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THE TRANSITION INTO KINDERGARTEN FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract

The transition into kindergarten often serves as the basis for long-term disparities in educational attainment because initially small differences in early learning widen throughout the K-12 educational system. Given the long-standing disparities in their academic achievement related to being of low socioeconomic status and a racial/ethnic minority, the large and growing population of English language learners constitutes an important population in which to study the transition into formal schooling. The purpose of this book chapter is to describe the vulnerabilities faced by English language learners during this transitional period and the implications of this transition for their short- and long-term educational success. Throughout this chapter, we highlight how this transition into kindergarten may be amenable to policy intervention, its role in inequality, and how researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners can capitalize on the many strengths of these children and their families to facilitate a successful transition to school.

The Transition into Kindergarten for English Language Learners

Although many children make a seamless transition into kindergarten, it is a period of vulnerability for many, who must learn to navigate a new institutional system, form and maintain new relationships with adults and peers, and develop new academic skills (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). This vulnerability is heightened when children have not had significant exposure to early childhood education prior to entering the K-12 system, their families' disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances disrupt their opportunities to learn in and out of the home, and their parents lack familiarity with and status in the U.S. educational system. In such situations, a smooth transition into kindergarten becomes less likely, which is notable given that even initially small differences in early learning at the start of formal schooling tend to widen across the educational career. The transition into kindergarten, therefore, is a fundamental component to long-term disparities in educational attainment (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2014).

This chapter focuses on English language learners as one segment of the increasingly diverse U.S. population that may be vulnerable during the transition into kindergarten. Certainly, disparities between English language learners—large numbers of whom come from immigrant backgrounds—and their fellow students in academic achievement and educational attainment are well-documented, but the connection between those population-level disparities and the transition into kindergarten needs to be better understood (Crosnoe, 2005; Reardon & Galindo, 2009; The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). After all, English language learners are less likely to attend early childhood education programs than other U.S. children in the years prior to kindergarten, their families have high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, and their parents often have trouble communicating with English-speaking parallels and may have little experience with the U.S. educational system (Crosnoe, 2013).

Consequently, what might be a challenging academic period for children in general may be particularly challenging for them, especially in the absence of sufficient supports and services (Crosnoe, Bonazzo, & Wu, 2015; Reardon & Galindo, 2009).

What can be done to reduce or counteract this potential vulnerability among English language learners to break the cycle of cumulative disadvantage before it gains strength? To address this question, this chapter delves into the kindergarten experiences of English language learners in the U.S. during a time of demographic change, the relations between their families and schools, the implications of these kindergarten experiences and family-school relations for their educational success, and the policy and intervention efforts to serve English language learners and their parents in order to shed light on possible answers to this question.

The Transition into Kindergarten

According to life course theory, a transition is a change in status, stage, or setting that can result in a potential change (or disruption) in children's experiences and developmental trajectories (George, 1993). More specifically, transitions represent critical points of change in long-term development or experiential pathways, either as a time of opportunity for people to change course in positive ways or a time of vulnerability when people may be forced off course or fall behind in negative ways (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). The start of kindergarten has been viewed as a transition point with potential to create problems for children, especially certain groups of children already facing academic risks. Indeed, theoretical perspectives, like contextual systems (Pianta & Walsh, 1996), have been formulated to explain this phenomenon. This specific transition—one of many that children will make in their educational careers—represents both a physical change, in that many children move to a new school setting, and a social psychological change, in that children are exposed to new sets of norms and challenges in

kindergarten (Crosnoe & Benner, 2015). Like any transition, a school transition—including the transition to kindergarten—is both fluid and dynamic, with children’s prior experiences shaping how the transition unfolds, which in turn, shapes children’s future home and school experiences.

This transition to school has also been found to magnify the existing disparities in children’s early skills and behaviors. That is, children from different backgrounds enter school with wide-ranging differences in personal (e.g., English proficiency), experiential (e.g., preschool enrollment), and social psychological factors (e.g., parent-child relationships) that translate into small differences in early learning upon kindergarten entry (Entwisle & Alexander, 1988). These initially small differences in children’s early learning and development then affect teacher and peer expectations, class assignments, and children’s own self-evaluations and interactions with their families in ways that then shape future progress and performance. In other words, the early demonstration of skills (or lack thereof) affects educational investments in and treatment of children in an incremental way that eventually accumulates into divergent trajectories through elementary and secondary school—what starts out small is much bigger by the end (Reardon, 2011; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005). This role of the transition into kindergarten in long-term educational outcomes is precisely why the focus of human capital intervention is increasingly turning to the years before and after this transition point.

Two additional theories help to explain why the transition into school is so important and how to invest in children—including English language learners—early on to reduce the effects this transition has in the long-term disparities in educational attainment. First, the family investment model posits that families with greater socioeconomic resources can invest more in their children. As an illustrative example of this theoretical framework, there has been a growing consensus within the social sciences that families with more money can spend some of those

extra resources on higher quality child care, books, and other educational activities (Crosnoe et al., 2016; Yeung Linver, & Brooks-Gunn., 2002), each of which have ramifications for children's early learning and development (Duncan, Morris, & Rodrigues, 2011). At the same time, however, we also know that the parents of English language learners are more likely to be living in poverty as compared with the parents of monolinguals, and, thus are less likely to experience each of these activities (Crosnoe, 2013).

Second, family stress theory argues that the stress of financial hardships can result in less effective parenting (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994). Indeed, the stress of raising a family with few socioeconomic resources has been found to bring about feelings of depression and increasing family dysfunction, including in parents' relationships with their children, which in turn, has short- and long-term implications for children's educational careers (Gershoff et al., 2007; Yeung et al., 2002). Again, because the parents of English language learners are more likely to be living in poverty as compared with the parents of monolinguals, and because most are ethnic minorities who likely face the stress of ethnic discrimination and segregation, they are more likely to experience higher levels of emotional distress and dysfunction (Flores, Tschann, Dimas, Bachen, Pasch, de Groat, 2008; Raver et al., 2007). When taken together, these developmental and educational theories regarding the transmission of inequality point to the importance of the school transition and underscore the accumulating nature of inequality, which if not addressed early on, is likely to persist throughout the life course.

Who are English Language Learners?

Although there is no single definition of English language learners, a common usage is that they are children whose native language is not English but who are learning English as a second language (also referred to as linguistic minorities, non-native speakers, emergent

bilinguals, and dual language learners). These children represent an important and growing segment of the U.S. population. According to the Department of Education (2016), English language learners represent the fastest growing segment of the student body of the U.S. educational system. In the 2013-2014 school year alone, for example, over 4.5 million children in the K-12 system, or one out of every ten students, was classified as learning English as a second language. As a point of comparison, between 1997-1998 and 2007-2008, the population of English language learners grew by approximately 53%, which far surpasses the 8% growth rate of the general student population in the U.S. (Batalova & McHugh, 2010). In fact, many expect continued growth of this population in the decades to come, such that, by 2030, English language learners will account for roughly 40% of students in the U.S. educational system (Thomas & Collier, 2002). This demographic transition has had (and will continue to have) far-reaching implications for domestic policy and practice, and it has resulted in increased interest in the school experiences of this population of children.

Of course, this large and growing population is internally diverse—linguistically, culturally, and socially. English language learners demonstrate varying degrees of English language proficiency and speak more than 400 different languages at home (Ruiz-Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015). Some of the most widely spoken foreign languages in the United States include Spanish, followed by Chinese, Vietnamese, French, and Arabic (Ruiz-Soto et al., 2015). Relatedly, estimates from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Cohort of 2010-2011 (ECLS-K: 2011; Tourangeau et al., 2014), a national sample of U.S. children who entered kindergarten in the fall of 2010, reveals that roughly half of Hispanic (48%) and Asian (54%) American children entering kindergarten come from a non-English speaking home. Notwithstanding the diversity among English language learners, Spanish remains the most

dominant foreign language spoken in the U.S., with seven out of every ten English language learners coming from a household that speaks Spanish (Ruiz-Soto et al., 2015).

There is also an extensive body of literature documenting that English language learners experience both a disproportionate amount of socioeconomic disadvantages as compared with the general population and a cultural and linguistic mismatch between their home and school systems, which together, result in a more difficult transition to kindergarten (Capps Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herantoro, 2005). To begin, both English language learners and their parents often lack proficiency in the English language, which places them at academic risk during the transition to school. For children, this lack of English proficiency means that they enter kindergarten with lower English language skills as compared with their monolingual English-speaking classmates, a gap that persists well into their educational careers (Halle, Hair, Wandner, McNamara, & Chien, 2012). It is these very disparities that have spurred debates regarding the education of English language learners with a growing focus on whether dual language learning should be supported during the transition to school, even though there is evidence to suggest that learning English at the expense of children's first language may result in fewer benefits for children in the long-term (The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that the parents of English language learners are often immigrants, which means that they have less knowledge about the inner workings of the U.S. educational system than many other parents—even those of the same socioeconomic status—and are less familiar with the written and unwritten rules of what is expected of them as their children's first and most enduring teachers (Crosnoe, Ansari, Purtell, & Wu, 2016; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Beyond these socio-linguistic and cultural differences, children who are learning English

as a second language are also more likely than other children to come from low-income families and communities. As a result, their parents are less likely to have a postsecondary education, which is important because mothers' educational histories shape children's early experiences and are predictive of school performance and economic mobility (Davis-Kean, 2005). Moreover, their parents, on average, are engaged in less cognitively enriched parenting, such as shared book-readings and school involvement (Crosnoe et al., 2016). They themselves are also less likely to attend preschool or some other form of early childhood education during the years before kindergarten, which is notable given the promising potential these programs have in narrowing the existing disparities in children's early academic achievement (Capps et al., 2005; Crosnoe, 2007).

To be sure, the story of English language learners is not solely about risk and disadvantage. They, their parents, and their communities have some key strengths. For example, English language learners tend to exhibit stronger socio-emotional and behavioral skills than their peers, and these children enter school with more emotional maturity in their classroom behaviors as compared with their monolingual classmates (Crosnoe, 2006; De Feyter & Winsler, 2009). Given a large number of English language learners are also the children of immigrants, these socio-emotional strengths could reflect the types of families who decide to come to the United States in the first place. They could also point to something about the immigration experience itself that results in children with a stronger social-behavioral skillset, such as overcoming challenges and building strong social networks (De Feyter & Winsler, 2009). An equally plausible explanation is that the parents of English language learners have different values and place emphasis on different skills and behaviors as compared with the parents of monolingual children (Fuller & Garcia-Coll, 2010). Either way, these strengths are notable

because teachers often consider children's social-behavioral skills to be one of the greatest assets during the early school years (Arnold, McWilliams, & Arnold, 1998). For example, children who hit, push, or are verbally aggressive toward other children make it harder for teachers to be emotionally supportive in the classroom, and instead, requires that teachers spend more time in behavioral management, especially in classrooms with a high concentration of problem behaviors (Arnold et al., 1998; Yudron, Jones, & Raver, 2014). Unfortunately, however, given the rise in accountability standards in the educational system with regards to children's academic achievement, including in kindergarten (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016), these social-behavioral strengths that English language learners demonstrate are often not recognized enough during the transition to school.

As for the parents of English language learners, they tend to be quite emotionally invested in their children's future success and highly motivated to help them succeed. Despite these strong emotional ties, the socialization goals and parenting practices of these parents are quite different from those of monolingual White parents, which is largely attributed to the differences in cultural heritage (Fuller & Garcia-Coll, 2010). For example, Latino parents often try to foster good manners and respect for adults in their children, resulting in the aforementioned social-behavioral strengths during the transition to school, whereas monolingual families are often more academically focused. Even as the parents of English language learners adapt to a new culture in the U.S., they face countless obstacles to being involved in their children's education in the ways that are rewarded by the school system. Moreover, even when these families try to get involved in their children's education, school personnel are less likely to engage with them and often distance themselves, blaming parents for their children's struggles (Adair, 2014). In fact, the parents of English language learners have been found to derive fewer

benefits from their participation in their children's schools (Adair & Tobin, 2007; Crosnoe et al., 2015) potentially because these partnerships are often unidirectional and shallow (e.g., teachers giving instructions to parents without fully incorporating their views or capitalizing on their motivations and support; Crosnoe & Ansari, 2016). That is, although the parents of English language learners often view themselves as integral to their children's education, due to obstacles and cultural mismatches, teachers often view these parents in a more passive light. These mismatches stem from the fact that few early childhood teachers are fluent in more than one language and even fewer are certified in bilingual education (National Academies of Sciences, 2017). Ultimately, even when the parents of English language learners are (or want to be) involved in their children's education, their involvement takes on different forms than the parents of monolingual children and, therefore, they did not reap the maximum benefit from that involvement (for their children or themselves).

Nonetheless, when taken as a whole, there is clear converging evidence to suggest that English language learners often do not have access to the early experiences that result in a more successful transition to kindergarten, which is critical because what happens during this period sets the stage for children's long-term educational success (Ansari et al., 2017; Halle et al., 2012; Reardon & Galindo, 2009). Moreover, the strengths and positive experiences that these children and their families do demonstrate are often not viewed as strengths by the American educational system and, thus, are often written off by school personnel.

English Language Learners' Transitions to Kindergarten: An Example from National Data

Given evidence of the role of the entry-level skills in long-term educational trajectories and disparities, any differences in children's early learning as a function of their home language are noteworthy and require closer inspection. To help illustrate these disparities, we use data

from the aforementioned ECLS-K Class of 2010-2011, which contains roughly 2,180 English language learners in its nationally representative sample, of whom 74% are Latino/a, 16% are Asian-origin, 6% are White, and 4% are Black. Although the ECLS-K does not have the depth of many community-based studies of dual language learners (e.g., Chang et al., 2007; Farver Lonigan, & Eppe, 2009; White & Greenfield, 2017) it provides a broad population perspective useful for giving a general picture of the experiences of this group of children and for identifying patterns that need to be unpacked.

From our analyses, we present both unadjusted and adjusted differences in the early learning and development of approximately 14,050 kindergartners in the sample. One set of models illustrates the raw differences in English language learners' and non-English language learners' academic and social-behavioral skills at kindergarten entry in 2010; that is, we do *not* control for other indicators of families' socioeconomic status (i.e., unadjusted models). In doing so, we illustrate how well English language learners are doing as compared with their monolingual peers right after the transition to kindergarten. The second set of models adjust for mothers' educational histories as a means of demonstrating how much of these differences in kindergarten performance in these key domains can be accounted for by other indicators of socio-economic status (i.e., adjusted models).

When looking at the unadjusted descriptive statistics, a number of important patterns emerge. To begin, English language learners enter school scoring approximately 45-55% of a standard deviation lower than their monolingual English-speaking classmates on assessments of math and reading (see Figure 1). Practically speaking, these unadjusted disparities in children's academic achievement amount to roughly 11 months of development (calculated by dividing the standardized difference in academic test scores by the regression slope for children's age at

assessment; see Bradbury et al., 2011). That is, at the age of five, English language learners enter school roughly one year behind their monolingual classmates in areas of early math and reading. While there are no differences in children's approaches to learning, English language learners do exhibit some social-behavioral strengths. Specifically, children who are learning English as a second language enter kindergarten demonstrating lower levels of internalizing and externalizing problems as compared with their monolingual peers, with differences corresponding to 10-15% of a standard deviation (see Figure 1).

We next incorporated mothers' total years of educational attainment to assess the degree to which these disparities in children's early learning related to English language learner status stem from other socioeconomic factors, especially socioeconomic disadvantages, correlated with this status. We find that each additional year of mothers' educational attainment results in a 13-14% of a standard deviation improvement in children's academic achievement in kindergarten. It also results in a 2-6% of a standard deviation improvement in their social-behavioral skills, as measured by teacher reports at kindergarten entry. When comparing the effect sizes between the unadjusted and adjusted models, we find that roughly three quarters of the initially observed differences between English language learners and non-English language learner's academic achievement were accounted for by their mothers' lower levels of educational attainment (see Figure 1). Similarly, after accounting for mothers' educational histories, we find that English language learners demonstrate even stronger social-behavioral skills (effect sizes = 13-22% of a standard deviation) as compared with their mono-lingual speaking classmates, including approaches to learning (effect size = 14% of a standard deviation).

When taken together, these descriptive estimates from the ECLS-K paint a national portrait of English language learners and their special needs during the transition into formal

schooling. To recap, these national estimates indicate that English language learners enter kindergarten up to a year behind their monolingual English-speaking classmates in areas of early mathematics and literacy, which is largely—but not entirely—attributed to their mother’s lower levels of educational attainment, an important proxy for socioeconomic status as well as the home environment more generally. At the same time, however, English language learners do exhibit socio-emotional and behavioral strengths, which are partially masked by their mothers’ lower levels of educational attainment. Thus, these descriptive estimates highlight the strengths and weaknesses of English language learners during the transition to kindergarten, which the school transition and contextual systems models contend will have long-term ramifications for their educational careers. The question, then, is how we can counteract the potential vulnerabilities among these children before they enter kindergarten.

Examples of Transition Intervention Programs

If these small but significant gaps in children’s early learning and development related to English language learner status are the basis for long-term inequality, then closing these achievement gaps would serve as a meaningful way of reducing inequality before it is too late. This very argument underlies the increased investments in the early childhood years (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Yoshikawa et al., 2013), which are supported by the fact that the greatest long-term benefits of intervention programs are derived from policies that target children and their families prior to formal schooling (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Reynolds, Temple, White, Ou, & Robertson, 2011; Schweinhart et al., 2005). The family investment model and family stress theory, which are discussed above, also point to two potentially successful strategies that are at the center of many government policies and programs that have been developed to address achievement gaps before the transition to school. The

strategies differ in their generational focus, with one strategy focusing on developing the skills of children themselves and the other strategy focusing on developing the skills of children's mothers as an indirect way of helping children.

Early Childhood Education

The first strategy is investing in preschool education for 3- and 4-year-olds across the country (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013). Although over half of children in the U.S. experience some sort of formal preschool program during the two years prior to school entry, roughly 47% of 3- and 4-year olds do not attend preschool before entering kindergarten (Child Trends, 2016). For these children who do not experience preschool, one can imagine that their adjustment to the new demands and routines of kindergarten may be more challenging. Beyond experiences in a formal education setting that might facilitate a more seamless transition to school, the academic benefits of preschool are also well-documented, including for children of Latino origin and those learning English as a second language (Ansari & Winsler, 2016; Bloom & Weiland, 2015; Crosnoe, 2007; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). In fact, this group of children is *more* likely to benefit from participating in preschool than their monolingual classmates (Gormley & Gayer, 2005; Loeb et al., 2007), suggesting that preschool programs can reduce the aforementioned disparities in children's academic achievement during the transition to formal schooling.

The most successful preschool programs are often characterized by emotionally supportive teacher-child interactions, skillful behavior management, and classroom activities that promote children's engagement, all of which have been found to be particularly important in facilitating children's early academic and social-behavioral readiness for kindergarten (Johnson, Markowitz, Hill, & Phillips, 2016; Mashburn et al., 2008). Such programs are also characterized by smaller class sizes as well as strong educational qualifications and training among teachers.

Finally, some of the most effective preschool programs also acknowledge and embrace children's diversity and culture, which is imperative for the school success of young English language learners (Garcia & Jensen, 2007, 2009; The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017).

Although these types of high quality preschool programs have had great success in facilitating children's school readiness for kindergarten, their long-term academic effects for both English language learners and monolingual children tend to diminish as they progress through the K-12 educational pipeline (Hill, Gormley, & Adelstein, 2015; Lipsey, Farran, & Hofer, 2015; Puma et al., 2012). One reason for these diminished benefits is that investments in children's education prior to school entry are undermined because they are not coupled with continued investments in children after the transition to formal schooling (Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Currie & Thomas, 2000). An emerging body of evidence does suggest, however, that early childhood programs that implement sustainability practices (e.g., have preschoolers visit kindergarten class) ease children's transition into formal schooling, and therefore, can sustain a larger share of the benefits derived from early childhood programs (Benner, Thornton, & Crosnoe, 2017). At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that English language learners are less likely to experience such practices during the school transition than their monolingual White peers (Benner et al., 2017), which in turn, results in a less successful school transition.

Nonetheless, illustrating the promise of preschool, evaluations of early childhood programs in Florida and North Carolina have found that these programs do facilitate children's school preparedness, which in turn, results in greater school success for all children four to six years down the road, including among children learning English as a second language (Ansari et al., 2017; Dodge, Bai, Ladd, & Muschkin, 2016). Specifically, these evaluations from these two

communities show that preschool attendees are more likely to pass standardized tests of math and reading, earn a higher grade point average, are less likely to be placed in special education, and are less likely to be retained, with effect sizes ranging from 10-20% of a standard deviation.

Two Generation Programs

Even though preschool programs hold great promise in facilitating English language learners' early school success, these children are, on average, less likely to be enrolled in a high quality preschool program as compared with their monolingual English-speaking peers (Crosnoe, 2013). Moreover, although early childhood programs can reduce existing disparities in children's early learning, parents remain the most important shepherds of their children's school success (Belsky et al., 2007). That is, one of the most important factors in determining whether children experience a more seamless school transition is the extent to which parents actively participate in their children's education prior to (and during) the transition to kindergarten (Raver, Gershoff, & Aber, 2007). Specific activities such as reading to children daily, playing with numbers and letters, and parents' school involvement have each been linked with improved prospects of school success (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016; Cooper et al., 2009).

Despite the potential benefits of parents' investments in their children's education, we also know that the parents of English language learners are less likely to support their children's school readiness in these ways, which are oftentimes rewarded by schools, both before (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2016) and after the transition to school (Crosnoe et al., 2016). Thus, early childhood initiatives and intervention programs can only go so far without making changes to the family system. While some of these disparities in parenting are accounted for by corresponding disparities in socioeconomic status and stem from structural barriers and lack of access to educational and economic opportunities (Crosnoe et al., 2016), one persisting question is how we

can reduce them. Below, we discuss a second strategy that has received renewed policy interest, namely: two-generation approaches, which focus on providing services for both parents and their children (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014).

Two generation approaches can take one of two forms, but both methods have one thing in common: both strategies attempt to improve the quality of children's lives at home. Indeed, providing children and families with education, economic supports, and social capital are three key elements of two generation programs that aspire to break the intergenerational transmission of inequality (Aspen Institute, 2014). The first two generation strategy has been to *indirectly* target parent's involvement in their children's education by addressing the factors (e.g., lack of education, language barriers) that constrain it. As one example, there has been increased interest in providing more financial stability to families and providing mothers with the opportunity to go back to school to pursue secondary education (Harding, 2015; Magnuson, 2007). These efforts are largely due to the fact that improvements in families' socioeconomic status, especially during the early childhood years, has been found to have downstream effects on children's school success, in part because these investments help parents construct a more educationally supportive home environment (Gershoff et al., 2007; Raver et al., 2007; Yeung et al., 2003). These potential benefits of improving parents' human capital hold true for the parents of English language learners as well (Crosnoe & Kalil, 2010). Such strategies are particularly relevant for this population, however, because a large share of English language learners live in homes with incomes below the federal poverty line, and over 40% have mothers with less than a high school education (Tourangeau et al., 2014).

In one such program, CareerAdvance, trained staff in Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide free coaching and career training for parents with the goal of helping parents

to qualify for employment within the health care sector and to attain a degree in Registered Nursing or Health Information Technology. Efforts to raise the human capital of parents have also been attempted by many public assistance programs in many locales, such as the Advancement Plus Program in Colorado, funded by the Temporary Aid for Needy Families program. Similar two-generation strategies have also been incorporated into child interventions, including programs like AVANCE. With sites across the country, the AVANCE program attempts to strengthen families in at-risk communities through parent education and support programs, with evidence suggesting that the program does in fact increase parents' knowledge and skills and parenting practices at home (Johnson & Walker, 1991).

The second two generation strategy is to *directly* target parents' parenting behaviors and knowledge on either side of the transition into school. These services are often coordinated with existing early childhood services, such as Early Head Start and Head Start, or operate out of schools or community centers. While the primary goal of these programs vary, they generally attempt to make the home environment more supportive of children's learning and development. Some programs also try to bridge connections between the home and school systems and between communities and families. Despite the differences in the goals of programs, these two-generation services often have a set curriculum and require that parents attend a series of educational sessions that aim to promote positive parenting and healthy child development.

Although changing parents' behaviors is difficult, especially within a short period of time, there is promising evidence to suggest that this strategy can be effective. As one example, Head Start, which is the nation's largest federally funded preschool program serving roughly one million children per year, and perhaps, the most well-known two generation program in the U.S., has been found to improve parents' home involvement and reduce use of punitive forms of

discipline (Puma et al., 2010). The Head Start program has achieved these goals through a variety of formal activities such as having parents volunteer in the classroom, attend parenting workshops, and engage in regular parent-teacher conferences (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016). Relatedly, long-term evaluations of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers Program, which coupled educational services for children during the transition to school with opportunities for parents to make social connections, attend workshops, and attend parenting and GED courses, has yielded consistent positive outcomes for participants through their late twenties. For example, the program participants not only entered school more ready to learn, but they were also more likely to complete high school and were less likely to be involved in the criminal justice system (Reynolds et al., 2011). Other smaller and more contemporary two generation programs that are specifically targeted at English language learners, such as Abriendo Puertas and the Parent Engagement Education Program, have also received growing recognition for their promise in making a difference in the lives of children and their families. For example, Abriendo Puertas, a ten session program that focuses on teaching parents how to engage in their children's education (both in and out of the home), has served over 30,000 families in over 30 states around the country and has proven to be successful at improving parents' engagement in educational activities with their children (Moore, Caal, Rojas, & Lawner, 2014).

There have also been programs that have been designed to target both parents and teachers, with the goal of changing school personnel attitudes towards the families of English language learners. For example, programs such as Lee y Serás offer workshops for parents and teachers as a means of breaking through the cultural mismatches that often exist across the home and school systems and familiarizing parents with teachers and teachers with parents. In fact, results from a program evaluation of Lee y Serás found that not only did parents improve in their

knowledge, efficacy, and home literacy activities, but just as importantly, teachers who participated in the workshops were more likely to supplement their English instructional practices with Spanish activities (e.g., including bilingual material; reading bilingual stories; Goldenberg & Light, 2009). Put another way, teachers and providers who participated in the Lee y Serás workshops were better able to integrate English language learners home language and culture into their program activities, which some scholars argue has downstream benefits for the school preparedness of English language learners (Garcia & Jensen 2007, 2009). Thus, programs that train both parents and teachers might prove to be even more successful at fostering the type of environment necessary to support the early school success of English language learners and allow for families and schools to better understand each other.

In sum, there has been increased investments in intervention programs in the years right before and right after the transition to kindergarten, which has largely resulted from the growing recognition of the long-term ramifications of early disparities in children's academic and social-behavioral development (Heckman, 2006). Indeed, there are a variety of transition programs, including high quality preschool education and two-generation strategies that we have discussed here that have been implemented to reduce the achievement gaps that result from English language learner status and facilitate a more seamless transition to kindergarten.

The Home and School Experiences of English Language Learners: An Example from National Data

Considering that different dimensions of parenting discussed above and preschool enrollment have implications for children's short- and long-term educational trajectories, any differences in these factors across English language learners and their monolingual peers also requires greater scrutiny. To help illustrate these disparities, we again use data from the ECLS-K

Class of 2010-2011. Similar to our prior set of analyses we present both unadjusted and adjusted differences in the parenting and preschool enrollment of roughly 14,050 kindergartners. The outcome measures of interest were all based on parent report and included information on parents' involvement in their children's schools (e.g., attended an open house or back-to-school night), parent's engagement in cognitive stimulation (i.e., the frequency with which parents read to children), children's participation in organized activities (e.g., dancing lessons, and organized clubs and/or recreational programs), children's enrollment in preschool (i.e., a school-based or center-based program), and household resources (i.e., the number of books in the household).

Beginning with preschool enrollment, national estimates from the ECLS-K Class of 2010-2011 reveal that roughly 60% of monolingual children attend preschool at the age of 4, which is significantly greater than the enrollment rate of English language learners, which lagged behind at 45% (see Figure 2). Thus, similar to other recent national estimates (e.g., Child Trends 2016) these data suggest that the majority of English language learners were cared for by either their parents or another informal childcare provider (e.g., relative or non-relative). Even though significant disparities persisted in our adjusted models after we accounted for their mothers' educational histories, we find that the preschool enrollment gap between the two groups was greatly reduced, from roughly 15 percentage points to 5 percentage points (see Figure 2). In fact, each additional year of maternal education was associated with a 15% increase in children's likelihood of attending preschool during the year before kindergarten.

Next, we turn to disparities in the parenting experienced by English language learners and their monolingual peers. As can be seen in Figure 3, results from these analyses indicated that the parents of English language learners scored 28-70% of a standard deviation lower across all dimensions of parenting as compared with the parents of non-English language learners. When

comparing the effect sizes between the unadjusted and adjusted models, we find that approximately half of these differences could be attributed to disparities in mothers' educational histories (see Figure 3), with a one-year increase in maternal education resulting in 7-13% of a standard deviation improvement in parenting. When taken together, these results indicate that large gaps exist in the home and school experiences of English language learners as compared with monolingual children, which has downstream effects for their school success. At the same time, however, and similar to children's school performance, we find that a large share of these disparities were rooted in socio-economic inequality.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we sought to link two contemporary issues of educational research and policy that are both implicated in educational inequality, namely: (a) the transition into kindergarten; and (b) the educational experiences of English language learners. To this end, we have discussed why the transition into kindergarten is a particularly important period in the life course for the growing population of English language learners in the United States and highlighted three key themes regarding this transition to formal schooling.

The first key point was that the transition to kindergarten often underlies the long-term socioeconomic and racial/ethnic disparities in educational attainment because once children fall behind as early as kindergarten, they often continue to stay behind throughout the life course (Alexander et al., 2014; Reardon, 2011). Second, we discussed how this stage in life is more amenable to policy intervention as compared with many other mechanisms of inequality, and that the economic returns to investments during this period far surpass those that occur later in life (Heckman, 2006). Finally, we wanted to emphasize the relative strengths and weaknesses of English language learners during the transition to kindergarten, with the survey findings from the

ECLS-K Class of 2010-2011 revealing some important information about the status of these children and their parents. Specifically, the survey findings summarized above revealed that English language learners enter kindergarten with social-behavioral strengths and while they entered kindergarten behind their monolingual peers in areas of academics, a large share of these disparities was rooted in malleable factors, such as their mothers' educational histories.

Moreover, the parents of English language learners were less likely than the parents of monolingual children to engage in the types of parenting behaviors that are often rewarded by the U.S. educational system. Similar to their children's academic achievement, however, a large share of these disparities was attributed to differences in the educational histories of parents. Thus, intervention programs that target both children's and their parents' human capital during this period can potentially reduce educational disparities before it is too late.

Even though the experiences of English language learners are not solely about risk and disadvantage, with their families bringing great optimism to the communities in which they live and the schools in which their children attend, schools rarely take an asset-based approach to their education and, thus, their strengths and diverse experiences are not fully leveraged by school personnel. To facilitate a more seamless transition to kindergarten, and in turn, promote an equal opportunity to achieve the American dream, schools and communities need to welcome English language learners and their families with an open door and build on the strengths of these children in order to maximize their potential.

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Gaps in Kindergarten Readiness Between English Language Learners and Monolingual Children Upon the Transition to Kindergarten

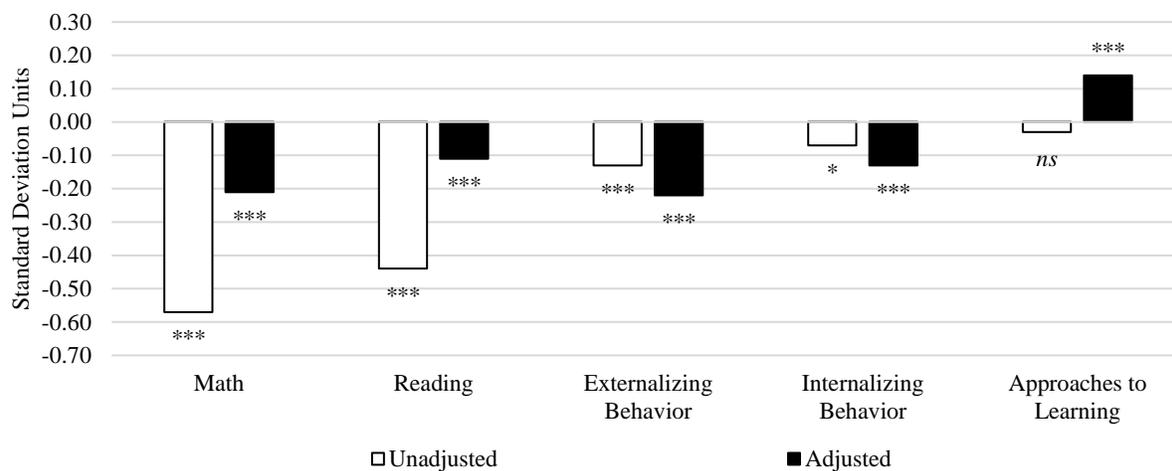


Figure 1. Early learning disparities between English language learners and monolingual children during the transition to kindergarten. *Notes.* Smaller numbers for externalizing and internalizing behavior indicates more optimal behavior. Unadjusted models only account for children's home language status. Adjusted models include mothers' educational attainment. Data source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Cohort of 2010-2011.

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. *ns* = not significant.

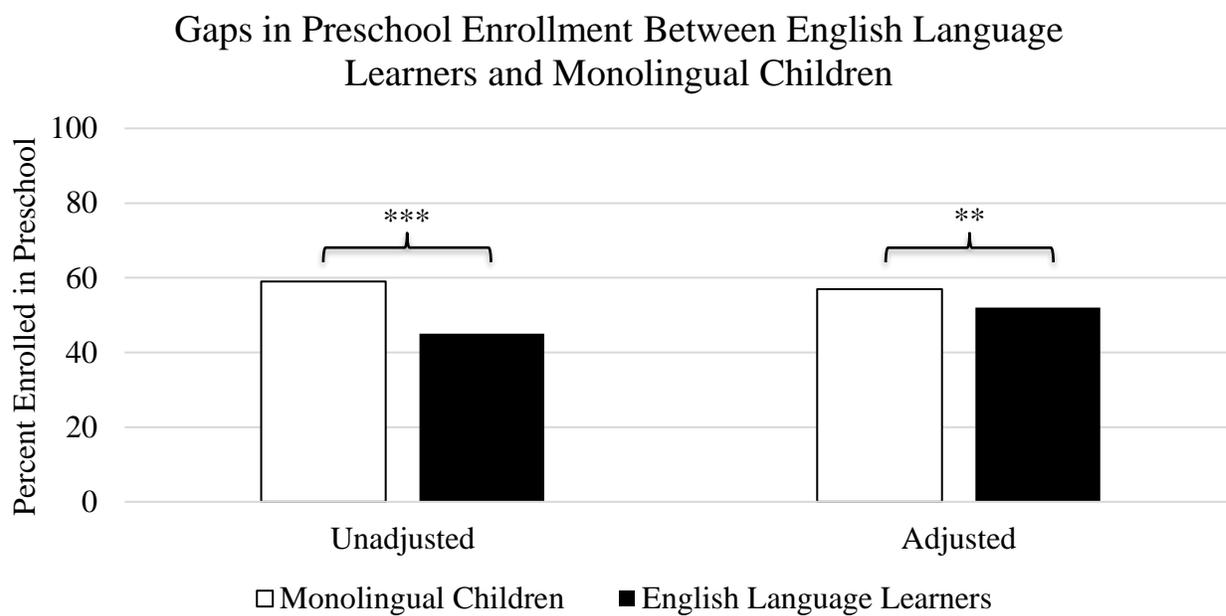


Figure 2. Disparities in preschool enrollment between English language learners and monolingual children. *Notes.* Unadjusted models only account for children's home language status. Adjusted models include mothers' educational attainment. Data source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Cohort of 2010-2011. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$

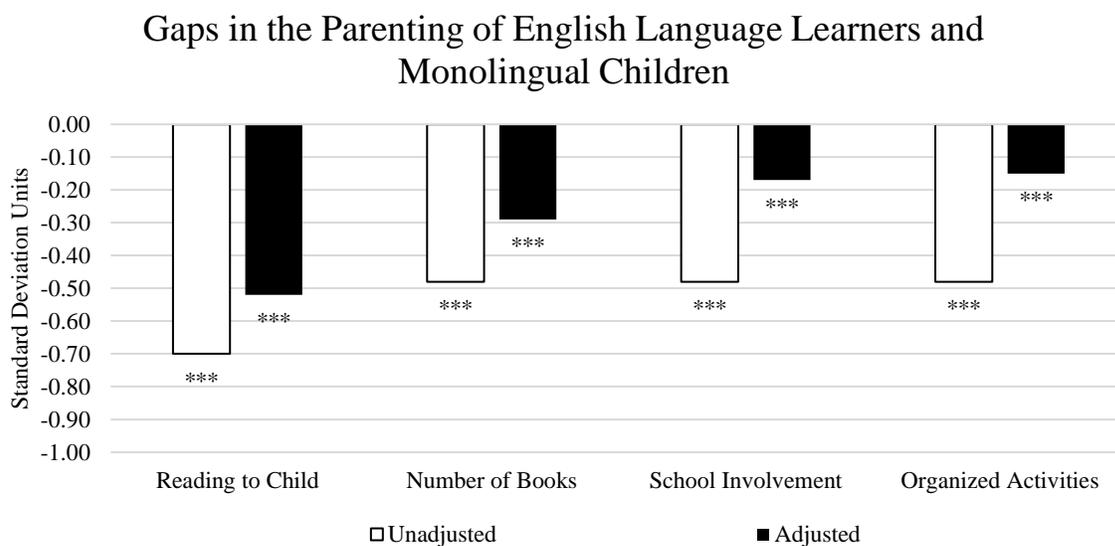


Figure 3. Disparities in the parenting of English language learners and monolingual children during kindergarten. *Notes.* Unadjusted models only account for children’s home language status. Adjusted models include mothers’ educational attainment. Data source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Cohort of 2010-2011. *** $p < .001$.