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ELL Status or Learning Disability

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Abstract

Across the United States, increasing numbers of children whose first language, culture, and/or heritage is not English are being served in classrooms where English is the primary language in instruction. English Language Learners (ELLs) represent more than 5 million students in the United States, of which seventy-five percent are only Spanish-speaking. Many ELLs are facing the challenge of overcoming a language barrier to be academically successful, causing a risk of failure in increasing literacy demands. For educators working with ELLs in general education-related settings, their mission is to identify the root cause of their ELL student's reading difficulties before they are potentially identified as having a learning disability (LD). As this is not an easy process, it is becoming difficult for educators to determine what strategies to use to support the reading difficulties of ELLs with the potential reading disability. This research focuses on the following research questions: (1) examining how educators' beliefs and experiences are related to and impact their teaching of English language learners (ELLs), (2) determining if teachers are currently using evidence-based strategies to support reading achievement in ELL students, and (3) examining the relationship between ELL status and learning disability diagnosis.

Introduction

Should a language barrier cause a student to have an educational barrier? Across the United States, increasing numbers of children whose first language, culture, and/or heritage is not English are being found in classrooms where English is the primary language in instruction. While teachers may embrace student diversity in their classroom, students are still facing the challenge of overcoming a language barrier to be successful in their academics. Consequently, they may risk failure in increasing literacy demands throughout their education. For educators working with English language learners (ELLs) in education-related settings, the task is to identify the root cause of a student's reading difficulties which interfere with reading achievement. More specifically, reading difficulties of students with limited English language proficiency and those who may have a concealed learning disability are difficult to distinguish between.

Learning Disabilities

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), a specific learning disability (SLD), or learning disability (LD), is a developmental disorder that begins at school-age involving ongoing problems in learning academic skills such as reading, writing, and math. To be diagnosed with a learning disability, a person must have difficulties in at least one of the following areas, continuing for at least six months despite targeted help: (1) difficulty reading, (2) difficulty understanding the meaning of what is read, (3) difficulty with spelling, (4) difficulty with written expression, (5) difficulty understanding number concepts, facts, or calculation, and (6) difficulty with mathematical reasoning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Learning disabilities are not a result of poor instruction. Children with this disorder are often described as having unexpected academic

underachievement, meaning the child's test scores or grades are significantly below what would be expected at that grade level ability (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Learning difficulties are seen within the early school years in most children; however, a specific learning disorder may be more likely diagnosed as academic demands increase. This challenge is due to a child's specific needs not being met early enough, causing them to be behind other typically developing peers. Significant skills that may be impacted include decoding, reading comprehension, writing, spelling, math calculation, and math problem solving. If not treated, a learning disability can potentially lead to lower academic achievement, lower self-esteem, higher drop-out rates, higher psychological distress, and overall mental health problems (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

English Language Learners (ELLs)

When discussing the population of English language learners (ELLs), these individuals are students who come from homes where English is their second language. In the United States, ELLs represent more than 5 million students, of which 75 percent are only Spanish-speaking (Orosco, 2014). The challenges for many ELLs are not only overcoming a language barrier, but also achieving academically. In addition, ELLs at risk for reading failure or those who have been placed in special education are often the poorest readers in terms of decoding, word-reading, and fluency (Orosco, 2014). As special education teachers learn how to apply a skills-based instruction with ELLs, which implements instruction that focuses on essential learning components, they must understand the contexts in which content is being taught. ELLs bring a wealth of knowledge into any classroom; however, complex schooling processes, such as the identification of a learning disability, can cause educators to overlook their cultural learning experiences and influence their acquisition of reading skills (Orosco, 2014). As ELLs' cultural

and linguistic experiences are crucial to have in any classroom, teachers must use students'

cultural experiences in their instruction to help them learn to transfer knowledge and utilize

critical-thinking skills.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this review of the literature is to examine research that analyzes whether or not ELLs' reading difficulties are due to their status as an English language learner (ELL) or a learning disability (LD), as well as best practices for educators in addressing the needs of these students. The following topics will be reviewed: (1) ELLs with learning disabilities in special education, (2) reading intervention programs for ELLs with learning disabilities, and (3) teacher collaboration and best practices for identifying learning disabilities in ELLs.

(1) ELLs with Learning Disabilities in Special Education

Placement of ELLs in Special Education – Learning Support

Regardless of a deficiency in speaking English, ELLs may benefit from being placed in learning support services to address reading deficits. In some cases, early identification of a learning disability allows educators to adapt instruction to a child's learning needs before difficulties grow to be difficult to remediate (Hibel, 2012). On a related note, if ELLs are not entered into an English-speaking school or are not exposed to the language early enough, they may end up being placed in special education for learning disability needs. If an individual student with a learning disability misses early intervention opportunities, research suggests that the student will be correspondingly less successful in consequent schooling experiences (Hibel, 2012).

Given that the early childhood years of schooling contribute to academic success, educators are tasked with providing students equal educational opportunities and ensuring that those who have specific learning needs receive access to effective special education services (Hibel, 2012). Consequently, mistaking the identification of ELLs with a learning disability and

inappropriately placing them into special education often represents denying them of their equal opportunities in education. The process for identification, classification, assessment, and intervention of non-native English- speaking students can be viewed as extensive (Hibel, 2012). More specifically, the foundation for concerns of how to build upon an ELLs knowledge-base to properly identify their learning abilities has not been established.

Typically, native English-speaking children who are low-achieving readers are identified and provided with supports early in their schooling, depending on their area of need. ELLs, on the other hand, are evaluated more closely and are more likely to be recognized as at-risk for reading disabilities as early as kindergarten or before fourth grade (Rosenman, 2012). Given this circumstance, there is limited research that examines the connection between culture and teaching and learning to read. ELLs bring a wealth of cultural and linguistic knowledge into the classroom, although many of them face a complicated schooling process that influences their achievement in reading instruction (Orosco, 2014).

In research conducted by Rosenman (2012), classification of reading difficulties in ELLs is often based upon teachers' assumptions regarding limited oral language proficiency in the second language in the beginning stages of reading. Rosenman (2012) also found that education systems are failing to identify students' problems earlier due to difficulties in trying to differentiate between limited language proficiency and problems in learning to read. In such scenarios, dependence on an ELLs' oral language proficiency may be misleading and detrimental for educators and the child since both are unreliable predictors of basic reading skills.

Identification and placement of any disability requires valid and accurate measures (Rosenman, 2012). In the case of ELLs, there is a need for more intense analysis of reading assessment tools. According to Rosenman (2012), one of the most concerning areas of

identification of ELLs with learning disabilities is assessing oral language proficiency when learning to read. Oral language proficiency can be defined as the level of ability that an individual has in a specific language (Cole, 2014). Therefore, ELLs experience challenges learning how to read in a language that is not their native language. Before an ELLs reading achievement can be recognized as an issue, reading difficulties must first be recognized in regards to learning word recognition strategies and other reading techniques (Rosenman, 2012). Not only are ELLs at-risk for reading failure, but they are also the poorest readers in terms of decoding, word-reading, and fluency. These reading difficulties may cause them to be misplaced in special education (Orosco, 2014). To avoid future misplacement of ELLs, there is a need to address the gap between reading achievement and student performance by focusing on the quality of instruction.

ELL Response to RTI

One area of research that aims to determine reading achievement of ELLs is the use of Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI, a preventive approach that focuses on students' learning rates and levels of performance, is designed to help teachers make instructional decisions to support students through intervention sessions (McIntosh, 2007). Concerns in the special education field focus on linguistically diverse groups being over- and under-represented due to inappropriate assessment and instruction (Linan-Thompson, 2007). These concerns can come from inappropriate instruction, causing a learning disability in ELL students to be misidentified. While there is research on the effectiveness of RTI, there is not much on the effectiveness of RTI with ELLs (McIntosh, 2007). Therefore, RTI is in need of research on how to use eligibility and identification criteria to place ELLs with potential learning disabilities into proper instructional groups (Linan-Thompson, 2007). According to the recent authorization of IDEA (Individuals

with Disabilities Education Act), eligibility and identification criteria for those referred to special education include the following: "The LEA [Local Education Agency] may use a process that determines if a child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as part of the evaluation," (IDEA, 2004). The Local Education Agency (LEA) refers to the school district, the entity that operates public primary and secondary schools in the United States.

There is little guidance on how to measure the effectiveness of RTI with ELLs (Linan-Thompson, 2007). One researcher, Linan-Thompson (2007), examines the use of RTI with a population of ELLs who were identified as at-risk for reading problems in the fall of their first-grade year. For the first seven months, the school district provided extensive and systematic interventions. In terms of probing effectiveness of RTI, Linan-Thompson (2007) examined the population of ELLs who met RTI criteria using three approaches: benchmark, growth, and discrepancy. The goal was to identify students who had responded positively to the interventions and were no longer at-risk for later reading difficulties. Research approaches included screenings of students in both English and Spanish to assess reading concepts, such as initial word reading ability. RTI intervention sessions involved 50-minute small group meetings led by trained teachers in addition to core reading instruction (in English) five days a week. As a result, relatively few students within the context met any of the criteria set for first grade (Linan-Thompson, 2007). Granting the large sample, ELLs who were not at-risk who received reading instruction in English were able to perform as well as English monolingual students on measures of oral reading. Overall, Linan-Thompson suggests that since so few students didn't meet any of the first grade criteria, the criteria may have been too rigorous in terms of performance level and the amount of measures within the criteria. In addition, there is a possibility that students started out too low and, despite an intensive intervention, were unable to reach benchmark scores

(Linan-Thompson, 2007). There is still much unknown about the reading development of ELLs and the use of RTI with this population, especially when language learning is being considered.

Another study conducted by McIntosh (2007) helped to determine the effectiveness of RTI in first grade classrooms with ELLs from eleven native languages in three schools within an urban district in southern California. McIntosh conducted interviews and observations across two consecutive years comparing student-gains in oral reading fluency. This research was conducted in relation to the first two tiers of instruction in the RTI model. Results showed that by following students to the end of third grade, only nine of the original population of 111 were ultimately labeled as having learning disabilities. This indicates a moderately stronger relationship between instructional quality and student improvements in oral reading fluency (McIntosh, 2007). In addition, the results of this relationship indicate positive outcomes for both native English-speakers and ELLs. While this is only one area regarding how RTI can positively effect literacy development, a need exists for experimental studies with larger sample sizes to explore beginning reading instruction for ELLs with potential learning disabilities.

Impact of Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) Development for ELLs

In reference to identifying an ELL with a learning disability in the area of reading, research must consider the impact of how oral reading proficiency can impact language development. The process of learning to read can be challenging and complicated for many young children. According to Rubin (2016), for students with learning disabilities, learning to read can often be daunting, specifically for Latino/Latina students who have recently immigrated with their families from Mexico to live in the United States. If Spanish-speaking ELLs are expected to develop reading and writing skills that are comparable to native English-speaking peers, they must first be given time to develop literacy skills that will improve their English

language proficiency. One successful method for increasing reading fluency in ELLs with learning disabilities, and their typical peers, is the use of repeated readings (Rubin, 2016). When using repeated readings, students practice reading a given text until they reach the needed level of accuracy. Word accuracy refers to an increased speed of word recognition and automaticity of decoding words. While improving accuracy, students are learning to focus on the meaning of the text. Particularly for ELLs with learning disabilities in areas of reading, they may benefit from the use of repeated readings in a fluency-based reading program. Such programs have been shown to be greatly effective in attempting to increase reading fluency rates in ELLs (Rubin, 2016).

In a study conducted by Rubin (2016), three Spanish-speaking ELL elementary-aged students in 3rd and/or 4th grade with specific learning disabilities were individually assessed to measure growth fluency and in key areas of intervention (i.e. phonics, sight phrases, and oral reading passages). As a result, all three ELL students made noticeable progress in the areas of fluency based on assessment scores. While two of the three students increased by almost two grade levels in reading by the end of the school year, all three stated that they felt they were more confident readers than at the beginning of the school year (Rubin, 2016). Since the study involved a small sample, there is still a need to address the reading needs of ELLs with learning disabilities. Additionally, there is a need for more effective models that will address the development of reading achievement and improve oral reading fluency. Reading models, such as repeated readings, can benefit ELLs whether the student has a special education diagnosis or not (Rubin, 2016).

(2) Reading Intervention Programs for ELLs with Learning Disabilities

Literacy Instruction Programs

When teaching reading skills to ELLs with learning disabilities, one aspect of instruction that educators need to focus on is whether their school uses a program with a literacy-intensive curriculum. This can be described as a program that includes explicit teaching of linguistic knowledge, reading skills, and strategies corresponding to phonological skills (D'Angiulli, 2004). While success in reading is essential for ELLs, teachers must develop adequate instruction in teaching reading skills to students from various cultural groups.

In a team study led by D'Angiulli (2004), researchers investigated the effectiveness of a districtwide school literacy-intensive curriculum program. The program was delivered to ELLs and at-risk children entering school at kindergarten. The purpose of the study was to determine if the program had the potential to reduce the risk of reading failure before reading disabilities were recognized through standardized testing (D'Angiulli, 2004). After analyzing word-reading achievement scores from students in the district (grades kindergarten – 5th), results were probed to examine whether or not the program showed a decrease in students being at-risk for reading failure. Although the study organized results by socioeconomic status (SES), the research team found that the effects of SES in the students' lives progressively disappeared with more instruction among ELL and at-risk students. In addition, a majority of the ELLs improved substantially over-time after being considered "below at-risk" for reading at the beginning of kindergarten (D'Angiulli, 2004). Outcomes indicate that early instructional programs similar to the one offered in the study have the potential for reducing the risk of reading disabilities. As a result, researchers suggest schooling and comprehensive literacy-intensive instructional programs begin in kindergarten to ensure a sustained achievement level throughout a child's literacy development (D'Angiulli, 2004).

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Instruction

In regards to literacy instruction programs, some researchers present a view of implementing culturally and linguistically responsive literacy instruction for instructing ELLs, specifically those considered learning disabled (Klingner, 2009). Although well intentioned, many teachers often lack training of how to teach ELLs in areas of second language acquisition, literacy development in a second language, and multicultural education. When teaching ELLs with possible learning disabilities, all general and special education teachers and supporting staff must consider instruction that is culturally and linguistically responsive to students' unique language and learning needs (Klingner, 2009). Since culture is responsive through various forms of learning, every child is deserving of being educated in ways that help them learn best. When determining a learning disability, educators find that a child's learning outcomes are lower than their peers, causing them to be viewed as more likely to struggle. In turn, strengths become unrecognized and/or unappreciated and any differences are likely to be misinterpreted as a learning disability (Klingner, 2009). As researchers consider the most effective strategies of helping culturally and linguistically diverse students develop literacy skills, they must provide instruction that focuses on the role of culture in student-learning.

Research conducted by Klingner (2009) presents a review of studies that address special education literacy instruction for ELLs with learning disabilities. These ELLs demonstrate low literacy achievement in both bilingual special education classrooms and general education diverse settings. Findings synthesized information for educators to consider when teaching ELLs with learning disabilities such as culture, instruction, learning environments, reading interventions, comprehensive instruction, and sheltered English instruction (i.e. integrating language and content in instruction). While implementing a culturally responsive instruction program, research indicated that instruction must emphasize how to assist students in accessing

and connecting prior knowledge with school content (Klingner, 2009). Though some students may share similar background experiences with their peers, others have developed their own personal and cultural experiences that teachers must draw from to help all students build relationships and gain appreciation in the classroom.

In addition to implementing culturally responsive instruction, teachers must take culturally responsive learning environments into consideration. Such environments include cultural value, high expectations for student success, parent involvement, and challenging academic curriculum, all while learning English (Klingner, 2009). These learning environments are partnered with intensive literacy interventions for ELL students who struggle with reading achievement and comprehension. One crucial role of special education teachers is to provide intensive instruction to students with learning disabilities, either individually or in small groups. As special education teachers integrate instructional practices, they must keep in mind that a focused instruction program requires a foundation of knowledge from research-based literacy practices for ELLs identified as learning disabled (Klingner, 2009).

The final area of Klingner's research (2009) discusses sheltered English instruction. During instruction, the teacher allows instruction to be more comprehensible for ELLs with learning disabilities by integrating language and content. The goal is to help ELLs access the general education curriculum while the teacher facilitates English-language acquisition instruction. For instance, the teacher may include the following strategies for ELLs: advanced organizers, connection-making opportunities, activating prior knowledge, pre-teaching new vocabulary, connecting key concepts, various delivery methods (i.e. modeling), frequent opportunities for higher level thinking (i.e. predicting or problem solving), real objects or visuals to represent concepts, and allowing "wait time" before calling on students (Klingner, 2009).

General education teachers, ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers, and special education teachers using sheltered instruction must be mindful of ensuring that instruction is comprehensible for ELLs with potential learning disabilities.

Along with considering culturally and linguistically responsive instructional programs, teachers must be culturally responsive, especially when working with ELLs who have learning disabilities. To be considered culturally responsive, teachers must consider a teaching structure that does not omit students' cultural and linguistic experiences (Orosco, 2014). Efforts towards being culturally responsive, such as incorporating language, history, and other cultural aspects of a student's particular racial or ethnic group, will engage all students in an authentic student-centered learning process.

The case study conducted by Orosco (2014) describes culturally responsive instruction in regards to how teachers' knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy can positively affect their special education instruction. Findings indicate that the success of special education with ELLs at the elementary education level may depend on how well the educator integrates culturally responsive instruction, based on the students' cultural and linguistic needs. As an outcome, three major themes of research were found: (1) cultural aspects of teaching reading, (2) culturally relevant skills-based instruction, and (3) collaborative agency time.

In terms of cultural aspects of reading, the study found that instruction must be fixed within students' cultural and linguistic experiences and customs (Orosco, 2014). This involves reading and discussing stories, activating prior knowledge, improving oral vocabularies and language development, and connecting content to deepen understanding while emphasizing cultural aspects of teaching. Second, the theme of culturally relevant skills-based instruction captures how instruction extends oral language opportunities for students to apply what they

already know. This collaborative approach includes interactive read-alouds with culturally

relevant material. Not only does instruction focus on core reading elements, but also provides

necessary social context and merges reading with experiences to create relevance. The final

theme, collaborative agency time, focuses on how the teacher develops knowledge for students

by associating new information with prior knowledge. In other words, to foster comprehension

and oral language development, students in the study were granted opportunities to involve the

community and their families to engage in meaningful cultural experiences with skills-based

practice (Orosco, 2014).

Overall, the purpose of the study demonstrates the importance of providing culturally

responsive instruction and having professional development for educators teaching ELLs with

learning disabilities. By having access to multiple strategies and instructional approaches, the

success of general and special education for ELLs may increase as teachers collaboratively

provide cultural and linguistic instructional supports.

Evaluation of Language Proficiency

Identifying disabilities in students can be a complex process made more problematic with

ambiguous definitions and differing eligibility requirements across the United States. In several

states, where the number of ELLs are increasing, students are being referred for special

education evaluations due to a suspected learning disability (Cole, 2014).

In terms of such students, an article written by Cole (2014) discusses testing language

proficiency with ELLs who have been referred for special education in a test that is in their

native language. In Cole's (2014) research, a process is proposed for evaluating oral language

proficiency of ELLs in both their native language and in English for educators and examiners to

gain the most accurate information. According to IDEA, federal law states that examiners

conduct evaluations "in the child's native language or other mode of communication and in the form most likely to yield accurate information," (2004). Therefore, regardless of students' proficiency in English, native-language proficiency testing should be an essential focus of any evaluation process. Special education testing in English alone will not bring the most accurate and valid results without examining the students' proficiency and abilities in their native language first (Cole, 2014).

The proposed examination process of evaluating ELLs' language proficiency in both English and native language suggests how educational professionals understand language acquisition factors and the overall impact of language competence. Cole (2014) proposes the following steps: (1) test language proficiency in both English and native-language, (2) determine the most proficient language, (3) investigate the language of instruction and educational placement, (4) determine testing language for students in a bilingual program, (5) determine testing language for students receiving English instruction with ESL (English as a Second Language) support, and (6) determine testing language for students receiving English-only instruction without ESL support.

To begin this assessment process, educators must establish the most proficient language using both formal and informal instruments. By determining the most proficient language, evaluators will be able to tap into the student's knowledge base, allowing reading achievements and learning English to be a more efficient process. Informal language assessments, such as rating scales or oral, reading, and writing activities, can provide helpful information related to students' levels of proficiency (Cole, 2014). On the other hand, formal language assessments, such as achievement tests or instruments that determine proficiency levels, can assess specific areas based on language (i.e. oral expression, listening comprehension, etc.). After determining

the most proficient language, educators must investigate the language of instruction and

educational placement, especially when special education is being considered. Often, families

and school personnel are left deciding the child's educational placement and language of

instruction.

According to Cole (2014), students receiving bilingual instruction in both English and

their native language are more likely to have higher proficiencies in both languages, especially if

instruction begins with a strong emphasis on the child's native language. There are many

misconceptions surrounding the question of how to best evaluate an ELLs' language proficiency.

Many times, native language is not taken into account, resulting in partial testing practices (Cole,

2014). Consequently, evaluation of ELLs for learning disabilities should be provided using valid

and appropriate assessments that consider the levels of proficiency in either English or the

students' primary language (Cole, 2014).

Influence of Reading Intervention Strategies

When teaching ELLs with potential learning disabilities, both general and special

education teachers must consider providing effective, evidence-based reading interventions that

support ELLs in the classroom. ELLs, either due to a deficient English-language knowledge or

poor learning skills, often experience academic difficulties in the classroom, especially in the

area of reading (Boon, 2017). While implementing interventions and strategies for ELLs in the

classroom, educators must ensure that they are motivating and engaging, involve interesting yet

challenging reading activities and materials, and take place in an interactive and collaborative

learning environment (Cho, 2010). In addition, a teacher's attitudes and expectations play a

crucial role in instructing students in reading. As many classroom tasks involve reading skills,

ELLs reading abilities depend on various factors including the following: literacy and language

skills in their native language, reading proficiency levels in their non-native language, their disabilities, past literacy educational experiences in their non-native language, test comprehension, background knowledge, and teacher abilities.

To address these challenges, teachers must implement reading interventions that have been used in special education for ELLs with learning disabilities in early grade levels (Boon, 2017). Boon's research team (2017) synthesized literature to review interventions that utilized inclusive criteria when teaching ELLs with learning disabilities. Reading interventions that emerged from the review consist of: (a) computer-based constant time delay, (b) graphic organizers, (c) peer tutoring, (d) repeated reading with a vocabulary component, and (e) two reading programs – *Project PLUS* and *Read Well*.

In the computer-based constant time delay intervention, instruction is designed to enhance phonological abilities of students to learn target phonemes. Students use a research-developed app for an iPad where they must identify object names that started with a taught target phoneme from previous instruction. In addition, through using graphic organizers, ELL students practice vocabulary that aim to improve reading comprehension skills. Through use of a peer tutoring intervention, research reports ELLs with learning disabilities who take part in peer-tutoring instruction improve their overall reading fluency (Boon, 2017). Additionally, repeated readings with vocabulary components are proven to be a research-based intervention that focus on reading fluency and comprehension skills through novel readings and vocabulary instruction.

Next, Boon (2017) researched two reading programs – *Project PLUS* and *Read Well*. In research on the reading program *Project PLUS*, the program was designed to improve alphabetic, phonological awareness, decoding, and reading fluency abilities of early school aged children. Results revealed that all participants, including those identified as ELLs with learning

disabilities, showed substantial growth in all skill areas except reading fluency. This may be due to a lack of knowledge in the English language for ELLs, hindering their progress in reading fluency (Boon, 2017). In the other reading program, *Read Well*, the intervention curriculum was intended to teach phonological awareness, decoding skills, vocabulary, reading fluency, and comprehension to ELLs with learning disabilities. Although research indicated that the intervention program was moderately effective in the area of phonological awareness, highly effective on decoding, and slightly effective on reading fluency, students still tended to struggle with alphabetic measures (Boon, 2017).

While there is extensive research related to effective, research-based reading interventions for elementary ELL students with learning disabilities, there is limited research in the knowledge and understanding of such interventions for ELLs, specifically those with learning disabilities at the elementary level. Generally speaking, there are several reading interventions and programs showing potential to create positive effects in improving reading outcomes for elementary-aged ELLs with learning disabilities (Boon, 2017). Clearly, there is a need for further research in this area of study.

(3) Teacher Collaboration & Best Practices for Identifying Learning Disabilities in ELLs

Culturally Responsive Literacy Practices

Culturally responsive literacy practices are crucial for the academic achievement of diverse learners, specifically ELLs with learning disabilities. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices are defined as the use of cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning opportunities more relevant and effective (Piazza, 2015). CRT focuses on and requires students' strengths

rather than weaknesses as a beginning point for instruction. As CRT classrooms involve students learning to read, comprehending multiple kinds of texts, and relating their knowledge to the world, such classrooms are vital to students' achievement in reading. In addition, ELLs must be given opportunities to connect their own language and forms of communication to reading content (Piazza, 2015). Within CRT classrooms, practices are embraced and students achieve through social, cultural, and linguistic instruction.

In a study conducted by Piazza (2015), research examines culturally responsive literacy practices across areas of special education, multicultural literacy education, and within teaching of ELLs. Within the study, five key recommendations for culturally responsive practices evolved for educators to implement in instruction: dialogue, collaboration, visual representations, explicit instruction, and inquiry-based learning. As each aspect for culturally responsive teaching incorporates students' cultural knowledge and lived experiences, Piazza (2015) notes that classrooms that promote culturally responsive teaching are essential for learning. Creating classrooms that promote dialogue and collaboration between students is indispensable as they embody the concept of literacy as a social practice.

In addition, collaborative opportunities allow students to extend their understandings of texts and mentor one another in ways that can improve comprehension, vocabulary, and critical thinking. Along the lines of visual representations, these symbols and depictions of content can encourage students to bridge their home and community literacy practices within school contexts (Piazza, 2015). Not only does explicit instruction provide ELLs and other diverse learners with quality instruction across content areas, but it also allows access to skills necessary for academic achievement. Finally, inquiry-based learning is a complementary approach to explicit instruction in that it provides contextualized and content-based learning that students find motivating and

engaging. Furthermore, these recommendations offer all educators opportunities to begin serving ELLs more effectively, supporting them in their efforts to become more proficient with culturally responsive practices.

Similarly, educators must consider how culturally responsive instruction impacts culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, such as ELLs, with learning disabilities. Within a study conducted by Utley (2011), research focuses on the importance of culturally responsive principles and procedures for CLD students with learning disabilities. As general and special educators are faced with overwhelming challenges to educate CLD students with learning disabilities, most of these students face many challenges in their society such as language, religion, ability, and/or age. Students from such backgrounds were found to have different learning styles from those of their typically-developing white peers and low achievement in general education classrooms, resulting in a subsequent referral for special education (Utley, 2011).

Students with CLD backgrounds often face difficulties in their learning, school progress, and behavior in the classroom. In an effort to teach CLD students with learning disabilities effectively, all educators must be knowledgeable about how culture affects their students' experiences, learning styles, preferences, and behaviors in the classroom. Educators must include the following in their instruction: (a) apply skills/strategies necessary for classroom management, (b) use educational resources to support CLD students, and (c) monitor students' performance on tests and interventions (Utley, 2011). By implementing culturally responsive practices such as these, CLD students will feel supported as they gain the necessary skills to academically succeed.

Differentiated Instruction

All students have their own set of unique background experiences, culture, language, personality, interests, and attitudes toward learning, as well as unique academic needs. Effective teachers must recognize that various factors affect learning in the classroom, and that adjusting or differentiating their instruction can help meet specific needs (Ford, 2015). Differentiated instruction does not mean that teachers teach students in a number of ways; this modified instruction aims to meet the needs of all students by focusing on who they are and what they know (Chien, 2012). In addition, this instruction offers a way of thinking about and approaching the planning and implementation of curriculum with an understanding that learners differ in many ways. The goal of differentiated instruction is to create learning opportunities that allow individual students to learn by ensuring equal access to important academic content. Content is to be modified for students who need additional practice in key areas before moving on to another subject; however, the expectation is that modifications in other areas will ultimately allow students to master the same content (Ford, 2015).

As differentiated instruction is designed to support individual students' with various backgrounds and needs, the same general principles apply to differentiated instruction for ELLs. To be successful in differentiating instruction for ELLs, teachers must apply the following: (a) get to know these students as much as possible, (b) have high expectations for all students, (c) have a variety of research-based instructional strategies readily available, (d) use ongoing assessment to guide instruction, (e) provide multiple types of assessment, (f) differentiate homework, (g) collaborate with other professionals, (h) use flexible grouping by matching students with different peers for activities, and (i) make content comprehensible for all students (Ford, 2015). By providing ELLs with alternative ways of accessing key content (e.g. charts, books written in their first language, simplified texts, discussion, etc.), these students learn the

same material as others while developing English language proficiency or skills. When using

differentiated instruction, teachers develop strategies of designing and delivering instruction.

However, there is little research on the benefits of providing differentiated instruction, nor is

there research that focuses on the importance of professional development where teachers may

learn to implement differentiated instruction techniques (Chien, 2012).

Moreover, differentiated instruction offers teachers an effective method of addressing the

needs of a diverse population in a way that allows all students equal access to learning.

Therefore, a need exists for research on how differentiated instruction affects early childhood

ELLs with learning disabilities. This includes the content, process, and product of how

differentiated instruction may/may not benefit ELL teachers' development of instruction.

Identification vs. Misidentification

When teaching ELLs with potential learning disabilities, teachers must be aware of their

responsibilities of identifying ELLs for eligibility in special education, the process of identifying

potential learning disabilities, and how to support ELLs that do have learning disabilities.

Misidentifying ELLs as learning disabled is a serious and pervasive problem in the field of

education (Sanatullova-Allison, 2016). In addition, recent increases in immigration cause this

problem to be even more urgent. Sanatullova-Allison's research (2016) outlines these problems

with current identification methods of distinguishing between students struggling with learning a

language and a genuine learning/cognitive disability, as well as more effective methods for

effectively identifying the differences between language difficulty and learning disability.

Due to a need for better identification models, ELLs continue to be overrepresented in

special education. According to Sanatullova-Allison (2016), ELLs are currently being under-

served in the public school system through either a lack of services and supports or through

misidentification of language acquisition as a learning disability. While learning disabilities can

be characterized as poor comprehension, difficulty following directions, errors in grammar and

syntax, and difficulty completing tasks, language acquisition problems focus on only

comprehension. If an ELL is not receiving adequate English input at home, they are not

receiving enough exposure to be prepared for the contextually-driven input and language in

school for academic success. Due to the fact that misidentification of any student as learning

disabled can create a lifelong label and potential stigma, schools must strive to resolve these

issues and correct identification, assessment, and placement, especially with ELLs (Sanatullova-

Allison 2016).

Two of the most widely used methods of identification today are Assessment of

Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and Response to Intervention (RTI) (Sanatullova-Allison, 2016). First,

the structure of the IQ assessment puts ELLs at a disadvantage; familiarity with English accounts

for at least 50 percent and up to 90 percent of test variance found within IQ tests. As a basis for a

referral to special education, the results do not offer valid, reliable results. In addition, teachers

may have lower expectations for ELLs prior to the administration of the test (Sanatullova-

Allison, 2014). The second form of identification, RTI, aims to gauge each student's response to

intervention, measuring where they currently are academically and what interventions they need.

Typically, RTI occurs in a general education setting where the teacher administers the first level

of intervention. This level addresses approximately 80 percent of students to achieve the

expected norm (Sanatullova-Allison, 2016). After evaluation, the teacher administers a second

level of intervention which addresses approximately 15 percent of students by using peer

tutoring, small group work, or another personalized interventions. Lastly, in the third level of

intervention, around 5 percent of students are assessed for prereferral to special education, due to

a persistent and significant gap in achievement (Sanatullova-Allison, 2016). If a student qualifies

for special education services, an IEP (Individual Education Plan) team determines what

measures will be necessary to address students' specific needs. However, teachers need

development in gauging language acquisition skills (Sanatullova-Allison, 2016). With the ELL

population increasing in public schools, more attention must be given to the development of such

skills to avoid problems in academic achievement.

Sanatullova-Allison (2016) suggests several ways for schools to ensure the validity and

reliability of testing students whose first language is not English. First, a framework to evaluate

and monitor procedures must involve a multi-stepped approach that focuses on the educational

environment as a whole, rather than just on the individual student. If teachers consider students'

levels of motivation, abilities to process new information, and social interaction factors,

instruction can be made effective for ELLs. Additionally, standards within the school and the

community must include clear guidelines for teachers to implement into instruction, focusing on

multiple student needs. Second, professional development may help teachers improve the

following: instructional guidelines, cooperative learning, integration of a student's first language,

and development of appropriate expectations (Sanatullova-Allison, 2016).

Furthermore, Nguyen (2012) recommends collaboration among general and special

education teachers, other specialists, and/or staff to work together in designing appropriate

learning experiences for ELLs with learning disabilities. Due to increasing demands placed on

the teaching profession, teachers need to be responsible for collaborating with one another to

help all students succeed. Some ways teachers can provide appropriate instruction to avoid

misplacement in special education include the following: (1) select rich literature based on

knowledge of students' English proficiency levels, (2) plan relevant activities, and (3) pose language-appropriate questions (Nguyen, 2012). Such curriculum will not only build home-school bridges linking academic knowledge to cultural experiences, but will also aid in the identification process. This process involves gathering necessary information, such as knowing student behaviors and characteristics, their background, and how they learn best (Nguyen, 2012). In addition, collaborators need to be mindful of the importance of communication by agreeing on how to carry out their work, divide responsibilities, and become problem-solvers (Nguyen, 2012). By fully including ELLs with learning disabilities in the least restrictive classroom, all teachers can use appropriate approaches for identifying ELLs to ensure quality instruction.

Methodology

(1) Participants

There were various participants involved in this research. Taking place in an elementary

school in central Pennsylvania, grade bands in this school building include kindergarten through

second grade. Each individual involved received a consent form that was required to be signed

before any research can be fulfilled. The consent form described their individual participation in

the research process and gave details in potential areas of risk. In addition, participants were

involved in the following forms of data collection: observations, questionnaires, and an

interview. Individuals that agreed to participate included the two (2) school reading specialist(s),

the ESL instructor, two (2) general education teachers, and the special education teacher.

However, there was no observation of the special education teacher due to the fact that she did

not have any ELL students in her special education caseload.

(2) Apparatus and Materials

There were a few types of equipment used to collect data in this research. First, during

interviews, the interviewer used the Live Scribe Pen in conjunction with a specific notebook with

the pen. This specific pen was borrowed by the investigator from Elizabethtown College's

learning services department. The purpose of this equipment was to be able to record the

participant for accuracy. Each participant gave permission in their consent form for the

interviewer to be able to use during the interview. A second material in the research process

included the Survey Monkey online software where the investigator designed two questionnaires

for all participants to take. The questionnaires were emailed to each participant and completed

online on their own time. The final material used in this research included an observation sheet

created by the investigator. The observation sheet listed the observer, the type of teacher observed, date, location, and time of observation. There was ample space for the observer to record the strategies, accommodations, and modifications they use with ELL students struggling with reading.

(3) Procedure

The data collection method of this research involved a triangulation in which three types of data facilitated validation of data through cross verification. Triangulation of data collection, according to Joseph Maxwell (1996), can be defined as the process of collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods to reduce the risk that conclusions will reflect only systematic biases or limitations of a specific method. In addition, this method allows the researcher to gain better assessment of the validity and generality of the explanations that are developed. In other words, the three sources used in this research, observations, questionnaires, and interviews, provide a more complete and accurate justification than any could alone.

The first source, observations, involved approximately five (5) of the six (6) participants recruited from the student teaching placement – Valley View Elementary School, including the following individuals: reading specialists (2), ESL instructor (1), and general education teachers (2). The special education teacher could not be observed as she did not have an ELL student in her learning support caseload. Observations included observing the teacher during instruction with their specific ELL students, and writing down on an observation sheet the classroom environment, strategies, accommodations, and modifications used with the students. Dates and times of observations varied pertaining to the schedule of the specific teacher. Observation sessions for each participant were conducted twice for approximately a half-hour each.

During the second source, there were two questionnaires sent to participants via email. The first questionnaire included each participant filling-in general information and describing of their work experiences working with ELLs and students with learning disabilities. The second part listed "I believe" statements in which the participant had to respond with strongly agreeing, agreeing, disagreeing, or strongly disagreeing. There was an area for optional comments to be recorded for each statement in addition to their response. The same six (6) participants took part in these short questionnaires via Survey Monkey, the online website where the investigator created the free surveys.

And for the third source, interviews were conducted with the same six (6) participants. Interview questions pertained to each specific type of teacher and were recorded using the same observation data-collection worksheet. In addition, the interviews were conducted when the participant had availability to sit in a quiet area with the investigator. The investigator utilized the recording pen from learning services at Elizabethtown College to use during the interview, and assured permission of each participant before using it via the consent form. Dates and times of interviews varied pertaining to the schedule of each participant.

Results

Based on the triangulation data-collection methodology process, four major themes emerged: (1) supporting the learning of ELLs; (2) preparedness in teaching ELLs; (3) evidence-based reading strategies when teaching ELLs; and (4) under-identifying ELLs in learning support. Each theme was identified as being prominent to the experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of the educators that participated in the research process.

(1) Supporting the Learning of ELLs

While discussing this question during the interviews with each of the participants, just about every single participant believed that the ELL students in the school building were receiving enough support to reach their learning goals. Particularly, both of the general education teachers touched on how much support and effort they felt the entire building put towards these students' successes in reading. In their experiences throughout the school district, all teachers and supporting staff have always been great at focusing on supporting the development and literacy skills of the ELL students. Based on observations, both teachers involved conversation, "check-ins", and lots of praise when they demonstrated understanding. One of the general education teachers, shared her beliefs:

> Based on my experience here, I can't say that [ELL's are not getting support] because I feel and I think that through the support they get here through the classroom, the support they get every day with our ESL teacher, the reading support they get pulled to receive, and the intervention literacy skills from some classroom aides… they are getting more than what kids in the past had gotten.

In addition, an equally important subject that relates to supporting ELLs achievement in reading is how ELLs only recently began receiving reading support services just this school year. This was a component that had never been approved by the school district until this current school year due to it being a fine-line and sensitive subject to determine. One of the reading teachers in the school building elaborated on this decision-making process:

> [Our school building] never took ELL students [for reading support] before this year because what the consensus had been was that [ELLs] were already being pulled from their classroom for however many thirty minutes a day to get ELL services. To pull them for another thirty minutes of reading support services, and they're not supposed to miss any core instruction, that is impossible. And so, [the reading support teachers] had never taken them before, but now we're getting more students who are really showing a deficit in reading and we're doing them a disservice by not servicing them… We've always run into that weird gray space where it's hard to know with our ELL students, even the ones who struggle in reading, is it a language-based problem or is it a reading-based problem.

Since ELLs began being included in reading support services, many teachers felt their students' needs were finally being met. This reading support teacher touched on several components that take part in supporting teaching reading skills to ELLs – such as areas of adjustment in curriculum and instruction. Both reading support teacher participants in this research emphasized how they have been helping general education teachers with this aspect of support. On the other hand, since ELLs just began receiving reading support services, they are still working on improving communication with the ESL teacher to communicate what areas of improvement to work on with their ELL students.

Additionally, both reading support teachers expressed what factors they have found to be helpful when supporting ELLs with reading, such as creating opportunities for students to practice language skills, designing a visual language rich environment, modeling, pre-teaching content, and adjusting personal expectations for the ELL students. While discussing a past ELL student, one of the reading support teachers reflected on her experience teaching him:

> You want [your ELL students] to succeed… by trying to meet them where [they are] to get them to where they needed to be… I think that's true of any student.

(2) Preparedness and Cultural Responsibility of Teaching ELLs

When thinking about being prepared to teach ELLs, participants responded to a belief statement from one of the questionnaires: "I believe I have had enough training on how to teach ELLs." Out of the six total participants, half of them either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. The other half either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Since respondents were anonymous, it is difficult to say who agreed and who disagreed.

One of the general education teachers did not feel as prepared as some of the other teachers to teach ELLs. However, as one of the more likely teachers to accept ELL students into her classroom, you would think that she has certification or training on how to teach them, but that is not the case. Throughout this general education teacher's time in college, she considered getting certification to teach ELLs but never did since she thought she would always have the ESL to rely on as a resource. There was not one course throughout her years in college that focused on how to teach ELLs or what strategies to use to help them with reading. She discusses how unprepared she felt to teach ELLs before receiving this position and what strategies she uses now:

[I was] absolutely not [prepared to teach ELLs at all]… my undergrad was very different

in every way to what students get in their undergrad now, especially in terms of reading

instruction. I have thought about actually getting certification in [teaching ELLs]. I rely

heavily on our ESL teacher, that's my biggest resource. Other than her or taking a course,

just getting experience with different kids and picking up your own little tricks [are what

I try to focus on].

When sitting in on her teaching reading to some of her ELLs, she had a small group where she

began by scaffolding vocabulary words and putting them into real-life or relatable scenarios. She

allowed for students to take turns sharing their voice, re-explained concepts of what they meant

in her own words, and used lots of expression in her voice and face. In addition, this participant

took advantage of any "teachable moments" in which a student took something out of context

and she took the time to clarify its meaning. For instance, a student was predicting part of their

story, and she told him that was a good prediction. The student had no idea what that word

meant, so she had to stop and clarify what that skill meant and told him that they will keep

practicing that skill.

On the other hand, based on the interviews, the ESL teacher of the building gave

significant insight into her beliefs of being prepared to teach reading to ELLs. As an employee of

the district for over twenty-five years, her preparedness of teaching ELLs overall has increased

over many years of experience – allowing her to feel very much prepared. More importantly, she

touched on her beliefs of what it means to be culturally responsive. In turn, she offered her

philosophy of what cultural responsiveness meant to her:

I would hope my work is culturally responsive… I try to incorporate books or pictures

from other countries… but sometimes there's just not enough time. [Being culturally

responsive means] being accepting within certain bounds, awareness of culture, actions

or behaviors, and putting yourself into their shoes.

In addition to the ESL teacher, the reading support teachers of the building gave their

perception into what being prepared to teach ELLs has meant to them, what research they have

looked into for teaching them, and what being culturally responsive means to them. The first

reading support teacher spoke about her beliefs:

Cultural responsibility to me means knowing my students on a personal level so that I can

consider how their cultural perspective may influence their education… whether it's in

their responses, in their eye contact, in their literature choices… I also think a lot about

how our [ELLs] or their skin tone or ethnicity are not being represented in the teachers

they see in the building, not represented in the curriculum we put in front of them, not

represented in the book choices I have around my room, and I try to be cognizant of

that… I'm not sure what to do about that other than to find the right literature and that's

tough… I also think it's our responsibility to know our students intimately.

Similarly, the second reading support teacher offered her viewpoint on being culturally

responsive:

I think of [being] culturally responsive as not overlooking different cultures [of students],

trying to blend them in, and being aware and respectful of the cultures… Trying to find

out a little bit about the student based on their family, culture, and background… I think

[try to] look for things that they can connect to within certain texts without being overly

"in their face" … [such as bringing in] books that they can see themselves in and connect

to, but that's still hard to do… I would say I do see [myself being culturally responsive]

in my practice; because it's not a whole group of ELL's sitting in front of me, what I'm

working on is based on so many different things and I try to keep that a piece of it.

(3) Evidence-Based Reading Strategies when Teaching ELLs

Along with the concept of being prepared to teach ELLs and being culturally responsive,

many of the participants in this research spoke out on their beliefs of the use of evidence-based

strategies when teaching reading/literacy skills to ELLs. A few participants spoke out on what

strategies they knew they use and what they have found to be successful, while others questioned

what evidence-based strategies meant or if they were even using them successfully.

Based on the observations and interviews of both reading support teachers, some of their

more notable teaching aspects when working with ELLs included scaffolding their prior

knowledge of concepts and vocabulary, using visuals and conversation, pulling pictures up on

the computer, taking notice of how characters are feeling, involving kinesthetic movements into

word/letter chunking, making personal connections to certain texts, and reviewing word-

decoding strategies when coming upon a word in a text that they may be unfamiliar with.

Overall, they both agreed it was important to alter their own personal expectations of teaching

ELLs – for instance, whether their English-speaking is more or less developed than others and

whether or not they can retell about a story as much as others. One of the reading support

teachers pointed out: "It is important to not just assume or pre-judge an ELLs prior knowledge.

Not only is this important of our ELLs but of any student really."

As far as general education teachers, their strategies vary since they both taught different

grade levels. The first, a Kindergarten teacher, pointed out that she utilizes many visuals and

organizers (i.e. KWL chart), states clear and concise objectives, summarizes what the class has

done in a lesson so far, and clarifies similarities and differences in culture norms. She wishes she could label things in her classroom more with the word in English and Spanish, or with another type of visual image. She noted that this task may take much time to prepare, and at the beginning of the school year it is difficult to determine the level of English-proficiency of her ELL students, and whether or not they would benefit from the labels or not. From the second general education teacher's perspective, as far as teaching second-grade and preparing ELL students for more demanding reading requirements that past grades, she uses many different strategies. For instance, she utilizes questioning techniques, allows time for peer discussions or conversations, pre-teaches vocabulary and concepts within a story before she has a whole group lesson later that day, and takes time to stop and explain certain story contexts in small groups.

Within the strategies used by the ESL teacher regarding reading and/or literacy skills, she utilized reading concepts, vocabulary, and comprehension skills from the school's reading curriculum. However, she based many of her lessons upon her own instructional activities. For instance, she integrates pictures, visuals, videos, words, etc. to help the language development of her students. She focuses on finding ideas children their age-level may experience, all while taking their culture into consideration. One idea that stood out within the ESL teachers' teaching strategies is the concept that some students "fall between two stools." She elaborated on what this meant in the realm of teaching-strategies for today's ELL students:

Maybe my research is a bit out of date, and research does change, but I think it's more the problem of what I call 'falling between two stools.' You will see this a lot - students who are not really completely conversed or literate in either language… It's a heck of a job to get them to where they need to be. [For instance], I have a student whose mother speaks

very little English, and how she doesn't want to speak Spanish to her anymore…her

English is becoming stronger and the mother isn't quite so sure of what to do.

The ESL teacher strongly believes in teaching the ELLs who come into her classroom to learn

English at their own pace. She emphasizes that they are there to learn and practice English only.

Although she understands that some students barely know English or that it may be more

difficult for them to speak-up or participate, but it is imperative that they learn and take the time

to practice in a safe and accepting environment. She encourages other ELLs who have had more

time to develop their English to be peer models to other ELLs in their English-speaking

development.

(4) Under-Identifying ELLs in Learning Support

According to research, the process of identifying ELL students with potential learning

disabilities in reading is challenging. Teachers must also be aware of their responsibilities in

teaching ELLs. The misidentification of ELLs as being learning disabled is viewed as a serious

and prevalent issue in the field of special education. Nevertheless, after cross-verifying the data

of this research, all six participants agreed on the questionnaire that ELLs are not being

misidentified as having learning disabilities, specifically in reading. This belief carried through

during interviews and observations of the participants.

The special education teacher, who has working for the district for over twenty-five years

in both the intermediate and primary levels, reported how she does not see ELLs in the district

being over-identified as having learning disabilities. She described her viewpoint on this subject:

From my experience, ELLs [in our district] are not being over-identified as having

learning disabilities. Students who are truly ELL are not being dumped into learning

support… just because their language [has not] fully developed yet does not mean it is a

learning disability… Throughout my years of experience, I have only had one student

who was labeled ELL and was receiving special education services for learning support,

but I'm not even sure to what extent she even knew English… She came from a home

where her native language was only spoken and when tested on whether she had a

learning disability or not… of course they thought she did [have a learning disability] so

they placed her in my program.

Furthermore, some of the participants touched on how there needs to be a better identification

method to distinguish between students struggling with learning a language and a genuine

learning disability. There is such a fine-line between language development and a learning

disability that some of the participants were not even sure if their strategies for teaching are even

effective or not.

Similarly, the Kindergarten general education teacher spoke strongly on her opinions

about how ELLs are being under-identified as having a learning disability. She described her

challenges in deciphering this complex situation based on her own experiences:

I would say under-identified… maybe it's because of my way of thinking… I do think

that with language, there are some kids where [they struggle due to] language barriers

and a lack of exposure that they have at home [to English]. This often times leads

[teachers] to believe [ELLs are] not learning and not growing, but it's because they're not

getting it at home…On the other hand, there could be kids who do have a learning

disability or some kind of a delay, but then it's related to how their language is not the

language we use every day [at school]… Sometimes, I think they get caught in the middle

of the road where there's a lot of uncertainty - do we or do we not want to assess or

identify them when it could be a [true] language issue.

Likewise, the other general education teacher believed that teachers and administrators are

hesitant to identify ELLs as having a learning disability. She sees this as unfortunate because

there may be some students who truly are learning disabled and do not receive the proper

services due to this inability to properly identify. In addition, she mentions how there are several

factors to consider other than the language piece, such as their emotional state, IQ, or whether

they are shy/unable to open up and speak out for help. In those cases, she feels their learning

disability becomes hidden until the student makes the decision to open up to the support that is

being offered.

Discussion

The research addresses various aspects of supporting and placing English Language Learners (ELLs) in reading support. There are several factors to take into consideration when questioning whether the ELL student has a true learning disability or if they are struggling with reading/literacy knowledge based on their status as an ELL. Several teachers question whether the student has an actual learning disability or whether or not their language has developed enough to be considered successful.

Implications and Limitations

Based on the findings of this study, several teachers noted that they were not sure whether or not they were using successful evidence-based strategies. Due to this narrow scope, one implication of this study is a need for investigating preservice education or training to prepare teachers to teach ELLs with potential learning disabilities. As stated in the literature review of this research, teachers must be responsible for collaborating with one another to help all students succeed (Nguyen, 2012). While several of the participant teachers agreed that their ELL students need much support and that they give them adequate amounts of support, some were unsure if they were doing all they could to meet their literary needs or helping to prevent a future learning disability diagnosis. Due to the low grade band where this research took place, many of the participants felt that there was a larger pressure on their shoulders to support these students earlier to possibly prevent a future learning disability. However, preventing a learning disability is not to be of concern; the school's concern is whether students' needs are being met at a level that they can achieve and succeed at, and for teachers to increase their expectations as their ELL students fill in the gaps of missing or unknown knowledge.

Similarly, a second implication involves the school district providing opportunities for teachers to implement research-based strategies that utilize an effective literacy instruction. According to the research, Piazza (2015) found that Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is one of the most effective practices for teachers to use when teaching ELLs. During interviews, a few participants mentioned how they never learned effective strategies to use while teaching ELL students. On the other hand, one participant did share how her teaching styles included building upon all students' strengths no matter their background or ethnicity. According to the literature review, while there is extensive research on research-based reading interventions for elementary ELL students with learning disabilities, there is limited research in understanding and evaluating the effectiveness of such interventions, specifically ELLs with learning disabilities (Boon, 2017). Due to the small sample size, this research may not adequately represent the entire population of teachers in the building or the district who may know of researched evidence-based strategies.

As previously stated, a limitation of this research study consists of limited findings due to a small sample size. The location of this research is only one building out of the entire school district, and there may be other teachers who have different experiences, beliefs, or viewpoints. In addition, a second limitation was the lack of district resources that were accessible for effective ESL and reading instruction. As stated by many participants, the quality of the literacy and reading instruction is of good quality, but it is difficult to determine whether it has been proven to be successful for language arts instruction of ELL students with a learning disability. Based on the literature review, there are several reading intervention and instruction programs being researched on how to best instruct ELL students with deficiencies in reading.

Conclusion

Overall, the research subject of predicting reading achievement and placement of ELLs is a relatively recent area of inquiry. Although some progress has been made, further research is necessary to understand issues involving reading achievement of ELLs, regardless of whether they are at-risk of have reading difficulties or not. Areas of particular concern include classification, identification, assessment measures, and implications for the educational practices of general and special educators.

As addressed throughout the course of this chapter, areas of consideration in the research of this field of study include: (1) properly identifying and educating ELLs with potential learning disabilities, (2) implementation of reading interventions and culturally responsive programs for ELLs with learning disabilities, and (3) best practices for teachers in collaborating to identify potential learning disabilities in ELLs. As a form of research, this thesis addressed the gap in literature relating to the following research problems: (1) examine how educators' beliefs and experiences are related to and impact their teaching of English language learners (ELLs), (2) determine if teachers are currently using relevant evidence-based strategies to support reading achievement in ELLs, and (3) examine the relationship between ELL status and learning disability diagnosis.

Based on the research results, four themes emerged: (1) supporting the learning of ELLs; (2) preparedness in teaching ELLs; (3) evidence-based reading strategies when teaching ELLs; and (4) under-identifying ELLs in learning support. Each theme played a crucial role in the experiences, insights, feelings, and viewpoints of the educators that participated throughout the research process.

List of Appendices

Site Consent

Site Consent Form

Title of Research: <u>Placement of Young English Language Learners' (ELLs') in Reading Support:</u>
<u>A Question of ELL Status or Learning Disability</u>

IRB#<u>_1168876-1_</u>
Investigator(s): <u>_Samantha Gehly, B.S._____</u>

<u>Purpose of Research:</u>
The purpose of the research is to address the following research questions: (1) examine how educators' beliefs and experiences are related to and impact their teaching of English language learners (ELLs), and (2) determine if teachers are currently using evidence-based strategies to support trading achievement in ELL students, and (3) examine the relationship between ELL status and learning disability diagnosis.

<u>Procedures:</u>
To collect participants, the investigator will begin by reaching out to the reading support teachers of the building. From there, the investigator will inquire these teachers about which teachers have ELL students they work with and choose two to three teachers at random to interview and give questionnaires. All participating teachers (both reading support and general education) will be receiving interviews and questionnaires. Additionally, the investigator will be interviewing and giving the questionnaire to the special education teacher (learning support) and ESL teacher of the school building. Interview and questionnaire inquiries for all participants will focus on their background and experiences with ELLs, as well as questions related to learning disabilities in reading, interventions, and successful strategies when working with ELLs. Each participant will be receiving a consent form.

In regards to the questionnaire, each participant will be receiving a Survey Monkey that will be completed and submitted online. During the interview, the participant will be recorded via a recording pen. The purpose of this pen is for accuracy. Recorded interviews will be privately saved and password protected. If the participant does not feel comfortable with this method of observation, they must let the investigator know beforehand. Finally, observations of each participant will be conducted twice for the ESL teacher, general education teacher, and reading support teachers for approximately an hour each. Once all data is collected after the study is completed, information will be analyzed and synthesized in a research thesis project.

<u>Risks and Discomforts</u>
No risks or discomforts are anticipated from participating in this study.

<u>Benefits</u>
There are no benefits for participating in this study.

<u>Compensation</u>
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality
The information gathered during this study will remain confidential and all records will be kept private and locked in a file during the study. Only the researchers listed on this form will have access to the study data and information. The results of the research will be published in the form of an undergraduate paper and may be published in a professional journal or presented at professional meetings. In any report or publication, the researcher will not provide any information that would make it possible to identify me.

Withdrawal without Prejudice
Participating in this study is strictly voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. Participants can withdraw from the study at any time. When possible, the data collected prior to withdrawal will be removed from the study.

Payment for Research Related Injuries
Elizabethtown College has made no provision for monetary compensation in the event of injury resulting from the research. In the event of such injury, assistance will be provided to access health care services. The cost of health care services is the responsibility of the participant.

Contacts and Questions
If participants have any questions concerning the research project, they may contact (list PI name and contact information as well as the faculty member and contact information).   Should participants have any questions about their rights as a participant in this research, they may contact the Elizabethtown College Institutional Review Board at (717) 361-1133 or the IRB submission coordinator, Pat Blough at bloughp@etown.edu.

Statement of Consent:

- ☐ I am in the position of authority to approve this study
- ☐ I have read the above information. I have asked questions and received answers. My organization is willing to participate in this study.
- ☐ A copy of this consent form has been provided to me.

Name of Site _____

Site Representative Name (Printed) _____ Date _____

Site Representative Signature _____ Date _____

Investigator Signature_____

Informed Consent- Participant's

<div align="center">

Consent Form
</div>

Title of Research: <u>Placement of Young English Language Learners' (ELLs') in Reading Support:
A Question of ELL Status or Learning Disability</u>

Principal Investigator(s): <u>Samantha Gehly, B.S.</u>

<u>Purpose of Research:</u>
The purpose of the research is to address the following research questions: (1) examine how
educators' beliefs and experiences are related to and impact their teaching of English language
learners (ELLs), and (2) determine if teachers are currently using evidence-based strategies to
support trading achievement in ELL students, and (3) examine the relationship between ELL
status and learning disability diagnosis.

<u>Procedures:</u>
Each participant will be completing questionnaires concerning their background and experience
with ELLs, as well as taking part in an interview conducted by Samantha Gehly to answer
questions related to ELLs with learning disabilities in reading, interventions, and successful
strategies when working with these students. In regards to the questionnaires, the participant will
be receiving a Survey Monkey that will be completed and submitted online. During the
interview, the participant will be recorded via a recording pen. The purpose of this pen is for
accuracy. Recorded interviews will be privately saved and password protected. If the participant
does not feel comfortable with this method of observation, they must let the investigator know
beforehand. Finally, observations of each participant will be conducted twice for approximately
an hour each for the following individuals: ESL teacher, general education teacher, and reading
support teachers. The dates and times of observation will be determined based on the schedules
and flexibility of the participant and my own schedule during student teaching.

<u>Risks and Discomforts</u>
I understand that no risks or discomforts are anticipated from my participation in this study.

<u>Benefits</u>
I will receive no benefits from being in this study.

<u>Compensation</u>
I understand that I will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

<u>Confidentiality</u>
The information gathered during this study will remain confidential with all records to be kept
private and locked in a file during the study. Only the researchers listed on this form will have
access to the study data and information. The results of the research will be published in the form
of a graduate paper and may be published in a professional journal or presented at professional
meetings. In any report or publication, the researcher will not provide any information that would
make it possible to identify me.

<u>Withdrawal without Prejudice</u>
My participation in this study is strictly voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. If I initially decide to participate, I am still free to withdraw at any time.

<u>Payment for Research Related Injuries</u>
Elizabethtown College has made no provision for monetary compensation in the event of injury resulting from the research. In the event of such injury, assistance will be provided to access health care services. The cost of health care services is the responsibility of the participant.

<u>Contacts and Questions</u>
If I have any questions concerning the research project, I may contact Dr. Shannon Haley-Mize, Associate Professor of Education (mizes@etown.edu). Should I have any questions about my participant rights involved in this research I may contact the Elizabethtown College Institutional Review Board Submission Coordinator, Pat Blough at (717)361-1133 or via email at bloughp@etown.edu.

Statement of Consent:

☐   I am 18 years of age or older.

☐   I have read the above information. I have asked questions and received answers. My organization is willing to participate in this study.

☐   A copy of this consent form has been provided to me.

Participant Signature _____ Date _____

Investigator Signature _____ Date _____

Interview Questions – Reading Specialist

Name of researcher: _____

Name of interviewee: _____

Date: _____   Location: _____   Time: _____

1. Describe your position as a reading specialist. What attracted you to this position?

2. What are your experience working with ELLs (English language learners)? How do you adjust curriculum and instruction to meet their needs?

3. Describe the key components of a reading assessment. Which assessments are essential and what are their purposes? Which assessments, if any, are used with ELLs?

4. Do you feel that the assessments you use are a valid indicator of an ELLs' needing reading interventions? Why or why not?

5. What does being "culturally responsive" mean to you? Do you believe your work to be culturally responsive? Why or why not?

6. Describe your knowledge of RTI (response to intervention). In your opinion, do you feel that this model would help in the identification of reading difficulties in ELLs? Why or why not?

7. What kind of environment does an ELL need to learn basic literacy skills?

8. How do you think language affects an ELLs success in reading achievement? What strategies have you found, if any, to be successful when teaching ELLs literary skills?

9. What is some advice you would give to other teachers in the school when working with ELL students in their classroom?

<u>Interview Questions – Special Education Teacher</u>

Name of researcher: _____

Name of interviewee: _____

Date: _____   Location: _____   Time: _____

1. Give a brief description of your position as a special education teacher. What attracted you to this position?

2. Describe your beliefs and experiences related to teaching ELLs (English language learners).

3. Do you feel as though ELLs in the school are receiving enough support in achieving their learning goals? If not, how do you think this could be changed?

4. How are ELLs, in general, being over-identified or under-identified as being learning disabled? If they are identified, do you think that it is a misidentification? Why or why not?

5. Do you feel that the assessments provided through the school are a valid indicator of an ELL having a potential learning disability? Why or why not?

6. Are ELLs in the school receiving enough support in achieving their learning goals? If not, how do you think this could be changed?

7. What is your opinion on placement of ELLs in inclusive settings? Do you feel their needs are being appropriately met? Why/why not?

8. How do you think language affects an ELLs success in reading achievement? What are some evidence-based strategies you have found to be successful in addressing this?

9. What is some advice you would give to other teachers in the school when working with ELL students in their classroom?

10. What information would be helpful to know about how to appropriately help ELLs in your class?

<u>Interview Questions – General Education Teacher</u>

Name of researcher: _____

Name of interviewee: _____

Date: _____   Location: _____   Time: _____

1. Give a brief description of your position as a general education teacher. What attracted you to this position?

2. Describe your beliefs and experiences related to teaching ELLs (English language learners).

3. Do you feel as though your ELL students are receiving enough support in achieving their learning goals? If not, how do you think this could be changed?

4. What evidence-based reading strategies, if any, are you using to address the academic needs of your ELL students? What kinds of accommodations/modifications have you had to make?

5. How do you think language plays a part in identifying ELLs as learning disabled?

6. Before receiving this position, do you feel were you prepared to teach ELL students? If not, what would you do to change this? Is there anything you wish that could be done to better prepare you?

7. In your opinion, are ELLs being over-identified or under-identified for learning disabilities? If they are identified, do you think that it is a misidentification? Why or why not?

8. Are ELLs in your classroom receiving enough support in achieving learning goals? If not, how do you think this could be changed?

9. What is your opinion on placement of ELLs in inclusive settings? Do you feel their needs are being appropriately met? Why/why not?

10. What is some advice you would give to other teachers in the school when working with ELL students in their classroom?

11. What information would be helpful to know about how to appropriately help ELLs in your class?

<u>Interview Questions – ESL Instructor</u>

Name of researcher: _____

Name of interviewee: _____

Date: _____   Location: _____   Time: _____

1. Give a brief description of your position as the ESL instructor. What attracted you to this position?

2. Describe your beliefs and experiences related to teaching ELLs (English language learners).

3. What materials/resources do you use when teaching ELLs? What strategies do you use, if any, to help with reading comprehension and/or literacy skills?

4. What is your opinion on placement of ELLs in inclusive settings? Do you feel their needs are being appropriately met? Why/why not?

5. Do you feel as though ELLs in the school are receiving enough support in achieving their learning goals? If not, how do you think this could be changed?

6. Are ELLs being over-identified or under-identified for learning disabilities? If they are identified, do you think that it is a misidentification? Why or why not?

7. How do you think language affects an ELLs success in reading achievement? What are some evidence-based strategies you have found to be successful in addressing this?

8. What does "culturally responsive" mean to you? Do you believe your work to be culturally responsive? Why or why not?

9. What do you think is most important to keep in mind while working with ELLs?

10. What is some advice you would give to other teachers in the school when working with ELL students in their classroom?

Predicting the Problem: ELL Reading

Achievement Questionnaire Links

Directions: The links provided below include all of the survey questions on a single screen. If the hyperlinks are not functioning, they may be copied and pasted into the browser. All questions for each questionnaire are listed on the single screen.

Part 1 – https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/C7LWC6Y

Part 2 – https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/CR8SFGM

<u>Observational Note Sheet</u>

Observer: _____   Date: _____

Type of teacher observing: _____

Location: _____   Time: _____

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