Proposed Empirical Study: Academic Disparity among English Language Learners

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**Introduction and the Problem of Practice**

Academic disparity among English Language Learner (ELL) students has been highly researched and targeted by several encouraging educational reform policies and innovative approaches over the past few decades, yet recent studies continue to reveal a significant academic disparity between the ELLs and their English-speaking counterparts (Carnoy and García, n.d.; Carnoy, Rosa, and Simões, 2022). The rise of ELL population in U.S. K-12 has been steadily increasing over the last few decades.

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 and Rutkowski, 2016, 264; Carnoy, Rosa, and Simões, 2022). During the process of language acquisition, ELLs face dual challenges such as acquiring the English language while also meeting the need to master content in other subjects while also adapting to new social and cultural norms. English learners, due to limited language proficiency, are reported to be underperforming academically (Rosen et al. 2018; Tong et al. 2014) either domestically and transnationally (Mang 2021; “PISA 2022 U.S. Results,” n.d.).

Despite the attempts aimed at remediating these persistent disparities, ELLs continue to experience disparate academic outcomes and consistently scoring lower on standardized tests across all grade levels (Ardasheva, Tretter, and Kinny, 2012) and registering lower overall graduation rates. In typical classrooms, ELLs’ academic and linguistic development is not fully supported, in part due to fragmented educational support and inconsistent instructional strategies. Empirical studies suggest that ELLs usually perform at lower academic levels compared to non-ELLs (Callahan & Gándara, 2014; Umansky, Valentino, and Reardon, n.d.). Umansky and Reardon (2014) indicate that long-term ELL students tend to experience academic stagnation due to lack of structured and cohered instructional systems.

ELLs I encounter in my POP context, Legacy Learning Center (“Legacy News,” n.d.), had previously matriculated in public school system, albeit for a short periods of time, where they were 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 and Fix, 2000) in each grade, and even were placed in “sink or swim immersion” (Chang, 2015; Wortham et al., 2001) instructional settings.

These ELL students usually have limited English language proficiency (Molloy Elreda et al., 2022), poor academic records, and are behind in their mastery level of STEM subjects. I've discovered substantial empirical proof indicating that my identified issue, POP, is widely acknowledged and constitutes a genuine concern. At present, state legislators responsible for adopting academic standards, as well as district and school administrators, instructional leaders (Ndura, 2004), and content developers, all recognize the existence of this problem. Additionally, schools encounter difficulties in creating content that is both socially and culturally pertinent (conscious) (Ladson-Billings 2021; Menken and Solorza 2015; Valdes 2004), aligns with state standards, and is tailored for language learners with bilingual or even multilingual socio-cultural backgrounds. To better examine and understand the academic disparity, the connection between institutional perspectives and the components that are causing it must be researched and studied.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

The literature review synthesis consistently showcased that the academic disparities experienced by English Language Learners are deeply systemic and multifaceted. Within this exploration process, several theoretical frameworks, best poised to explore and understand the academic disparity, have been considered. The purpose is to offer a critical foundation for understanding *why* these disparities persist. To more directly connect these theories to outcomes, I considered these frameworks to identify and explain how systemic shortcomings in policy and school organization disproportionately affect ELLs. Menken & Solorza (2014) found that the emphasis on English-only accountability policies led schools to undermine bilingual education programs. This pattern contradicts research supporting the benefits of dual language models (Thomas & Collier, 2002) and reflects how the existing policies often fall short of supporting equitable educational structures for all students demographics.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), contends that educational structures and accountability policies are not race-neutral but instead reproduce existing inequities by favoring dominant cultural norms (Ladson-Billings, 2020). Additionally, Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) explains how multiple layers of influence, such as SES, school leadership, state policies, and broader sociopolitical forces, interact to either hinder or support ELL academic success. The "microsystem" of the classroom and the "macrosystem" of federal education policy both contribute to disparities, especially in the absence of adequate systemic support for bilingual and multicultural student population.

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| Table 1  Summary of Theoretical Frameworks | | | |
| Theoretical  Framework | Explains | Contribution to Understanding Curricularization | Link to Academic Disparity |
| Critical Race Theory | Structural racism | Whose knowledge is privileged in curriculum | Exposes systemic inequity |
| Sociocultural Theory | Social learning | Emphasizes interaction, scaffolding | Aligns instruction with learner needs |
| Funds of Knowledge | Cultural assets | Values home/community knowledge | Builds engagement & academic relevance |
| Ecological Systems Theory | Layered environments (micro to macro) | Highlights the multiple, interconnected systems shaping education | Shows how broader societal forces impact ELL achievement |

The Vygotkian Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978; Tudge & Winterhoff, 2010), on the other hand, poised as a great intersection of social interaction and cultural context in learning, reiterates how these two elements serve as essential assets in ELLs’ learning journeys. Along these lines, the Funds of Knowledge framework (Moll et al. 2005) postulates that learning is socially mediated and underscores the importance of recognizing and integrating the rich cultural and linguistic experience that ELLs bring to their education.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my proposed study is to identify the institutional and instructional factors that are contributing to academic disparity among the English Language Learners. Literature and research indicate that the academic trajectories of English Language Learners (ELLs) in U.S. schools are deeply shaped by systemic forces, particularly school leadership, teacher efficacy, accountability structures, and socioeconomic status (SES). Effective school leadership is critical but often falls short due to a lack of culturally responsive practices, which undermines ELLs’ linguistic and cultural identities (Menken and Solorza, 2015; Sebastian et al. 2019). Similarly, teacher efficacy is hampered by insufficient preparation in second language acquisition and culturally responsive pedagogy, weakening instructional quality for ELLs (Haworth, McGee, and MacIntyre, 2015; Chen 2019). High-stakes accountability systems exacerbate these issues by prioritizing English proficiency over holistic learning, narrowing curricula, and ignoring the long-term nature of language development (Menken 2010; Jennings and Lauen, 2016; Solorzano and Yosso, 2001). SES compounds these challenges, as low-income ELLs often lack access to enriching academic environments, thus bearing a double burden of linguistic and economic disadvantage (Snellman et al. 2015; Blair and Raver, 2012). Finally, accountability-driven funding and resource allocation practices further institutionalize inequity by favoring compliance over responsiveness to students’ diverse needs (Figlio and Loeb, 2011; DeAngelis, Burke, and Wolf, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2020). A transformative shift toward linguistically and culturally responsive leadership, teacher preparation, assessment, and policy is vital to address these structural disparities.

**Research Questions**

I’ve composed the following potential research questions to help guide my proposed empirical research study:

1. In what ways does language curricularization contribute to the classification and categorization of ELLs, and how does this process impact their academic trajectories?
2. What are the unintended consequences of accreditation-driven accountability measures on instructional practices, particularly regarding the balance between compliance and fostering meaningful learning experiences?
3. What is the relationship between the standardization of educational practices under accreditation and state accountability policies and teacher autonomy, instructional innovation, and student learning outcomes?

**Operationalization of Constructs**

The constructs of interest in my proposed research along with operational definitions and potential indicators are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Summary of Constructs of Interest

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| Construct | Operational Definition | Indicator | Citation(s) |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Assessment-based accountability policies | State or national tests used to evaluate and hold schools, educators, and students accountable for academic performance and outcomes | Adequate Yearly Progress (IDOE) | (Shin 2022) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Language Curricularization | Standardized content development and assessment practices aimed at achieving specific and measurable language outcomes | Survey – Participatory Action Research (PAR)  Interview  Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale | (Sosnowski 2021) |
| School accountability | The process of evaluating school performance on the basis of student performance measures | AYP, ESSA | (Portz and Beauchamp 2022; Shin 2022) |
| School compliance and funding | Educational Institution’s adherence to legal, regulatory, or policy standards mandated at state or federal level | Survey  Interview | (DeAngelis, Burke, and Wolf 2021) |

**Description of Participant Population**

The population for my proposed study comprises the Legacy Learning Center staff and faculty. As a former principal and a counselor at LLC, both the administrative and instructional staff at LLC are former colleagues and fellow parents.

**Population Description**

The population consists of 20 male and female adult teachers and administrators, most of whom are either 1st or 2nd generation immigrants. After getting an approval from the school principal and the participants’ consent, I’ve carefully selected teachers from all grade levels and a select of subject area teachers and 2 administrative staff members. I’ve also expressed my intention to interview the school principal. He agreed to participate in my research study either during the summer recess or early at the beginning of the new school year around August 2025. In Table 3, there is a breakdown of the population demographics of this proposed study.

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| Table 3 | | |
| Distribution of Participants by Role and Gender | | |
| Role | Gender | Count |
| KG Teachers | Female | 2 |
| Elementary/Classroom Teachers | Male | 1 |
| Elementary/Classroom Teachers | Female | 5 |
| Science Teachers | Female | 1 |
| Science Teachers | Male | 1 |
| Math/Algebra Teachers | Female | 1 |
| Math/Algebra Teachers | Male | 1 |
| English Teachers | Female | 2 |
| Social Sciences Teachers | Female | 1 |
| Social Sciences Teachers | Male | 1 |
| World Languages Teachers (Arabic and French) | Female | 2 |
| Office Administrators | Female | 1 |
| Office Administrators | Male | 1 |

**Appropriateness of the Population**

Legacy Learning Center is a state-accredited private school located in downtown Indianapolis, Indiana. Serving as a K-12 institution, it accommodates over 240 students, the majority of whom are immigrants with multilingual and multicultural backgrounds. Students from elementary to high school levels are classified as English Language Learners until they meet the World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) benchmarks. The school was established in 2015, during which I held the position of Principal for the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 academic years. Subsequently, I transitioned into the role of volunteer academic advisor. Legacy Learning Center also serves as the professional context for my Place of Practice (POP).

Moreover, the majority of teachers and administrators are also immigrants, whether they were born in the U.S., moved at a young age, or immigrated more recently. This makes them a highly suitable population for my proposed research.

**Access to Population**

As an immigrant, a former school employee, and a current volunteer academic consultant, I have a unique access to the population. I also attend the Friday congregational prayers and am acquainted with the teachers, students, and the school administrators, who are all my ex-colleagues. I don’t foresee any potential barriers or blockers to conducting my study at LLC by the time I engage in my scholarship of application, however, the principal's involvement remains uncertain due to his unpredictable schedule at this time.

**Implications of the Population Size**

The primary goal of this study is to gain a deeper insight into the factors contributing to academic disparities among ELLs. This research specifically focuses on a U.S.-based population, with a carefully considered relatively smaller sample size. To thoroughly examine all aspects of the study, I have determined that a mixed-methods approach is the most appropriate for conducting the needs assessment as indicated in summary of constructs of interest.

**Data Collection and Data Analysis**

To effectively examine the influence of assessment-based accountability policies, I intend to rely on state or national performance data such as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports from the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE). These metrics are publicly available and provide quantitative evidence of how schools perform in meeting state-determined benchmarks under accountability policies. Analyzing these metrics helps me capture the broader impacts of standardized testing systems on school performance and identify trends across demographic groups, school types, or instructional models.

For examining the language curricularization, using qualitative and mixed-methods tools is perhaps more befitting, especially with surveys grounded in Participatory Action Research (PAR) and semi-structured interviews with educators, can reveal how language policies are enacted in the classroom. These can also provide insight into how curricular decisions are influenced by policy mandates and how they carry impact on English Language Learners (ELLs) as well.

For measuring school accountability, I’ve switched from looking at WIDA and iLearn results to both AYP data and metrics outlined in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) framework as they are deemed as great sources of valid and policy-aligned indicators. Both AYP and ESSA measure school progress and are used by state education departments to rate school effectiveness. Portz and Beauchamp (2022) as well as Shin (2022) note the importance of using standardized performance data not only to assess outcomes but also to explore their correlation with teacher performance, resource allocation, and student subgroup achievement.

Next, I will be relying on structured surveys and interviews for examining the relationship of school compliance and funding and school leaders and administrative staff. These instruments can assess how well schools understand and implement funding and compliance requirements. As demonstrated by DeAngelis et al., (2021), triangulating survey and interview data can offer detailed insights into how compliance pressures and fiscal accountability can have impact on instructional priorities, resource distribution, and institutional decision-making.

**Summary of Data Analysis Procedures and Tools**

For data analysis portion of the research, I’ll be employing mixed-method data analysis tools and procedures. Assessment-based accountability policies and school performance studies largely rely on quantitative methodologies. As such using tools such as SPSS, R, and Excel to analyze standardized test data and metrics like Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) are most appropriate. These tools are useful in performing regression analyses, track trends, and in assessing policy impacts on educational outcomes. For the school accountability portion of the research, advanced techniques like hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to handle nested data structures can be useful. Then the use of visualization tools like Tableau and Power BI can help me with presenting performance data in accessible formats for Legacy stakeholders. The use of quantitative approaches is perhaps more applicable as they can help to evaluate the effectiveness of accountability frameworks like ESSA and provide tangible data points of school performance and policy efficacy.

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| Table 4 – Summary of Data Analysis Procedures and Tools | | | | |
| Construct | Data Type | Analysis Tools | Purpose / Why These Tools? | Key References |
| Assessment-Based Accountability Policies | Quantitative (e.g., AYP, test scores) | SPSS, R, Excel; Regression (linear/logistic); Time-series/trend analysis | Handle large datasets; control for covariates; reveal student outcome patterns linked to accountability pressures | Shin (2022) |
| Language Curricularization | Mixed Methods (Interviews + Surveys) | NVivo/ATLAS.ti (qualitative); SPSS/R (quantitative); Mixed methods frameworks | Enables deep thematic coding and quantitative validation; supports Participatory Action Research and teacher efficacy measurement | Sosnowski (2021) |
| School Accountability | Quantitative (AYP, ESSA metrics) | SPSS, R, Stata; Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM); Tableau, Power BI | Supports analysis of nested data (students in schools); visualizes multi-level performance data for policy interpretation | Portz & Beauchamp (2022) |
| School Compliance and Funding | Qualitative (Interviews), Quantitative (Surveys) | NVivo/manual coding; SPSS/Excel (Likert-scale analysis); Content analysis | Captures institutional behaviors and perceptions; combines qualitative insights with basic statistical validation of survey responses | DeAngelis et al., (2021) |

On the other hand, language curricularization and school compliance studies are best studies with qualitative and mixed-methods approaches. Using these approaches will help gain deeper insight into how policy shapes classroom practice and institutional behavior. For data analysis part, tools like NVivo and ATLAS.ti can be of use. They support coding and thematic analysis of interview data, and the survey results are statistically validated using SPSS and R. The purpose of my choice towards leaning to mixed-methods designs, including triangulation and joint displays, is because of how effective they can be in participatory action research (PAR) contexts, especially where stakeholder perspectives are central and play a pivotal role. Lastly, qualitative interviews can help me with analyzing the relationship between compliance and funding and the ways schools understand and implement funding and compliance mandates,

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