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## Elementary Teacher Experiences With English Language Learners With Special Education Needs in New York

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Elementary Teacher Experiences With English Language  
Learners With Special Education Needs in New York

by  
Colleen Ann Cahill

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education  
and School of Criminal Justice in Partial  
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Degree of Doctor of Education

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## **Approval Page**

This applied dissertation was submitted by Colleen Ann Cahill under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

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Colleen Ann Cahill  
Name

December 18, 2021  
Date

## **Acknowledgment**

Finishing a doctoral degree has helped me know that I can do anything if I put my mind to it. That being said, I did not do this alone. I have always wanted to accomplish this since I was younger. I have been blessed with a few amazing educators in my life who have always encouraged me to do more. Go that extra mile and give me the tools to get there. I hope to be that educator for others that come after me.

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do the same. They ensured I had the educational opportunities as a child and young adult that led me to earn this doctoral degree.

## Abstract

Elementary Teacher Experiences With English Language Learners With Special Education Needs in New York. Colleen Ann Cahill, 2021: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: English as a second language ESL, English language learners ELL, English as a new language ENL, special education, response to intervention, RTI

This qualitative study aimed to understand teacher experiences working with English language learners (ELL) with or suspected of having a learning disability. This study also addressed the current problem of ELL students concurrently being under and over classified as needing special education services. This study explored the experiences of elementary school teachers in the state of New York.

The participants were from different school districts within New York State. The participants all had experience teaching students who were designated ELL who were currently in the process of response to intervention (RTI) or had already been referred and classified as having English as a second language and special education needs.

This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) when analyzing the data as the importance of a person's life experience was the focus of this approach. Data was collected using Zoom's telecommunication platform for face-to-face, virtual interviews. This data yielded results that described the experiences these teachers have with identifying ELL students that demonstrate the need for special education. The following research questions were explored:

1. What are the experiences of teachers adapting curriculum to support students when teaching English language learners with suspected learning disabilities?
2. What are the experiences teachers have with the concept of scaffolding when teaching English language learners with suspected learning disabilities?
3. What are the experiences of teachers when they recommend an English language learner to special education?

Seven themes emerged that helped fulfill the need for current research. They were (a) Understanding students as people, (b) ESL teachers are without curriculum, (c) Student-teacher ratio impacts differentiation, (d) Inconsistencies in scaffolding, (e) Delays initiating special education services, (f) Sense of value varied, and (g) Theory taught but not applied for special education classification.

The intended audience of this study who benefitted were all teachers of ELLs, principals, and school administrators of schools with high ELL populations. Additionally, researchers and higher education institutions that prepared teachers benefited from this research.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **The Research Problem**

There was a strong need for better testing procedures, protocols, and screening tools to determine if an English language learners' strengths and weaknesses were due to a learning disability, general second language acquisition, or a combination of both. Migliarini and Stinson (2021) found this to be an issue within the state of New York's public schools. They were unable to find a single approach on both large and local levels regarding the approach schools use to identify English language learners with suspected learning disabilities. Professional development was needed in this area for special education teachers (Tong et al., 2017). Still, the problem persisted as there was a lack of research in best practices for teaching ELL students with Learning Disabilities (Orosco, 2014). Most of the current research referred back to studies and reports from the early 2000s, 10 to 20 years old. Kangas (2017) found there to be no research on the practice of bilingual education for ELL students. Miranda et al. (2019) published a study examining how well we prepared teachers to work with this unique but not uncommon student. They found that teachers were not fully prepared to screen and test ELL students for disabilities (Miranda et al., 2019). Currently, there was a lack of research on English language learners who had a learning disability, resulting in both the over- and under-classification of this unique student.

### ***Background and Justification***

Orosco (2014) believed experienced teachers were needed to teach ELL second language acquisition skills and strategies. Using a dynamic assessment (DA) framework, Orosco (2019) explored the lack of strategies available to improve word problem-solving

skills in math. Limited math vocabulary exposure increased the risk of developing or having a math disability (MD) for ELL students. He started his findings by commenting on the overall lack of math-based research in the field of English language learners with math disabilities. Math practices were written for native English speakers (Orosco, 2014). Using third-grade Latino students who were at risk for MD, he set up experiments in which teachers used DA frameworks and Dynamic Strategic Math techniques (DSM) and measured the student's success and growth. Using Woodcock-Johnson's (WC) math subtests as an assessment, he found a direct relationship to the development of at-risk for an MS, LEP students, and using these strategies. (Orosco, 2014).

Orosco and Abdulrahim (2017) created a case study that looked at culturally-responsive, professional development in response to his previous research. This case study followed one teacher who worked with students that were ELL and had math learning disabilities (MLD). The elementary school teacher expressed feelings of confidence in their ability to provide a quality math instruction to their SPED students where the students were successful with comprehension. The same teacher did not feel as confident when it came to SPED-LEP students with MLD. They felt they that they were not prepared or had the background knowledge to meet the needs of the SPED-LEP Students. (Orosco & Abdulrahim, 2017)

Becker and Deris (2019) found an overrepresentation of ELL students within the classrooms, a lack of training, professional development, and research-based instructional methods for ELLs with LD. Many schools have a translator, verbatim translate testing tools that are normed for monolingual students. Testing in this way can lead many teachers to feel they were not able to report findings fully. As the student responses are

translated for the teacher, they may not reflect the most accurate picture due to a margin of error with all translations (Becker & Deris, 2019).

### ***Deficiencies in the Evidence***

In addition to the lack of appropriate testing measures, Becker and Deris (2019) identified that researchers should study the disproportionalities as there is very little to identify a single cause (Becker & Deris, 2019). This same study should be replicated across school districts and geographic regions to have better results. Nevertheless, the need for research-based intervention and teaching methods or strategies for these students would most likely still be an issue as there still is a void in this area. The problem has yet to be solved but could easily be worked on with more research as this population is ever-growing within the United States.

### ***Audience***

The audience for this proposed research is academic researchers, psychologists, special education teachers, and school administrators. All public schools are affected by this, as they are legally required to provide free and appropriate education to all students (IDEA, 2004). The changing demographic within the United States continues to present this problem. For many school districts that may not have served ELL students in the past, this will be a problem if not further researched.

### ***Setting of the Study***

This study will be online using the application Zoom. Recruitment will take place using social media platforms, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. The targeted participants will be elementary school teachers that have English language learners enrolled within mainstream or inclusion classrooms.

## **Researcher's Role**

The researcher is a special education teacher with students who are dually classified SPED-LEP within New York State. No data will be collected from the individual school building in which the researcher is currently employed.

## **Definition of Terms**

*Committee on Special Education (CSE)* is the IEP Team determining initial or continuing eligibility for special education services. It is made up of but not limited to highly qualified general education and special teachers, psychologists, service providers as needed, such as speech or occupational therapists, parents, advocates, or anyone a parent feels can speak on behalf of the child's current levels of performance (IDEA, 2004).

*Dynamic Assessment (DA)* is a method of teaching a student while assessing a student at the same time or simultaneously (Orozco, 2014).

*English Language Learners (ELL)* "are individuals who have sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language to be unable to learn successfully in classrooms or to participate fully in the larger U.S. society" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

*English as a Second Language (ESL)* is referred to as the type of instruction designed to support students in English settings for whom English is not their first or native language (Brown, 2014).

*Individualized Education Plan (IEP)* is a legal document prepared by a team or CSE that classifies a student as needing special education services under 13 areas of classification as deemed by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004).

*L1 is a person's first or native language (Cummings, 1989).*

*L2 is a second language a person is currently learning or fluently speaks (Cummings, 1989).*

*LEP is a classification designated by the United States government, meaning a person has limited English proficiency. Thus, English is their second language (United States Department of Justice). New York State also uses this term on individualized education plans (New York State, 2021).*

*Response to Intervention (RTI/RtI) is a plan or process under IDEA that provides students with research-based interventions in areas they demonstrate weakness and require progress monitoring. This is implemented before a school-based referral to special education (Bender & Shores, 2007, IDEA, 2004).*

*Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) is a model developed for the prekindergarten–12th-grade classroom that meets common core standards and the language acquisition needs of ELL within a classroom setting. It focuses on explicit instruction scaffolded within a student's Zone of Proximal Development (Echevarria et al., 2016).*

*Special Education (SPED) is a term used to describe the services provided or a formal classification of a student with one of 13 disabilities that limit the function of learning (IDEA, 2004).*

*SPED-LEP is used to define a classified student as a special education student and an English language learner.*

*Woodcock-Johnson is a standardized test that measures cognitive abilities and academic achievement. It is one tool that can aid a committee on special education when*

evaluating a student to determine if special education services are needed (Schrank & Wendling, 2018).

*Zone of Proximal Development* refers to a component of Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social development. A learner has a minimum baseline and maximum ceiling range of levels to work within to progress and learn while being provided different levels of assistance—a learner's progress the baseline and ceiling of the zone raise.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative study aimed to understand teacher experiences working with ELL students with or suspected of having a learning disability. The researcher specifically asked questions regarding the strategies teachers were currently using in a classroom to teach ELL students and what tools or assessments were being used to determine if an English language learner should be referred for special education services. This type of research was needed as current studies were not widely available in this area.

Additionally, teachers were interviewed about their backgrounds and training. Specifically, the researcher asked about their knowledge of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), also, if they had formal training in teaching English as a Second Language. The answers to these questions enabled the researcher to compare and contrast teacher experiences based on teacher training.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

Even though the laws had changed there remained a strong need for better testing procedures, protocols, and screening tools to determine if the student's strengths and weaknesses were due to a learning disability, general second language acquisition, or a combination of both (National Center for Education Statistics ([NCES]; 2015).

Professional development was needed in this area for special education teachers.

However, the problem persists as there is a disturbing lack of research in best practices for teaching ELL students with Learning Disabilities. The majority of current research referred back to studies and policy reported from the early 2000s (Richardson, 2007; Zehler et al., 2003). This made the research at least 10 to 20 years old.

The audience for this proposed research was academic researchers, psychologists, teachers, and developmentalists. All public schools were affected by this, as they were legally required to provide free and appropriate education to all students (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004). The changing demographic within the United States continued to present this problem. This was a new problem for many school districts that may not have served ELL students in the past. The major question was how best to identify ELL students with learning disabilities. When this big picture question was answered, not only would have the pedagogy of teachers improve, but the lives of many children could also be changed. A more vital education supporting building upon weakness opened new doors that lead to new experiences and opportunities for these students who potentially dropped out of high school. The coursework may have been too hard as they were not properly identified or supported correctly.



## **Conceptual Framework**

Scaffolding material could have been the difference in ELL student's mastery of a concept. This strategy was based on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Historically, Vygotsky (1978) believed that all learners had a minimum baseline and maximum ceiling range of levels to work within to progress and learn while being provided different levels of assistance. At the same time, the learner progressed within the zone, their baseline and ceiling of the zone increased.

Pahlevansadegh and Mirzaei (2020) recognized the term scaffolding could have been used as a general term with multiple meanings, while most educational professionals scaffold in a similar way to the ZPD approach.

Using the theory of ZPD, Taukeni (2019) conducted quantitative research on English language learners who were identified as needing remedial support. They did not achieve passing grades in the previous school year. Interventions with a framework that used the ZPD were provided to some students. Strategies such as scaffolding, when the work was outside of the ZPD, were used as well. The students who received ZPD instruction were able to achieve at or above their potential. However, students did not work to their potential when a ZPD framework was not used and needed further remedial supports (Taukeni, 2019).

Learning vocabulary was key to ELL success within any classroom. Mirzaei et al. (2017) explored the use of Dynamic Assessment regarding vocabulary learning as they found to be little to no research. Using the ZPD framework, they developed experimental groups and lesson plans using junior high school EFL students in Iran. They found a ZPD approach allowed for the development of greater critical thinking, vocabulary and

linguistic skills. Students also were more likely to collaborate to solve problems within the classroom (Mirzaei et al., 2017). They argued this approach should be used with elementary school EFL students to provide a stronger foundation in terms of vocabulary. This disproves older studies like Mercer and Fisher's (1997) that ZPD would limit whole class progress as it focused on individual student learning. Mirzaei et al. (2017) found their study to be valuable and felt it should be replicated to see if it produced similar results as current education trends move towards a more individualized approach to teaching and learning.

Pahlevansadegh and Mirzaei (2020) conducted a study that sought to examine how a ZPD approach supported vocabulary, reading and writing instruction. Their findings showed an increase in the decoding, oral and written vocabulary and written skills students demonstrated. These results lead them to believe students taught with a ZPD scaffolding framework increased their awareness of Lexile density and understanding of domain-specific vocabulary compared to the experimental group that did not engage in this type of learning (Pahlevansadegh & Mirzaei, 2020).

Scaffolding for ELLs starts with language and vocabulary for all subjects. Understanding the Lexile density of words and how students perform within their L2 is key to student understanding and master. When a teacher scaffolds, the students have a better chance at greater independence and less likely to need intervention services. Scaffolding allowed learners to become more responsible during a time and provided opportunities for learners to increasingly conform to their learning regulation, which helped them become more self-regulated. Increasing one's ability to self-regulate was a

vital skill that lifelong independent learners needed and such methods could be taught within a ZPD model. (Pahlevansadegh & Mirzaei, 2020).

### **Historical Background**

The enrollment of English language learners (ELL) within American classrooms was growing rapidly (Zehler et al., 2003). Historically, ELL students had been disproportionately classified as needing Special Education support and removed from English as Second Language support (Orosco & Abdulrahim, 2017). This was never done with any malice but with good intentions of educators who were not trained to work with such needs. Due to stronger regulations within the law regarding ELL students, the metaphoric pendulum had swung in the other direction; students labeled as ELL or Limited English Proficient (LEP) were denied special education services (Orosco & Abdulrahim, 2017). Specifically, students with learning disabilities tended to not receive special education support at an early age like their monolingual counterparts due to the fears of disproportionality and over-representation. Currently there was not an agreed upon way or set of best practices for students to identify students who truly needed both.

Cummings (1989) believed that students that have a stronger foundation in their L1 or native language had an easier time learning a new language. An interdependence was built between both. Content knowledge within an academic setting was hypothesized to transfer between languages easily. This created a debate for teachers to use students' L1 within a classroom setting to support their background knowledge. It also supported the notation that bilingual education was extremely beneficial for ELL students. Cummings (1989) pushed for the debunking of myths that bilingualism handicaps a student, or that ELL students required special education. This research was the

foundation of ESL and bilingual education today. It had helped shape the federal and state laws regarding the teaching of ELL students and the exclusionary methods many schools took in the past.

The Policy Report of Zehler et al. (2003) submitted to the United States Department of Education in 2003 found an estimated 3,977,819 LEP students enrolled in public schools (kindergarten–12th grade) for the 2001–2002 school year. Out of that amount of LEP students, 357,325 qualified as requiring special education (SPED) services. School districts with larger LEP populations had a lower LEP student rate than receiving special education services. These students were less likely to receive intensive services to address their language acquisition and were more likely to receive academic instruction in English. Additionally, 75% of these students did not have specifically-designed services instead.

Zehler et al. (2003) found separate programs were running parallel to one another in schools. The ESL departments taught ESL while the SPED departments delivered only SPED services. There did not seem to be any collaboration between the two. This suggested a discrepancy with students' classification as SPED-LEP in American public schools based on demographic information.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021) examined the increase of racial and ethnic diversity in the United States. In the fall of 2010, 9.2% or 4.5 million of the population of students in public schools were classified ELL. This rose to 10.2% or 5.0 million in 2018. In New York State, 9.1% of students were ELL in the fall of 2018. The NCES (2021) identified students who received targeted learning supports for language acquisition were able to "develop high levels of academic attainment in English

and met the same academic content and academic achievement standards that all students were expected to meet" (NCES, 2021). However, not all students had taken part in this instruction. Seven hundred sixty-six thousand, six hundred sixty students were reported to receive special education services or be considered to have had a disability which was 15.3% of the total ELL population in the U.S.

### **The Over- and Under-Referral of English Language Learners to Special Education**

The NCES published findings that only 8% of LEP students read on grade level by the fourth grade. Students in some schools were over-referred due to this, while others were not (NCES, 2015). There does not seem to be a singular approach to solving this problem. This was the same issue found in 2002 and it was yet to be solved.

The number of students from other cultural backgrounds was growing in the United States. Growth in the minority population had been a trend for urban schools and suburban schools. The disproportionate number of students from a multicultural background requiring special education services was a real concern for schools that previously did not have these students (Obiakor & Rotatori, 2014).

This overrepresentation of English language learners (ELL) in special education had become a severe problem in the United States. The ELL population was rising at a faster pace than ever (Obiakor & Rotatori, 2014). General education teachers were not trained to teach ELLs, created a misunderstanding of student needs, contributed to the the over-referral rate for special education services (Miranda et al., 2019).

Historically, there had been a disproportionate representation of minority groups within special education across the United States. The rate at which minority groups received special education services and referrals were due to many contributing factors,

such as systemic socioeconomic and racial disparities (Strassfeld, 2017). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) had put in measures to prevent this in 2017.

Strassfeld (2017) found a lack of uniformity when she reviewed the court rulings about the disproportionate representation of minorities in special education. Many states over-report while others were underreporting, which was a true civil rights violation for these students. Strassfeld (2017) related this to segregation issues and inequality of access to quality education for all. There was a burden on the states to ensure schools used culturally- sensitive evaluation practices to avoid civil rights violations.

Boon and Barbetta (2017) identified the need for reading interventions for the English language learner at the elementary level. Students enrolled in the lower elementary grades of kindergarten through third grade were less likely to receive special education services if they were ELLs. They also found fourth- and fifth graders who were ELLs were more likely to receive special education services and become classified as learning disabled if they were struggling readers. This was not surprising to them as the older elementary students' academic tasks heavily relied on reading skills (Boon & Barbetta, 2017).

The over-referral rate of LEP students to be evaluated for special education services had been researched by many. At Niagara University, NY, the TESOL department took an in-depth look at LEP-SPED students. Their findings were that the placement of an LEP student in special education that was struggling would not be detrimental to a student's success overall as they received instruction using strategies they otherwise would not be exposed to. However, it could show regression or a slowdown of the learning rate if the teacher was not trained in or had not studied second language

acquisition strategies. It was found that experienced teachers lacked the skills needed to teach this special student population (Huang et al., 2011).

Sanatullova-Allison and Robison-Young (2016) highlighted the changing demographics of students with LEP in American public schools. In the past, states such as Texas, New York, and California had the highest student special education classification rates for ELL students. This was rapidly changing and presenting new challenges to states and school districts with little to no experience with this type of learner. Teachers were not trained in second language acquisition and often, had difficulty distinguishing the similarities between learning disabilities and second language acquisition behaviors. This was noted within Response to Intervention (RTI) models. Teachers who lacked training in language acquisition may have assumed the student had a learning disability, which resulted in a misguided attempt and misplacement with the students' programming resulting in an over-classification to special education (Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016).

The over-classification of ELLs needing special education for many years had resulted in many lawsuits and legal settlements within school districts with large ELL populations. Maxwell and Shah looked at the San Diego School System in 2012. They noted, this particular school system was faced with a class-action lawsuit. The suit claimed 70% of the Latino students were more likely to be referred to special education, creating an over-representation of students classified as ELL in special education. The suit also named a low quality of special education services in general after classification for these students. This lawsuit changed the San Diego school system's special education protocols and turned to a Response to Intervention model. They also implemented a pre-

referral process. This created a new problem under classification. The school district now will exhaust every intervention before a special education referral, resulting in a delay of services for some students who may have needed it (Maxwell & Shah, 2012).

ELLs with undiagnosed and diagnosed special needs often needed psychological support. When they were also introduced to a new environment or culture, having had teachers who understood and embraced their culture could have helped their academic achievement. Thibeault et al. (2018) believed this was an affirmation needed and could have been provided through multicultural education. They found success for immigrant and first-generation students when inclusion and cultural awareness of their ethnic background was present. This approach had been proven successful with general education students and should have been considered when making a referral to a CSE to prevent unnecessary testing and formal batteries of assessments.

### **Teaching and Assessment of SPED-LEP Students**

Currently, there was a lack of culturally responsive programming and assessments presently being used in American schools. Obiakor and Rotatori (2014) found a lack of teacher preparation and standardized testing regarding a multicultural approach to teaching and learning to contribute to over-identification. When we had an overall systemic change in the way teachers were trained, students grew up and treated those with special needs.

The over-referral rates were directly related to the assessments used by special education teams. When test items were translated, often, they lost their meaning and became very easy or extremely difficult to solve. Also, students were not always literate in their native language, only verbally fluent, so they could not have skewed test results



when asked to read or write. Furthermore, many LEP students did not have the background/prior knowledge to solve problems or answer questions in a thorough enough manner, therefore, falling within the academic ranges of qualifying for special education services when they were not necessarily needed (Huang et al., 2011).

Language learning and second language acquisition were taught with many strategies and philosophies. The two main agreed-upon philosophies were English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Hong-Nam and Szabol (2012) found the theory behind each approach to be grounded in the same research. The method was different. Often, EFL classrooms were homogeneous, and all students spoke the same L1, where ESL classrooms contained heterogeneous students with varying L1s and culturally diverse backgrounds. Hong-Nam and Szabol (2012) conducted a study to find the differences between the approach within these classrooms that had the same objective: to have become fluent in English. They found fewer strategies were used in an EFL setting as the students all spoke the same L1. Teachers used more varied techniques within an ESL setting where students all said different L1s.

There were strengths and weaknesses to both models. With the ESL model, more hand gestures were used when speaking, allowing students to understand English better, but grammar and syntax were more focused on in an EFL setting as the need for social communication were met as they all spoke the same L1. Hong-Nam and Szabol (2012) did state caution should have been used when generalizing these findings, but it could have been beneficial to be replicated within different settings where the goal was to become fluent in English, such as bilingual and SIOP modeled classrooms.

### *Culturally Appropriate Teaching*

Kleen and Glock (2018) felt culturally responsive pedagogy should have been part of teacher training. Their study found new and preservice teachers responded to the misbehavior of minority students in a harsher way. This teacher demographic was often found in low socioeconomic, culturally, and linguistically diverse schools. They found new and preservice teachers were more likely to suspend or expel minority students.

The use of culturally responsive behavior management systems should also be part of school policy, and teachers should be trained. Management systems like this had proved to be promising to influence the educational system. These prepared teachers to have had a better understanding of their students. They encouraged implementing preventative behavior management systems rather than reactionary ones (Kleen & Glock, 2018).

Many students had undiagnosed or misdiagnosed special education and mental health needs. Parents from diverse backgrounds have had little to no access to education and did not know to advocate for individualized education plans. They carry a stigma in many diverse communities. When these students present with certain behaviors beyond their control, it could have been viewed as an intent to break a school rule. These behaviors escalated at times, and schools would have called the police and pressed criminal charges (Wiggin, 2016). The trend across all research was when teachers understood their students at a cultural and social level, created and implemented behavior management became more successful. The potential for serious, life-lasting punitive action decreased.

Multicultural education allowed for the inclusion of all. Including culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners with special needs were the crux of multicultural education. Camicia and Zhu (2012) believed it allowed all students to understand different perspectives and create environments in which all students could have learned. Without an approach such as multicultural education, C.LD Students with special education or ESL needs can easily become marginalized.

### ***Assessment***

An additional problem faced by educators working with students classified as S-LEP is the inconsistency of formalized testing regarding students classified as ELLs. Every state had a different way to identify or classify students as an ELL. Furthermore, the law varied from state to state regarding special education testing of a student that was ELL. Cole (2014) identified best practices concerning testing for classification purposes. Reviews of a student's language acquisition history, the use of valid and appropriate test protocols, and bilingual academic evaluations in the student's native and second language should have been used before any learning disability classification (Cole, 2014).

In 2014, Orosco published an article in *Learning Disability Quarterly* titled, "Word Problem Strategy for Latino English Language Learners at Risk for Math Disabilities." Using a dynamic assessment framework, Orosco explored the lack of strategies available to improve word problem-solving skills, the idea of supporting limited math vocabulary exposure, and the risk of developing or having a math disability (MD). He started his findings by commenting on the overall lack of math-based research in the field of English language learners with Math Disabilities. He explained that most of the research he had completed was based on native English speakers' math practices.

Orosco believed it was necessary to have had experience teaching native English speakers to have had the foundation and improved on it by using language acquisition strategies. (Orosco, 2014).

Using the dynamic assessment (DA) framework, he posed the following research questions, "To what level did DA improve students' word-problem skills as measured by word-problem-solving achievement?" and "To what degree did DA maintain students' word-problem solving skills in generalization sessions?" (Orosco, 2014). Using third-grade Latino students at risk for MD, he set up experiments in which teachers used DA frameworks and Dynamic Strategic Math techniques (DSM) and measured the student's success and growth. Orosco (2014) used the results from the Woodcock-Johnson math subtests as an assessment. They indicated a direct relationship to the development of at-risk students for M.D., LEP students, and these strategies. This was found in general overall math skills and word-problem solving (Orosco, 2014).

Park (2020) conducted a study about educator beliefs regarding special education referrals for ELL students. She found that when teachers were categorized, they could have been put into The Wait to Be Sure Group and The Sooner the Better Group. Each group believed that their ideas about referrals were correct, and most felt very strongly about this. Park (2020) found evidence that these philosophies were influenced by the individual school districts and their policies through qualitative methods.

Participants in the Wait to Be Sure group acknowledged students needed to be statistically rare to be referred to special education. When children did not fall within these parameters, they would continue to wait for a referral. Many felt this led to what they called a failure model, meaning that a student would have needed to fail or have

been 2 years behind grade level (Park, 2020). There were limitations to this model as younger students would not have access to special education until the second grade. Park (2020) noted this model was not compliant with federal policy and violating educational law (Park, 2020). This model also violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and IDEA of 2004, although many school districts had adopted this as standard policy because of fears of disproportionality. These students ended up receiving years of intervention services rather than special education in efforts to support the notion they were just simply immature and needed time. They felt the students, over many years, become proficient in English as they matured (Park, 2020).

Participants in The Sooner, the Better Group felt that it was wrong to wait years and provide interventions in place of special education. They used the same argument that the Wait to Be Sure Group used, it was statistically rare for a student to need both special education and English instruction to prove their point. The feelings of giving a disservice to the students were present with all participants. Park (2020) discovered this group overwhelmingly felt they needed to use preverbal backdoors using IDEA provisions. They encouraged parents of ELL students to write letters requesting evaluations or used health care to initiate referrals. Under federal law, a school had 15 days to respond and to act upon all parent requests for evaluation (IDEA, 2004). Teachers had strong opinions and overall wanted to do the right thing for ELLs with suspected disabilities, but there seemed to be no clear right or wrong approach (Park 2020).

Hutchison (2017) revisited Maslow's theory of nature versus nurture and Gardener's theory of multiple intelligences with the lens of special education referrals of culturally diverse students. Many of the standardized tests and measurements used to

evaluate students in the United States were not necessarily culturally relevant to the students. When measuring the ability of students based on experiences they had not had life experiences to gain background knowledge in specific areas that would have resulted in a disproportionate group of students who were considered below a benchmark standard with artificial roots built from the local area.

Many schools did not have the support systems for new students from new cultures in place to help them succeed. Often, these students were ELLs and came from two-income households that were still considered low-income. Hutchison (2017) discussed the feeling of parents and guardians who recognized the lack of support for their children was a problem, but they could not have solved them. Many parents felt they did not have the choice or ability to leave work. The parents of these students had few paths of survival and success. Access to support was prohibited by financial costs when it was not fully provided by the local public schools.

Although Hutchison (2017) acknowledged the need for special education and traditional school-based assessments, he questioned why this the only measure is used for determination into a special education setting. The idea of common sense and street smarts should be considered more often while in school, as many students who demonstrate this, will be very successful later on in life. Hutchinson (2017) called for a reassessment of a school's pedagogical approach to have included this type of intelligence. Allowing students to learn and be assessed from their natural talents was part of a student's human and civil rights and not just be assessed by traditional school values (Hutchison, 2017).

People continued to find success in their adult lives through their natural strengths and talents that they may not have had in school. The current system of learning did not include ways to highlight this. As a result, many students, especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse families, were considered learning disabled. If teaching had a more natural component, which would have increased its efficiency. When a student's needs were assessed differently, their natural ability to learn increased (Hutchison, 2017). Although many schools had not recognized their need to change their philosophy of education, others were struggling to change. As their student population changed, many schools struggled to keep up with providing the supports needed.

### **Effective Strategies for a Student Classified SPED-LEP**

Boon and Barbetta (2017) used nine published research studies to identify meaningful reading interventions for a student classified as SPED-LEP. They found graphic organizers, computer-based apps, peer tutoring, repeated reading with a vocabulary component, and targeted reading intervention programs all increased the students reading levels. They found discrepancies with how each study was implemented and how students were classified. They called for further research regarding the learning-disabled English language learner at the end of their research study. They noted that most research was about teaching strategies geared toward monolingual students with learning disabilities (Boon & Barbetta, 2017).

Many strategies are developed for the elementary student. Haagar and Osipova (2017) found there was not enough research published for the SPED-LEP adolescent. They examined the idea of using interventions that would have helped taught these students the basic skills they missed as a younger child. An example of this would have

been when a teacher found the gaps, and taught those particular skills to the students, particularly in the area of reading, oral language and ESL, defined as backfilling (Haagar & Osipova, 2017). Ideas used for younger students, such as explicitly teaching phonics, sentence structure, main idea, and vocabulary, were overall successful when embedded into the content area. They noted, these strategies helped all students but made a big difference academically, assisting the students classified as SPED-LEP access the classroom materials (Haager & Osipova, 2017).

In Germany, a research team at the University of Cologne published a single-case, multiple-baselines research study on the use of storytelling for students struggling to learn English learning disabled. The university's team conducted this study because speaking English was essential and significant in a global society. Poor memory skills were commonly known characteristic of a student with learning disabilities. This made learning any second language extremely difficult for a student. Barwasser et al. (2020) identified that the use of vocabulary was the key to students acquiring language. They found through the use of storytelling and direct vocabulary instruction, the students made progress. They identified some limitations as this was the first time this was done with only four out of the six participants but strongly felt their approach should have been replicated. They believe it could have benefited many students as it was cost-effective and targeted to them (Barwasser et al., 2020).

Dussling (2020) noted there was a lack of research about instruction for ELLs in the areas of spelling and decoding. Many general education teachers felt they did not have the skillset to teach ELL students who showed signs of disability. A 2019 study was designed to find ways to address this need. Dussling (2020) worked with a New York



school district with students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Thirteen students that were identified as needing both reading intervention and an ELL were selected by their teachers to study. These students received explicit instruction in the areas of phoneme awareness, decoding, and encoding in groups of students with varying language abilities by general education teachers.

Using the standardized tools of the Developmental Spelling Test (DST) and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), the researcher monitored children's spelling and reading growth. Nine out of 13 students showed an increased in scores on the DST with the group average also increasing. After receiving the explicit instruction, 11 students were placed within the highest scoring range of the DIBELS (Dussling, 2020). This proved early findings from Vadasy and Sanders (2010), Stuart (1999), and Tangel and Blachman's (1992, 1995) studies that explicit phonics instruction helped ELLs particularly in decoding, spelling, and oral reading fluency (Dussling, 2020).

### **Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol**

Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) is a model developed for the prekindergarten–12th-grade classroom that met common core standards and the language acquisition needs of ELL within a classroom setting. It focused on explicit instruction scaffolded within a student's Zone of Proximal Development. It was developed in the 1980s and then implemented in the 1990s in response to the influx of ELL students in United States public schools (Echevarria et al., 2016).

The key components of a SIOP classroom contained visuals, collaborative student paring, curriculum modifications, kinesthetic movement, and focused on vocabulary.

This approach allowed ELL students to have new learning opportunities and ways to succeed than they would have been in a traditional, monolingual classroom.

As educational law and policy changed, SIOP became prevalent in U.S. public school classrooms to meet the needs of ELLs. Teachers and school districts tended to like using a SIOP model as Echevarria et al. (2016) and continued to develop and fine-tune this approach to the instruction of ELLs as new research was conducted. Teachers did not need to be bilingual, nor did they need certification in ESL. Rather, a general or special education teacher could have been trained in these strategies. Often, they supported what teachers felt to be the best practices and complemented this methodology. Many studies, such as McIntyre et al. (2010), have proven to improve academic achievement in students only when consistently implemented within a classroom. Regardless of if they had a background in ESL, teachers needed to be intensely trained for this model to work.

Daniel and Conlin (2015) examined the SIOP model using a preservice teacher's experience. They reported that she felt that her lessons were purposeful, and the lesson planning format helped her become aware of the supports her ELL students needed and her class as a whole. Although fans of the SIOP method found that there was room for improvement, Daniel and Conlin (2015) also found that there was room for improvement—specifically, within the SIOP checklist. This was a list teachers were given when planning their lessons to aid planning for the needs of ELLs. They felt this checklist did not offer enough from the student's perspective and was one-sided. They felt that for students to be successful, their perspective should have been considered while planning a SIOP lesson.

## **Teacher Collaboration for ESL Student Achievement**

Vintan and Gallagher (2019) studied the practices of ESL and elementary school classroom teachers. Using the framework of Vygotsky's (1978) theories of social constructivism and interactions, they sought to determine what current methods were being used to teach ESL students and what resources and collaborations were. What they found mirrored Meyers' (2006) findings of the growing misconception that all teachers have the ability to teach ESL students, and there was a strong need for a collaborative approach between classroom teachers and ESL teachers to further student growth.

Current collaboration efforts of classroom teachers and ESL teachers varied depending on the schools. Each school that took part in Vintan and Gallagher's (2019) study had different resources, environments, and teacher backgrounds. They noted there was a strong desire for collaboration, but it was inconsistent, and at times, unpredictable. The most effective collaborations were when teachers shared roles and responsibilities within a classroom. The roles became blurred to both outside observers and students. It was hard to determine which teacher was the general education teacher and which teacher was the ESL teacher. The ideal model should look like this, as it benefitted all students because both teachers could have brought their expertise and style to every student.

There was a significant need for collaboration between classroom teachers and the out-of-classroom teachers who serviced their students with ESL or special education (Vintan & Gallagher, 2019, DelliCarpini, 2014, Dove & Honigsfeld, 2010, Meyers, 2006). Numerous researchers theorized that the students would not have received the most appropriate education needed for their individual needs without this collaboration.

Collaboration between professionals could have created a shared experience that helped solve problems and allowed teachers to brainstorm solutions and strategize.

### **Response to Intervention**

Response to Intervention (RTI) was a plan or process under IDEA that provided students with research-based interventions in areas they demonstrated weakness in behavior management and academic skills. This was implemented through an RTI team prior to a school-based referral to the Committee on Special Education teams (IDEA, 2004). This approach had been around and studied since the 1960s (Bender & Shores, 2007). Before this, a student who was thought to have had an LD was evaluated using a discrepancy model. Under that model, a CSE was required to look for discrepancies between a student's I.Q. and current performance levels in an academic setting. Each state had its range and guidance, which led to both over- and under-classification rates depending on the location.

Roseberry-McKibbin (2021) feels that RTI was a great tool for identifying a learning disability in an ELL if implemented correctly. She thought that RTI was helpful in defining what was a natural part of second language acquisition in a student or external factors that could have impacted or prevented learning in an ELL that could have been presented as an LD. Furthermore, the RTI process could have helped teachers determine if an ELL's issues were due to language acquisition or a true disability. Often, classroom teachers struggled with deciding the difference if they were not a trained ESL or special education teachers. RTI took the burden from a general education teacher and allowed a team to make this decision (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2021).

Implementing a DA model within the RTI process for ELLs had been identified as beneficial to the CSE during initial evaluations. Often, ELL students had not received research-based, quality instruction from highly qualified professionals that had properly been assessed or progress monitored. If an ELL could have been successful he would not need the services of special education. Using a DA framework within RTI lesson planning, a teacher should have seen the difference within student's needs. Teachers who worked under this model were less likely to refer students directly and prematurely; thus, this prevented an over-classification or mislabeled SPED-LEP students (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2021).

The RTI system was designed to create a more equitable process between states (Bender & Shores, 2007). Currently, RTI programs were shifting to a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). MTSS was very similar to tiered RTI programming but incorporated social emotional learning and academic and behavioral supports. A whole child theory was used with MTSS. The recent addition of social and emotional learning complimented this approach. Pairing this at the ground level, or Tier 1, with behavioral and academic supports, had positive outcomes for all students. Needs that might have gone missing could now have been met (Sailor et al., 2021).

Coyne et al. (2018) sought to examine how schools used an MTSS or RTI program and discovered no standardized ways schools, even within the same school district, had been implementing these approaches at a Tier 2 level. Within the purpose of this study, they noted there was very little literature to support the full implementation of this model. The study looked at 395 students enrolled in kindergarten–third grade, with 33% identified as an ELL, to determine the overall impact of Tier 2 reading intervention

services. They used the DIBELS as a measurement tool for oral reading abilities and the Woodcock Passage Comprehension to measure reading comprehension. They found that the teachers did not have the time or resources to implement Tier 2 reading supports.

Coyne et al. (2018) hypothesized that if school districts invested more time and resources in the MTSS model, it would be more successful. Additionally, there were flaws with the data they collected at each school that participated had a different approach and structure to their Tier1 or general education curriculum.

Behavior management was a controversial issue in RTI and special education. A disproportionate number of ELL, minority students from low socioeconomic areas end up in the Juvenile Justice System. Many of these students were special education students. Wiggin (2016) believed much of this stemmed from school systems. There was a need for better training for educators regarding special education needs and culture. He found most teachers who worked in these communities did not have the same background as their students or experience teaching. They also tended to lack formal training in special education and did not understand the community they worked in at a social level. When schools and teachers implemented behavior management, evidence-based practices should always be used.

Gage et al. (2018) found simple yet effective strategies such as allowing for a wait time for student responses, especially for linguistically diverse students, could have changed the atmosphere and created less tension. When English was not a student's first language, allowing extra time to process academic or social information could have changed a student's reaction. When students know they would have had this spare time to process or respond in various ways, they were less likely to become frustrated. If students

were less frustrated, their behaviors would be less likely to be interpreted as misbehavior or disrespect. Additionally, other evidence-based strategies such as active instruction and supervision and constant, positive feedback decreased misbehavior (Gage et al., 2018).

Samuels (2017) felt that the Response to Intervention process falls short for many students. Using a research study by Hudson and McKenzie (2016) and Samuels (2017), they reported no clear model for RTI in any school. Ninety percent of states had no regulation or requirements for length or a framework for implementing RTI. This had led to students staying in intervention services for a much longer period to avoid special education referrals (Hudson & McKenzie, 2016). Nevertheless, all schools that took part in the research used a 3-tiered system in response to the discontinued use of a discrepancy model and the reauthorization of IDEA (Samuels, 2017; Hudson & McKenzie, 2016; IDEA, 2004).

This model had created a problem for student access to special education. When the Every Student Succeeds Act was passed, it did not include RTI but spoke of multitiered support systems such as RTI to support ELL students, but this had created issues for ELL's with language acquisition issues as well as students that had medically documented needs. An extreme example of this came from an Ohio School District. In 2011 they tried to enforce an RTI tiered system for a student with diabetes when the parents formally requested accommodations (Samuels, 2017).

Hudson and McKenzie (2016) felt RTI impacted the length of time students with Learning Disabilities took to receive special education services. When their parents referred students, there was a limitation on the number of days that the evaluations needed to be completed (IDEA, 2004). Under RTI, students could have increased their

time due to school delays or delayed referrals to the Tier 3 status. Often, a CSE committee would have found the RTI services that were delivered were not delivered by a highly qualified teacher implementing research-based interventions and denied the requested until this need was met, thus, leaving a student in RTI for a longer time. Hudson and McKenzie (2016) noted a lack of literature that addressed this concern, so their findings were rather new and should be investigated further. At that time, they believed teachers had a hard time understanding the validity and value in the RTI process regarding LD students (Hudson & McKenzie, 2016).

### **Teacher Expectation**

Future performance of students had been linked to teacher expectation. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1966) brought this theory to light. Many researchers had continued looking at the classic study of teacher expectations. Harvey, Suizzo, and Jackson (2016) found that when teachers with varying expectations based on their student demographics, larger discrepancies appeared and were negative regarding ethnic and minority students. Many of these students were ELL or were classified as being Limited English Proficient (LEP).

As students get older, teachers expressed more concern over grade-level mastery skills while teachers of younger students' teachers focused on classroom behaviors and peer relationships. Within the classroom, Tran and Birman (2019) looked at all three areas, grade-level skill mastery, peer relationships, and classroom behaviors regarding teacher expectations of ELL students from Somalia. Teachers of the kindergarten students did not express any concern about grade-level skills but reported on progress in classroom behaviors. All the teachers interviewed expressed their expectation that



students would have memorized materials and produced written responses using handwritten work or a computer-based word processor.

### **Professional Development for Teachers**

A research article published in May 2019 supported what the majority of research had found. Becker and Deris found an overrepresentation of ELL students with teachers who lacked training, professional development, and researched-based instructional methods for students classified as SPED-LEP. They found that many teachers responded in-depth about the bilingual testing process for special education students. Many schools had a translator, verbatim translated testing tools that were normed for monolingual students. This led many teachers to feel they could not have fully reported findings as the student responses were translated, which may not have reflected the students' most accurate picture. (Becker & Deris, 2019).

In addition to the lack of appropriate testing measures, Becker and Deris (2019) identified that there was a gap in the literature and there was a need for more. This may have been due to the small subgroup they looked at, as all their work was conducted within the same school district. This same study should be replicated across school districts and geographic regions to have better results. Nevertheless, the need for research-based intervention and teaching methods or strategies for these students would most likely still be an issue as there always was a void in this area. The problem had yet to be solved. More research needed to be done as this population was ever-growing within the United States. Miranda, Wells, and Jenkins (2019) published a study examining how well we prepared teachers to work with this unique but not uncommon

student. They had found mixed evidence that teachers were not fully equipped, and teacher preparation programs were not well defined or researched (Miranda et al., 2019).

In 2017 Orosco with Abdulrahim created a single case study to examine the culturally responsive as a follow up to their previously published research. They found the teacher felt as if the monolingual special education students were comprehending the math curriculum. The teacher did not have any doubt about their ability to teach that group but felt insecure and not prepared to teach SPED-LEP students with MLD highlighting the need to address this type of student in professional development and preservice learning for teachers (Orosco & Abdulrahim, 2017).

### **Preservice Teacher Preparation**

Meineke and DeVasto (2020) conducted research in hoping to find the attributes of preservice training models that supported the needs of emergent bilingual students (EBS). Currently, there was an issue of teachers who were underprepared to meet the needs of EBS. There was a discrepancy in teacher preparation programs. Many simply do not address best practices. Unfortunately, many teacher preparation programs and literature do not cover the needs of EBS. Meineke and DeVasto (2020) felt this was a vital part of Critical Theory so educators could have gained a better understanding of their student's prior knowledge and backgrounds.

An understanding of language acquisition models such as Cummins' (1989) Foundations of Language Theory should be taught to all preservice teachers in addition to a Critical Theory Lens. These two ideas work well together. A Critical Theory Lens background would have allowed the preservice teacher to understand how a home language, other than English, could have marginalize students (Meineke & DeVasto,

2020). While a deeper understating of Cummins' (1989) models of how Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) explained how students would have effectively communicated both socially and academically in the classroom. Regarding students that were SPED-LEP, preservice teachers needed to have an understanding that monolingualism created an advantage. Teachers of SPED-LEP students that had insufficient training in language acquisition inadvertently missed learning opportunities for their students. According to Meineke and DeVasto, (2020) the more theory all preservice teachers were taught, the more effectively they were and had the potential to make a positive impact on ELLs and SPED-LEP students.

### **New York State and the Education of SPED-LEP Students**

New York State (NYS) historically had been a place for recent immigrants to move to since the United States' founding as a country. According to the U.S. Census, 2015–2019, 35.5% of New York State residents speak a language other than English in their homes (United States Census, 2020). The NCES (2021) reported NYS to have 9.1% of its total population of public-school students be considered ELL. This number differed from the census data. Each state had the freedom to use any means to identify and test students for English Language Proficiency. Many students spoke a language other than English in their homes but did not meet the qualification of ELL status as they had shown proficiency in English.

In February 2018, The New York Education Department (NYSED) began to use a newly designed tool to Identify English language learners. This was called New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners (NYSITELL). Under the

guidance of State Law CR Part-154, there were five English language learner levels students who could have been identified as Entering, Emerging, Transitioning, Expanding, or Commanding. Only four of these levels were given explicit instruction in language acquisition under the law. If a student scored within a Commanding level, they were placed in a general education setting. Students with IEP or 504 accommodation plans received accommodations on this exam (New York State Education Department, 2018).

NYSED had made major reform to the educational policy of NYS public schools regarding ELL students because of CR Part-154. CR-Part 154 was a “comprehensive collection of regulations regarding equity and inclusive education for ELLs” (Migliarini & Stinson, 2021). It broke down ELL students into subgroups: newcomer, developing, long-term ELL, students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFEs), and ELLs with disabilities. These subgroups were formed to ensure each ELL was provided the services they needed while ensuring inclusion and a school’s specialization in understanding the individual needed of each group than in a broad language acquisition approach (Migliarini & Stinson, 2021).

Migliarini and Stinson (2021) found several themes emerged from their qualitative study that sought to understand how teachers in NYS were implementing CR-Part 154’s new regulations. All the teachers that participated in their study agreed that there was not an official protocol in place that was implemented in schools for inclusive education. There were major differences in all buildings, even within the same school district as to how this was approached. (Migliarini & Stinson, 2021).

Teachers often relied on their background knowledge to implement curriculum

and provided instruction. They also felt that special education and the ESL or ELL departments within their schools worked separately with SPED-LEP students. There was not a sense of collaboration between the two departments. Teachers felt this was not done on purpose but simply because there was not enough time to plan and work together outside of the classroom for their students. They also felt they were not able to implement curriculum change due to the lack of resources provided by their schools (Migliarini & Stinson, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

If there were fundamental changes for true inclusion for all students regardless of background or ability, general attitudes towards special needs could have changed positively (Matveieva, 2019). New York State has adopted a three-tiered RTI model for both academic and behavioral interventions. Tier1 required the use of a culturally and linguistically appropriate general education curriculum. Part 154 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education required that RTI and CSE teams ensured ELL students received quality English as a Second Language (ESL) support. This support was provided in addition to RTI. New York also required the review of similar peer progress when conducting progress monitoring for LEP/ELL students and a culturally and linguistically appropriate approach. Without these steps, an LEP/ELL student may not necessarily have qualified for a referral to special education (New York State Education Department, 2010).

There was a need for research to provide better education to the SPED-LEP student. English was a complex language to master, as it had many rules that needed to be memorized fully. Across the world, educators had to come to a collective understanding

there was little to no research in this niche area resulting in both an over- and under-referral to special education. To further examine this problem in an attempt to solve it, qualitative research must be done to understand the present experiences of teachers working with these students. This was needed, as there were significant gaps in the current literature.

Furthermore, the development of language proficiency within this population was critical for further student success. There were limitations in this research field, as every state had very different educational laws for all its students. Each school had its philosophy and approach. Results may have been skewed because of these factors. Vygotsky's theory of ZPD to determine student potential was not always used. Using this may have helped schools with untrained staff better identify true learning disabilities in their ELL population.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the experiences of teachers adapting curriculum to support students when teaching English language learners with suspected learning disabilities?
2. What are the experiences teachers have with the concept of scaffolding when teaching English language learners with suspected learning disabilities?
3. What are the experiences of teachers when they recommend an English language learner to special education?

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Aim of Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the lived experiences of elementary school teachers that work with English language learners that may have or have special education needs. The main goal was to interpret trends with what they feel is successful and works for their student. This is significant as the limited research available shows many schools do not have one streamlined approach to the best practices for this type of student. This lack of understanding and research on a larger level has led to both over-classification and under-classification rates.

### **Qualitative Research Approach**

The phenomenological approach was utilized this study. In Phenomenological Research, a researcher looks at the development of the participant's life experiences to understand a certain aspect of a theory or idea, peculiarity, or to understand perceived anomalies. There is a significant focus on the essence or crux of their participant's reality (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In this study, the phenomenon studied was the approach teachers take when they suspect or know an English language learner to have additional educational needs that require special education services.

The phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study as it looked at teachers' experiences with English language learners with or suspected of having disabilities. Using a semi-structured interview, the researcher was able to ask different questions to further clarify the meaning of the lived experiences being discussed. The study sought to understand how teachers work with this type of student with hopes to share approaches that teachers feel are currently working in New York State. These

teachers' lived experiences can help establish what works and currently doesn't work, given the parameters and educational policy and law set forth by the State of New York.

The researcher was able to look at the past experiences of these teachers to find common meaning and explain it, which is how Creswell and Poth (2017) and Bliss (2017) describe the essence of a phenomenological study. The data collected was analyzed by hand using notations to find themes within. This gave a better insight and understanding of the factors that make these teachers successful or less successful with their students. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used when analyzing the data as the importance of a person's life experience is the focus of this approach. Understanding the details of the life experience only enriched the data provided. The researcher was challenged to think about the participants' sense of their experience from their point of view (Smith et al., 2009).

## **Participants**

### ***Selection***

The participants for this study, were selected first using purposeful sampling using online social media networks, then snowball sampling was employed until the desired number of 15 participants was achieved. The criteria looked for teachers that had public elementary school experience in New York State teaching ELL students, with diagnosed or suspected learning disabilities. These characteristics made the population of potential participants complex and hard to find as not all teachers may have had this experience. Snowball sampling was proven to be extremely useful as members of the social network research sites may not have this experience personally but were able to recommend someone that had. Creswell and Gutterman (2019) explain snowball



sampling can occur during the recruitment process after the study has begun through informal conversations at the research site. All 15 participants were full-time teachers with more than six years of experience, with master's degrees in education and were fully certified to teach elementary school students. Most importantly they had all had experiences at the elementary level with ELL students that showed a need for special education services in addition to language acquisition instruction.

### ***Recruitment***

The researcher used Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn social media networks to recruit self-identified teachers in New York State or teachers who are already members of teaching networking groups, public forums, and general feeds. Upon approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Nova Southeastern University, public postings were created using a preapproved message of text (Appendix A) to the researcher's social media general feed, teacher groups, and professional networks on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. Cresswell and Poth (2018) suggest at least 10–15 individuals should be interviewed when conducting a phenomenological study, The use of snowball sampling was used informally through comments and direct messaging platforms until 15 participants were fully interviewed.

Each social media platform differed in various ways, but all offered a direct messaging service or comment section on each post. Both direct messaging and comments were used to facilitate scheduling with potential participants, answer any questions and share further contact information. Once a time was established a unique Zoom Meeting Link was created and emailed, using the researchers Nova Southeastern

encrypted email and Zoom accounts, to the participant with the time, date, link, and password to enter the online Zoom meeting.

### ***Setting***

The researcher used the online telecommunication platform Zoom to conduct a one-time interview. Marshall and Rossman (2015) have identified the use of the internet to have a commonplace role in qualitative research. The use of a semi-structured interview on Zoom allowed for open-ended questions. The Zoom platform allowed for a password protected interview to occur. Only the researcher and participant had access to the unique meeting link and password to gain access.

### **Data Collection and Instruments**

#### ***Semi-Structured Interview***

The data collection that was used in this study was a semi structured interview using prepared open-ended questions (see Appendix B) using the telecommunication platform of Zoom. Although this was not in person, a face-to-face interview was achieved and body language of both the participant and interviewer was able to be seen as if they were in person. Cresswell and Gutterman (2019) state a face-to-face semi-structured interview has many advantages. The biggest advantage is that it allows a researcher to explore additional areas that closed-ended questions cannot.

The researcher used the student paid Zoom account through the Nova Southeastern University platform. The use of this type of account helped to establish and protect the collected data. This also offered a password protected, encrypted recording option with transcript feature that was shared with the participant for their review which

created an accessible way for member checking and the participant to validate and ensure their interview was valid and honest.

Often, researchers can find overlapping themes with respondents' answers using one-time semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, this type of data collection can lead to a larger quantity of high-quality results in a shorter amount of time. Marshall and Rossman (2015) acknowledged over the last few decades, the use of the Internet to gather data has become a legitimate tool and is considered a valid site setting for qualitative research given how the world has changed and the social science of research is changing. The only drawback is that the researcher has the potential to lose the personal connection and non-verbal information gathered from an in-person interview that cannot be seen from a camera (Marshall & Rossman, 2015).

Using an inquiry-based approach, the researcher wrote 15 questions that target specific details and parts of the research questions' broader themes:

1. What are the experiences of teachers adapting curriculum to support students when teaching English language learners with suspected learning disabilities?
2. What are the experiences teachers have with the concept of scaffolding when teaching English language learners with suspected learning disabilities?
3. What are the experiences of teachers when they recommend an English language learner to special education?

The use of more conversational language rather than language such as academic theory was mentioned by Castillo-Montoya (2016) and Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) as a successful tool in interviewing. While developing the questions it was determined by the researcher, the first-asked questions would allow participants to describe how they use

the researcher's theoretical framework within their teaching without using the technical terms. This allowed the researcher to gauge if the participants had any theory background or working knowledge. Some participants used the theory or term unprompted, while others did not know when asked. Therefore, it was planned as the final structured question as to create the feeling of discomfort among participants who were unaware. This was a direct change from the pilot interview. One of the pilot participants was visually uncomfortable as they had never heard the theory before, while the other was well versed and was happy to share their experience using this as a backbone to their teaching. The researcher felt that a semi-structured interview format allowed for a conversational flow of the prepared questions to be asked out of the set order. The use of the camera also allowed the researcher to read body language and reword questions to make the participant feel more at ease.

### ***Development of Table Specifications***

Using the Interview Protocol Matrix presented by Castillo-Montoya (2016), the researcher ensured each interview question was a focused, detail-based one on the broader question. If the researcher had only asked a general research question, it could overwhelm the participants with technical terms and receive generalized answers. The researcher used background information and the three research questions. The three research questions on the questionnaire were evenly balanced, as shown in Appendix C.

### **Procedures**

The researcher piloted the semi-structured interview with teachers that work at the researcher's current place of employment, an elementary school in New York State. Teachers there meet the criteria for participation, but the researcher chose not to use data

from the individual school they work at to avoid any conflict of interest or bias when analyzing the experiences as they may have been shared. The researcher sought the pilot participants' feedback to validate the data collection tool and identify areas that may need clarification. In addition to this, the researcher asked classmates from their doctoral program to review the line of questioning and provide feedback. Upon their feedback, the researcher continued to look for trends of personal bias to ensure the questions asked were relevant to the research questions.

After the researcher had the peer feedback from a pilot test and approval from the IRB, several public posts with the approved recruitment text were posted on social media platforms. Direct messages were sent to potential participants who publicly identified as elementary teachers in New York State, meeting the criteria. Postings using Facebook, Instagram, and Linked In to recruit the participants were also used. Each platform has a slightly different way to post but the digital posting thread and direct message contained the same recruitment text (see Appendix A). The text in Appendix A was also the initial message sent using the direct messaging features of these social media platforms. The text included the following required and recommended elements: approval from group administrators, the study title, the words research and Nova Southeastern University, the researcher's contact name and email address, the purpose of the study, the location, time commitment, and expectations of participants. It will also state there will be no payment for participating in the group.

When potential participants agreed to the study with a time and date, they were asked for an email address for the researcher to contact them, formally through the researcher's student email account. All participants were over the age of 18, and this

study did not involve procedures that would require written consent outside of a research context. Furthermore, it was a one-time online semi-structured interview. All participants were given directions to access the Zoom meeting via email.

The recruitment period and data collection took about 1 month to get the desired number of participants at 15. As data was collected, it will be stored on a password-protected computer with a backup on a password-protected cloud server. Additionally, the researcher used their Nova Southeastern student account on the platform Zoom, which offered the advanced features of password protection and encrypted recording and transcript of the interview for 145 days.

The student Zoom account not only make data collection easier for the researcher, but it will also made it easier for participants to use. It created a custom simple web address for their individual interview with password. After the interview the data was fully collected it was analyzed with an IPA approach as laid out by (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher ensured that personal bias was not influential within the analysis of the data by using bracketing. Bracketing is a method to help remove a researcher's personal bias. Chan et al. (2013) highly recommends for all research using an IPA method to keep the idea of bracket within their mindset throughout the notation and the analytic process. First, the researcher ensured they understood the topic by completing and reviewing a literature review, prior to making notations. memoing and commenting. Exhausting the research allowed for an in-depth understanding and helped the researcher to have the background knowledge to write concrete comments within the notations and memos (Chen et al.,2013).

After the research had gone through the bracketing steps, the interviews were analyzed by hand. The researcher took notes and made comments. This initial noting was exploratory in nature. Smith et al. (2012) descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments will be labeled using the letters d, l, or c. The descriptive comments were how the researcher interpreted and summarized what was said within the interview. The linguistic comments noted things such as metaphors and language used in the interview, while conceptual comments spoke towards the interaction within the questioning and dialogue between people. After this initial noting happened, the researcher de-contextualized the statements and comments. Smith et al. (2012) recommended doing this to ensure an in-depth understanding by the researcher happens. This was done by re-reading the interview and comments made by the researcher several times.

Additional notes, comments, and memos were written physically on paper when needed. After extensive commenting and note-taking occurred, the printed quotations' physical cuttings were sorted into trends using a foam board and pinned. The next step for the researcher was to sort the comments into themes using higher-order thinking strategies. First, the trends were sorted using abstraction then subsumption. After this was conducted, they were reorganized by frequency, how often do similar ideas and themes appear. This is referred to as numeration by Smith et al. (2012). The final step for IPA analysis was sorting the trends into themes. Then the function of each theme was then explored, and overall themes will be chosen using this method. The interviews had 15 participants, so multiple points of view and experiences were taken into consideration. Flick (2018) stressed the importance of having more than one participant while using an

IPA approach. It can create a connection that interweaves the experiences of the interview participants.

The researcher then scrutinized and reviewed their work by closely re-reading all of the responses and notations. Additional notes or memos were added when they were needed on the printouts (Smith et al., 2012). This additional analysis was done to ensure the noting any type of commonly used semantics, themes that may develop while searching for connections and patterns while using various critical lenses to interpret the results were not missed. Charlick et al. (2016) suggested taking small parts of your transcript to find themes. All printed data was physically stored in a locked space, not accessible to anyone but the researcher and access to all digital data was password protected.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All ethical considerations are of the utmost importance in research. The researcher believes that honesty and the right to privacy are paramount for any research study. All individual identifying factors were not reported about the participants. The use of Zoom also allows for additional privacy considerations. The raw data was encrypted on their server and was deleted after 145 days. Each participant was assigned a participant number and pseudonym derived from a list of common female names. They were not identified by their real name in any data physically printed or stored on the researcher's password-protected computer. This was explained to all participants so participants were assured their responses could not be used against them in any way, allowing them to express their opinion on the topic without risk freely. As the participants will not be immediate co-workers or sonorants of the researcher, there was no power differentials or



conflicts of interest. Pseudonyms derived from a list of common female names were used.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the credibility of this study, many steps were taken. First, the semi-structured interview was pilot tested with two individuals over Zoom that fit the participant criteria. Terrell (2016) believes all qualitative studies depend on the responses of participants and the researcher's subsequent analysis. Peer-Debriefing, ensures the research, and summaries are grounded in data. This will also be used to help identify any hidden bias (Delve, 2021, Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Additionally, gaining participants' trust and ensuring their privacy will allow for the collection of rich and thick data to develop an audit trail that will help the researcher understand where the theme and patterns evolve or emerge from the data.

### **Potential Research Bias**

The researcher is a special education teacher that works with learning disabled English language learners in New York State with 16 years of experience. Teaching this unique student is of significant personal interest as the researcher seeks to understand teachers' processes and experiences with students in the elementary school setting. Creswell and Gutterman (2019) suggested the use of bracketing for researchers who have an interest in their studies. The researcher used this strategy to mitigate any preconceptions held as lived experiences can change drastically from school to school because there is no consensus on best practices for ELLs with suspected disabilities.

**Limitations**

There were many limitations to this study as not all elementary teachers have had the experience of referring an ELL student to a special education department for evaluation. Therefore, purposeful snowball sampling was implemented. The use of purposeful, snowball sampling with only elementary teachers from New York State means this study cannot be generalized as the laws and procedures regarding special education and English language learners differ from state to state. Furthermore, not including middle and high school teachers also limit this study as they may have similar lived experiences as many of the elementary teachers stated this is a phenomenon that crosses grade levels and often is dealt with throughout students' academic careers.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The findings in this chapter describe the lived experiences of teachers working with English language learners (ELLs) identified as currently having or needing to have special education learning needs in New York State. The methodology from Chapter 3 was used to collect the data presented within this chapter. The use of a phenomenological approach was selected as it best allowed to explore the nature of the lived experiences of these teachers.

Data for this phenomenological study was gathered using a semi-structured interview protocol using Zoom's virtual face-to-face telecommunication platform. Seven common themes were found after analyzing the data collected from the participants, which allowed the researcher to understand the phenomenon they collectively are experiencing working with ELLs. This chapter presents each research question and discusses the following themes.

### **Participant Summaries**

A phenomenological approach was chosen to examine teachers' lived experiences in New York that work with ELL students who demonstrate a need for special education. The researcher used Zoom's video conference software to conduct face-to-face, virtual interviews. Fifteen New York State public school teachers took part. They worked in various school districts throughout the state. Fifteen participants had Master's Degrees in Education, and two had a Doctorate of Education. Pseudonyms were used to maintain the anonymity of the participants.

***Mary***

Mary is currently a general education teacher who works in a suburban New York State Public School, has a master's degree and is certified to teach general education students K–6 and ESOL K–12 in New York State. She has over 20 years of experience in the district where she currently works.

Mary stressed the importance of correct classification, even if multiple classifications such as ELL and Learning Disability. Mary felt the community resources around the student's family make a significant difference in the child's overall growth and early identification of special needs. As many of the families need help to navigate the route for proper testing:

It took until third grade for her to get the correct medical testing, and the special ed specialized testing for her to be designated learning disabled. And then after two years, I actually ended up being her fifth-grade teacher and she just soared. And it was amazing to see the difference with the correct identification, the correct language learning and you know, every child can succeed that which is our motto in our district, but it often takes, for some kids, years if they get the right neurologist, you have to get appointments. They're six months you know, it takes six months to book, you have to get the parents to understand because often parents with a language barrier, it's really difficult or they don't have insurance.

***Patricia***

Patricia is currently a Dual Language elementary school teacher in a suburban New York State Public School. She has a Master's Degree in Education and is certified to teach general education at the elementary and middle school levels and bilingual

education in New York State. She has 10 years of teaching experience and 5 in her current school district. In addition, she self-identifies as an English language learner.

Patricia expressed her frustrations as a bilingual teacher being told her students have language acquisition needs and do not need academic support. She spoke to how she feels she has a unique perspective on her students' needs because she teaches in both languages, and if she sees deficits that appear to her as special education needs, they are generally present in both languages. She feels it's easier for monolingual or students not classified as ELL to get the help they need. In contrast, her students are told to wait:

As an ESL kid they're always going to tell you what let's see like how what they're how they're doing in Spanish and let's wait a little bit longer let's give it six more weeks and it's like six more weeks becomes two years they can't make it to third grade and they still don't recognize letters syllables they can only add up to 20 and it's like whoa let's just give it six more weeks after that.

### ***Linda***

Linda is currently a high school special education teacher who works with special and general education students in a suburban New York State Public School. She spoke about her past experiences with elementary students and connected them to her high school experience. She has a Doctorate in Education. She is certified to teach General Education K–12 and Special Education K–12. She has experience teaching at all grade levels. She has been a teacher for more than 30 years.

Linda found many of her ELL students had other issues sometimes that presented as special education needs and at other times masked the special education needs. She

expressed that interrupted schooling is one of the biggest frustration points for her and her co-workers to pinpoint and properly address the needs of the students:

Our students have a lot of interrupted learning we find when they come to us from other countries. That they you know, sometimes don't go to school, for you know months or maybe a year, you know or so they've lost some learning and then you have to determine, you know, is it a disability or is it just lack of education so.

That's really that's another factor that truly plays in.

***Beth***

Beth is a special education teacher in New York City and teaches ESL students in a summer school setting in a suburban area with rural characteristics in a New York State Public School. She has Master's Degrees in Education and School Administration. She is certified to teach general education students PK–6, Special Education birth–6, ESOL K–12, Literacy PK–6, and certified as a School Building Leader in New York State. She has been teaching for over 20 years.

Beth's interview had two lenses: a special education teacher in a lower socioeconomic school and one as an ESL teacher in a school with higher socioeconomic status. The students from the lower socioeconomic status she felt truly had both needs, while the students she worked with within the more affluent setting may have been misclassified as both special education and ELL, which is why they were getting the extended school year services. For those students, she did not understand how some were classified as special education as she only saw language acquisition needs, not special education needs:

I think the comprehension of their conversations, the ability to make texts to self-connections text to text connections, connections that made references to home life, and make references to other books they've read. Some of them were able to make references and how these books, they have the same book in Spanish and were able to give me the name of that book their recall of things that they remembered from the day before. And also, they would also try to speak to me in Spanish, if they knew what I was asking them but didn't understand how to say it, they would try to say it in Spanish, so I just felt like a lot of it was a language based.

### ***Maria***

Maria is a general education teacher who currently teaches third grade in a suburban New York State Public School. She has a Master's Degree in Education and is certified to teach General Education K–6 in New York State. She is in her 27th year as a general education teacher. Maria's second language is English, and she speaks two languages fluently but is not bilingual, or certified to teach ESL.

Maria expressed many frustrations with the process of getting ELL students to get help outside of the classroom with special education. She described numerous times being told to wait and that it was a language or a socioeconomic issue, not special education, which not only prevented special education evaluations but access to RTI, the pathway towards being evaluated for special education:

Sometimes it can be frustrating. They'll [the school] say no, they [the student] had to wait due to unfortunate things if they move or they don't have their parents, they are limited socio-economically, is there and then this is all there was

hardship is trauma, so they always they say no. I had a student oh my gosh and why do I have to fight for two years in a row, and we kept trying to get them classified and they kept brushing it off and it was heart wrenching to see because they knew it was more... it's like it just was really heartbreaking and finally in fourth grade she was classified.

***Debbie***

Debbie is a general education teacher who teaches third grade in a suburban New York State Public School. She has a Master's Degree in Education and Administration. She is certified to teach Reading K–12, General Education K–6, and ESOL K–12. She is also certified as a School District Administrator. She has over 25 years of teaching experience. She also disclosed that she has gone through the process as a student's parent who needed special education services and said she uses that as a lens.

Debbie expressed frustration in the time it takes ELL students to get classifications when needed. She felt that RTI prevents students from moving forward and receiving special education accommodations and services. Debbie felt that looking at a whole child and understanding their background and home life first makes a difference in referrals to special education versus needing ESL services to help parents help their children move forward in the process. Her frustration came across with how many students spend many years receiving intervention services through RTI:

We need to move on, it can't be it, you know on Tier 3 for a lifetime this isn't you know how it works. I don't understand how when I hear people spend forever in a tier that I don't think that's how RTI is supposed to work.



***Margaret***

Margaret is currently an English as a Second Language (ESL) Teacher and a Compliance Liaison for the New York City Public Schools. She has a Master's Degree in Education and is certified to teach 1st-grade–6th-grade general education students and K–12th-grade ESL in New York State. She has 15 years of experience teaching.

As an ESL teacher, Margaret did not always feel valued during the special education process. She spoke to her relationships with the other members of the team and how they worked together determining her perceived value in the decision-making process:

I've also been in both situations where it depends on the teacher if it's a group, where I work really well with the kids and then I'm the teacher, and I collaborate truly then yeah they would say, what do you think? Then we are part of the conversation, and then there are many other cases where I'm just like we're working on English.

***Lisa***

Lisa is currently a self-contained special education teacher in a suburban New York State Public School, but she spoke towards her experience in a co-teaching setting in previous years. She has a Master's Degree in Education. She is certified to teach Special Education 1–6 and General Education 1–6. She has been teaching for 12 years.

Lisa's interview highlighted the need for the special education teachers to collaborate with the ESL teacher. She expressed that as a teacher who only had experience with general and special education, having an ESL teacher help her use language acquisition skills-based learning made her feel confident. She was meeting the

needs of her students. She found many strategies between special education and ESL similar:

In general, I think a lot of times in ESL and special ed you use a lot of the same teaching methods, so I didn't change much. One thing I did do was I did collaborate with an ESL teacher to make sure I was covering some of the language pieces with her like. Is there anything else you would include so I definitely touched base with the ESL person in our school. Just to make sure I was meeting all of her needs but I felt like a lot of it, I was already doing the using the visuals the using audio I'm using different modalities and as a selected learner, the same concept, I felt like a lot of it was very similar.

### *Nancy*

Nancy is a bilingual special education teacher who works with general and special education students in a suburban New York State Public School. She has a Master's Degree in Education and is a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst. She is certified to teach K–12 General Education, Special education, and Bilingual Education in New York State. She has over 18 years of experience teaching general education classes at the high school and elementary levels and special education small classes and pull-out services at an elementary level. Nancy, self-identifies as an English language learner.

The essence of Nancy's interview spoke to, with each role she has had as a teacher, it changed her perceived value regarding the special education referral process:

It depends, it depends on the capacity of the role I am in. So as a self-contained teacher, yes, they took my value. I was more valued than when working with co-teachers it's a little tough, so you know and then certain teachers, it depends on

their characters like there was one teacher that I led I let the whole thing [meeting] you know and they listened to me, I was more valued. And it all depends. Other times as a general ed teacher I was not.

### ***Helen***

Helen currently is an elementary academic intervention teacher for the New York City Public Schools. She has a Master's Degree in Education and is certified to teach Birth-6th grade General Education and Special Education in New York State. She has been a teacher for 7 years.

Helen was very confident with her teaching approach and distinguishing between a language acquisition issue or special education issue. She felt that she was a very valued key member of the special education meetings but did not feel all teachers, from her experience, understand the differences:

Teachers really need to know their students and know when it's not a language barrier and some people automatically assume that it's a cultural thing when it's not. So you know there's a lot of biases a lot of you know. Like, oh, they just came from another country they don't know, but you know the kid is reading and their language and their loved one their language it's not a special ed, you know they don't belong, especially because they don't know.

### ***Donna***

Donna is currently an English as a New Language Teacher (ENL) and works in multiple schools within one school district located in a suburban New York State Public School. She has a Master's Degree in Education and is certified to teach General Education 1–6 and ESOL K–12 in New York State. She has been a teacher for 11 years.

Donna expressed some frustrations about her current school district being firm with how they currently interpret the New York State laws regarding ELL students and special education: “So my district is very firm on not allowing students to become special education students if they are ENL without waiting a full year.” She spoke to the development of the state-mandated language proficiency teams (LPT) preventing her from being able to get students special education services as she had in the past:

So prior to the LPT teams, I was able to kind of like get kids in myself I thought needed special education services, and I would work very closely with the special ED teachers, the school psychologist and the social worker on that.

### *Carol*

Carol is currently a special education kindergarten teacher in a suburban New York State Public School. She has a Master’s Degree in Education and is certified to teach birth–6th grade special and general education in New York State. She has 10 years of experience teaching. In addition, she self-identifies as an English language learner.

Carol spoke about looking at students always as ELLs first before requesting or thinking about special education services. She cautioned that assumptions should not be made because of language. Still, she stressed when a student needed both language support and special education services, they should be given:

When there isn't an official classification, I cannot you know, and all conscioues make an assumption, so what I tried to do is I first looked at them as a second language learner, and I tried to think about what are the strategies are clickable for a second language learner applied those first, as the first layer scaffold. And then, if that's not enough for them to get the concept that I'm trying to teach, I did my

hand into special education interventions which are you know there's a lot of crossover, as we all know. But I treat them a second language learners first and then, if that is not working or is not enough, then I go into the deeper intervention.

***Ruth***

Ruth is currently a general education kindergarten teacher in a suburban New York State Public School. She has a Master's Degree in Education and is certified to teach General and Special Education Preschool–12th grade in New York State with a reciprocal license from the state of California. She has been teaching for over 30 years.

Ruth has had many life experiences as a teacher in various roles at different grade levels. She spoke towards using the school community and having others around helping out not only her students but their families:

And then last year, you know I had a girl, I was worried about you know really no one spoke English at home. And we tried to get their neighbors to link up.

Community based helped to you know work with the family and work with us, with me and with the ESL teacher to see you know what we could do what more we could do for her.

***Laura***

Laura is currently an English as a New Language Teacher (ENL) in a suburban New York State Public School. She has a Master's Degree in Education and is certified to teach General Education 1–6 and ESOL K–12 in New York State. In addition, she self-identified as an English language learner.

Laura continuously referred to getting to know her students on a deeper, more meaningful level. She spoke about the whole child approach and understanding where they are coming from before recommending special education services:

Become this kind of teacher, because you have the patience, the flexibility and the understanding that it's not easy. You really have to give it time and you can't get frustrated and complain all this kids not reading on level well there's so much more. Did they eat breakfast did somebody give them a bath this morning, so all these home factors, you really have to understand or their parents in another country, right now, are they upset that mom and dad aren't here. So going forward K-5 give their babies, you. Really you need to just you become like an all-around, how-to for parents, with many hats.

### ***Megan***

Megan is currently an academic intervention teacher at an elementary school in a suburban New York State Public School. She has a Doctorate in Education and is certified to teach 1–6 general education and 6–12 math education. She has an unspecified school administration certification for New York State. She has been a teacher for more than 15 years.

Megan's interview addressed her feelings of just speaking with ELL students and exposing them to the language was the most important aspect in her teaching:

I just think that speaking with that student is very important, I don't know I think it's difficult for the English language learners that they speak English in school all day and they go home and switch that switch and speak Spanish at home. So, If they are special ed, not only do they have the challenge of being special ED but

they have the challenge of now flipping that switch. Switching languages, so I think it's like a double-edged sword that they are dealing with it just speaking with them and giving them exposure to the language is so important.

### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 asked, “What are teachers' experiences adapting curriculum to support students when teaching English language learners with suspected learning disabilities?”

There were many similarities in the participants' self-described experiences approach or teaching methods, but the idea that good teaching is good teaching helps everyone reoccurred. Three themes were found that addressed Research Question 1: (a) Understanding students as people, (b) ESL teachers are without curriculum, and (c) Student-teacher ratio impacts differentiation. The subsequent section includes direct quotes from the participants that exemplify the identified themes.

#### ***Theme 1: Understanding Students as People***

All the participants interviewed described their approach to teaching English Language Learners with suspected learning disabilities similarly. Overwhelmingly, the participants spoke to how they naturally included ESL teaching strategies into their teaching for all students and the idea to take in who they are outside of school. They described, in detail, how they try to understand and connect with their students personally to teach them.

Maria spoke about the concept of understanding the whole child. This approach is a deep understanding of a student's strengths and weaknesses in and outside of the classroom. She considers how they do in classes like art, music, and PE to see if they are

learning and progressing there. Maria said, “I do feel that there could be emotional components with some kids.” She expressed that she believes that teachers should consider students' backgrounds and life stories like she does. She feels teachers should ask themselves questions like what happened to this student prior to entering the country or school. Often, she finds social-emotional needs that first need to be addressed before learning can even happen.

Many special education teachers work in an RTI role with general education students suspected of needing more services. Nancy said, “I approach all students the same way when they come to me,” often special education teachers’ were more likely to group students by age and ability for small group instruction depending upon the nature of the lesson. She further went on to describe their likes and interests to further connect with them.

Carol, a special education teacher, stressed the idea of learning where her students come from and how they are at home. She feels that understanding a student’s schema will help her adapt to what she needs to teach. Before lesson planning, she asked herself if adding word banks, images, preteach, and re-teach with audiovisuals was necessary. She stated she is “always looking for a way to bridge prior knowledge.” She does this prior to using what she identifies as special education techniques. She described the way she does this by:

Well, first of all, I find out if the student was born here and what is it that makes them a second language learner you know, is it that at home, they only speak Spanish and they only spoken Spanish and what kind of second language learner they are you know, are they are receptive are they both receptive and expressive



second language learner and then. Based on that, then I determine Okay, so if I'm going to teach you a new concept.

Beth, a teacher who only speaks English, finds that valuing the home language of the student is important. Beth describes how she makes an effort to understand their student and connect by learning some words in their native language to figure out what these students know before assuming they have no skills. She feels she makes her best attempt and describes it like,

I think that showing things kids stuff in their home language. I think, trying to use words in their home at language that makes them understand I also try to make when I had them I had books and so I would have the English word and the Spanish word with a picture on each side, so I think visual some tactile stuff so this way they were able to label things. Especially when we were doing new books and new vocabulary I would look up words in Spanish that were based on the level of reading we're doing so this way they saw it in Spanish first.

Linda found that often her coworkers don't fully understand the students. In her experiences ELL students with special needs can be looked over as not everyone is trained in ESL. She went on to say,

I really enjoy working with that population of students, because I think that so often there can be mistakes made with determining whether or not you know a lot of times, people are very quick to say oh it's just a language issue. Then, not look deeper and find out that there really is an underlying learning disability and that must be so frustrating for the students, because you know it's not just the language

issue. So you know it really takes a lot. You know, sitting with the students and trying to get to the bottom of what it is we also often get like I said earlier.

Laura spoke to building trust with the parents. Ensuring they know you understand them and their child as a person. She said,

You need to “look into parent's eyes when you are speaking even if they do not understand your language” she feels this will build their trust with you, then through translation, you can establish a better understanding of where the family is coming from and meet and attempt to meet their needs outside of the classroom which can help their needs inside the classroom.

### ***Theme 2: ESL Teachers are Without Curriculum***

The participants that identified as current ESL teachers said they did not have to change any curriculum, as they reported not having a set one in place for ESL instruction. They generally described their approach to lesson planning as best practices or good teaching.

Donna stated, “I find just good teaching for English Language Learners is just good teaching practices.” Donna went on to describe her lesson plans in the same way the special education teachers did. One of the ways Donna, approached her lessons is to preteach the classroom curriculum. She would focus on vocabulary by using pictures or theatrical acting with puppets. She felt this was most easily done with science or social studies. These methods help her have a deeper understanding of her ELL’s comprehension levels. Where taking language fully out of a task and using just visual representation, she feels she should give students “opportunities to be able to like get the word, not just see a word and hear it as an abstract concept.” Her stress on the

understanding and recall of vocabulary becoming concrete for her students helps her differentiate if her students need more intensive help through special education or language acquisition support.

Laura, also an ESL teacher, stressed the use of pictures and concrete conceptualization of vocabulary. Furthermore, she also felt that body language and everyday activities played a significant role in her students' language development. She communicated with students using pictures to create sentences. One example of this was sharing what they had for breakfast by using a student's self-portrait with the photos of breakfast items. She would help the students create a grammatically-correct writing sample with those picture supports. When she feels more, she implements wait time but feels she will do this for an ELL student she does not suspect of a disability but at an earlier stage of language acquisition.

Laura has the freedom to teach her own curriculum as she stated, "In my school, we don't have a set curriculum." This allows her the freedom to meet her students where they are at without modifying something developed without her students in mind. Margaret, too, has the ability to create her own curriculum and does not need to alter standardized materials. Laura and Margaret are both ESL teachers.

### ***Theme 3: Student-Teacher Ratio Impacts Differentiation***

Patricia addressed her concerns as a dual language classroom teacher. The needs are very different and vary within her classroom. The larger class size means she does not have time to meet each student individually, by herself, and there is a sense of frustration for her with that. She states,

I try to as much as I can it's hard when you have 25 children in your classroom and one of you when they are all at different levels. You can help one or two kids and where are most of the other kids are but its like what you do to try to meet their needs, but we can't neglect the others.

Debbie struggles with giving her students the one-on-one instruction she identifies they need other than small group reading instruction. It is hard to work in small groups or one on one. With 25 students, it is impossible for them. To try to accommodate all her students, but keeping her ELL students in mind, she must use many strategies when teaching the whole group to target the students in need while benefiting all. Unlike Patricia, she has a teacher push in for two short periods a day to provide RTI services to her classroom. This is when she tries to give as much time as possible to the students who are not yet receiving RTI, but she feels she may need it but is still done in a whole group setting.

Maria also speaks differentiation when teaching her whole class. She is unable to give individualized instruction to her students and must group them homogeneously and primarily for reading instruction only. In math, she tries to pull students one on one as much as possible but cannot differentiate to the degree needed for an ESL student demonstrating additional needs in her own classroom. She must go through an RTI process to seek out of the classroom help.

Ruth's kindergarten classroom has the extra adult support needed that allows her to address some of her students' needs. She always has three adults in her classroom, which allows her to plan more personalized instruction. She has small-group reading instruction and while that is happening the other adults can work with the students and

not leave them independent work. When needed, she can also deliver targeted math interventions that address the needs of her students. This level of individualism allows her to make a better assessment if the student needs more than language acquisition help.

### **Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asked, “What are the experiences teachers have with the concept of scaffolding when teaching English language learners with suspected learning disabilities?”

One major theme was found that addressed Research Question 2: Inconsistencies in scaffolding. Each participant varied in their approach and opinion of the technique of scaffolding. One participant said they don’t use it at all, while others provided conflicting viewpoints about it. The subsequent section includes direct quotes from the participants that exemplify this identified theme.

#### ***Inconsistencies in Scaffolding***

This study found that all teachers were familiar with the term scaffolding and have used it at least once within their teaching career with students. Nevertheless, there was a difference in opinion of the value and ability to implement proper scaffolding. Most teachers who participated in the study found scaffolding beneficial, but not all teachers agreed and did not find it feasible or valuable in a whole-class setting.

The academic interventionist, Mary, found scaffolding looks different in each grade. She found as students grow older, they are resistant to work that looks different than their peers. Mary used the term “sneaky scaffolder” to describe how she approaches older students to make them feel while younger students thrive on individualized materials that have been created for them at their level, as they are unaware that their

work can be easier than the others. Linda also works with older students and feels like scaffolding for her ELL students benefits the whole class and she will present and preteach lessons to everyone so as not to put a metaphoric spotlight on those who need it. Both Linda and Mary felt it was beneficial to the special education and ELL students and all students.

Carol feels scaffolding is a misunderstood strategy implemented by teachers. She described many classroom accommodations as scaffolds other teachers have told her to use. She stressed the notion of understanding the student's cultural background first and foremost before developing and plan. She described a system in which she learns about her students' home life and their expressive and receptive language skills, then builds her plans for teaching new concepts and determines the level of scaffolding and tools she will use. She stated, "I think a lot of people think scaffolding is just a graphic organizer."

Maria describes the "use of a lot of graphic organizers and hands-on materials" when speaking about scaffolding. She felt this that modifying work the amount on a page has been successful for her students. Often, if she suspects a student of having a disability that is also an ELL student, she will give them five problems rather than ten as the language barriers can slow them down. She feels "every child learns differently; everyone learns at a different pace" and she goes on to say the ELL students need "different modalities to help and support them."

As a pull-out ESL teacher, Donna found additional scaffolding to not be needed in her small groups as it is planned to be a targeted lesson on the students' current level. She did, however, feel that it was one of the most important tools for a teacher to use to truly assess what an ELL student may or may not know in the larger class setting. She supports

the classroom teachers to ensure it happens when they are not in a small group. She felt sentence frames or stems were one of the best ways for an ELL to scaffold as it will take away the grammar and sentence building aspect and help a student express what they know or do not know. Laura had a similar viewpoint on scaffolding and is also an ESL teacher.

Margret, another ESL teacher, was hesitant when talking about scaffolding. She found there to be a benefit when teaching social studies or literature/reading comprehension. In her experience, she did not find it to be useful for math. She felt it works when “you’re trying to build on information,” depending on the goal of your lesson. She felt scaffolding was not beneficial for students in other subject areas.

Beth, a special education teacher, found scaffolding reading lessons to be easiest for a teacher. The individual reading lessons are leveled to their ability and can easily go up or down for each kid based on their specific need. In math, she found it also beneficial to the scaffold. Many of her ESL students needed basic math concepts and vocabulary. She stated that while teaching a time unit, she had to teach one student what the word o’clock meant, and once he understood that he could read time orally and wasn’t focused on the text in his book. At the same time, she taught others the passing of time by using multiplication using the clock and skip counting.

A special education teacher, Nancy felt her whole day was just scaffolding but did not describe her approach in detail. She plans her lessons in an individualized format which is scaffolding. She defines it as starting at a base level and teaching with photographs, hands-on manipulatives, and visuals. She specifically spoke to teaching math, saying this was the easiest to scaffold as it builds upon itself naturally. When asked

for a specific example of scaffolding, she stated, “In math, you start from the bottom and work your way up.”

Like Nancy, Megan’s description of scaffolding was not detailed. She described preteaching as scaffolding and felt that “scaffolding works really well because then they’re not getting lost in the full class lesson” and that “it gives them that second dose to be successful, while the classroom teacher is teaching it, so I definitely think that has worked.” Her use and experience with this type of scaffolding has been positive and beneficial to her and her students.

As a kindergarten teacher, Ruth found scaffolding to be necessary but felt she was successful with it because she has additional adult support in her classroom working with students. She needs to break down the material to basic levels such as creating choice opportunities in math, reading, and writing, tracing or copy words to support their writing and understanding where they are academically. Without the additional personnel in the room, this would not be as feasible or realistic if left alone in a full class of more than 20 students: “You know so one scaffold would be to point to where a letter should start or write it in a yellow marker for the student to trace over it.”

A dual-language teacher, Patricia felt scaffolding works well when implemented correctly but cannot use it in her current classroom as she is the only adult. She expressed feelings of frustration as she acknowledged the different learning styles of her students and her inability to meet them all daily.

It sounds great if it’s doable. If you have two people in your classroom you would be able to teach at three different paces for the five different learning styles but that’s not the real world in the classroom if it’s one of you and 25 of them. Right



now I can scaffold just one way at a time because I can only work with one small group at a time.

Debbie, a general education teacher, did not feel confident in her ability to scaffold. Like Patricia, she is the only staff member in her classroom. She thought that the teachers in integrated co-teaching classrooms (ICT) were better prepared and staffed to implement scaffolding correctly. To offset this, she does whole group instruction that is scaffolded to help address the needs of the ELL students who she suspects need more intervention services. One way she is doing this is with an intervention phonics whole class instruction “even kids who are quote unquote on grade level.” Debbie continued to express that she is “not there yet.”

Lisa, a special education teacher, finds scaffolding to help support a student’s confidence levels but warns that it can prevent students from learning independently. She felt that “You just got to make sure you draw the line where you’re not actually completing the work for them, often they don’t comprehend it because you have done the work.” With ELL students, she found sentence starters or frames very beneficial as they don’t do the comprehension part of the work but start a sentence.

Like Lisa, Helen also warns that scaffolding needs to be scaled back as instruction continues. As an interventionist, she finds her students cannot function independently if they have grown to rely on scaffolds. “Scaffolding needs to be taken away at a certain point, because you know, during an exam, they don’t have that support anymore.” Helen’s experience has led her to believe the students will never become independent without the removal of scaffolding.

### **Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 asked, “What are teachers' experiences when recommending an English language learner to special education?”

Three themes were evident in relation to teacher experiences when recommending English language learners. (a) Delays initiating special education services, (b) Sense of value varied, and (c) Theory taught but not applied for special education classification. The subsequent section includes direct quotes from the participants that exemplify the identified themes.

#### ***Theme 1: Delays Initiating Special Education Services***

Every teacher that participated works within a Response to Intervention (RTI) Framework to internally refer all students to special education. They each described a three-tiered system of intensive intervention that increased as students went through before qualifying for special education evaluations. All teachers interviewed about the RTI process expressed frustration with their experiences regarding ELL students within the RTI tiers. All participants felt that when students had the ELL classification, a longer wait time within the RTI tiers would happen than their general education peers. Debbie stated, “I don’t understand how they [ELL students] spend forever on a tier. I don’t think that’s how RTI works.”

Margaret spoke to how her district asks them to wait longer and for additional time for ELL students to go through the tiers. Her opinion was this was due to a staffing shortage of professionals trained to work with the neediest students. The time it takes for her to work with a student that is ELL takes from other students she has on her caseload to help distinguish the needs. “I have had kids who definitely need more [support] and we

just can't give it to them. We don't have the manpower or the time." Mary's experience is similar to Margaret's where it takes ELL students two to three extra cycles of RTI even to be considered to work in a Tier 3 setting with a special education teacher who then, after an additional cycle or two of RTI, recommends the student for an evaluation to consider the need for special education services. "I feel this pushes them at least a year behind [their non-ELL peers]. If they are a beginner, they have to have a full year of language services instead of getting them into RTI right away."

Donna's school district has implemented a policy that students wait a full year after a teacher recommends RTI at a Tier 2 level for ELL students. They are told to wait and make sure it is not a language issue. Laura reports that her school does not allow ELL students to receive RTI like their monolingual peers, even if they present with the same learning profile. Megan's school provides what she described as academic intervention services before the three-tiered system. Unlike the monolingual students, all ELL students must go through this system of interventions for 1 year prior to starting a formal RTI process. For Nancy, she felt it was simply "too late" when her ELL students were evaluated for special education services compared to others.

Patricia was passionate about her experience bringing her dual-language class students up to the RTI team/committee in her school. She expressed, she felt, that the teachers on these committees have misconceptions of language acquisition problems compared to learning disabilities. She experienced colleagues who automatically assumed students who were not functioning or growing within classrooms that were ELL did so because they did not understand the language. Therefore, her students would be passed over for spots in RTI programs.

Patricia has a different look on it as she teaches every other day in the students' native language and often sees the same issues in both but feels she is not heard, and the committees only see the ELL designation. She said:

In school, if they [ELL students] cannot function in their language and they are not retaining any material, then you know that's a red flag. There is a huge possibility that this child may have a learning disability, not just a language issue.

Helen echoed Patricia's experience with the misconceptions many RTI teams/committees have. She said, "some people automatically assume that it's a cultural thing when it's not."

### ***Theme 2: Sense of Value Varied***

All participants had a mixed feeling of being valued when working as a member of the Committee on Special Education (CSE). The roles of each participant differed greatly. Some participants had conducted formal educational testing and presented standardized results, while others did not administer the evaluations discussed at the meeting. They attended CSE meetings in the capacity of their current role as a general education, special education, or ESL teacher. Regardless of their position on the team, most teachers interviewed expressed they felt it depended upon who was running their meeting, and a few felt not valued at all.

Helen believes she works under a good administration and currently "definitely feels valued." Without her good administration, she would not feel the same way. Donna works in multiple buildings in the same role within one school district. She expressed, "I feel like the low man on the totem pole" in some buildings and have to "fight a little bit harder to get her voice across," while at other schools, her input is "really, very heavily

relied on.” Laura works in one building quantified as 90% of the time. She felt valued when she attended CSE meetings because they “Turn to me to find out the student's background. I feel like I’m Sherlock Holmes and am always investigating and calling home.” On the other hand, there have been times when she felt she was not needed as the student's background was not a mystery or even asked about by the person running the meeting.

Patricia feels that because she was not a member who conducted any of the testing, her input is not valued depending upon who is on the committee that day. “It depends on who’s part of the committee, and sometimes I feel like it just doesn’t matter what I say because all these other people did the testing.” Patricia’s feelings of not being heard while other times her input about where a student is in the classroom is very much heard and taken into consideration. Which is much the same as to what Mary expressed. “Well, it depends on who is running the meeting. In the past, some leaders would just say, oh no, that’s fine.” Mary went on to describe other meetings where she was asked many questions and it made her doubt her ability to be valued. She would ask herself, “Do I have enough RTI information to share?” It creates a confusing situation regarding how to prepare for a CSE meeting when she is unsure who the chair is and what questions they will ask her.

Linda, in the past, has had experiences where she did not feel that her input was valued but felt that she does now because she has developed a good rapport with her current committee on special education. She did acknowledge that there are currently others on her team that do not feel the same way as her regarding being a valued member of the team. She attributes that to the professional relationships she has formed.

Maria feels like her opinions are not being valued at any point during the CSE processes starting with RTI. She mentioned that she often speaks about this with her colleagues. “We’re not being heard and valued when it comes to these children [ELL students].” Margaret feels like her voice is not heard as well, and she reports that “I’m just working on English,” and she is not spoken to for the rest of the time at a CSE even when she has standardized testing results to present.

Carol and Debbie both felt they were strong advocates and made sure their input was valued. The degree to which they thought they had to express their opinion changed based upon the leaders of the CSE. They both had personal stories. Debbie is a mother of a special needs student and feels that she must speak for the parents and advocate for the students, especially ELLs, as their parents do not often understand the language or the full gravity of a CSE. Carol is a former ELL student herself, and she “prides herself on being very strong. And if I’m not in agreement with what’s going on, I will voice that disagreement, even if I have to say I cannot sign off on the results of this CSE.”

***Theme 3: Theory Taught but not Applied for Special Education Classification***

Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP) theory is stressed when teachers are prepared to teach ELLs. This theory essentially states learners have a range in which they should grow without assistance. Once they grow, the floor and ceiling of said range grow with the learner. Theoretically, if a child continues to grow within these ranges without assistance, their rate of learning is within a normal range (Vyotsky, 1978, Pahlevansadegh & Mirzaei, 2020).

Five participants stated they were unaware and had never heard of the theory. Although these five said they had never heard of the theory, they described their teaching

methods within its frameworks with scaffolding, homogeneous groupings, and supporting or providing background knowledge. The other 10 participants in this study also spoke and described their teaching to fit within the framework of ZPD.

Only one of the 15 teachers, Patricia that participated in the study was fully aware of the theory, gave examples, and made connections of how it is used within her classroom, and has had it mentioned or discussed during a special education meeting to determine if they demonstrated a need for special education services. “I use it more for the kids that are ELL. It’s all I use.” She said that it shapes her teaching for ELLs and how she helps to make her determinations when asking for further help.

Nine participants were very familiar with the theory and used the concepts of scaffolding within their classrooms but felt that they had never used the theory or thought to use the theory within the context of determining if a ELL student should or should not qualify for special education services. Within that nine, three of them stated that their school district has recently provided professional development within that area, but it has never been used or spoken of outside the professional development by their administrators or regarding special education. One participant, Debbie, then ruminated on why that was, “Why have we had many PD’s [professional development sessions] on this but never used it at these [CSE] meetings?” Laura said her ESL teachers speak about it at meetings, but “I’ve never heard administrators mention it,” regarding CSE meetings and special education classification.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter discusses teachers' lived experiences working with ELLs suspected of having or identified as needing special education services in New York Public

Schools. The participants provided a deeper insight into their experiences working with this unique learner and their experience with special education committees. The process of discovering themes helped the researcher gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. As a result, seven major themes within each research question were identified: (a) Understanding students as people, (b) ESL teachers are without curriculum, (c) Student-teacher ratio impacts differentiation, (d) Inconsistencies in scaffolding, (e) Delays initiating special education services, (f) Sense of value varied, and (g) Theory taught but not applied for special education classification.



## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

This chapter presents an interpretation of the themes described in Chapter 4. The researcher links these findings to the literature. Additionally, the researcher has offered an overview of the study and the implications this researcher has for students who have both ELL and special education needs. Recommendations have been provided for teachers, researchers, special education committees, and educational institutions to understand better the experiences teachers currently have teaching ELL students who have or are suspected of having special education needs.

### **Overview of Study**

This qualitative study aimed to understand teacher experiences and addresses the current problems of ELL students concurrently being under- and over- classified as needing special education services. Researchers have identified a current need for more research regarding this type of student as most of the literature is not current (Kangas, 2017; Orzoco, 2014; Tong et al., 2017). The purpose of this qualitative study aimed to understand teacher experiences working with ELL students with or suspected of having a learning disability. The researcher specifically asked questions regarding the strategies teachers are currently using to teach ELL students and what tools or assessments are being used to determine if an English language learner should be referred for special education services. This type of research is needed as current studies are not widely available in this area.

Additionally, teachers were interviewed about their backgrounds, training, and special education experiences. Specifically, the researcher asked about their knowledge of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), also if they had formal

training in teaching English as a second language, as this is not a requirement of New York State teachers.

### **Interpretation of the Themes**

The researcher identified seven overall themes from data analysis: (a) Understanding students as people, (b) ESL teachers are without curriculum, (c) Student-teacher ratio impacts differentiation, (d) Inconsistencies in scaffolding, (e) Delays initiating special education services, (f) Sense of value varied, and (g) Theory taught but not applied for special education classification.

#### ***Understanding Students as People***

Overwhelmingly, teachers who took part in this research believed they need to know their students' backgrounds and who they are as a person, where they come from, and what their cultural background is like truly to give them help. Students from other cultures can get themselves into trouble or be misidentified as having special needs if school personal are not aware of their cultural norms. This notion is similar to Kleen and Glock's (2018) and Orosco and Abdulrahim's (2017) idea about using culturally-responsive pedagogy. Understanding how their family and cultural dynamics work will allow teachers to reach students differently. At times, the participants felt other teachers they worked with assumed student behaviors, such as lack of eye contact or responding to teachers without speaking, were due to special education needs. Often, these could be cultural behaviors, and the participants wished that all their colleagues would do this.

Trust is another key aspect to teaching students who are ELLs. Often, families come from other countries where the help that is offered in American public schools simply does not exist. Teaching the whole child, starts with understanding their culture

then building the trust with families that the right thing is being done for families.

Debbie, Laura, and Maria all spoke specifically about the whole child approach. Sailor et al. (2021) supports these feelings. Ensuring basic needs are met can prevent or show the need for special education services for ELL students.

### ***ESL Teachers Are Without a Curriculum***

Every ESL teacher who took part in this study was not provided with research-based materials by their school district and relied on teacher-created materials. McCollum and Reed (2020) found adult ESL students progressed at a higher rate when using a standardized system when compared to students who had teachers that did not. As there is no consistency or research to back the content currently being used by ESL teachers, as they have said they are free to create their material and assessments, how can special education committees know if the ESL services they received were effective?

### ***Student-Teacher Ratio Impacts Differentiation***

Classroom teachers struggle with differentiation and scaffolding for the ELL students due to enrollment numbers. The participants who taught full-size classes all cited class size as the major difficulty for reaching their students themselves. The expectation is that differentiation happens for all students, but as class size numbers rise above 20, it is very difficult to do this properly. Bennett's (2021) findings concur that class size impacts the ability to teach students in individualized ways. This most impacts students with additional learning needs, such as a SPED or ELL population. Differentiation was not an issue for the participants, such as special education, intervention, or ESL teachers who primarily taught small groups within or outside general education classrooms. They

did not feel that they were unable to differentiate and meet each student because their student-teacher ratio was considerably smaller than that of a classroom teacher.

### ***Inconsistencies in Scaffolding***

Scaffolding is currently a word that means different things to the participants in this study. For some, it meant a single worksheet with graphics on it, while others went completely in-depth and described their differentiation at a micro-level for their students. Not one participant defined scaffolding the same way but had a common theme of differentiation. Additionally, not all participants felt they had the time, resources, or knowledge to implement it correctly. These findings confirmed Boon and Barbetta's (2017) findings. Both studies found teachers used different approaches and did not seem to have one common way to teach their students with ESL or learning needs. While there are no consistent profiles, this may not necessarily be a negative as all students are drastically different learners, and not all teachers teach with the same approach. Despite the inconsistent scaffolding, all the participants agreed the attempt or use of scaffolding makes a difference in the learning outcomes of their students when able to use it.

### ***Delays Initiating Special Education Services***

The frustration of the RTI process for ELL students was evident in all participants' interviews. Overwhelmingly, participants felt that RTI helped get their ELLs additional educational interventions they needed at the moment but slowed the initial referral process to formalized special education services down. When compared to students who were not ELL students, participants felt they could justify and move the process along quicker. The phrase they need time or wait an extra year or two was commonly used among all participants when asked about how their school district

determined their referral should go through or not. These responses suggest that students need to wait on average a year longer than their non-ELL peers for formalized special education services due to the ELL classification.

### ***Sense of Value Varied***

Teachers' experiences with the special education referral process vastly differed. The commonality amongst all participants' responses was their sense of value at special education meetings. Every participant mentioned the leadership or chairperson of the meetings regarding how they felt valued. Often, if the participant was not presenting any standardized testing data, the feeling of their participation was a formality rather than of value. While some felt strongly, they would get their opinion across and be valued, they acknowledged they needed to be strong with some chairpersons, and it was within them to be heard. While other times they felt their opinions were extremely valued without question. These findings suggest chairpeople need to be cognizant of all the participating members of the CSE. Teachers that have not presented standardized testing results can feel left out of the process if not actively engaged. If they are not made to feel valued and heard, they may be less likely to have a positive experience refereeing their students to special education.

### ***Theory Taught but not Applied for Special Education Classification***

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP) is conducted by school districts during professional development sessions to measure growth rates for English language learners. This theory believes students should grow without assistance a range over time. The range will increase with the student as they grow. An example of this would be reading at a 1st-grade level as a 5th grader. If this

student made 1–2 months of growth within that 1st-grade range in 1 month, the child would be considered within a normal growth range if they are progressing even if they are not on grade level (Vyotsky, 1978, Pahlevansadegh & Mirzaei, 2020).

Taukeni (2019) found positive results when English language learners are taught using these methods and screened for potential learning disabilities. Methods such as scaffolding and visual cues are the key elements within teaching under this framework. Five participants stated they were unaware and had never heard of the theory. Nevertheless, the teaching methods they described using all fit within a ZPD framework. Only one of the 15 teachers who participated in the study was confident in her understanding of this framework and stated she considers it when determining if a child needs help other than ESL.

The remaining nine participants all spoke about how either they learned about this in graduate school, or their school districts mentioned it during professional development sessions, but it has never been used in their professional experience. If special education and RTI committees started considering the ZPD of students and looked at the rate at which they are learning, and not the level student is currently at, perhaps the feeling of having to wait extra years to recommend students for special education services will change.

### **Recommendations**

The researcher has found three recommendations after an in-depth analysis of the data. To begin with, schools should provide some basic, research-based curriculum to ESL teachers, but there is a need to develop this first. Second, classrooms with high ELL populations should have smaller student-teacher ratios to ensure differentiation can occur.

Finally, special education and RTI committees should take into account a ZPD of a student to help avoid additional wait times for ELL students to be referred to special education

The protocols of current RTI models should be redesigned for ELL students. At this time, there seems to be a one size fits all Tiered instruction model in which ELL students take longer to move through when compared to their non-ELL peers. ESL and RTI are separate initiatives these students are receiving simultaneously, both mandated by the state of New York. The lack of a research-based ESL curriculum prevents the ESL services from being considered a Tier 3 or last step before special education. Research-based intervention for ELL students should be developed and implemented for ELL students demonstrating the need for special education. The researcher and participants are unaware of any research-based intervention designed for this type of student at this time. Rather, there are programs on the market adapted for ELLs with learning disabilities not designed especially for them. This recommendation is not for general ELL students but students within the RTI tiers.

Classrooms with high needs of special education students and ELLs should have lower student-teacher ratios or additional teaching staff assigned to their rooms. The participants of this study found a higher student-teacher ratio in their particular classrooms to hinder their ability to provide individualized instruction without the help of additional teaching or support staff. The range in which they are expected to differentiate was wide, and some participants said they were unable to meet these expectations because they had no help. Giving teachers this help would allow them to reach all their students' needs.

CSE committees should consider the rate students are learning at within the framework of ZPD. Many students who have learning needs will progress at a much slower pace than that of a typical ELL student. This theory could help students not wait for the additional help they may need or confirm that a student may not need to go through a special education referral earlier.

### **Considerations for Future Research**

This study revealed two significant opportunities for future research. The first opportunity would be to look at former ELL students today as teachers who work with ELL students. The second opportunity is for a quantitative look at the rate in which ELLs are classified as needing special education service when going through the RTI process.

A finding derived from the background of three participants suggests a study could be conducted using self-identified ELLs who are now teachers of ELLs. An in-depth look comparing and contrasting their responses between non-former ELL students who became teachers could reveal new best practices. This proposed research could also seek to understand how their experiences as a student shaped their experience as teachers. Those who self-identified as ELL did so unprovoked and seemed to connect to their students who needed help on a different personal level. This research could also examine if they had higher success rates with their student outcomes or not.

A quantitative study could look at the difference in the time it takes an ELL student compared to a general education student to go through the RTI process and be referred to special education. There is a need to correctly identify students with learning needs and differentiate them from those with language acquisition needs. Looking at the rates of different schools could allow a researcher to see what schools are doing to help



this process run promptly or pinpoint where there is a weakness. It is imperative students are correctly identified as not to have either over- or under-recommendations.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study add to the literature on this unique student profile. There is a strong need for current research in this area as most published studies happened in the 1990s and early 2000s, and recent research only has outdated material to reference (Kangas, 2017; Orzoco, 2014; Tong et al., 2017). This study highlighted some of the challenges teachers face today when determining if an ELL has a learning disability in addition to second language acquisition needs so they can provide an appropriate education.

This study included 15 participants that share a unique experience working with ELLs that have or are suspected of having special education needs. Analysis of the interview revealed seven major themes: (a) Understanding students as people, (b) ESL teachers are without curriculum, (c) Student-teacher ratio impacts differentiation, (d) Inconsistencies in scaffolding, (e) Delays initiating special education services, (f) Sense of value varied, and (g) Theory taught but not applied for special education classification.

The continued growth of the ELL population in American public schools does not appear to be slowing down, rather growing (NCES, 2021). More teachers will start to experience this phenomenon. With the historical over-referral rates of ELL students to special education in the past and current under-referral rates, general education teachers may be hesitant to make this determination or teach this type of student (Miranda et al., 2019). Now, more than ever, there is a need for continued, current research to help do the

right thing for ELL students with learning needs and make their educational experience successful.

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## Appendix A

Text of Social Media Recruitment Using Facebook, Instagram, and Linked In

## Appendix A

## Text of Social Media Recruitment using Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn.

I am seeking Elementary Teachers in New York State that have English Language Learners in their classroom to become participants to conduct research for my doctoral applied dissertation study titled: Elementary Teacher Experiences Referring English Language Learners to Committees on Special Education.

My name is Colleen Cahill. I am a doctoral student at Nova Southeastern University. This research study aims to understand teacher experiences working with ELL students with or suspected of having a learning disability.

It will consist of a 15 question, on time questionnaire on Zoom and should take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. There is no payment for participating in this study.

If you feel that you meet this criterion or know someone willing to take part in this study that does, please email me at [cc3287@mynsu.nova.edu](mailto:cc3287@mynsu.nova.edu) or direct message me for more information.

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Zoom Interview Questions



## Semi-Structured Zoom Interview Questions

1. What do you currently teach, how long have you taught and what are you certified to teach?
2. Have you taught ELL students within your classroom this year or in previous years? If so, have you suspected an English Language Learner in your classroom to have a learning disability and why did you think it was a disability rather than a language acquisition issue?
3. How did you change your teaching methods or approach for these students if any?
4. Are you familiar with the just-right approach to teaching, meaning the work is not too easy nor too hard for a student? If so, what are your experiences implementing this within a classroom?
5. What is your opinion of scaffolding material within a classroom setting?
6. Can you describe ways you scaffold Math material within your classroom?
7. Can you describe ways you scaffold Reading (including nonfiction, social studies and science text) material within your classroom?
8. Can you describe ways you scaffold Writing lessons within your classroom?
9. In what ways do you measure a student's current abilities or levels of performance (examples progress monitoring, benchmark assessments, formal standardized measures, informal assessments etc...)?
10. Explain how students are grouped within your classroom for academic instruction, are they homogeneously or heterogeneously grouped?
11. What are the procedures or protocols followed when you feel classroom interventions and ESL services are not sufficiently meeting a ELL student's

needs, do they follow an Response to Intervention program or something different?

12. Describe the similarities or differences when first initiating the need for interventions for general education students compared to ELL students?
13. Can you describe your role on a CSE when a request for student evaluation is accepted by a special education department?
14. Explain how you perceive your input about a student at an initial evaluation or annual review for your students? Do you think the other members find what you report to be valuable and taken seriously?
15. Are you familiar with the term Zone of Proximal Development, if so, how would you describe its place within your teaching?

Appendix C

Table of Specifications

Table of Specifications

	<b>Background Information</b>	<b>Research Question 1</b>	<b>Research Question 2</b>	<b>Research Question 3</b>
<b>Interview Q 1</b>	<b>X</b>			
<b>Interview Q 2</b>	<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>
<b>Interview Q 3</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
<b>Interview Q 4</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
<b>Interview Q 5</b>			<b>X</b>	
<b>Interview Q 6</b>			<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>Interview Q 7</b>				
<b>Interview Q 8</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
<b>Interview Q 9</b>				<b>X</b>
<b>Interview Q 10</b>		<b>X</b>		
<b>Interview Q 11</b>				<b>X</b>
<b>Interview Q 12</b>		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
<b>Interview Q 13</b>				<b>X</b>
<b>Interview Q 14</b>				<b>X</b>

<b>Interview Q</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
<b>15</b>				

Research Questions:

1. What are the experiences teachers have with the concept of scaffolding when teaching English language learners with suspected learning disabilities?
2. What were the experiences do teachers have with the concept of scaffolding when teaching English language learners with suspected learning disabilities?
3. What were the experiences of teachers when they recommend an English language learner to special education?