

English Language Learners: Acceptance and Belonging

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Quantitative Research Proposal

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## **Introduction**

Teacher preparation programs provide limited training when it comes to teaching students who speak a language other than the language of instruction, and do not adequately prepare educators to accurately scaffold, assess, and develop lessons to promote comprehension, engagement, and cultural relevance for ELLs (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, et al., 2018). Despite the fact that nearly 10% of school aged children are English language learners (Odowd, 2010), a national survey conducted by the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) in 2011 found that less than 20% of colleges offered professional development and training around working with English language learners, and that 57% of the teachers surveyed indicated that they felt they needed additional training in best practice for supporting students learning English as a second language (Gomez & Diarrassouba, 2014).

When teachers fail to access their ELL students' underlying knowledge, rooted in their culture and first language, the opportunity for expression and demonstration of understanding is constrained (de Araujo et al., 2018). Turner and Celedon-Pattchis (2011) confirm that when teachers provided opportunities for ELL students to access their first language in open ended math opportunities, the Latinx students performed similarly to their caucasian peers. The ability to be seen and heard in a school environment allows students to develop that sense of belonging. Without providing a safe and secure place for students to express themselves, the chance of alienation and disengagement rises (Riley et al., 2018). As language can be the barrier to inclusion in a classroom setting, it is vital that we assess student perception of peer belonging

and self-belonging in the classroom community; are students learning English accepted by peers, and feel like an integral part of the room?

### **Literature Review**

English language learners (ELLs) are estimated to make up 4.8 million students in the United States, or approximately 9.5% of school aged children (Lee, 2019). The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) states that all students participate in standards based testing as a measure of academic growth and success (Odowd, 2010). This is not an exception for ELLs. To support ELLs in their academic growth, the World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) standards were developed to identify the baseline skills of ELLs in the domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing in English. Students speaking English as a second language take the WIDA assessment each year, in addition to any other mandated state assessments, and are given a score from Level 1 (Entering), to Level 6 (Reaching) to identify their progress in English language development. Within each of the levels on the WIDA assessment, there are Model Performance Indicators (MDIs) that provide educators with an explanation of the type of oral phrasing, receptive listening, encoding, and decoding ability students at each 'level' are capable of (Odowd, 2010). The WIDA assessment, and MDIs provide teachers with a clearer picture of where their students are on the way to English acquisition and provide guidance for in class scaffolds. However, after one year in the public school setting, ELLs are expected to participate in the same testing as peers who are native English speakers (Odowd, 2010) using none of the written or oral accommodations provided during instruction.

Although ELLs have support in the classroom to learn content and develop academic vocabulary in a specific context, the language in which the test is provided determines the

success of the student (National, Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, et al., 2018). The study conducted by Solano-Flores & Li (2009) provide evidence of the difference in phrasing orally used in academic settings, Standard English used in written assessments, and the English used by ELLs as a source of measurement error and limited validity. Although some districts have begun to recognize these testing biases and work to create more equitable and developmentally appropriate assessments, the United States' educational system has shown to be ineffective in supporting ELLs as proven through standardized assessment scores, graduation rates, and course taking patterns (de Araujo et al., 2018). If a student's first language (L1) is different from the language of instruction (LOI), ELLs have the additional cognitive workload of code-switching, or translating the LOI into their L1 to comprehend, and then formulate an appropriate response to reply (Kasule & Mapolelo, 2005). However, if a reader's LOI proficiency is below the grade level expectation, then the attempt to transfer knowledge through code-switching is prevented (Brevik et al., 2016). As educators are working to assess the knowledge of ELLs, it becomes unclear if the student is not comprehending the content, or if expression of understanding is impaired by the language barrier in the classroom environment (Gablasova, 2014). In a multilingual classroom with varying languages and needs of students, and assessments that impact teachers job security, educators are confined to high-stress environments which are shown to lead to emotional;-disengagement from pupils, reduced tolerance or academic patience, and a withdrawal from professional interactions (Kasule & Mopolelo, 2005).

If disengagement and frustration is how professional educators feel when working to teach students of varied linguistic abilities, imagine how students with limited English

proficiency are feeling when working to participate, share insight, and develop peer relationships. The language and culture they have grown up with is either not referenced, or diminished within the culture of the school or classroom. Knowing that closeness and a sense of belonging with a teacher in early childhood years predicted English language proficiency in ELL students (Kim, 2008), it is imperative that teachers are armed with strategies to engage all students, no matter their L1. Research conducted by Kasule & Mapolelo (2005) show that teacher effectiveness is determined by the strategies an educator employs; creating engagement through joy, fun, movement, and relationship building. With language as the modality for inclusion or exclusion in schools (Riley et al., 2018), the use of which languages appear in the classroom must be evaluated so that all students and teachers feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. The relationships between teacher and student have a large part in determining the success of the student; inclusion of language and culture can only strengthen that relationship.

Riley et al. (2018) explains that acceptance and belonging are not stagnant feelings, but rather are fluid and continuously growing feelings that are developed over daily interactions (verbal and non-verbal). If students do not feel as if they belong, or have a significant place in the classroom, then they are apt to develop feelings of isolation and alienation, which then affects school achievement. Kim and Plotka (2016) state that not being able to fully communicate in the LOI is a source of anxiety for students, and it is recommended for teachers and schools to integrate students' home language to build a sense of community and rapport. Including students into lessons through question-answer interaction, and having heterogeneous groupings of peers is not enough. Teachers must address internalized biases of the abilities of ELLs, because children begin to internalize a deficit thinking model of bilingualism without

direct information on what it means to speak multiple languages and be learning how to participate in the language of instruction (Mehmedbegovic, 2011). Being in the general education classroom is not enough to develop a sense of belonging, this is only offering proximity. Feldman et al. (2016) states that conversation with peers, social interactions, and relationship development with peers and adults alike is what the root of belonging in the classroom looks like. The research done by Carter et al. (2016) around developing a sense of belonging categorizes the ten feelings students need to have to feel as if they belong: being present, noticed, welcomed, cared for, supported, accepted, known, befriended, needed, and loved. As educators curate the environment for learning, it is imperative to consider how students of all linguistic abilities in the LOI are developing their sense of belonging, as their academic success depends on it. Rose and Shevlin (2017) express that to belong is a basic human need which creates the motivation to be a part of a community; are feelings of belonging being developed in classrooms around the country for ELLs?

In the 2006 study by Hughes et al. on peer perception of teacher to student support and the correlation to social acceptance, 509 children in first grade were asked to score their peers on a scale of 1 (not liked at all) to 5 (very much liked). In this study the mean score was compared to observational data of classroom interaction between teacher to student, teacher survey on student behavior and demeanor, reading achievement, and student survey on perceived teacher and school belonging. The results of the study show that teacher support is positively related to peer acceptance and classroom engagement (Hughes et al., 2006). These findings have the immediate implication for teacher training programs and professional development for educators on the importance of relationship building, one on one interaction, and getting to know students

on a personal level. In studying belongingness in 353 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, Goodenow (1993) developed a Class Belonging and Support Scale (CBSS) that measured student feelings on being included, liked, and respected in the classroom setting.

### **Questions**

This quantitative study is being conducted to identify student feelings of belonging in the elementary classroom. Students will be surveyed using the CBSS (Goodenow, 1993) to identify feelings of belonging in the classroom. The CBSS scale will be observed through the lens of race and ethnicity to determine a correlation between speaking the LOI and having a sense of belonging in the classroom. The overarching research question for this study is; Do ELLs feel a difference in belonging when compared to English speaking students?

### **Method**

#### **Research Design**

This quantitative study is being conducted at the elementary school level through the use of the CBSS survey (Goodenow, 1993). The survey consists of 28 questions to be answered on a Likert scale of 1-5 to express their opinion. Answers closer to a rating of 1 would explain feelings of ‘exclusion or alienation,’ versus a score of 5 meaning that students felt ‘accepted’ (Goodenow, 1993).

The information collected on student perception of personal belonging in grades 3 to 6 will be looked at within the classroom context to determine if student acceptance and belonging correlates with speaking the LOI. The data gathered from students will be reported back to the school as feedback around student sense of belonging. This data could be used to inform teacher professional development, and school improvement planning (SIP) goals.

## **Participants**

This study is to be conducted in third through sixth grade classrooms at Pine Spring Elementary in Fairfax County Public Schools in Falls Church, VA. The elementary school has a population of 624 students, with 53% of the student population identifying as an English Language Learner. Within the population at Pine Spring Elementary school, 87% of students are a part of the general education setting, receiving no Special Education needs or having an identified Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 plan. Participants would be confirmed by parents and students signing an informed consent form, sent home in the parent preferred language, to participate in the study.

## **Measures**

Students who felt cared for by their teacher rated themselves more positively in their participation in the classroom (Hughes et al., 2006). To determine student feelings of belonging, the CBSS (Goodenow, 1993) would be administered to students in grades 3 through 6 by the School Based Technology Specialist (SBTS) within the homeroom setting.

## **Procedures**

For insurance of student understanding, the Likert scale section of the survey would be administered in a computer format that included verbal reading of questions and directions in the student's language of choice. As over 50% of the student population at Pine Spring Elementary are English language learners, and 18% of the school population receives Special Education services, having the directions in written and auditory formatting is appropriate to ensure student comprehension.

## **Ethical Considerations**

An important area for ethical consideration is that I am currently a teacher at Pine Spring Elementary school. Being a teacher in the building could be seen as a conflict of interest, and feel intrusive to the other professionals in my building if I were distributing and administering surveys personally. In an attempt to create an unobtrusive survey environment, I would collaborate with the SBTS at Pine Spring Elementary School to conduct the surveys in a whole class setting, while the teacher was out of the room. This would ensure that the protocol for survey distribution and completion of the survey was unimpaired by myself, or the homeroom teacher.

### **Proposed Preliminary Data Analyses**

With the 2011 survey conducted by National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) uncovering that 57% of the teachers surveyed indicated that they felt they needed additional training to teach and engage ELLs (Gomez & Diarrassouba, 2014), it is theorized that teachers feel uneasy in their methods for teaching, reaching, engaging, and providing feedback to students who speak a language other than their own. If this population of students does not feel connected to their teacher, or their classmates, and the graduation rates are lower for students who speak a first language other than English (de Arajuro et al., 2018), it is vital that teachers learn how students see themselves as belonging in the classroom. From here, teachers can begin a conversation around what can be done to develop a sense of belongingness through pedagogical techniques that inspire engagement, joy, and promote belonging.



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