

COMMENTARY

The Positive Peer Effects of Classroom Diversity

English Language Learner Classmates and Socio-Emotional Skills in Early Elementary School

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PUBLISHED: September 23, 2014

As one critical turning point in recent years, many state policies, including [Proposition 227](#) in California, have mandated or induced districts and schools to educate [English Language Learner](#) (ELL) students with their non-ELL peers to the maximum extent possible in English-speaking general education classrooms. The proportion of ELL students continues to grow, as does the proportion of ELL students receiving most (if not all) of their instruction in English from within the general education classroom. Therefore, an increasing number of students, both with and without ELL needs, may be affected by the ever-changing context of the general education classroom.

So far, the research has focused predominantly on the outcomes of *ELL students* affected by being in these general education classrooms. That said, schooling policy implications cannot be properly drawn without knowing the effects on *all* students in that classroom. Only one prior study has focused on how ELL students might influence the academic achievement of their non-ELL classmates. No prior study, however, has considered the influence that ELL students might have on classmates' social development. As such, [this study](#) fills an important gap as to how exactly ELL students in general education classrooms might affect non-ELL classmates in a previously-unexplored way.

Relying on a large-scale dataset of kindergarten and first grade students, I evaluated the relationship between the number of ELL classmates and 5 well-established social developmental scales of non-ELL students in that same classroom. The scales included two problem behavior scales and three social skills scales. The dataset contained information about children as well as measures pertaining to their families, classroom settings, teachers, and schools. Focusing on kindergarten and first grade was intentional: both years are established as critical time periods for social development, with implications for educational and life-long success.

The results of my study indicated a significant, favorable relationship between having ELL classmates and social development. For non-ELL students, having a higher number of ELL classmates was linked to fewer problem behaviors and greater social skills. The full version of my study provides insight into why these findings might have arisen. Additionally, I found some evidence that other aspects of the classroom context matter as well. While teacher race, gender, and years of experience did not change the results, formal teacher training in [English as a Second Language](#) (ESL) did. The number of courses that a teacher had taken in ESL was positively related to an even stronger relationship between the number of ELL classmates and the social developmental scales for non-ELL students in the same classroom.

These findings are important for California. With an increasing number of ELL students entering California's school systems, combined with policies that either mandate or induce the placement of ELL students into general education classrooms, the findings from my study can guide school practices to more efficiently address how to improve the classroom experience for all

students in our state. Knowing which significant classroom factors elicit positive outcomes can support more efficient schooling practices going forward. Doing so is especially pertinent for social development, given the lifelong implications that such skills have on school success.

The [*full study*](#) can be found in Michael A. Gottfried, *The Positive Peer Effects of Classroom Diversity: Exploring the Relationship between English Language Learner Classmates and Socioemotional Skills in Early Elementary School*, *The Elementary School Journal*, Vol. 115, No. 1 (September 2014), pp. 22-48.

Suggested citation

Gottfried, M. (2014, September). *The positive peer effects of classroom diversity: English language learner classmates and socio-emotional skills in early elementary school* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/positive-peer-effects-classroom-diversity>



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