

Identifying the Consequences of Actions and Options and Dimension of Teachers' Ethical Sensitivity at Various School Levels: Implications on English Learner Student Achievements

By Kim Glatt Yochai, Ed.D.

Abstract:

English Learner (EL) students in the United States are historically lower achieving students than their native-English-speaking peers. There are a number of contributing factors for the achievement gap. In recent years, the U.S. Department of Education has undertaken various initiatives to address some of the known factors to improve education for these students and minimize educational disparities, one such initiative being the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). Researchers have suggested that among the challenges many ELs face are others' misunderstandings of and lack of sensitivity to the academic and social needs of ELs. One area explored marginally in the education arena that could provide valuable insight is ethical sensitivity that has been associated with effective teaching (Krashen, 2003; Noddings, 2005).

This paper covers an analysis of levels of self-reported ethical sensitivity by teachers of the growing number of ELs in the mainstream classroom utilizing statistical research among teachers from the New York City suburbs of Nassau and Suffolk Counties. The findings indicate that teachers of ELs at high schools and middle schools have more ethical sensitivity compared to teachers of ELs in elementary schools. Based on the findings, further profes-

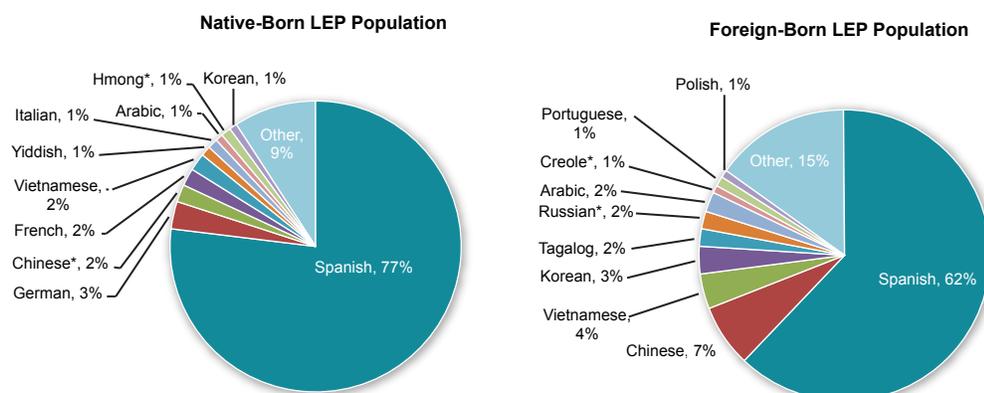
sional development of education professionals in ethical sensitivity training seems warranted among elementary teachers.

Introduction

This paper covers the degree and nature of ethical sensitivity among teachers of EL students in the mainstream classroom, and how school level may be a key factor for the achievement of these individuals that are learning English as a new language.

Teaching at its core is considered a caring and moral practice (Noddings, 2005). Ethical sensitivity is the ability to perceive and interpret events and note situational cues in a moral way (Bebeau, Rest, & Narvez, 1999), and visualize alternative actions in response to the situation in ways that lead to ethical action, based on seven dimensions as interpreted by Narvaez, Endicott, and Bock (Tirri & Nokelainen, 2011). These dimensions fall in the domain of critical components in the effective teaching of ELs (Krashen, 2003). The ethical sensitivity dimension of Identifying the Consequences of Actions and Options as perceived by teachers of ELs in the mainstream classroom is the focus of this paper.

Figure 1. Top Ten Languages Spoken by Native- and Foreign-Born Individuals (U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2013)



Background and Significance of the Study

In the autumn of 2015, nearly five million public school students in the United States were ELs, amounting to 10% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). **Figure 1** shows the vast range of home languages for the native and foreign born population with limited English proficiency (LEP).

Statement of the Problem

According to Zong and Batalova (2015), most of the population with limited English proficiency in the United States has been less educated than the English proficient-population. The academic achievement of ELs in the United States has been far below their non-EL peers, as evidenced by math and reading proficiency levels and lower high school graduation rates. Recent data indicates that 43% of fourth grade ELs scored below basic in math compared to 15 % of non-ELs. The gap continues into the eighth grade with 69% of ELs and only 26% of non-ELs scoring below basic in math. The difference is more dramatic on English Language Arts (ELA) assessment which relies entirely on reading, writing and language skills. In New York State, achievement in math and reading among ELs is equally alarming (**Figure 2**).

Not surprisingly, low scores translate into graduation rates below their English speaking peers. In 2015, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that ELs

had the lowest graduation rate of all subgroups. With less than two-thirds of ELs graduating in New York State, ELs were about 20 percentage points below the national graduation rate (**Figure 3**).

The English proficiency levels of ELs in New York are revealed through their performance on the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT). Consequently, ELs might receive English as a new language (ENL) instructional support based on scores in accordance with state mandates. ELs with higher proficiency levels received much of their ENL instruction in the mainstream classroom, proportionate to their proficiency level. As an outcome of the 2016 NYSESLAT results, over half of all ELs received all ENL instruction in the mainstream classroom (NYSED, 2015, 2016). Performance outcomes and mandated instructional settings are represented in **Figure 4**.

The shift over the last half decade in integrating ELs more into the mainstream classroom (NYSED, 2015) may have a detrimental impact on ELs. Often mainstream classroom teachers are provided with inadequate tools and training to effectively support ELs' learning (Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005). The achievement data, along with research and theory on second language acquisition and education of ELs, was the impetus for the examination of a possible connection between the ethical sensitivity of teachers of ELs and ELs' academic performance.

Figure 2. Percent of English Language Learners Scoring 2, 3, or 4 on the 2016 New York State Math & English Language Arts Assessments (NYSED, 2016)

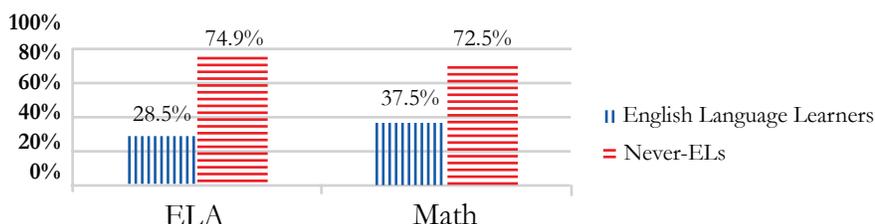
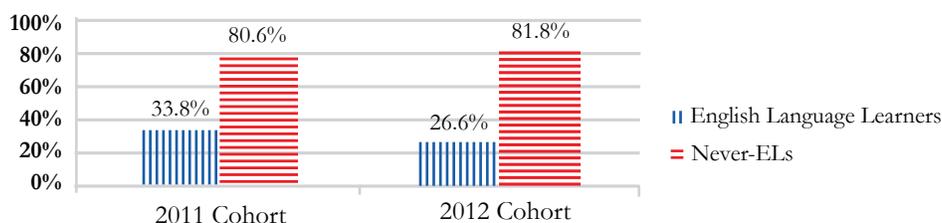


Figure 3. 2015-16 New York State English Learner Graduation Rates (NYSED, 2016)



There are links between ethical sensitivity and the practice of teaching, depicted in **Figure 5** (Kuusisto, Tirri, & Rissanen, 2012). Gholami and Tirri (2012) depict the specific dimensions of ethical sensitivity and their link to teaching in **Figure 5**. Despite these referenced links, there was a dearth of research on ethical sensitivity in the education domain, with none attainable that specifically involved ELs in the United States. This study references Tirri and Nokelainen (2011) who based their Ethical Sensitivity Scale Questionnaire (ESSQ) on the dimensions as interpreted by researchers Endicott, Narvaez, and Bock (2003) as well as operationalization of ethical sensitivity by Narvaez (2001).

Design and Methodology

Survey data was collected from elementary, middle, and high school teachers using a quantitative Likert scale. The sample population of participants included public school teachers ($N = 370$) from Nassau and Suffolk Counties of Long Island, a suburb of New York City. This sample represented about one percent of the target population of elementary, middle, and high school teachers on Long Island, estimated at 35,242. A power sample analysis indicated a desired sample of 380 participants. The criteria for selection included respondents that are elementary, middle, and high school teachers from public schools on Long Island, identified as having 10% or more ELs among the total student

Figure 4. Proficiency Levels of ELs based on performance on 2016 New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test and related NYS-Mandated setting for ENL support services for 2017 school year (NYSED 2015, 2016)

Note. Entering is beginning level; Commanding indicates attained proficiency/entitled to two additional years ENL services (Mntrm = Mainstream; clsrm = classroom)

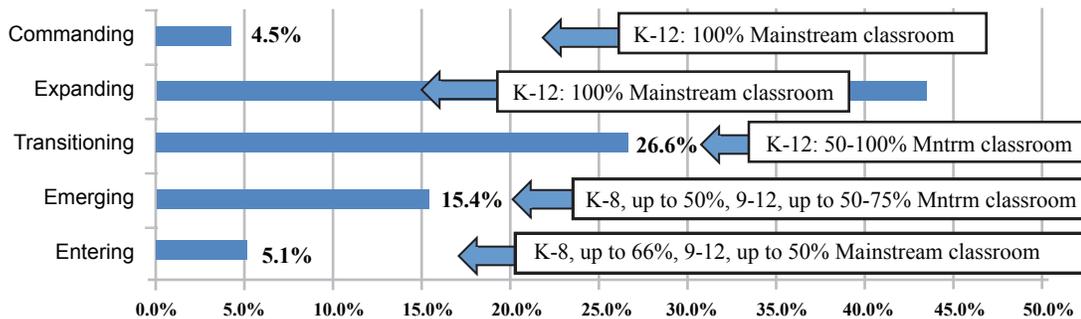
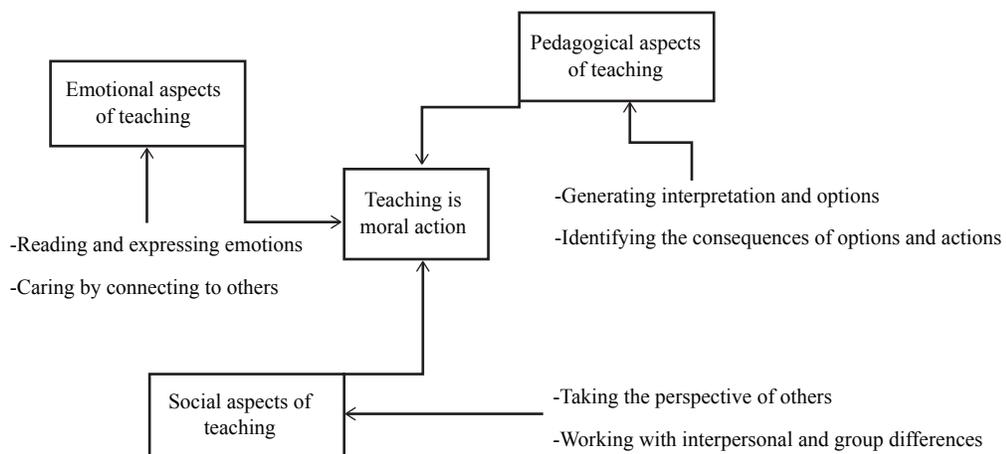


Figure 5. Dimensions of Ethical Sensitivity and Link to Teaching



population, according to the 2016-17 New York State Comprehensive School Report Cards. The 10% criteria approximated the national average for suburban areas and provided a substantial base from which to sample in the selected area. In suburban areas of the United States, ELs constituted an average of 8.9% of public school enrollment (NCES, 2018).

Table 1 presents the 30 districts of Long Island with 10% or more ELs among the student population (NYSED, 2017). The sample generalized the public school districts of Long Island with more than 10% ELs among the districts' student population.

The quantitative survey was comprised of 26 demographic items probing teachers about themselves and their EL students. To evaluate participants' degrees of ethical sensitivity, demographic questions were followed by the 28-item Ethical Sensitivity Scale Questionnaire (ESSQ) developed by Tirri and Nokelainen (2011), which was determined to be valid and applicable for multi-cultures and backgrounds. The participants in the survey responded to statements on a 5-point Likert scale associated with Identifying the Consequences of Actions and Options dimension along with other dimensions defined for ethical sensitivity, revealing significant findings pertaining to the self-perceived degree of ethical sensitivity by teachers of ELs in various school levels.

By way of multiple studies conducted over the course of a decade, the developers of the ESSQ and additional researchers have performed analyses on the psychometric qualities of the instrument with respect to its reliability and validity (Tirri & Nokelainen 2007, 2011; Gholami & Tirri 2012; Kuusisto, Tirri, & Rissanen 2012). Considering reliability as the proportion of the true score versus what is observed, researchers typically defer to the time-tested Chronbach's coefficient alpha, which suggests any alpha below .60 to be unacceptable, .80 to be good, and .90 or above to be outstanding (Meyers, Gamst, & Guarino, 2013). The Cronbach's Alpha coefficients in Gholami and Tirri (2012) revealed a sufficiently high overall reliability ($\alpha = .84$).

Validity of the ESSQ was also examined and refined via exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses in more than one study, due to some indication that the instrument might have biases deeming it culturally invalid (Gholami, Kuusisto, & Tirri, 2015). Based on these results of validity using Spearman's Rho nonparametric correlation coefficient, further evaluation using exploratory factor analysis was deemed unnecessary as the items measuring ethical sensitivity did not share enough common variance.

Inferential statistics were used to determine if there were mean differences in the criterion variable(s), degree of ethical sensitivity, and/or dimension of ethical sensitivity, which were dependent on the predictor variable of teachers'

Table 1
Long Island NY Public School Districts with 10% or More English Learners

<i>Populations</i>					
<i>School District</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>%ELLs</i>	<i>School District</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>%ELLs</i>
Amityville	Suffolk	22%	Mineola	Nassau	11%
Brentwood	Suffolk	32%	Montauk	Suffolk	10%
Bridgehampton	Suffolk	18%	Patchogue - Medford	Suffolk	13%
Central Islip	Suffolk	30%	Riverhead	Suffolk	24%
Copiague	Suffolk	17%	Roosevelt	Nassau	26%
East Hampton	Suffolk	18%	South Huntington	Suffolk	17%
East Quogue	Suffolk	16%	Southampton	Suffolk	17%
Freeport	Nassau	20%	South Country	Suffolk	10%
Glen Cove	Nassau	17%	Southold	Suffolk	13%
Greenport	Suffolk	17%	Springs	Suffolk	15%
Hampton Bays	Suffolk	22%	Tuckahoe Common	Suffolk	26%
Hempstead	Nassau	39%	Uniondale	Nassau	20%
Hicksville	Nassau	11%	Wainscott	Suffolk	31%
Huntington	Suffolk	19%	Westbury	Nassau	34%
Lawrence	Nassau	20%	Wyandanch	Suffolk	28%

Note. Represents 24% of the 127 Long Island districts (public and charter schools only)

²Source: NYSED (2017)

Table 2

ANOVA for Teachers' Dimension of Ethical Sensitivity and School Level

Dimension	School Level	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Identifying the consequences of actions and options	Elementary	138.00	3.77	0.62	2.00	5.12	0.01
	Middle School	63.00	4.02	0.58	360.00		
	High School	162.00	3.98	0.71			
	Total	363.00	3.91	0.66			

Table 3

Scheffe Post Hoc Comparisons for Teachers' Dimension of Ethical Sensitivity by School Level

	(I) School Level	(J) School Level	<i>Mean D.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Identifying the consequences of actions and options	Elementary	High School	-.21209*	0.08	0.02
		Middle	-.25751*	0.10	0.04
	High School	Elementary	.21209*	0.08	0.02
		Middle	-0.05	0.10	0.90
	Middle	Elementary	.25751*	0.10	0.04
		High School	0.05	0.10	0.90

school level. Additionally, variances were evaluated using one-way analysis of variances (ANOVA) and subsequent Scheffe post hoc tests.

Results and Analysis

The following research question was assessed: Will there be differences in ethical sensitivity of teachers of ELs at various school levels - elementary (*N* = 138), middle school (*N* = 63), and high school (*N* = 162). To properly address the research question, outliers were eliminated. The means were similar across the dimensions. The study revealed ethical sensitivity of teachers of ELs in the mainstream classroom and school levels. Ninety percent of the teachers who participated in the current study reported having ELs in their classroom, although nearly the same percentage indicated not having certification in Teaching English as a Second Language or Bilingual Education.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the differences in ethical sensitivity of teachers among those at various school levels, the predictor variable, among other dimensions of ethical sensitivity, the criterion variable. Results (**Table 2**) indicated significant differences in the dimension of Identifying the Consequences of Actions and Options, $F(2, 360) = 5.12$, $p = 0.01$.

Multiple comparisons of the Scheffe post hoc tests determined the source of the specific mean differences. The results in **Table 3** revealed strong significance in the dimension of the focus herein, Identifying the Consequences of

Actions and Options. The perceived levels of ethical sensitivity in this dimension among middle school teachers ($p = .04$) and high school teachers ($p = .02$) was significantly higher than that of elementary school teachers.

Summary of Findings

The study's findings were based on the analysis of data collected on the nature and degree of ethical sensitivity of the sample population. Descriptive statistics provided a sense of levels of self-reported perceptions of overall ethical sensitivity among elementary, middle, and high school teachers in select school districts of Long Island. The overall mean for teachers' ethical sensitivity indicates respondents tend to agree with the Ethical Sensitivity Scale statements. Ethical sensitivity was investigated and compared by teachers' employment at various school levels. The middle and high school teachers had significantly higher self-reported scores in the Identifying the Consequences of Actions and Options dimension compared to that of elementary school teachers. Teachers' self-reported scores in this dimension are still in the range that indicates agreement with the statements on the scale ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.66$), although lower than the overall self-reported ethical sensitivity ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.40$) and that of other dimensions on the scale.

The significant findings of ethical sensitivity in Identifying the Consequences of Actions and Options dimension among teachers of ELs in high schools and middle schools versus elementary schools could be attributed to

the nature of ethical situations that might arise among a population of older students in middle and high school levels. Further, with the nature of the more mature situations and choices faced by their secondary students, it is reasonable to infer that secondary level teachers have a greater awareness and recognition of ethical matters, as probed by statements in Identifying the Consequences of Actions and Options dimension. Also, these secondary teachers might have a stronger sense of their own biases, as a result of being in the midst of maturing and more independent students awakening their sensitivity to broader personal and social choices.

Recommendations

The current study has implications for future practice in a number of ways. There is room for improvement that may be accomplished through the following key recommendations:

1. Meaningful character education programs should be developed further at the elementary school level.
2. District administrators should participate in and encourage professional development among their faculty to support moral decision making at all levels.
3. Ethics classes should be mandated in school curricula.
4. Further research in different educational contexts, including teaching with additional exploration into higher education and adult education should be explored, given the relationships discovered with the criterion variable of teachers' school level.

Conclusion

The research discussed serves to shed valuable light on the abstract topic of ethical sensitivity, which had been explored marginally in the context of education, and apparently not at all in the education of ELs after thorough investigation. With the burgeoning population of culturally and linguistically diverse students expanding within public schools across the nation and the myriad of challenges they and those who educate them face, ethical sensitivity matters if the educational process and its beneficiaries are to succeed in molding students into valued and valuable citizens. The success and future of ELs rests in the hands of government policy-makers, school boards, administrators and the teachers who look to these decision-makers for support and guidance.

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