**Scholarship of Integration: Academic Disparity among the English Language Learners**

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**Abstract**

Academic disparity among English Language Learner (ELL) students has been a highly researched and debated social phenomenon in academic circles. With the growing population of ELLs in U.S. schools, several encouraging educational reform policies and innovative approaches have been proposed to address this issue. However, recent studies reveal that academic disparity between the ELLs and their English-speaking counterparts remains noticeably significant. During the process of language acquisition, ELLs face dual challenges such as acquiring English while also meeting the need to master content in other subjects. These challenges can only exacerbate the academic disparity, especially if a combination of resources to support the ELLs is not offered or non-existent. Resources such as effective instructional practices, supportive educational and legislative policies, and well-prepared educators can be utilized to help recognize and leverage ELLs’ linguistic and cultural assets in order to reduce academic disparities.

**Objective**

The rise of ELL population in U.S. K-12 has been steadily increasing over the last few decades. Today, the ELL population comprises over 10% of student population in the United States (Molloy Elreda et al., 2022). The impact of academic disparity on language learners and the language learning process is well-documented. The process of language acquisition can be an arduous task for ELLs. In U.S. schools, ELLs face the challenge of learning the language and mastering the subject contents while also adapting to new social and cultural norms. Despite the attempts aimed at remediating these persistent disparities, ELLs still face disparate academic outcomes. They seem to consistently get lower test scores at every grade level (Ardasheva et al., 2012) and register lower overall graduation rates. Understanding factors that lead to academic disparities helps define institutional policies, learning objectives, specify content, design assessments, and establish guidelines for teaching and learning in any given educational institution. The goal is to provide structure and consistency to ELL education, to ensure that ELL students receive structured, comprehensive and organized learning experiences. In typical classrooms, ELLs’ academic and linguistic development is not fully supported.

Additionally, experienced educators and educational leaders understand the importance of meeting the academic needs and preferences of a demographically changing student population in U.S. K-12 educational institutions. Yet, the road map is mired with complex and systematic challenges that lie ahead of the institutions as they strive to provide equity and diversity in education, especially within the marginalized student population.

This paper will identify the contributing factors to my research on academic disparity among the ELL student population which delves into institutional, financial, academic, and administrative challenges educators and school leaders face in the face of addressing academic disparity among the ELL student population. In the first section, I further explore the importance of my research topic as a social phenomenon. In the next section, I define contributing factors to the phenomenon and connect each factor to the problem, followed by conclusion where I attempt to summarize the findings of my research.

**Statement of the Problem**

Studying the achievement gap among the immigrant English learners led me to broaden the scope of search for relevant literature. This process helped me form a better understanding of the problem as I realized the need to determine the construct of Language Learners in my research. Which English language learner group am I studying? As I refined my search I came to know of various categorizations of English learners. English learners, in general, are classified into different categories. There are English Language Learners (ELL), English as a Second Language (ESL), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), multilinguals, or, non-English speaking immigrant students in general?

Following extensive conversations with faculty, stakeholders, teachers, and parents, as well as conducting initial literature reviews, I chose English Language Learners as my area of focus. In my professional context, ELLs, as a construct, can encompass all types of individuals learning the English language. Subsequently, my focus will center on comprehending the factors contributing to the issue of academic disparity among English Language Learners (ELLs).

ELLs in U.S. schools often face significant academic disparities compared to their native English-speaking peers. These disparities arise from a variety of factors, including language barriers, cultural differences, socioeconomic status, and access to resources. According to research, today, English learners represent more than 10% of the total K-12 student population in U.S. schools (Mang, 2021; *PISA 2022 U.S. Results*, n.d.; Rutkowski & Rutkowski, 2016, p. 264). ELs, due to limited language proficiency, are reported to be underperforming academically (Rosen et al., 2018; Tong et al., 2014) either domestically or transnationally (Mang, 2021; *PISA 2022 U.S. Results*, n.d.). According to Genesee at al. (2005) only 18.7% of ELL students meet state norms for reading in English. This academic disparity seems to be consistent and persistent across the nation, especially with the continuous rise of the non-English speaking student demographics. Additionally, continuous educational reforms that call for high standards and strong accountability for schools and students only serve as the contributing factors to the problem.

This is no different in my own professional context at Legacy Learning Center (LLC), an inner-city state-accredited private school in Indianapolis, Indiana. I have gained firsthand experience on the matter as the principal of LLC.

ELLs that I encountered are typically categorized belonging to immigrant and marginalized student population by the Department of Education. Before matriculating in LLC, they usually enroll in public school system, albeit for short periods of time, where they were either identified as belonging to one or more “at-risk” status groups (Callahan, 2013), or misidentified in the process of language curricularization (Kibler & Valdez, 2016), and faced increasing academic achievement accountability (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000) in each grade, and even were placed in “sink or swim immersion” (Chang, 2015; Wortham et al., 2001) instructional pools. In my role, I actively addressed the requirements of incoming ELL students and ensured alignment with state standards. However, these state standards albeit compliant with the state’s curricularization mandates, they were not ELL friendly and not always conducive to their needs. Additionally, securing and retaining proficient ESL teachers (McKay, 2000) posed an additional challenge, as teachers’ efficacy is crucial for aligning with state standards and readying the ELL students for various standardized tests that are administrated by law at my institution.

As an educator, in recent years, I've also become more aware of the ongoing difficulties educational institutions encounter in creating equitable learning environments for all students, with a specific focus on ELLs. I started defining these connections that are important to understanding and examining the definition of academic disparity among the ELLs from 7 main concepts: (a) school leadership; (b) teachers’ efficacy; (c) assessment-based accountability policies; (d) socio-economic status; (e) language curricularization, (f) school accountability and (g) school compliance and funding.

**Contributing Factors**

**School Leadership (Administrative and Instructional Leadership)**

School leadership is responsible for creating processes and taking action in school that help guide, support, and enhance the educational experiences of both teachers and students. Their role in addressing academic disparity includes establishing clear goals, providing ELL professional training, and supporting ELL friendly instructional methodologies. Ideally, school leaders, both administrative and instructional, play a pivotal role in setting and maintaining a positive culture, conducive for learning and collaboration.

Effective leadership within schools is crucial for enhancing academic results, as it shapes the motivations and abilities of teachers and contributes to the overall school environment (Bishop, 2011; Grissom & Loeb, 2011a; Sebastian et al., 2019). However, school leadership often faces challenges while navigating through existing administrative and curricular structures and expectations for ELLs such as conflicting goals for students, ESL trained staffing, ensuring good teaching and learning, and strategically managing funding and resources.

There are differences between educational management and educational leadership as well. Management, in general, primarily involves administrative tasks and organizational efficiency, whereas leadership encompasses a broader vision, inspiring and guiding stakeholders (teachers, parents, and students) towards a common educational goal. Literature reiterates the importance of organizational and educational management for effective school leadership work (Bishop, 2011; Grissom & Loeb, 2011b; Sebastian et al., 2019). Menken and Solorza (2015) and Kurowski (2020) argue that school principals have the power to shape a school’s language policy and the overall quality of schooling bilingual students receive.

Furthermore, studies compared how principal perceptions of effectiveness on instructional leadership versus organizational management were related to student achievement. Findings indicated that principals’ effectiveness and instructional leadership in organizational management to have significant impact on student achievement (Sebastian et al., 2019, Bishop, 2011; Connolly et al., 2019). Connolly et al., (2019) defined educational leadership as a visionary and transformative role which can go beyond mere administration to inspire and influence positive change. In that regard, educational leaders are expected to have a broader perspective, emphasizing innovation, motivation, and the development of a shared vision.

There is another perspective of leadership that is found to be a key indicator of ELL students’ success and achievement: culturally responsive educational leadership. Culturally responsive educational leadership focuses on incorporating diversity and inclusion, equity in educational outcomes, community engagement, reflective leadership practices, and ongoing professional development for school leaders and faculty. According to Ardasheva et al. (2012), “ELLs are bilinguals as they need and use two (or more) languages in their everyday life (2012, p. 770).” Khalifa et al. (2016) argue that school principals are essential for adopting culturally sensitive pedagogies and developing bilingual education. Ovando (2003) contended that bilingual education in the USA is highly politicized (Ovando, 2003). Menken (2013) validated Ovando’s statement by saying that the US language policy has been characterized by the adoption of restrictive language education policies that limit the usage of students’ home language in instruction (Menken and Solorza, 2015). Literature about schools serving emergent bilinguals suggests that leadership in these contexts must make diversity central to the school’s mission (Brisk 2006; Zentella 2005). Carrasquillo and Rodriguez (1998) identified school leadership as essential to the success of a bilingual school, based on their research in three New York City schools with bilingual education programs (Carrasquillo & Rodriguez, 1998).

In the context of contemporary demographic changes within U.S., the significance of instructional leadership in educational environments has become increasingly crucial. Educational leadership holds a pivotal role in comprehending and integrating cultural competence into their methodologies. Such leaders acknowledge and respect diverse cultural backgrounds, promote inclusivity, and implement policies that address the unique needs of students from various cultural contexts in their efforts to address academic disparity.

**Teachers Efficacy**

Teacher efficacy refers to “a cognitive process in which people construct beliefs about their capacity to perform at a given level of attainment” (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p. 202). In addition to having strong school leadership and strong ESL programs, schools should possess a robust teacher efficacy for supporting ELLs and ELL-oriented pedagogical programs. Teachers’ efficacy is often attributed to student success. Teachers with high self-efficacy feel more confident dealing with ELL students and are receptive to adjusting instructional methods to accommodate language differences. Additionally, fluency in ELL students’ language and being trained in culturally responsive teaching methods are found to be key indicators of increasing teacher’s efficacy (Haworth et al., 2015). Moreover, cyclical professional development training that focus on understanding and addressing ELL needs along with trainings in increasing cultural sensitivity are corelated to teachers’ efficacy (Chen, 2019). The higher the teacher efficacy the more confident teacher feels in their support of ELL students. However, many teachers lack the training needed to design effective, ELL-oriented lessons that address both language and content objectives. There are also time constraints and limited resources that make it difficult for teachers to individualize instruction for each ELL student (Parker, 2011), especially in large-size classrooms.

Literature identified that the teachers’ efficacy is built around a strong emotional support (Chen, 2019): a strong and crucial factor to improving different aspects of education such as teachers efficacy, teaching, student, and learning. Cansoy et al., (2022) indicate that collective teachers efficacy is best perceived with teachers’ commitment to school and whether they are willing to make efforts on behalf of the school, and whether teachers identify with the organization’s values and objectives (Cansoy et al., 2022; Nganga et al., 2019; Qadach et al., 2020) and willing to commit to and remain in that organization. Goddard (2017) and Nganga et al., (2019) believe that a robust sense of collective efficacy among teachers tends to foster the types of effort, creativity, and persistence required to support student learning. Nganga et al., (2019) also stress the importance of “caring teachers” (Nganga et al., 2019, p. 7) for establishing nurturing and inclusive learning environments.

Conversely, low teachers’ efficacy can lead to low job satisfaction. Studies have also noted that teachers with low job satisfaction (Gooden et al., 2023; Gregg & Lavertu, 2023; Williams et al., 2022) are much likely to leave the profession. Ruecker (2021) points out how recruiting and retaining experienced ESL teachers is a compelling challenge for private and rural schools. He contends that how highly localized teacher labor markets (Ruecker, 2021) can cause outsider teachers to suffer from professional and cultural isolation. von der Embse et al (2016) further examined how teacher test stress, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction are interrelated and warrants further research.

**Assessment-based accountability policies**

Assessment-based accountability policies have been developed and institutionalized with the goal of improving educational quality, student learning and achievement and institutional effectiveness. Assessment-based accountability refers to the process of producing quantifiable results to justify funding and demonstrate institutional effectiveness (Ewell, n.d.). In today’s educational sphere, accountability policies are rather seen as a bureaucratic exercise focused on compliance rather than a tool for growth. In that regard, accountability policies have fundamentally changed how schools use test performance to determine student achievement and teacher effectiveness. Literacy-based performance assessments may put ELLs at a disadvantage due to their limited or underdeveloped English literacy skills. Menken (2010) indicated the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act’s requirement for testing ELLs in English produces unique challenges, especially due to the linguistically complex design of these tests. This approach can undermine equal treatment of ELLs and exacerbate persistent academic disparities, as both ELLs and the schools serving them are more likely to face penalties under such policies (Menken, 2010).

Additionally, von der Embse et al (2016) contend that test-based accountability policies have been associated with increased pressure to teach to the test, reduced instructional depth, and instruction targeted primarily toward students whose test scores are likely to improve in hopes of improving overall test performance, yet another less favorable angle of the testing policies seen used as a bureaucratic measure rather than a tool designed for success.

Furthermore, state standardized tests, Jennings and Lauen contend, do not randomly sample from the state standards each year, so alignment to the state standards (“teaching to the standards”) may produce different instructional practices than alignment to the specific frequency with which standards predictably appear on “state tests” (“teaching to the test”) (Jennings & Lauen, 2016, pp. 220, 221, 222). As such, the need to comply with state accreditation standards could lead to a standardization of educational approaches, suppressing creativity and variety within schools. Consequently, this may contribute to the already acknowledged widening gap in academic achievement among English language learners.

In the United States, schools that do not meet annual test performance goals can be subject to whole staff restructuring resulting in administrators and teachers losing their jobs (Reback et al., 2014; von der Embse et al., 2016). Some states have even eliminated teacher tenure and now place a greater emphasis on student test scores in evaluating teacher effectiveness.

State and district regulations such as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets (Shin, 2022), set specific objectives for schools to achieve a 100 percent proficiency standard. Schools that fail to meet AYP may encounter various consequences, including the implementation of additional instructional programs, restructuring, or closure, potentially contributing to teacher burnout (Grant, 2022, p. 3). Policymakers have also relied on these scores to assert differences in the academic performance of American students over time, as well as variations in achievement disparities between “historically privileged and underprivileged groups” (Jennings & Lauen, 2016, p. 221). Furthermore, literature cited (von der Embse, Kilgus, Solomon, Bowler, & Curtiss, 2015) that the increased use of student test performance within evaluations of teacher quality may increase stress leading to counterproductive instructional practices and lower student achievement (Putwain & Best, 2012).

Another co-dependent factor of assessment-based accountability polices is the school accreditation process. Accreditation is often seen as an integral part of implementing accountability policies at institutional level. In efforts to ensure effective accountability policies, schools incorporate accreditation strategies into policies governing licensure and program quality and are also used as incentives for recruiting and retaining teachers in areas of need (Darling-Hammond, 2020).

Accreditation has traditionally been viewed as a crucial measure of quality assurance in educational institutions. It serves as a stamp of approval of sorts, indicating that an institution meets certain standards and criteria set by accrediting bodies. However, accreditation requirements bring about accountability-induced changes in educational practices that can stifle good judgment and best practices in favor of compliance and accountability to enhance institutional efficiency. Romanowski (2021) uses the term "idolatry" (Romanowski, 2022, p. 156,157) metaphorically to suggest that the veneration of accreditation may lead to an uncritical and excessive reliance on its authority. He further argues that the focus on meeting accreditation standards can divert attention from fostering meaningful learning experiences for students (Romanowski, 2022) and focus on “teaching to the standards” pedagogical approach instead (Jennings & Lauen, 2016, pp. 220, 221).

**Socioeconomic Status (SES):**

There is a complex relationship between socio-economic status of students and academic performance. Socioeconomic status is one of the key indicators of academic achievement. Socio-economic (SES) status refers to a rank or a position an individual holds in a group or organization. ELLs come from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds which can unquestionably influence their educational experiences. SES, a contributing factor to academic disparities, is an indicator of family income, parental education, and access to resources (Fernández Sanjurjo et al., 2018). Students from lower SES often lack access to high-quality schools, extracurricular programs, and resources that support their academic growth. This, in turn, creates gaps in readiness and achievement as early as kindergarten and widens through K-12 (Maruyama, 2003). Without adequate support, such as extracurricular activities or additional tutoring classes, ELLs can lag in academic achievement, thus increasing their dropout risks and limiting their postsecondary opportunities.

Furthermore, a range of academic research indicates that access to greater financial resources and higher socioeconomic status can lead to meaningful experiences and interactions to help guide students through issues of inequality (Destin, 2020). Consistent systemic, institutional, and contextual support (Destin, 2020), value ELL conscious classroom practices coupled with nurturing socioeconomic diversity through promotion of resources in the form of financial aid and work study that is available for lower-SES students (Browman & Destin, 2016).

Snellman et al. (2015) contends that there is a concept of "engagement gap" (Snellman et al., 2015) which refers to disparities in extracurricular participation based on socioeconomic factors. Lack of availability or lack of participation in after school and extracurricular activities have significant implications for social mobility, essentially affecting the socioeconomic opportunities available to students from different backgrounds.

Extracurricular activities, including athletics and student government, are designed to promote character, build “soft” skills, and cultivate a sense of unity among students from different religious and socioeconomic backgrounds. Such activities enhance academic resilience (Browman et al., 2017; Snellman et al., 2015), educational achievement, and promote wellbeing, healthy choices, and prosocial behavior. However, Snellman et al. (2015) highlight the unequal distribution of extracurricular opportunities among students of varying SES backgrounds, with students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds having greater access and participation compared to their counterparts from lower-income families. This engagement gap is identified as a contributing factor to the broader social mobility divide and academic disparity, reinforcing existing inequalities in academic achievement and socioeconomic mobility among the disadvantaged students.

Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that family socioeconomic status (SES) and school resources have significant impacts on students’ academic achievement (Sousa & Armor, 2010). In their study, Sousa and Armor (2010) examine family-related factors and their influence on academic achievement and Fuchs & Wößmann (2008) contend that “family background, home incentives, (Fuchs & Wößmann, 2008, p. 4), student characteristics, school resources, teachers’ quality, and school institutional factors account for more than 85% of the variation in test scores at the national level in math, science and reading achievement.” In another study, Animasaun and Oyadeyis (2023) recognize the importance of familial support and how familial encouragement and involvement in a student's education has a huge potential of mitigating disparities based on school type and gender (Animasaun & Oyadeyi, 2023).

Additionally, literature further suggests that SES factors such as income, parental education, and social status play a significant role in defining academic disparity and contribute to divergent educational outcomes among children. On an ending thought, it is important to point out the relationship between SES and academic disparity among ELs as an emergent relationship, which has garnered much attention, momentum, and research since the Coleman Report (Downey & Condron, 2016).

**Language Curricularization**

Language curricularization refers to standardized content development and assessment practices aimed at achieving specific and measurable language outcomes (Sosnowski, 2021). However, curricularization which adopts one-size-fits-all instructional approach, can exacerbate academic disparities by overlooking learners’ unique backgrounds, SES, and learning preferences. Thus, creating socially and culturally relevant teaching frameworks and pedagogy lie at the heart of increasing and developing English Language Learners (ELL) students’ self-efficacy and ensuring their learning success. In theory, curricularization is a methodical standardization approach aimed at curbing drift at academic standardization and unification level, yet, in practice it fails to be inclusive and does not always lead to equity in academic outcomes for all students. Sosnoski (2021) points out how the curricularization process can lead to marginalization and the creation of academic deficits in language and literacy programs.

Curricularization built on multicultural pedagogical approaches requires the involvement of both content creators and educators alike. Existing literature contends that structured language instruction not only establishes but also necessitates the categorization and classification of learners, which are inherently non-neutral and frequently yield significant consequences for individuals. Lewis (2022) indicates that academic language ideologies became curricularized and impacted a bilingual classroom’s teacher and students, especially in a “deeply entrenched infrastructure of curricularization (Lewis, 2022, p. 10).” Additionally, these learner constructions are influenced by various interconnected mechanisms, such as theoretical perspectives, educational policies, and informing disciplines. Kibler and Valdes (Kibler & Valdés, 2016) explore the conceptualization of language learners through the lens of socioinstitutional mechanisms and examine the resulting consequences. The key concepts of their theory involve understanding how societal and institutional factors influence the perception and experiences of language learners.

However, Kibler and Valdes (2016) recognize the complexity of language teaching programs as their design and implementation form a multifaceted system involving various elements. This system, they argue (p. 97), “includes conceptualizations of language, theories related to second language (L2) acquisition/development, language policies (such as graduation unit/credit requirements), instructional traditions, language ideologies, teaching materials, instructor competencies, and mandated assessments (Kibler & Valdés, 2016, pp. 97–98).” Due to these requirements and challenges, school administrators, staff members, curriculum developers, and teachers find themselves operating withing a framework of assumptions and expectations in order to enhance institutional efficiency. Despite their awareness that these assumptions and expectations present challenges, the influence of these elements inevitably shapes their operational approach.

**School Accountability**

In addition to the curricularization, school accountability movement has also contributed to academic disparities among the English language learners in U.S. schools. School accountability refers to “the process of evaluating school performance on the basis of student performance measures” (Figlio & Loeb, 2011, p. 383). When school accountability is discussed, often times standardized testing, performance metrics, and consequences for underperforming institutions are brought to the fore. States often set benchmarks that public and state accredited private schools must meet to demonstrate their institutional competence. As such, schools are assessed based on measurable metrics such as graduation rates, attendance rates, and proficiency levels in core subject like math, reading, and social studies (Barrow & Rouse, 2008). Conversely. School that fail to meet academic standards may face consequences such as state interventions or loss of funding.

Literature revealed a complex relationship between accountability, inequality, and achievement. Education policies aimed at holding schools and teachers accountable (Turkan & Buzick, 2016) for students' academic progress, albeit adopted and enacted with progressive and reformative intentions, have produced unintended consequences, particularly how they influenced educational inequality and student achievement across multiple measures. Moreover, policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the subsequent Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) aimed to address educational disparities by holding schools accountable for student performance through high-stakes standardized testing, led to unintended consequences such as narrowing the curriculum and fostering a "teach to the test" mentality (Jennings & Lauen, 2016, p. 221). This shift in instructional practices may have influenced the measured improvements in test scores while potentially neglecting broader aspects of student development, especially with English Language Learners.

Further research highlights the pervasive influence of accountability pressure on educational institutions. With the implementation of policies such as NCLB and ESSA, schools are subjected to rigorous standards and assessments. Lauen and Gaddis (2016) argue that this pressure creates a challenging environment where schools are forced to navigate the delicate balance between meeting academic benchmarks and addressing the diverse needs of their student populations (Lauen & Gaddis, 2016).

In a high-stakes accountability environment, including my own context at LLC, schools might focus their efforts on supporting students who are on the cusp of meeting proficiency standards while potentially neglecting those who are further behind or already exceeding expectations. This is often due to the strategic allocation of resources to maximize outcomes withing the constraints imposed by accountability measures. This triage approach reflects the difficult choices educators face when attempting to boost overall academic performance while adhering to externally imposed standards. This perspective underscores the influence and control wielded by accreditation, illustrating how the procedure enforces standardized methods that alter and disregard prevailing epistemic and epistemological structures, hindering alterations while necessitating adaptations (Romanowski, 2020). Alternatively, Reback at al (2014) argue that the prevailing perspective on how educators react to accountability requirements and incentives suggests that without such systems in place, schools could make resource allocation decisions based on their preferences regarding the importance of enhancing various skills in students and aiding different student groups (ELs) in making progress (Reback et al., 2014, p. 3).

To further drive this point, Holcombe at al (2013) found that the testing encountered during the implementation of No Child Left Behind has revealed a lack of alignment between the tests and state standards and that state tests have often predictably focused on a limited set of standards (Holcombe et al., 2013). Lauen and Gaddis refer to this approach as "educational triage (Lauen & Gaddis, 2016, p. 127)." Research recognizes that the educational reforms have largely been influenced over the past decade by the growing difficulties and limitations posed by recent public management reforms. These reforms are marked by an emphasis on standardized agendas and centralized accountability systems (Cranston, 2013). As such, the focus on narrowly defined improvements in student learning has become the guiding principle for school and instructional leaders, who, in turn, under such systemic regulations, experience heightened levels of accountability which directly impacts the overall standing of the language learners.

**School Compliance (funding)**

The final factor I will review that contributes to EL’s achievement is school funding. School compliance and funding are critical aspects of educational management in any U.S. schools. Schools in U.S. are primarily funded through local property taxes or through state voucher programs (Austin, 2015; Barrow & Rouse, 2008; DeAngelis, 2020; DeAngelis et al., 2021), thus often leading to significant disparities in per-student spending between affluent and lower-income communities. This funding model often leaves schools in lower-income areas and voucher-bound schools struggling to afford qualified teachers, updated materials, and enrichment programs (Maruyama, 2003). As a result, charter, private, and parochial schools face significant challenges in providing ELL and Special Education services due to budget constraints and staffing difficulties such as larger class sizes, outdated textbooks, and limited educational and extracurricular opportunities for minority and ELL students. In my own professional context, funding is the central concept of school compliance as the results of standardized assessments categorically and unequivocally determine the budget allocation in the following school year, especially in private schools which choose to participate in Voucher Programs (Austin, 2015).

Skinner and Riddle (2019) explore the intricacies of funding public education in the United States, focusing on the roles of state and local governments. "Local control" in educational funding, the authors argue, although it empowers communities to influence their schools' financial support, it also sustains inequalities. According to their study, wealthier areas typically generate more revenue via property taxes than economically disadvantaged ones, resulting in a funding disparity that directly affects the educational quality across different regions (Skinner & Riddle, 2019).

DeAngelis et al., (2021) examine the concept of "regulatory costs" (2021, p. 417) associated with private schools participating in voucher programs. The authors contend that private schools weigh the benefits of voucher funding against the potential drawbacks of increased government oversight and compliance requirements such as accreditation requirements, curriculum standards, teacher certification mandates, and other regulatory measures that contribute to compliance costs (DeAngelis, 2020; DeAngelis et al., 2021, p. 420). While it is anticipated that school voucher programs will create greater competition among schools to address the varied needs of students, including English Learners (ELs), a significant drawback is that eligibility is contingent upon adherence to state standards and requirements for standardized assessments.

Many ELLs come from low-income households which can limit their access to educational resources, such as tutoring, extracurricular activities, and technology. Underfunded schools that often lack the necessary resources to support ELLs effectively are especially impacted by the drawbacks of fiscal budgeting. This will limit the school’s ability to hire qualified bilingual educators, adequate instructional materials and programs tailored to the needs of ELLs.

**Conclusion**

Academic disparity among ELLs in U.S. schools is a well-documented social phenomenon and has been looked at from many different angles. There are several contributing factors to academic disparity that emphasize the relationship between academic disparity and challenges schools face due to funding, ELL friendly content development, accountability, assessment-based compliance, and recruiting and retaining effective teachers. As such, English language learners’ language acquisition journey would require a comprehensive pedagogical approach that would require better understanding the effects of these factors. Geneva Gay articulated these factors in five essential elements of creating an ELL friendly educational environment through 1) developing a cultural diversity knowledge base to increase teachers’ efficacy, 2) culturally relevant content development to ensure inclusion of diverse perspectives, voices, and experiences, 3) providing caring and supporting learning environments for diverse demographics by the administrative and instructional leadership, 4) effective cross-cultural communications to efficiently communicate with language learners, and 5) fostering cultural congruency in teaching by offering professional developments to teachers to better align their pedagogical methodologies with the cultural preferences of students (Abdalla & Moussa, 2024).

In conclusion, the academic disparities faced by ELLs are truly multi-faceted and require a concerted effort from policymakers, school districts, educational leaders, educators, and communities to ensure that they receive the educational support they need to succeed.

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