Peer Victimization Among English Learners: Examining the Role of Dual-Language and English-Only Programs

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Abstract

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Introduction

While there is an extensive body of literature on English Learners' (ELs) academic outcomes, relatively few studies have examined peer victimization and broader socio-emotional well-being in EL populations. This study contributes to this underexplored area by demonstrating that EL students' experiences of bullying are influenced by their instructional environment. The current study's findings suggest that educational programs do more than shape language proficiency and academic trajectories - they also play a critical role in students' social interactions and overall well-being.

Given that peer victimization has long-term consequences on academic success, mental health, and social adjustment (Ttofi et al., 2014; Martinez, 2024), the lack of research on EL students' social experiences represents a critical gap in the field. By examining the relationship between EL status, instructional setting, and peer victimization, this current study underscores the need for more interdisciplinary work that bridges education policy, developmental psychology, and bilingual education research. A deeper understanding of how language policies and instructional settings shape students' socio-emotional development is essential for designing inclusive and supportive learning environments for EL students.

Peer Victimization

Peer victimization or bullying is associated with a range of negative psychological, social, and academic outcomes (Lawrence et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2017). Early childhood bullying has been linked to anxiety, depression,

loneliness, and low self-esteem, which can persist into adolescence and adulthood (Martinez et al, 2024; Ttofi et al., 2011; Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Victimized children report increased physical health problems and reduced engagement in education, leading to lower academic achievement and school dropout rates (Turunen et al., 2021). While causation is difficult to establish in all cases, studies have demonstrated that the effects of childhood bullying can last into adulthood, influencing mental health, career progression, and interpersonal relationships (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Callahan, 2023).

Moreover, peer victimization can create a cycle of poor outcomes, where children who experience bullying are at higher risk of future victimization due to psychological vulnerabilities that emerge from earlier experiences (Walters & Espelage, 2020; Christina et al., 2021). However, not all victims of bullying are equally affected - some demonstrate resilience, which may be linked to their coping mechanisms and social support systems (Ttofi et al., 2011). Research suggests that children who develop adaptive coping strategies are better able to navigate peer victimization without experiencing long-term negative outcomes (Compas et al., 2017).

Bullying is not limited to middle or high school students - it begins in early childhood. Several studies have found high rates of peer victimization in elementary schools, particularly among students in grades K-5 (Orpinas et al., 2003; Glew et al., 2005). Orpinas et al. (2003) found that 32% of students in kindergarten through second grade exhibited aggressive behaviors, while another study revealed that 80% of students in grades 3-5 had engaged in at

least one aggressive act. More recent research confirms that peer victimization is a universally persistent issue in elementary schools, with minority and linguistically diverse students being more vulnerable (Rose et al., 2011; Jansen et al., 2016; Moutappa et al., 2004). Studies have also shown that children who experience bullying in early elementary grades are more likely to develop social anxiety and academic disengagement later in life, reinforcing the need for early intervention (Glew et al., 2005).

Peer Victimization Among ELs: The Intersection of Language, Immigration, and Social Exclusion

The relationship between immigrant status, EL classification, and peer victimization remains understudied because of its complex interactions with race. Research indicates that Asian and Hispanic students are disproportionately targeted due to language barriers and cultural differences (Qin et al., 2008; Mouttapa et al., 2004). Immigrant status and linguistic diversity have been found to be predictors of victimization (Bayram Özdemir, 2016). As such, bias-based harassment against ELs has been linked to lower academic performance and increased absenteeism (Green et al., 2024).

Several theories explain why ELs are at greater risk of peer victimization, particularly in monolingual school environments. Social identity theory suggests that students strive to belong to dominant social groups, leading to exclusion of those perceived as different (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). ELs in programs where they are minoritized may face discrimination

due to learned biases of their peers from their social environments towards linguistic and cultural differences (Mazzone et al., 2018).

Alternately, segmented assimilation theory explains how immigrant students' adaptation influences their school experiences and long-term social and economic outcomes (Zhou & Xiong, 2005). While some assimilate into mainstream culture, others face downward assimilation, increasing their exposure to risk factors such as bullying and exclusion (Peguero, 2009). The likelihood of victimization varies based on school diversity, with peer victimization more prevalent in ethnically heterogeneous classrooms (Vervoort et al., 2008). These findings highlight the need for more research on how race, language, and cultural adaptation shape bullying experiences among ELs, with urgent need to examine how school policies and instructional models influence EL students' social experiences and well-being.

Understanding Peer Victimization Through an Ecological Systems Perspective

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the causes of peer victimization (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). At the microsystem level, family dynamics, peer relationships, and teacher-student interactions shape children's experiences with bullying (Hong & Espelage, 2012). The mesosystem focuses on the school environment, where factors such as teacher attitudes, school policies, and peer group norms contribute to whether victimization is tolerated or prevented. The exosystem level considers broader societal factors, such as

media representation of violence and socioeconomic disparities, which can lead to higher aggression levels in schools. At the macrosystem level, cultural beliefs about language, race, and social integration influence how minority students are treated in schools (Green et al., 2024). Finally, the chronosystem highlights the impact of historical and life events, such as immigration experiences and policy changes affecting ELs, on victimization patterns (Peguero, 2009).

Considering this framework, the current study aims to isolate the effects of school-based factors, particularly instructional models, while accounting for the range of interconnected influences across these ecological levels. The present study is uniquely positioned to achieve this by utilizing a dataset that incorporates key variables across multiple contexts, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis of how school environments shape peer victimization experiences.

The Importance of Examining Peer Victimization in Dual-Language vs. English-Only Programs

Understanding peer victimization among ELs in different educational settings is essential as different instructional models might serve as protective factors that mitigate bullying. Bilingual education programs have been shown to cultivate a more inclusive school climate for ELs by recognizing and valuing their linguistic abilities, in contrast to English-only environments that often adopt a "deficit-oriented" perspective, where multilingualism is viewed as a barrier rather than an asset (Dabach, 2014; Peguero, 2009; Porter et al.,

2023; Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006). Schools that embrace bilingualism and cultural diversity tend to promote linguistic proficiency and cultural competency by valuing and applying ELs' home languages as the basis to advance learning and create inclusive environments (Mavrogordato et al., 2024). Further, bilingualism has been associated with enhanced cognitive control and conflict resolution skills, which may contribute to lower peer victimization rates among bilingual students. Research suggests that bilingual individuals frequently engage in language selection and suppression processes, strengthening their ability to manage social interactions and navigate conflicts effectively (Green, 2013). These cognitive advantages may help bilingual students mitigate peer bullying by fostering adaptive problem-solving strategies and improving social integration.

Despite its demonstrated benefits, bilingual education has historically faced political opposition, institutional biases, and resource limitations (Hakuta, 2011; Flores & García, 2017). However, recent policy shifts - such as the repeal of English-only laws in several states and the nationwide adoption of the Seal of Biliteracy reflect growing support for multilingualism (Mitchell, 2019).

Yet, while bilingual education is gaining momentum, its impact on ELs' social experiences, particularly in relation to peer victimization, remains underexplored. If bilingual programs foster more inclusive environments, do they also mitigate bullying and other forms of peer victimization more effectively than English-only settings? It remains unclear whether the

protective effects against bullying stem from the instructional model itself—specifically, Dual-Language programs—or if broader school climate factors, such as a stronger emphasis on academic achievement or differences in student ethnic composition, are the key drivers of variations in victimization rates compared to English-only settings. (Stephenson et al., 2024). This research is also significant because it moves beyond academic outcomes to consider the social and emotional realities of EL students, ensuring that educational policies not only enhance learning but also create safer, more supportive environments.

Programs for Language Instruction

U.S. schools provide several instructional models for ELs that aim to develop both academic skills and English proficiency. These programs can broadly be categorized into two groups: Dual-Language programs, which support literacy in both English and the students' home language, and English-only programs, which focus exclusively on English literacy (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). These instructional choices not only shape students' linguistic and academic development but may also influence their social well-being (Valentino & Reardon, 2015).

Dual-Language programs vary in their emphasis on English proficiency versus bilingualism. Two-way immersion (TWI) and heritage language programs are designed to cultivate fluency in both a student's home language and English, promoting bilingualism as an asset. Maintenance bilingual programs and transitional bilingual programs also incorporate

students' home languages but with a stronger focus on transitioning to English, though maintenance bilingual programs provide some continued support after the transition. A key feature of all these programs is that instruction is delivered by teachers who are fluent in both English and the students' home language, allowing for a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment.

English-only programs, in contrast, focus entirely on developing ELs' proficiency in English, often through immersion models that limit the use of students' home languages. Instruction is adjusted to students' English proficiency levels, but the learning environment is exclusively English-speaking. Pull-out English as a Second Language programs remove EL students from their mainstream classrooms for dedicated English instruction, while push-in ESL programs provide English language support within mainstream classrooms. Sheltered English instruction (SEI) classrooms, which serve students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, use modified instructional strategies to teach academic content while developing English skills. SEI programs aim to transition ELs into mainstream classrooms as quickly as possible, reinforcing English as the dominant and, at times, the only accepted language of instruction.

EL students in these programs may face a heightened risk of peer victimization, as linguistic differences become more pronounced when they are placed in all-English environments without structured support for their first language. Linguistic marginalization can make these students more

vulnerable to bullying, particularly if they struggle with English fluency, have noticeable accents, or display limited vocabulary (Green et al., 2024). Unlike Dual-Language models, which encourage cross-cultural interactions, English-only programs tend to isolate EL students, limiting their opportunities for peer bonding and increasing their exposure to social exclusion (Peguero, 2009).

While prior research has suggested that instructional programs may differentially influence peer victimization among ELs, evidence at the national level remains inconclusive. Existing studies have largely relied on localized samples or correlational designs, limiting the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, few studies have employed quasi-experimental approaches capable of drawing causal inferences regarding the relationship between Dual-Language instruction and peer victimization.

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Class of 2011 (ECLS-K:2011) provides a nationally representative dataset that tracks whether students participate in Dual-Language or English-only programs. Teachers report on students' instructional settings, allowing for an analysis of how these models relate to students' academic and social experiences, including exposure to peer victimization. This current study contributes to the literature by leveraging this dataset and employing quasi-experimental methods to assess whether being classified as EL and whether exposure to Dual-Language programs influences EL students' experiences of peer victimization, thereby addressing critical gaps in the current empirical evidence.

This study seeks to examine peer victimization patterns among three non-mutually exclusive groups: ever ELs, Dual-Language program participants, and English-only program participants. By analyzing how peer victimization manifests in different instructional settings, this research aims to determine whether bilingual education provides a protective effect against bullying or whether broader school policies and attitudes toward linguistic diversity play a more significant role in shaping EL students' experiences.

To guide this analysis, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does being classified as EL influence students' experiences of peer victimization, and do these experiences vary over time across EL subgroups?

2. Does participation in a Dual-Language or English-Only program have a differential effect on peer victimization among ELs?

Data and Methodology

Data Source

The ECLS-K:2011 study follows approximately 18,174 students from kindergarten through fifth grade, providing extensive information on student demographics, academic achievement, school environments, and social experiences, including peer victimization and language instruction programs. While the dataset is longitudinal, peer victimization was only measured in 2014, 2015, and 2016. However, the availability of multiple years still allows

for an examination of how peer victimization experiences evolve over time while accounting for individual- and school-level factors.

This current study utilizes a final analytical sample of 9,562 children, resulting in 20,644 observations with non-missing data. These observations reflect multiple waves of data collection within the years where peer victimization was assessed, enabling a robust analysis of the relationship between language instruction type, EL status, and peer victimization.

EL Status and Language Instruction Program Classification

The key independent variables include Ever EL status (students who were classified as ELs at any point in the dataset), and language instruction type (Dual-Language versus English-only programs). The variable EverEL compares outcomes of students those who have been classified as ELs at any point in the dataset with those who have never been classified as ELs. The variable *DualLang* is coded as 1 if the student attends a Dual-Language focused program in that respective year and 0 if the student attend English-Only focused program.

The current study distinguishes between Dual-Language programs and English-only programs, following ECLS-K:2011 classifications: (1) Dual-Language programs: These include heritage language programs, transitional bilingual programs, developmental bilingual programs, and TWI programs. These programs emphasize varying levels of bilingual literacy and often provide instruction in both English and students' home language, and (2) English-only programs: These include sheltered English instruction, SEI, pull-

out ESL, and push-in ESL programs. These models focus solely on English acquisition and often minimize the use of students' home languages.

Outcome Variable

The primary dependent variable is peer victimization, measured on a 1-5 scale based on student-reported survey items. The scale was adapted from Espelage and Holt's (2001) 21-item measure of bullying and victimization, which captures peer influences and psychosocial correlates of early adolescent bullying behaviors. Peer victimization is coded as the mean response across multiple survey questions that reflect the frequency of bullying experiences.

Control Variables

This current study includes student-, school-, and parent-level control variables to account for factors influencing peer victimization and language instruction experiences. Student-level controls include demographic characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, and special education status, as well as socioeconomic indicators like eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch. Health status and prior experiences of peer victimization are also considered, as they may influence students' vulnerability to bullying. School-level controls include measures of EL concentration, overall student enrolment, and the socioeconomic composition of the school, which shape peer dynamics and school climate. Parent-level controls capture family involvement in education and household structure, including parental engagement and the number of siblings, as these factors may affect students' social support and school experiences.

Descriptive Summary

The data provides insight into the sociodemographic characteristics of students, peer victimization patterns, and how these trends evolve over time based on EL classification and language instruction type. Table 1 presents the baseline characteristics of the sample, showing 13.8% of students were classified as EL at some point in the data. 4% of students (26.8% of the ELs) participate in Dual-Language programs, whereas 11.7% in English-Only programs. The sample is racially diverse, with 49.9% White, 33.9% Black, 25.3% Latinx, and 8.5% Asian students. Additionally, 56.5% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, reflecting a significant proportion from lower-income households. Health status is mostly positive, with 56.2% reporting excellent health, but 2.4% fall into the fair or poor health category. Parental involvement varies, with 24.4% of parents reporting no involvement, while 47.3% are somewhat involved and 28.3% are highly involved.

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics of peer victimization across EL subgroups, showing that Ever EL students report slightly lower peer victimization (2.03) than Never EL students (2.12). However, differences emerge when considering language instruction type. EL students in Dual-Language programs report the lowest levels of victimization (1.98), whereas those in English-Only programs experience higher rates (2.12), similar to Never EL students. These findings suggest that Dual-Language program environment may be associated with bullying experiences for EL students.

-1 further illustrates the trends in peer victimization over time, revealing a general decline in victimization on average across all groups, However, while there may be an observed steep decline in peer victimization for those in the Dual-Language program type, it does not capture changes in victimization due to movement into Dual-Language programs. That is, the observed trends reflect differences in peer victimization across years within each instructional setting and classification but do not indicate a causal relationship between transitioning into a Dual-Language program and victimization outcomes.

While the descriptive trends suggest that ELs in Dual-Language programs experienced the steepest decline in victimization, these patterns do not account for other factors that may be linked to both program participation and peer victimization. Students are not randomly assigned to Dual-Language programs, and placement may be influenced by socioeconomic background, school characteristics, parental preferences, and prior academic performance. Additionally, schools that offer Dual-Language programs may differ from other schools in ways that impact peer victimization, such as differences in school climate, teacher training, peer composition, and available resources.

To evaluate whether Dual-Language programs have an independent distinguishable effect compared to English-only programs on peer victimization, it is necessary to account for these potential confounders. The next section outlines the analytical strategy used to estimate the effect of Dual-Language program participation while controlling for student-, school-,

and family-level characteristics. This approach provides a more robust assessment of whether the observed differences in victimization rates are attributable to Dual-Language programs themselves or driven by underlying selection factors.

Analytical Strategy

This study employs two comparative analyses. The first comparison examines students who were classified as ELs at any point in the dataset (Ever ELs) against those who were never classified as ELs (non-ELs). This comparison is conducted using two models: one that compares students on average between schools and another that employs a school fixed-effects model to compare students within the same school, thereby accounting for school-level heterogeneity.

The second comparison is restricted to ELs and focuses on differences between students enrolled in Dual-Language programs and those in Eng-Only programs. This analysis does not include ELs prior to their classification or after their reclassification. Instead, the comparison groups consist of ELs who were enrolled in either of those programs during the years 2014, 2015, and 2016 and for whom peer victimization scores are available.

This analysis is conducted using linear regression models with school- and individual-level fixed effects to estimate the association between language instruction programs and peer victimization. Fixed effects models control for time-invariant individual differences and unobserved characteristics that may influence both program assignment and bullying experiences.

Baseline Model Specification

The baseline models estimate the association between student's EL classification and peer victimization, and the differential effects of attending a Dual Language program versus an English-Only program.

$$Y_{ist} = \beta_1 \; EverEL_{ist} + + \beta_2 F_{ist} + \beta_3 \; L_{ist} + \beta_4 \; Y_{ist-1} + \beta_5 \; C_{ist} + \varepsilon_{ist} \tag{1}$$

$$Y_{ist} = \beta_1 \; DualLang\_vs\_EngOnly_{ist} + \beta_2 F_{ist} + \beta_3 \; L_{ist} + \beta_4 \; Y_{ist-1} + \beta_5 \; C_{ist} + \varepsilon_{ist} \tag{2}$$

Y_{ist} represents the peer victimization score for student i in school s at time t, $EverEL_{ist}$ is an indicator for students who were ever classified as ELs. DualLang_vs_EngOnly is coded as 1 if the program that student participated in was Dual-Language and 0 if it is English-only. Y_{ist-1} represents prior year's peer victimization measure. C_{ist} includes child characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, household size, socioeconomic status, health and reading scores as proxies for academic achievement. F_{ist} captures family background factors, including parental involvement. L_{ist} accounts for school characteristics, such as percentage of ELs in school, and school's poverty index. ε_{ist} represents the error term, that is clustered at the school level to account for the nesting of students within schools.

School Fixed Effects

The experiences of ELs may differ across schools for both observed and unobserved reasons, and the baseline model does not account for these differences. Schools may have distinct policies, climates, and cultures that shape student interactions and influence levels of peer victimization. For example, some schools may implement targeted anti-bullying initiatives,

create inclusive learning environments, or provide resources that foster social-emotional well-being. If these efforts are systematically related to the presence of Dual-Language programs, the coefficient of *DualLang_vs_EngOnly* may capture not just the effect of language program type but also these unobserved school-level factors.

Additionally, family characteristics may influence both school selection and peer victimization experiences. Parents who value bilingualism and cultural diversity might be more likely to enroll their children in Dual-Language programs, and these schools may also cultivate environments that mitigate bullying and social exclusion. If students in Dual-Language programs are more likely to attend schools with lower rates of peer victimization due to these unobserved factors, failing to account for school-level characteristics could bias the estimates. By including school-fixed effects, this study effectively compares EL and non-EL students within the same school for the first research question and EL students who attend in Dual-Language programs versus those in Eng-Only programs within rather than across schools for the second question. This approach accounts for school-level differences in policies, student demographics, and other unmeasured institutional factors, ensuring that the estimated effect of Dual-Language program enrollment on peer victimization is not confounded by broader school characteristics.

By controlling for the time-invariant school-specific characteristics, such as leadership, curriculum, hiring practices, or even school mission or

ethos, assuming those attributes remain unchanged over time, the model

allows estimating the effect of within rather than between-school variation

(Author, [year]; Gottfried, 2019). The school fixed effects models are

specified as:

$$Y_{ist} = \beta_1 DualLang\_vs\_EngOnly_{ist} + \beta_2 \mathbf{X}_{ist} + \delta_s + \varepsilon_{ist} \tag{3}$$

$$Y_{ist} = \beta_1 EverEL_{ist} + \beta_2 \mathbf{X}_{ist} + \delta_s + \varepsilon_{ist} \tag{4}$$

where δ_s represents school fixed effects, controlling for unobservable

differences between schools. This model ensures that students are compared

only to their peers within the same schools.

Student Fixed Effects

A concern not addressed in the baseline or school-fixed effects model

is the potential for unobserved individual-level heterogeneity or within-school

(i.e., between-classroom) sorting. Schools may implement systematic, though

unobserved, placement strategies that affect the likelihood of experiencing

peer victimization. For example, a principal might intentionally place ELs

who exhibit stronger social skills or greater resilience in classrooms with

higher instances of peer victimization, anticipating that these students can

better navigate such environments. Conversely, administrators may assign

more socially vulnerable students to teachers known for fostering inclusive

classroom climates, thereby reducing their likelihood of victimization.

Such sorting mechanisms would introduce bias, as differences in peer

victimization between ELs in Dual-Language and Eng-Only programs might

reflect unobserved characteristics that influence both classroom placement and

victimization experiences, rather than the causal effects of program enrolment itself.

To test this possibility, I regressed *DualLang_vs_EngOnly* on individual child characteristics (included as controls) using a school fixed effects model. While none of the observed characteristics were statistically significant predictors of classroom placement, it is plausible that principals or teachers make placement decisions based on unobserved factors – such as a student's engagement level or parental values – that are not captured in administrative data but may still influence the likelihood of experiencing victimization.

To address this concern, the study employs a student-fixed effects model. Here each student serves as their own control over time. This model leverages repeated observations of the same student across different years, effectively isolating within-student variation in peer victimization experiences. By doing so, only time-varying covariates - such as changes in school composition, teacher characteristics, or student health - remain in the model, while all time-invariant observed and unobserved student characteristics are controlled for.

In other words, this approach eliminates confounding due to stable, individual level differences and allows for a better estimate the causal effect of program enrolment on peer victimization. If classroom-level sorting is a significant concern, this model should yield a more precise estimate of the relationship by ensuring that comparisons are made within students over time,

rather than across different students with potentially different underlying vulnerabilities to victimization.

The student fixed effects specification is as follows:

$$Y_{ist} = \beta_1 DualLang\_vs\_EngOnly_{ist} + \beta_2 \mathbf{X}_{ist} + \delta_i + \varepsilon_{ist} \tag{5}$$

where δ_i represents student fixed effects, accounting for time-invariant individual characteristics. The term X_{ist} includes all time-varying covariates from the baseline model. Time-invariant variables, such as gender and race, are excluded since they are absorbed by the fixed effects. Models with EL status are also excluded since there would be absorbed by individual fixed effects well.

To strengthen the justification for using fixed-effects models and incorporating lagged peer victimization measures, this study follows established methodological standards for estimating causal effects in observational research. Lagged dependent variable is included to remove bias that may originate from current and past unobservable factors that influence both attendance in Dual-Language programs and peer victimization. For instance, families who chose to send their children to Dual-Language programs may be culturally different, which may relate to the extent of peer victimization in schools and attendance in Dual-Language programs. The one-year lagged outcome term controls for any unobserved historical factors that influence both peer victimization and program selection in addition to individual fixed effects, accounting for individual-level characteristics that are consistent over time (Gottfried, 2019). Frank et al. (in press) highlight the

significance of including pre-treatment measures - such as lagged absenteeism or test scores - in minimizing bias in non-randomized studies. Their analysis of Within Study Comparisons indicates that accounting for pre-tests can eliminate between 84% and 90% of bias when compared to randomized controlled trials. This empirical evidence underscores the value of prior outcomes as proxies for unobserved confounders, particularly when the outcomes demonstrate relative stability over shorter timeframes.

Therefore, while the methodological choices in the study strengthen causal inference, it is important to acknowledge that, despite these efforts to mitigate bias, the estimated effects in this study should be interpreted as the best approximations of causal effects rather than definitive causal estimates. Concerns regarding potential residual confounding are valid, and the results should be understood within the broader context of quasi-experimental research in education policy.

Results

EL Status and Peer Victimization

The results presented in Table 3 examine the relationship between EL classification and peer victimization, comparing Ever EL students to their non-EL peers. Across both the baseline model and the more robust school-year fixed effects model, being ever classified as EL is negatively associated with experiencing peer victimization. Specifically, the coefficient for Ever EL is -0.10 after controlling for school and year fixed effects. These results

indicate that Ever EL students experience lower levels of peer victimization, even after accounting for school-level characteristics and year effects.

Regarding racial differences, Latinx and Asian students report significantly lower levels of peer victimization compared to White students, while Black students show no significant difference in the baseline model but exhibit a small negative effect in the school fixed effects model ($\beta = -0.09$). Parental involvement also emerges as a protective factor, with students whose parents have high involvement experiencing lower levels of peer victimization compared to those that experience low parental involvement. Additional factors, such as receiving free or reduced-price lunch and being classified in the special education status are positively associated with peer victimization. Conversely, female students, as well as those in excellent or very good health, report significantly lower levels of victimization.

Dual Language Program Exposure and Peer Victimization

Table 4 shows whether participation in Dual-Language programs influences peer victimization experiences for EL students, compared to those in English-only instructional settings. The results demonstrate a significant and negative association between Dual-Language program exposure and peer victimization across all models. In the baseline model, the coefficient for Dual-Language program exposure is -0.17, indicating that students in these programs experience lower levels of peer victimization than their peers in English-only programs. This effect becomes even stronger and remains negative and significant in the most robust student-year fixed effects model,

with attending in Dual-Language being associated with .41 units lower peer victimization, holding all else constant.

The stronger effect in the school-year fixed effects model suggests that school-level factors may contribute to victimization differences between Dual-Language and English-only programs. Since school fixed effects models control for time-invariant characteristics within schools, they allow for comparisons between students in the same school, effectively isolating the role of instructional programs from broader school-related differences. Further, to reiterate the significance of the student fixed effects model, which compares students to themselves over time, indicates that the observed effect is not due to school selection biases but linked to the experience of being in a Dual-Language program itself. The fact that the negative effect of Dual-Language program participation remains significant even after accounting for student fixed effects provides strong evidence that Dual-Language programs reduce peer victimization for EL students.

Discussion

Lower Peer Victimization Among ELs

The finding that Ever EL students report lower levels of peer victimization compared to their non-EL peers aligns with previous research suggesting that EL students may experience distinct peer dynamics that reduce their risk of victimization. One potential explanation is that EL students are often socially clustered with other ELs, forming supportive peer networks that offer protection from bullying (Peguero, 2009; Stephenson et al., 2024).

Studies indicate that students who belong to strong, identity-based peer groups are less likely to be targeted by bullies, as peer group cohesion acts as a buffer against social exclusion and harassment (Hatchel et al., 2019).

Another explanation may stem from teacher and school-level interventions that specifically address ELs' social integration. Many schools with high EL enrollment implement targeted anti-bullying programs and culturally responsive socio-emotional learning programs that foster inclusivity and reduce victimization risks (Espelage et al., 2015). Moreover, EL students may be perceived differently by peers, with some studies suggesting that linguistic and cultural diversity can sometimes shield EL students from direct verbal bullying, though they may still experience subtle forms of exclusion (Peguero, 2009).

Peer Victimization and Instruction Programs for ELs

Prior research has largely focused on academic outcomes for ELs, with little attention given to how programmatic differences influence their socio-emotional well-being. Additionally, a central question in the bilingual education debate is whether Dual-Language programs offer distinct social benefits for EL students compared to English-only models. The findings from this study provide empirical support for the protective role of Dual-Language programs, as ELs in bilingual education settings experience lower levels of peer victimization than their peers in English-only instruction. This aligns with prior research suggesting that Dual-Language programs create inclusive

environments by fostering positive intergroup relationships and reducing linguistic stigma (Porter et al., 2023).

One possible explanation for this effect is that Dual-Language programs normalize bilingualism, reducing the social hierarchies that often position English monolingualism as the dominant standard in school settings (Dabach, 2014). Unlike English-only models, where EL students may feel isolated due to linguistic barriers, Dual-Language programs structure learning environments where bilingualism is shared and valued, promoting greater peer integration (Porter et al., 2023). Prior research suggests that EL students in English-only programs often face higher rates of social exclusion and bias-based harassment, as these settings may reinforce deficit-based perspectives of non-native English speakers (Dabach et al., 2017; Stephenson, 2024).

However, while this current study finds evidence supporting the protective effects of Dual-Language programs, more research is needed to understand their underlying mechanisms. It remains unclear whether these reductions in victimization stem from bilingualism itself, the inclusive climate of Dual-Language programs, or broader school culture differences. Future research should explore how teacher attitudes, peer norms, and school-wide policies interact to shape the social experiences of EL students.

Implications for Policy and Future Research

The findings of this study have important policy implications, particularly for the structuring of EL programs. The evidence suggests that Dual-Language education may serve as a protective factor against peer

victimization, reinforcing the need for expanding bilingual program access as part of comprehensive EL education policies. Given that EL students in English-only programs face higher rates of peer victimization, policymakers should consider how school climate, language policies and instructional models impact the social well-being of EL students. Schools implementing English-only instruction must adopt strategies to mitigate the social risks EL students face, ensuring they are supported both academically and socially.

Future research should continue to examine the social dimensions of bilingual education, moving beyond test scores to assess how instructional models shape students' peer relationships, self-esteem, and school belonging. Given that the gap between Dual-Language and English-Only program outcomes appears to increase over time, longitudinal studies could further explore whether the protective effects of Dual-Language programs persist beyond elementary school, particularly as EL students transition into middle and high school. Additionally, research should investigate whether the benefits of bilingual education extend beyond EL students to native English-speaking peers, as integrated learning environments may foster a more inclusive school climate and reduce bias-based victimization for all students.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the ongoing discussion on the effectiveness of instructional programs for ELs by demonstrating that programmatic differences matter when it comes to peer victimization. While EL students overall report lower levels of peer victimization, the findings provide

empirical support for the protective role of Dual-Language education. Instructional environments influence more than just language proficiency - they also shape social well-being and peer experiences.

Given the limited research on peer victimization and socio-emotional outcomes among EL students, this study highlights the need for a more holistic approach to bilingual education research - one that considers academic success alongside social integration and emotional well-being. Expanding the scope of future research to examine the long-term social benefits of Dual-Language programs will be critical in ensuring that language policies support both linguistic development and positive peer relationships for EL students.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1.

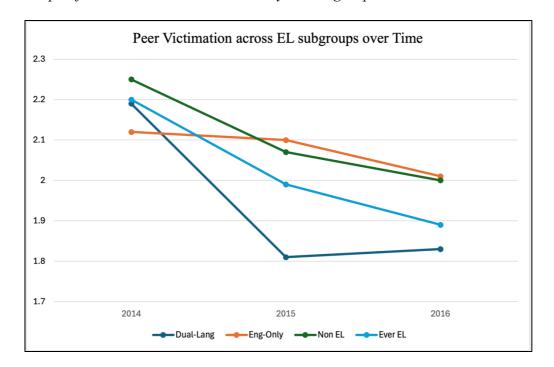*Sociodemographic Characteristics of Respondents at Baseline Statistics*

	Proportion/Mean	SD
EL-classified students groups		
Ever EL	13.8%	
Dual-Lang Program	4%	
Eng-Only Program	11.7%	
Reading Scores (standardized)	.76	.76
Student Gender		
Female	48.8%	
Male	51.2%	
Student Free or Reduced Priced Lunch Eligible	56.5%	
Student's Special Education Status	11.8%	
Student Race		
White	49.9%	
Black	33.9%	
Latinx	25.3%	
Asian	8.5%	
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1%	
Native American/Alaskan	1%	
Multiple races	4.6%	
Student Health		
Excellent	56.2%	
Very Good	28.7%	
Good	12.8%	
Fair or Poor	2.4%	
Number of Siblings	1.57	1.13
Parent Characteristics		
Parental Involvement		
Not involved	24.4%	
Somewhat involved	47.3%	
Very involved	28.3%	
School measures		
School District Composite Poverty	19.87	10.46
Total English Learners in School	15.6%	
Percent of Students Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible	13%	
Locale		
City	33.3%	
Suburban	38.1%	
Town	7.5%	
Rural	21.1%	

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables by EL-classified subgroups

	NeverEL		EverEL		EL: Dual Lang. Focused Program		EL: English Only Focussed Program	
	M/%	SD	M/%	SD	M/%	SD	M/%	SD
Peer Victimization	2.12	.95	2.03	.92	1.98	.88	2.12	.96
N	(15663)		(2511)		(709)		(2124)	

Figure 1.

Graph of Peer Victimization overtime by EL subgroups

Note: Ever EL students are divided into two instructional model categories: English-Only and Dual-Language programs. This distinction helps assess whether language instruction program type influences peer victimization trends among EL students.

Table 3.

Regression Results of English Learner Status on Peer Victimization

	Baseline Model	Model with School & Year Fixed Effects
Ever Eng. Learner	-0.11***	-0.10***
	(0.03)	(0.03)
Lagged Peer Victimization	0.51***	0.46***
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Student Characteristics		
Free or Reduced Priced Lunch	0.07***	0.06**
	(0.02)	(0.02)
No. of Siblings in Household	-0.03***	-0.03***
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Female student	-0.04**	-0.04*
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Student Health (Poor & Fair health omitted)		
Excellent Health	-0.12**	-0.13**
	(0.05)	(0.07)
Very good Health	-0.09*	-0.11
	(0.05)	(0.07)
Good Health	-0.06	-0.10
	(0.05)	(0.06)
Special Education Status	0.04	0.06*
	(0.02)	(0.03)
Student Race (White omitted)		
Black	0.02	-0.09**
	(0.03)	(0.05)
Latinx	-0.14***	-0.13***
	(0.02)	(0.03)
Asian	-0.06**	-0.12***
	(0.03)	(0.04)
Native Hawaiian/Pac. Islander	0.18	0.17
	(0.11)	(0.15)
Native American/Alaskan	-0.06	-0.11
	(0.08)	(0.12)
Multiple Races	-0.02	-0.04
	(0.04)	(0.05)
Standardized Reading Scores	-0.15***	-0.15***
	(0.03)	(0.04)
Parent Characteristics (Low parental involvement omitted)		
Parental Involvement – Medium	-0.03	-0.03
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Parent Involvement - High	-0.08***	-0.10***
	-0.03	-0.02
School Characteristics		
Total Number of English Learners	0.00	0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)
District Poverty Index	0.00***	0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Constant	1.29***	1.62***
	(0.0764)	(0.179)

Observations	11,210	11,210

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses (Clustered by School), *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table 4.

Regression Results of English Learner Dual Language Program Exposure on Peer Victimization

	Baseline Model	School-Year Fixed Effects Model	Student-year Fixed Effects Model
Dual-Lang Program Exposure	-0.17***	-0.57***	-0.41**
	(0.06)	(0.17)	(0.20)
Lagged Peer Victimization	0.39***	0.31***	-0.38***
	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.14)
Student Characteristics			
Free or Reduced Priced Lunch	0.03	0.17	
	(0.10)	(0.18)	
No. of Siblings in Household	-0.02	-0.01	-0.08
	(0.02)	(0.05)	(0.27)
Female student	-0.06	-0.04	
	(0.05)	(0.11)	
Excellent Health	-0.11	-0.16	-0.19
	(0.12)	(0.20)	(0.35)
Very good Health	-0.00	-0.03	-0.06
	(0.12)	(0.20)	(0.31)
Good Health	-0.07	-0.18	-0.05
	(0.11)	(0.18)	(0.33)
Fair or Poor Health	*Omitted*	*Omitted*	*Omitted*
Special Education Status	-0.01	-0.08	
	(0.07)	(0.13)	
Student Race (Reference Group: White)			
Black	-0.20	-.02	
	(0.30)	(0.32)	
Latinx	0.00	0.62**	
	(0.23)	(0.25)	
Asian	-0.01	0.38	
	(0.23)	(0.40)	
Native Hawaiian/Pac Islander	-0.48	-0.22	
	(0.30)	(0.68)	
Native American/Alaskan	-0.37	-1.06	
	(0.25)	(0.65)	
Multiple Races	-0.32	1.11***	
	(0.24)	(0.35)	
Standardized Reading Scores	-0.15	-0.11	-0.37
	(0.10)	(0.19)	(0.47)
Parent Characteristics (Parent Involvement – Low Omitted)			
Parent Involvement - Medium	0.09	0.11	0.04
	(0.06)	(0.11)	(0.15)
Parent Involvement - High	0.01	-0.02	0.02
	(0.08)	(0.13)	(0.26)
School Characteristics			
Total Number of English Learners	0.00	-0.00	-0.01
	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Percent of students with Free or Reduced Priced Lunch Status	-0.01	-0.32	-0.01
	(0.04)	(0.39)	(0.33)
District Poverty Index	0.00	0.15*	

	(0.00)	(0.08)	
Constant	1.29***	-1.73	4.00***
	(0.35)	(2.61)	(1.31)
Observations	982	982	1,008

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses (Clustered by School), *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.