted in 1998 and followed the children from kindergarten to eighth grade. Information was collected by parents and teachers

throughout this time. Ansari (2018) focused research on first-time kindergarteners and children that did not attend the Head Start program for preschool. Ansari (2018) had a diverse sample of families; however, with the exclusion of the Head Start preschool program participants and the matching algorithm used, middle-class families were widely represented. This was cited as a limitation of the study. The author excluded Head Start preschool data because it was thought to be different than state-funded or center-based care.

Analysis of the data suggested that children who attended preschool programs sustained academic performance; however, children who attended informal care had better psychosocial (social-emotional) functioning over time compared with those who were at school 20 hours a week or more. The low skills evened out over time (Ansari, 2018). This study, conducted in 1998, but researched and analyzed again in 2018, did not consider the significantly different demographic and socioeconomic changes in the United States of America. The number of ELL students enrolled in schools more than doubled from 1997 to 2008 (Winsler, Kim, & Richard, 2014). The effects of the achievement gap are felt further in school. Communities with low-income children are competing with middle to high income peers. Our nation will be affected (Yazejian et al., 2015). As the economic gap widens, achievement gaps widen, too. Early childhood care has been shown to close them and the cycle of poverty, and those who benefit most are ELL students (Yazejian et al., 2015).

### **English Language Learners in the Preschool Classroom**

Social-emotional learning is defined as the “developing capacity of the child from birth through five years of age to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn” (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012, p. 397). The Millennium Cohort study,

conducted in the United Kingdom with 17,034 children helped Hammer, Melhuish, and Howard (2018), identify antecedents and consequences of social and emotional development. This was a quantitative study. Children were given various tests at ages three, five, and seven in literacy, numeracy, socio and emotional development, and behavioral self-regulation. Two other tests, parenting and home learning environment, were administered to the children's mothers. With this data, Hammer et al. (2018) found academic success in high school and beyond related to young children's ability to self-regulate. The home learning environment (HLE) of children in the study was a predictor of academic success. Answers from the parent questionnaire concluded that children with higher scores on home based activities such as being read to, being taught letters and numbers, being taught songs/poems/rhymes, and going to the library meant higher self-regulation skills when the child was three and higher academic scores at ages five and seven. Children with higher scores had lower peer problems, lower hyperactivity, and better self-regulation at age five. Furthermore, HLE, self-regulation, parent education level, gender, income, and parenting style lead to strong predictors of success in math. Parenting style was not found to correlate directly with literacy but indirectly through self-regulation skills. However, peer problems, hyperactivity, parent education level, child gender, and family income, were predictors of literacy success. Limitations in the study included a data set which represented the children of the United Kingdom. It is important for future studies to examine other populations. HLE and social and emotional learning, where self-regulation is taught, go hand in hand. Students from the Millennium Cohort Study with higher self-regulation had higher academic scores. Social and emotional development provides a foundation for successful future learning (Hammer et al., 2018). Engaging children in academic cooperative play opportunities developed by early

childhood educators and parents provides long term academic outcomes in literacy and math (Hammer et al., 2018).

### **Play to Learn**

For English language learning students, play can present a barrier to education (Scrafton & Whittington, 2015) but is also needed to develop English language skills (Baker, 2019 & Dominguez & Trawick-Smith, 2018). Scrafton and Whittington (2015) authored a qualitative study which focused on ten culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) preschoolers in Australia and access to play in the classroom. The bilingual children in the study were able to communicate easily with English speaking peers. Authors cite this as a limitation of the study. Scrafton and Whittington interviewed children and teachers. Children were given cameras to document play time. Pictures were used as talking points between the children and the interviewer. The findings indicated that children who do not know the majority language fall behind peers in academics via socialization difficulties. Children who did not speak the majority language had difficulties entering and sustaining play with English speaking peers. Authors found classroom materials that closely resembled the home environment encouraged children to play and engage with peers. Teachers played a large role in the success of English learning children. During play time, teachers facilitated play between children and provided English words and phrases. Play with peers in early childhood is essential for English language learners. Play provided ELL students with opportunities to learn a new language and culture (Scrafton & Whittington, 2015).

Scrafton and Whittington's study in 2015 on access to play is supported by a 2018 study by Pakarinen, Salminen, Lerkkanen, and von Suchodoletz's. Pakarinen et al. authored a quantitative study on associations between social competence and language and literacy skills in

preschool. In the study, Pakarinen et al. (2018) studied 441 Finnish preschool children. The researchers concluded that socializing with peers enhances pre-literacy and language skills in children. Pre-literacy testing, conducted by teachers in Finnish, looked for letter knowledge and phonological awareness, or letter sounds. Receptive vocabulary (language skill) was tested again in Finnish by the teacher, and students were to identify a picture that matched a word the teacher said. Results from these tests found that cooperating skills were related in boys and girls to a positive outcome in language and pre-literacy skills. A second result from these tests, done in the fall and spring, found that in the spring, girls had higher scores than boys in letter knowledge and phonological awareness which related to higher scores in cooperating and empathy. This information relates to the Oades-Sese et al. (2011) study of 207 Hispanic American children. Pakarinen et al. (2018) studied Finnish children, and Oades-Sese et al. (2011) and Winsler et al. (2014) studied Hispanic American children. The data from all studies showed that boys with low language skills seemed to be at risk of lower academic achievement because of lower social and emotional skills. Authors cite five limitations of the study. First, the use of only two measurement points, then, limited home learning environment knowledge, third, a third of the parents did not indicate level of education, fourth, only teacher ratings were included, and fifth, the authors could not investigate explanations of associations. The academic divide does not favor one language. Children from around the world experienced the same risk of low academic skills when social and emotional skills are low (Pakarinen et al., 2018).

Educators needed to be available for ELL students to help start, guide, and facilitate play interactions between peers (Scrafton & Whittington, 2015, & Dominguez et al., 2018, & Winsler et al., 2014). In 2018 Dominguez et al., studied play of four ELL children and four English speaking children. The quantitative study took place at an accredited community based childcare

center on a university campus in Connecticut. The four ELL children were boys and the English-speaking children were split evenly two and two between girls and boys. Authors cited low numbers of ELL children as a limitation of the study. Languages present in the classroom were English, Spanish, and Mandarin. All teachers were monolingual English speakers, except one who spoke fluent Spanish. Dominguez et al., (2018) found ELL children were twice as likely to play with a teacher over English-speaking peers and were five times more likely to talk with a teacher rather than a peer. Researchers found ELL children used teachers as a secure base to explore the classroom. The ELL students who achieved positive interactions with English speaking peers had a teacher actively facilitate play. Through these interactions it was observed that ELL children showed social skills that previously were not seen. Teachers' facilitation of play allowed ELL students to demonstrate social skills and practice their English language abilities. Without this, the inability to initiate play and communicate hindered interactions between ELL students and English-speaking peers.

### **Inclusion of English Language Learners**

When English language learners are in the early childhood classroom and do not engage in learning opportunities because of language skills, they are at a disadvantage. This disadvantage carries on with the student throughout the learning career (Ansari, 2018). To give ELL students the academic and social emotional support they need in the classroom, teachers needed to be equipped with personal skills and classroom toys to guide ELL students' interactions (Baker, 2019, & Scrafton & Whittington, 2015). In 2019, Baker authored a qualitative, multiple case study which examined specific teaching practices in six community preschools for ELL students. Three different types of preschools were observed: Head Start, public Pre-K, and private preschool. Public Pre-K held the most ELL students with 100% of the

student population listed as ELL students, Head Start had 95% of children listed as ELL students, and private preschool had 33% of children listed as ELL students. Private preschool, however, had ten languages spoken at the school. The school with the smallest number of ELL students in its population had the most languages spoken by children and teachers. Head Start had seven languages spoken and Public Pre-K had two. Baker found teachers in each preschool held similar beliefs about ELL students; students and families brought important knowledge and resources to classrooms about culture and language. Learning more than one language benefitted students, and English learners deserved one-on-one support to learn English. Each classroom encouraged play as the primary role of language development. To support the language development of children in the classroom, teachers engaged ELL students with questions during play. The study explored ways that children could be encouraged to speak in native languages with parents engaged in reading activities at home and through volunteering in the classroom, empowering students to help plan curriculum using both native languages and English. All six classrooms were nominated in the local community for exemplary work. Limitations of the study included generalization, and Baker called for similar research to be done in English immersion programs. Inclusion is the first step and teaching social and emotional skills is next.

### **Teaching Social and Emotional Skills**

Facilitating play and providing culturally specific toys are two methods to engage ELL students. Teachers also needed to teach social and emotional skills to ELL students to aid in the development of friendship skills (Dominguez et al., 2018). A quantitative study by Ashdown and Bernard (2012) studied four teachers and 99 students from four classrooms in Australia. Two thirds of the students spoke English as a second language, and they were 45 females and 54 males. Two classrooms were kindergarten and two classrooms were first grade. Two classrooms,

one from each grade, were randomly assigned to be deliberately instructed in social and emotional skills from a curriculum called “You Can Do It!” (YCDI). The second set of classrooms were to serve as the control group and then receive instruction from teachers after the first ten weeks were finished. The study found that the social and emotional curriculum YCDI was successful in improving social and emotional competence equally for ELLs and English speakers of both genders. The study also found 50% of the first-grade classroom increased reading levels. These studies show a direct correlation between social-emotional skills and academics. Authors cite five limitations in the study. First, the study took place in one school. Second, the sample size for the study was small. Third, the choice of measurement for academic achievement limited data to text decoding. Fourth, teaching ratings of students could have been biased because they knew if they were in the control group or not. Finally, authors cite teacher-only ratings as a limitation.

Teachers with established relationships with children are encouraged to engage and facilitate play between ELL students and English-speaking peers. ELL students were known to have difficulties making friends and interacting with English speaking peers (Dominguez et al., 2018). When an ELL students’ first language is used in the classroom by the teacher, there is a reduced likelihood of peer aggression (Halle, Whittaker, Zepeda, Rothenberg, Anderson, Daneri, Wessel, & Buysse, 2014). A review of literature on the social and emotional development of ELL students conducted by Halle et al., (2014) found English language learners’ English acquisition correlated directly with relationships rich in language and social emotional strategies between ELL students and English speakers. Teachers’ emotional support and classroom organization related to higher levels of social and emotional skills. Skills such as sharing, play, communication, acceptance, and positive relationships provided children with more success in

school. The 14 studies reviewed by Halle et al. (2014) revealed ELL students navigate two sets of cultural norms by learning two languages and, therefore, had higher social and emotional skills than English speaking peers, like executive functioning skills.

Relationships between teachers and students, ELL students, were deeper when teachers use ELL students home language in the classroom. Students also acquired English faster when the first language was supported (Winsler et al., 2014). Halle et al.'s (2014) review of the literature cited ELL student's self-control and interpersonal skills were higher than English speakers as judged by teachers. Teachers also noted ELL students externalize and internalize behaviors less than English speaking students. Halle et al.'s findings suggest ELL students are poised to succeed in social and emotional development because of ELL status. The authors also cite success of teacher and student relationships, and a teacher's ability to use the ELL students first language in the classroom. Most of the studies reviewed featured only Spanish speakers and Latino students; these are the limitations of the study.

In 2011, Durlak and Weissburg set out on a large-scale research review to ascertain if social and emotional learning had an impact on education. Durlak and Weissburg (2011) reviewed 213 studies and over 270,00 students. Authors did not cite limitations of the study. Each of the 213 studies examined a social-emotional learning (SEL) program and control groups. It was revealed the schools who raised school affinity, student self-esteem, classroom behaviors, and social and emotional skills were the ones that employed an SEL curriculum (Durlak & Weissburg, 2011). Schools also reported an 11-percentile point gain in academic achievement. The authors state support from administration on professional development and support from state, local, and federal government provided students with the tools to help close the achievement gap. New skills in social and emotional development would positively affect

behaviors in school and academic performance. Schools, with support from administration, state, and national governments, implemented SEL curriculums, which the authors found to be the most successful school-based interventions (Durlak & Weissburg, 2011).

### **Teacher's Role**

A study done by Ramirez, Lopez, and Ferron (2018) studied teacher characteristics and the role it played in language, literacy, and math development of English language learners. The quantitative study followed 217 Latino preschool children from Head Start to kindergarten. The study also relied on teacher reported data, which the authors cited as a limitation. Authors found teachers' professional development in working with ELLs correlated with student's language, literacy, and math skills. Every hour a teacher attended professional development for ELL students, a student gained 0.04% increase in language scores. Authors suggested teachers that work with ELL students receive ongoing and intensive professional development training to continuously improve (Ramirez et al., 2018).

Winsler et al. (2014) suggest teachers who work with ELL students strongly encourage the first language of students in the classroom and develop relationships between students to encourage language development. In 2014, Winsler et al. authored a quantitative study on social emotional development in ELL students. Winsler et al. focused on 2,059 Latino/Hispanic children in preschool that qualified as low income. Children were assessed at four years of age in preschool and again at kindergarten entry. Authors found social and emotional skills in preschool were attributed to second language acquisition. Girls outperformed boys like Pakarinen et al.'s 2018 study. Teacher's role in development of English language acquisition played a significant role. When children learn a second language, it is typical to go through a quiet phase. Teachers cannot assume ELL students are in this phase of language development and must encourage peer

interactions. Authors cited language tests in preschool and location of the study as limitations. The community of Miami supports Spanish language development, and Winsler et al. suggested more studies take place in communities with ELL students that do not have similar support.

### **Brain Development in English Language Learners**

In the review of literature by Mohr, Juth, Kohlmeier, and Schreiber (2018), authors described what teachers and parents can do for ELL students to promote language development. Mohr et al. (2018) provided information on development in the field of neuroscience regarding ELL students. Mohr et al. (2018) stated that children who grew up around two languages are labeled as simultaneous bilingual learners, and children that learned one language at home and a different language at school are labeled sequential bilinguals. The authors found that the brain changed physiologically when a child learned a language at a young age. Simultaneous and sequential bilingual learner brains were different in the way the brain changed. Simultaneous bilinguals, children who grew up around two languages at the same time, had more white matter density in the brain compared to sequential bilinguals (Mohr et al., 2018). Regardless of where and how a child learned a second language, neuroscience supported the fact that bilingual children have better executive functioning skills. The authors provided insight into age of acquisition, the age when a language was first introduced. According to Mohr et al., children younger than six years old acquire a language, and children and adults over that age tend to memorize the language (2018). A native-like fluency is achieved through acquisition.

Authors recommended five strategies for parents and teachers to support ELL students. To begin to support first language development, there cannot be a division between the home language and the “other” language. Second, a caregiver and parent can introduce language as early as possible. Use of songs and playful interactions encourage interest in a language. Authors

suggest doing this before bed, as the brain retains information it learned during sleep. Third, a curiosity of languages like similarities and differences. Books can be used to introduce new words. Fourth, continuous practice of the language to support its development. The fifth and final recommendation is to practice patience. Language acquisition takes five or more years to become literate. Authors did not cite limitations to the study.

### **Conclusion**

The socioeconomic and linguistic demographic in America is changing. Preschool teachers are now accommodating for more ELL students in the classroom and require ongoing professional development to support ELL students (Ramirez et al., 2018). The research question, “Can early childhood educators foster academic growth in English language learners through social and emotional development?” has been addressed. English language learners are the fastest growing demographic entering our school systems (Winsler et al., 2014). Access to high-quality care and access to social and emotional development in early childhood classrooms is important for the social and emotional and language skills of ELL students. The peer reviewed articles brought insight to access of care for English language learners and the social and emotional development connection to academic success. At nine months of age, English language learners were already at a disadvantage in education in comparison with English-speaking peers if they were not in high-quality care (Yazejian et al., 2015). To lessen the impact of this disadvantage, ELL families need culturally consistent educational opportunities for children (Miller et al., 2014). Second, ELL students need to be enrolled in high-quality early education classrooms with social and emotional curriculum (Ansari, 2018). Early childhood educators should build classrooms that are culturally relevant and have culturally specific toys at hand (Scrafton & Whittington, 2015), and the educator's role is to guide and facilitate play

(Baker, 2019). Relationships in every classroom are important; however, relationships with ELL students and their families are key (Baker, 2019). Teachers that have a strong bond with ELL students helped bring peer relationships together (Dominguez et al., 2018). Furthermore, teachers needed support for professional development and implementation of social and emotional curriculums from the local, state, and national levels of government (Durlak & Weissburg, 2011). An increase in ELL students social and English skills will help close the academic gap between English language learners and English-speaking peers.

### **Chapter Three: Research Summary and Conclusions**

English language learners were at a disadvantage compared to native English speakers when access to high-quality schools and social situations were not available (Yazejian et al., 2015). English language learners grew in population, and access to high-quality schools did not grow with it. Parents preferred diverse childcare for cultural consistency. No availability made access more limited. Early high-quality care was shown to provide academic and social emotional skills to aide in ELL students' development. Children that entered care before kindergarten had higher language skills and grew academically at the same trajectory as native English speakers (Yazejian et al., 2015). To answer the question, "Can early childhood educators foster academic growth in English language learners through social and emotional development?" work in communities with an ELL population had to be done. ELL students needed access to high-quality culturally consistent care. High-quality childcare centers needed to employ teachers that fostered language development in the child's first language and supported a culturally diverse population. Teachers needed to be available to ELL students to navigate social situations, act as a play coach, and provide English words and phrases during play. Local, state, and national governments needed to support school districts when they employed social and emotional curriculum to the student body. The academic gap between ELL students and native English speakers can be addressed through these methods.

#### **School Access and Academic Success**

Immigrant families prefer to send a child to a childcare that is like the home. Communities that had such resources saw more immigrant children in childcare (Miller et al., 2014). Non-immigrant families were more likely to send a child to childcare if the mother was employed, the family had a higher income, and the parents had a higher level of education.

Childcare access before kindergarten entry made a difference for ELL students. ELL students with access to high-quality care had higher language scores (Yazejian et al., 2015). Higher language scores allowed ELL students to compete equally with English speaking peers in the classroom. However, ELL students needed to enter childcare at a young age for language acquisition to take hold. Two years was not long enough to gain proficiency like that of an English-speaking peer (Halle et al., 2013). In 2000, 68% of ELL students were considered low income. Halle et al. (2013) found ELL children were more likely to attend low-income schools with less highly trained teachers.

Entrance into high-quality care at a young age showed ELL children with high social and emotional skills, high linguistic ability, and high cognitive skills had higher academic scores and better oral English. Students adjusted better in school and had better academic scores in kindergarten with good social and emotional skills before entrance (Oades-Sese et al., 2011). A study of non-ELL and middle-income families showed the opposite. Children who attended preschool sustained academic performance, but informal care showed better social and emotional skills (Ansari, 2018). Low-income children compete with middle and high-income peers in school. Communities addressing the cycle of poverty and schools addressing the achievement gap had early childhood education opportunities for young children (Yazejian et al., 2015). Communities that provided early childhood opportunities gave children more opportunities for academic success. Academic success in high school was related to young children's ability to self-regulate (Hammer et al., 2018). The home learning environment of young children played a role in academic success. Parents who read to children, taught letters and numbers, sang songs, read poems and rhymes, and made trips to the library had children with higher self-regulation at age three and better academic scores at ages five and seven (Hammer et al., 2018). It took

parents, schools, and communities to address achievement gaps in children. ELL children required more and longer opportunities to reach parity with English-speaking peers.

### **Play to Learn**

In childcare settings, play was a method of delivering academics. Play was important for language development, but ELL students had difficulties entering in play with English-speaking peers and sustaining play with English-speaking peers (Scrafton & Whittington, 2015). Children that did not know the majority language fell behind peers in academics during play (Scrafton & Whittington, 2015). Social and emotional skills were attributed to academic success. Children with higher cooperating skills and higher empathy skills showed higher letter knowledge and phonological awareness (Pakarinen et al., 2018). Teachers played a role in the development of play with ELL children. In the classroom, ELL students were two times as likely to play with a teacher rather than an English-speaking peer. Likewise, ELL students were five times as likely to talk with a teacher rather than an English-speaking peer (Dominguez et al., 2018). Teachers needed to facilitate play between ELL students and English-speaking students to achieve positive interactions (Dominguez et al., 2018). Teachers played a role in play, but also played a role in classroom environment. Classrooms that had ELL parents volunteer, a classroom message of equality, ELL students' first languages present (Dominguez et al., 2018), and student-led curriculum had success with ELL students and families (Winsler et al., 2014).

### **Teaching Social and Emotional Skills**

Academic achievement was attributed to social and emotional development in early childhood classrooms (Ashdown & Bernard, 2011). Reading scores improved in first grade classrooms when children were taught from a social and emotional curriculum. ELL students that were learning alongside English-speaking peers were more successful with English acquisition

when the classroom had rich language and social and emotional opportunities. Positive relationships, communication with peers, acceptance of peers, sharing, and play with peers provided successful opportunities for ELL students' language acquisition (Halle et al., 2014). An 11% gain in academics was achieved in schools that taught from social and emotional curriculums (Durlak & Weissburg, 2011). Likewise, teachers that had more professional development opportunities in teaching ELL students provided ELL students with higher math, language, and literacy scores. Social and emotional learning goes hand in hand with academic achievement (Durlak & Weissburg, 2011).

### **Brain Development in English Language Learners**

ELL children learn languages at home and at school. Children who learned two languages at home were called simultaneous bilingual learners. Children who learned one language at home and a different language at school were called sequential bilingual learners (Mohr et al., 2018). All children who learned a second language had physiological changes take place in the brain. However, children who learned more than one language in the home had more white matter density in the brain. ELL students had physiological changes to the brain and had higher executive functioning skills (Mohr et al., 2018 & Halle et al., 2014). Parents and teachers that worked together helped ELL students. Homes that encouraged language development in both the native language and the new language helped ELL children. Likewise, parents that introduced language as early as possible, supported a curiosity in language, and read books supported ELL children. Parents and teachers that showed patience with ELL students supported language development.

### Conclusion

ELL children require high-quality childcare to learn English before kindergarten entry. The earlier an ELL child entered care, the better English language scores were at kindergarten entry (Yazejian et al., 2015 & Oades-Sese et al., 2011). When a child had higher English language scores, the academic gap between ELL students and English-speaking peers was smaller (Yazejian et al., 2015). However, ELL children's families had a difficult time finding culturally consistent care. Families looked for childcare that spoke the same language of the home and shared cultural values. When the families could not find it, they did not enter a child into childcare (Miller et al., 2014). ELL children's families that did find childcare thrived in high-quality programs that encouraged first language development, cultural values, and teachers that facilitated play between ELL students and English-speaking peers (Halle et al., 2014 & Dominguez et al., 2018). The question, "Can early childhood educators foster academic growth in English language learners through social and emotional development?" has been researched. High-quality programs and teachers that had ongoing professional development training saw value in ELL students in the classroom and higher academic scores (Ramirez et al., 2018 & Winsler et al., 2014). Early childhood educators that facilitated play between ELL students and English-speaking peers saw more social and emotional development strategies in the classroom from ELL students (Dominguez et al., 2018). Social and emotional education in the early childhood classroom for ELL students closed academic gaps between ELL children and English-speaking peers.

### **Chapter Four: Discussion, Application, and Future Studies**

Research in academic achievement for English language learning (ELL) students provided insight on the academic achievement gap between ELL students and English-speaking peers. Research also showed the importance of ELL children entering high-quality care at a young age to raise English acquisition and close the academic achievement gap (Yazejian et al., 2015). Through research, it was found that immigrant ELL families have different childcare wishes than non-immigrant and non-ELL speaking families (Miller et al., 2014). Communities that did not have such opportunities had fewer ELL students enrolled in child-care (Miller et al., 2014). Research showed ELL students learning a new language had higher executive functioning skills than non-ELL students (Halle et al., 2014). Access is the first step in providing ELL students with an opportunity to close the achievement gap. Teachers and parents had a role to play in the development of language acquisition, and research showed the importance of partnership between the two (Mohr et al., 2018). Social and emotional development at a young age showed higher academic scores (Hammer et al., 2018). The research provided information about how to inform instructional practices and educational policies for the future. Limitations from the synthesized studies provided areas for future development for possible future studies.

#### **Implications for Future Instructional Practice**

Research has shown that ELL students that achieve access in high-quality childcare settings thrive with English language acquisition (Yazejian et al., 2015) and social and emotional skills (Dominguez et al., 2018). For teachers, there are important steps to take to achieve a high-quality childcare worthy of ELL learners. Teachers of ELL students require ongoing professional development opportunities that teach about cultural values, language, and social and emotional strategies. There was research that showed teachers who engaged in professional development

opportunities raised the language scores of students for only one hour of professional development attended (Ramirez et al., 2018). Teachers must apply the knowledge gained in professional development settings with ELL students in the classroom.

Teachers with professional development opportunities would understand the sequence of language acquisition and understand the time it takes to achieve fluency. The first step of language acquisition is a silent phase (Tabors, 2008), and it takes at least five years and early entrance into care (Mohr et al., 2018). ELL students in the silent stage of language acquisition do not require teachers to leave them alone. This is the period where ELL students need assistance in play with English-speaking peers. Research has shown that ELL students prefer to play and talk to teachers rather English-speaking peers (Dominguez et al., 2018). A teacher's role in the development of language acquisition for ELL students is to act as a play coach and facilitate play between ELL children and non-ELL children (Scrafton & Whittington, 2015).

During play opportunities between ELL students and English-speaking students', teachers have a second role to play. Social and emotional skills are needed to support the healthy development of young children. This is no different for ELL students. Research shows that ELL children with higher social and emotional skills had higher academic scores in language, literacy, and math (Pakarinen et al., 2018 & Hammer et al., 2018). Research also shows that ELL students have higher executive functioning skills than non-ELL students because of the method of translating between first to second language (Mohr et al., 2018 & Halle et al., 2014). It has been found in research that executive functioning skills are linked to strong success in academics (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011).

ELL students in the silent phase of language acquisition are watching, listening, and learning about the classroom around them. The classroom community is a place that ELL

students and ELL families should feel valued. Research has shown that classrooms that value ELL students' culture, language, and encouraged the development of the first language had success with ELL students. ELL students' parents should be a wealth of knowledge on language and used as resources to provide culturally relevant childcare (Winsler et al., 2014 & Baker, 2019).

### **Implications for Future Educational Policy**

Through research, it was found that communities with high populations of ELL students are becoming more common (Winsler et al., 2014). Research also provided information that ELL students are commonly considered low-income and, therefore, enter low-income schools with less highly-trained teachers (Halle et al., 2013). Schools need the funds to send teachers to ongoing professional development opportunities. Communities with a high population of ELL children need more childcare opportunities that align with cultural values. Research has shown that immigrant families will keep children out of formal childcare because it did not match the values or language of the home (Miller et al., 2014). This is not what ELL students need to close the achievement gap. Schools with cultural values like the community population would enroll more ELL students, therefore providing them with high-quality care at a young age.

Schools that teach a social and emotional curriculum were found through research to have higher academic achievement scores (Durlak & Weissburg, 2011). Schools require funding to locate, study, and acquire high-quality social and emotional curriculums. With new curriculum comes the requirement of training teachers. Therefore, additional funding for schools would be required to train teachers in the social and emotional curriculum. Research has shown that schools need support from local, state, and federal governments to receive funding to acquire and implement social and emotional curriculums (Durlak & Weissburg, 2011).

### **Limitations in Research and Areas for Future Studies**

Limitations in the research provided knowledge for future studies. Many of the studies synthesized only focused on an ELL student population that spoke Spanish. Research showed that the ELL population in the United States is growing (Winsler et al., 2014). However, only two studies took place in the United States and had a student that spoke a language other than Spanish. Recommendations for future studies would include student populations other than Spanish speakers. Research showed that ELL students bring value to a classroom (Dominguez et al., 2018). There are many cultural values other than Spanish values that must be addressed in future studies.

A second limitation in the research provided were the dates of major longitudinal studies. Three of the studies synthesized used research from longitudinal studies that took place in the United States in the 1990s. A fourth longitudinal study from the United Kingdom took place in the mid-2000s. Research showed that the ELL population has grown significantly since this time (Winsler et al., 2014). A recommendation for future studies would be a recent major longitudinal study in communities that have seen a large influx in immigrants in the United States.

A third limitation that posed an opportunity for future research was the method of testing ELL students. ELL students tested for language proficiency were not always tested in a home language. Some of the studies used the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test in English or Spanish (Yazejian et al., 2015). The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test- Finnish Version was used in Pakarinen et al.'s 2018 study of Finnish children. Pakarinen also used ARMI, a ten-item test assessing reading and writing. Pre-LAS, another language screening tool, was mentioned in studies to test English language acquisition. Again, the Pre-LAS test was not mentioned to be used for a language other than English. A third language test mentioned, The ECLS-K Oral

Language Development Screener (OLDS) was used with children who did not speak English in the home (Halle et al., 2012). The test was derived from the Pre-LAS 2000 language acquisition test. Future studies must test ELL students in a native language first to assess the level of understanding and acquisition in a native language before testing in a second language. Three limitations provide opportunities for future research studies. Testing ELL students in a native language, a recent longitudinal study in immigrant communities, and more studies with ELL students that speak a language other than Spanish would provide the field of education with deeper knowledge of ELL students, families, and communities schools serve.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers, school communities, local communities, and governments have work to do to address the achievement gap for ELL students. The number of immigrant families is growing (Winsler et al., 2014). Immigrant families prefer culturally consistent care for children and communities that have such care have more ELL children in childcare. ELL students in high-quality care receive opportunities to learn English through social and emotional experiences. Teachers who work with ELL students need ongoing professional development to understand the needs of the diverse children in a classroom. “It is important to gain an understanding of bilingual children’s development of social– emotional and academic competence. This understanding will result in high-quality early childhood education programs tailored to enhance the specific developmental needs of these children” (Oades-Sese et al., 2011, p. 747). The demographics in the United States have changed. Teachers, school communities, local communities, and governments must uphold the cultural values of ELL students. Bilingual children and families are an asset to a classroom community. Social and emotional development

taught to ELL students in the early childhood classroom enhances English language learning opportunities.

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