

## A Case for Recess: A Migrant Child's Journey to Connection

Barbie Norvell, PhD, Janet Bavonese, PhD, Cynthia Connor, PhD, Aimee Weathers, EdS

**Abstract:** *Children who speak languages other than English are coming into American schools at a rate of 20% per decade (US Department of Education). Teachers need to be better prepared to help these children not only assimilate into their classroom environment but also interact socially with other children in their age group. One way to accomplish this is by giving children the opportunity to play during recess. A recess period was introduced in a very structured school environment, giving children 15 days to play outside with literacy lessons either preceding or directly following the recess period. Field notes, observations, and work samples showed that with only two weeks of added participation in a 15-minute recess period, an ELL student made more progress communicating in English than she was able to accomplish over many months of instruction in her highly structured classroom.*

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### I. Review of Literature on the Status of Education for English Language Learners

Almost one out of four (23 percent) public school students in the United States came from an immigrant household in 2015. As recently as 1990 it was 11 percent, and in 1980 it was just 7 percent. According to the National Center for Education Statistics records for 2018, 10.2% of all children in American schools were from migrant households and are currently English Language Learners. This is up from 9.2% in 2010, and with more and more migrants entering the United States every year, this number is going to continue to grow, and 75.2% of those children were Hispanic. A majority of these children attended some sort of center-based preschool education program such as Head Start. As of 2015, 25% of all preschool students in all early education programs were of Hispanic origin, and only 40% of Hispanic children attended preschool programs (US DOE, 2015). Although these children attend centers in which English is the language for communication and instruction, most of these children speak the language of their parent's country of origin (Matthews & Ewen, 2006) and enter school with little or no receptive or expressive language proficiency in English. This influx of non-English speaking students presents a challenge to many teachers who have insufficient professional preparation for overcoming language barriers and meeting the instructional needs of children from different cultural environments with languages other than English spoken in their homes and communities (Camarota, Griffith, Zeigler, 2017.) Currently, there are over 5 million English Language Learners in American schools, with most of these children being in elementary schools (2021).

Researchers have shown that children have a natural ability to learn multiple languages, but they need opportunities to interact socially in different cultural and communicative settings in order to develop competence in more than one language (Chomsky, 2003; Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev & Miller, 2003, Nieto, 2009). In response to this trend, many school systems have initiated programs in which English-speaking teachers are encouraged to take courses in Spanish, Chinese, and other languages to improve their ability to interact and communicate with English Language Learners (ELL). The largest percentages of ELL students in most U.S. schools are Hispanic so Spanish is the most common language targeted by these programs for teachers to learn additional languages (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In more and more schools, regular classroom teachers can rely on teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) for assistance in delivering much of the content education that takes place. Most states mandate a certain number of minutes of English language development for ELL students (Jobe, 2005); this approach allows ELL children to assimilate English by interacting with classmates and sharing respect for each others' cultures.

Children of all cultures need to spend time working on language and literacy skills such as phonemic awareness, the learning of letter names, phonics, orthographic patterns, and recognition of high-frequency sight words. However, research shows that directly using these skills in play contexts such as dramatization, puppetry, and "free writes" (Ferriero & Teberosky, 1979; Nieto 2009; Vygotsky, 1978) facilitates an ELL's assimilation into an English-speaking world. ELL children did not ask to come to the United States; they were either brought or

born here by parents looking for a better life than they had in their own countries (Jobe, 2005). It then becomes the responsibility of educators, especially those of very young children, to use the information that is available to plan instruction that respects cultural and language differences so that these children can be as successful as their English-speaking counterparts (Jobe, 2005).

## **II. Introduction to this Study**

When this research project began, the halls of Lancaster Elementary School [LES] (names for the school and all children discussed in this article are pseudonyms) were empty and nearly silent most of the time because low standardized test scores had precipitated a school-wide move towards a very rigid schedule aimed at keeping students in classrooms and academically on task as much as possible. The environment provided no time for frivolity, even during restroom and lunch breaks. Lancaster is just one of the thousands of elementary schools across the country in danger of being taken over by the state department of education due to failure to make Annual Yearly Progress [AYP] according to requirements outlined by the No Child Left Behind [NCLB] Act.

At LES, schedules were placed outside the classroom and inside on the board, and they included state course of study standards for each of the activities to justify their place in the curriculum. Each day was divided into subject area teaching and study sessions, with very few special area classes such as physical education and a minimum of time spent for bathroom breaks and walking to and from lunch. Teachers directly engaged students in instruction driven by teachers' manuals and programs and strictly adhered to the schedule prescribed by administrators; at the same time, however, many made comments that showed they were trying to reconcile their actions with conflicting beliefs about effective educational practices and appropriate learning environments for children.

As a result of the consistently low academic performance at LES, school officials had closed off a fully equipped playground and cut recess from the school day in order to devote more time to instruction eight years before the study began. For the 35 children in the three first grade classrooms at LES, there were many opportunities for teachers to interact with the children but not many opportunities for the children to interact with each other. This study began when the first author and researcher decided to see what kind of difference, if any, introducing a recess period would make in first graders' use of written language to record content from stories read aloud. The introduction of the recess period was a departure from the school schedule that children were accustomed to and a disruption of the routines established for eight years so these children had never experienced recess during school.

There were three Hispanic children designated as ELL in the three first-grade classrooms at LES. Two of the ELL students were in one teacher's classroom, and she rarely if ever even made eye contact with them. The classroom teacher knew it was her responsibility to address the same standards and teach the same content for all children in her class, but this teacher did not interact verbally with these students as often as she did with the other students due to the language barrier. The ELL students were provided the same directions and worksheets as other students, but very little follow-up assistance was offered to them. The teacher with the two ELL students often snapped at them and ignored their pleas for assistance. She seemed annoyed by having to address the needs of learners with whom she could not communicate, and her interactions with these two children indicated that she may have thought teaching these children went above and beyond her job description. The other child identified as an ELL was in a different classroom and interacted with his teacher as frequently and in the same ways as the rest of the students.

## **III. Method**

Permission to introduce a recess into this recess-less environment was given by the district office for a very specific and limited time period. The project was allotted a total of 18 days. Two days were used for observing and pre-testing the children with the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test [PPVT-III] to see if the children had sufficient English language skills to complete the literacy tasks planned for data collection. Then there were exactly 15 days for introducing and implementing the recess period and read-aloud lessons and writing activities. One day was devoted to post-testing.

Two groups of students were randomly assigned to conditions receiving recess before or after literacy learning activities. While Group A was outside at recess, Group B was inside participating in lessons and writing activities with multicultural folktales from an anthology that supplements a first-grade reading series (Lippert,

1993). After the fifteen-minute recess for Group A or lesson for Group B, the groups switched; Group B went outside for the recess treatment while Group A stayed inside for the literacy lesson.

The research team consisted of the first author who was also the principal researcher and two graduate assistants. The researcher stayed inside and conducted the literacy lessons to make sure that all procedures and data collection activities were consistent for both groups. One graduate assistant stayed inside with the principal investigator to ensure accuracy of data collection, and one graduate student was outside with the students to take field notes. Classroom teachers were invited to take notes while observing the children during the recess period and to write down anything and everything they noticed about the children during this time. These data were kept in a separate file from the students' written work samples that were the focus of data collection in this study. Out of the 35 total children in first grade, 32 returned letters of informed consent including the three Hispanic students who were categorized as ELL.

During the pretesting, many of the children were anxious to talk about themselves. Redirection back to the PPVT-III A was often difficult because so many children wanted to ask about why they were doing something different from the regular classroom routines and working with someone other than their teacher. After talking for a few minutes, they were promised answers soon and asked to either continue the test or go back to class.

During the administration of the PPVT-III A, Henrico was the first Hispanic child tested. His actions and comments during the testing session were similar to those of many other children in the study except that he was more talkative than most. He began a story about going fishing with his grandfather, putting in many details and using rich vocabulary. Henrico's score on the PPVT-III A was among the higher ones for these participants, and it indicated that his English language proficiency was more than sufficient for the tasks involved in this study.

The next ELL child encountered was Umberto. He was a very cooperative child but much quieter than Henrico. When the PPVT-III A was administered, his performance was below the threshold because he could not correctly point to the pictures that depicted objects, actions, etc. represented by English words. His limited English proficiency made the tasks involved in this study almost impossible for him. Instead of participating in most of the read-aloud lessons and writing activities with the researcher, Umberto joined students who did not have permission to participate in this project and his teacher when his Group did the writing activities.

When Inez came for the PPVT-III A pretest, she kept her head down and avoided eye contact. She had thick, black hair that fell around her face so she could hide behind it if she wanted. When asked if she understood an explanation about what she would be doing during the pretest, she nodded to indicate "yes." When asked if she wanted to tell something about herself, she replied non-verbally and shook her head "no." The PPVT-III A is administered by the researcher saying English words and the child points to the picture so Inez did not have to speak. She did very well on the pretest and demonstrated that she had enough knowledge of the English vocabulary to participate in the literacy tasks involved in the study. Inez did not speak at any time during the pretesting.

On the second day of pretesting, the researcher conducted classroom observations of literacy lessons to make sure that the read-aloud lessons and writing activities for the study were aligned with lesson formats for children that were familiar to them. Additionally, these classroom visits allowed children to see the researcher in their classes. Inez appeared much more comfortable in her classroom environment than when she was working when on the pretest. However, she interacted verbally only with Umberto, using a soft almost whispered voice. She also responded to her teacher, but all interactions with the teacher were non-verbal. When her teacher asked her questions, she answered by nodding or shaking her head "yes" or "no" or shrugging her shoulders as if to say "I don't know." She had been working with this teacher for eight months and had seen me for one day, yet her communications with both of us were exactly the same: voiceless.

Outside the classroom, she did have some additional interactions. Since the first grade was so small, the teachers allowed all the children to eat together at two large tables in the lunchroom and did not assign seats unless unruly behavior warranted it. Inez, Umberto, and Henrico ate lunch together. Henrico sat closer to non-Hispanic children and talked with the other students in the class, but Inez and Umberto interacted only with each other and Henrico. Occasionally Henrico said something mischievous to male classmates that resulted in lively conversations in English, but Inez never spoke English to anyone. With Umberto or Henrico, she was quite vocal and interactive but only in Spanish.

To prepare the children for the literacy lessons they would be participating in for 15 days, the researcher administered a field trial lesson identical in format to the actual literacy lessons to be delivered but without

recess before or after. They listened to a story from a book of multicultural folktales (Lippert,1993). This anthology was part of their reading series but had not yet been used by their teachers. They were asked to respond to the story by writing about their favorite part. They were also told that no teacher would be grading their work and that if they did not think they could write what they wanted, they could draw. This experience allowed the children to become familiar with the procedures they would be following while participating in the study and allowed the researcher to see approximately where each child was developmentally with regard to writing and to collect baseline data from writing samples.

When the children wrote after the story, they could sit anywhere they wanted. Umberto sometimes participated in the read-aloud lessons but did not do the writing activities because his scores on the PPVT-III indicated that he could understand little of the content of the stories or the questions that would have been asked of him. He did participate in the recess period with the other children, however. His pretest data were pulled before analysis and not considered as a part of the study.

#### **IV. Research Study**

On the first day of the study, the teachers reported that the children did not know what to do when offered a recess period. A large box of toys with footballs, frisbees, soccer balls, hula-hoops, jump ropes, etc. were provided for the children to encourage play. The playground was on the other side of the school and off-limits without permission from the principal or the physical education teacher. The school had a policy of using it for "Fun Fridays" and rewards. That first day, it became apparent that there was too little time to get there and back and conduct the literacy lessons in the 15-minute timeframe allotted. So from the second day forward, the children played in the courtyard outside their classrooms. It provided room to run, get fresh air, and socialize, and it was safely walled away from cars and other dangers. Since the children had never experienced a recess period, the teachers went to the box of toys and modeled how to play with them. They threw footballs to some of the children, played with the hula-hoops, offered the jump ropes, and engaged the children as much as possible for the 15-minute time period. When Group A came in, Group B went out to play.

Inez was in that first read-aloud session for Group A. She sat with Umberto when she came in. She sat on the floor and listened intently to the story. When given the chance to write a response to the story, she wrote nothing. The next day, when she came in, once again, she sat next to Umberto for the story, and this time she wrote a response to the story during the writing activity. The recess field notes from that day report that she "watched the girls play with the hula-hoops and jump ropes on the other side of the courtyard. She did not engage, even when invited, but she watched." She was absent the third day, but when she came back, her actions slowly began to change. She started writing more about the stories on her paper and began to talk about what her writing said. She was finding her voice and becoming verbal in English with her classmates. During her time in the courtyard, she began to "slowly interact with the girls in her class," as indicated by her teachers through field notes. "First she tried the hula-hoop, then the jump rope." With this social interaction came a drastic change in her writing. She went from writing absolutely nothing, speaking to no one but Umberto and when possible Henrico, to sitting with the other girls in her group to do her writing by the middle of the second week of recess. Her writing samples reflect a change from nothing on the page to an almost complete retelling of the story by the end of the study.

By the third week, Inez was quite comfortable with the girls in her group; she had separated herself from speaking or working only with Umberto and Henrico, and she sat with the girls inside and played with them outside. She was even making friends by sitting with the other girls and sharing crayons and laughing along with them during writing time.

She also sat with them at lunch. It seemed as if she had slowly come out of a cocoon of silence to become a beautiful first-grade butterfly. As she became more comfortable playing and talking with the girls in her group, however, her writing samples indicated that she was not interested in completing the tasks. She was very focused on the interactions with her classmates, watching the other girls and occasionally laughing and sharing a seat with a new friend; but her stories did not have as much content. She switched to drawing to respond to the questions and to put one or two words along with the drawings. She continued these behaviors in her writing samples until the end of the fifteen days.

During post-testing with the researcher, Inez no longer tried to hide behind her silky black hair. When she completed the alternate form of the PPVT-III for the posttest, she made significant gains as compared to the pretest, and she actually talked! When asked if she had fun during recess, she actually said "Yes."-- no shaking her head this time. When asked what part of recess she liked best, she said: "playing and making new

friends.” Back in her classroom, Inez was still non-verbal with her teacher even though she had made tremendous progress in communicating with her peers, and her teacher reported: “she was more verbal with both her classmates and herself.”

Like many individuals who have limited knowledge about working with ELL students, members of the research team for this study, teachers, and administrators had initial assumptions about Hispanic students and designations and expectations for ELL that were incorrect. Many of these children can easily assimilate into an English language environment with the right encouragement and opportunities to play and interact freely with other classmates. A child who is an ELL needs the opportunity to make new friends with whom he/she can speak English, and those experiences can happen much more easily during recess than in structured classroom environments with teacher-directed lessons.

## **V. Discussion and Questions for Further Investigation**

It is impossible to discern from one study in such a limited time for specific conclusions to be drawn for multiple English Language Learners across our country, but as more and more children enter the country from all over the world, this study does provide a glimpse into steps classroom teachers can make to support these children to assimilate into American classrooms. All children benefit from opportunities to socialize and interact with their peers. Child development theory supports the free exchange of ideas between children and adults, and while recess is only one way to allow these interactions to take place, the importance of this practice cannot be undervalued.

The outcomes of this study bring new questions to the idea of what types of instruction and interactions are the most appropriate for ELL students. Questions raised by the results of this study include the following.

- Would the results for Inez have been different if she and Umberto had been in different classrooms?
- How can teachers help ELL students find their voices and help children like Inez and Umberto become as talkative and proficient in English as Henrico?
- What can teachers who do not know how to speak languages other than English facilitate ELL language development and provide more appropriate instruction for ELL students?

Questions such as the ones above need to be answered through rigorous qualitative and quantitative investigations of programs and placements for ELL students if American education is to be equitable and more productive for all students.

## **VI. Conclusions**

Although this was a small-scale study lasting a brief amount of time, Inez’s expressive language in English changed relatively quickly, and it appeared that those changes in her verbal behaviors may have been the results of opportunities to interact with other children outside the classroom. In addition, the results provided insights into classifications, placements, and appropriate instruction and learning environments for programs that serve ELL.

Teachers, even those in schools with such strict schedules and no opportunity for recess, need to find time to balance instruction; perhaps by turning a structured lesson into a game that children can play. These types of activities can not only address content specified in state curriculum standards but also allow children the interactions they so desperately need in order to build those socialization and communication skills necessary to become fully developed as a whole child. Additionally, with young children, like these in the study, teachers need to be aware of the NAEYC principles of effective curriculum (Bradencamp & Copple, 2009) many of which state the necessity of play embedded within the curriculum. If classroom teachers join together, find, and present valid research evidence to justify instruction that incorporates play, and apply the developmental principles in *Developmentally Appropriately Curriculum* (Bradencamp & Copple, 2009), they can advocate for change in their schools. Additionally, their classrooms and schools can become examples for other schools. This type of advocacy for playing to learn has the potential to launch a movement to change the American curriculum and make it more student- and teacher-friendly for all, and perhaps especially for classrooms with ELL as students.



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